



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation

2018 International Observer Program (IOP-Belgium)

Muslims in America: Community, Interfaith, Integration and Radicalization Prevention

July 15 – July 31, 2018

MD - NY - VA - DC

SUMMARY REPORT



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International Observer Program (IOP)

Building partnerships between people, countries and civilizations is critical in the world we live in today. Establishing these relationships begins by fostering mutual understanding and appreciation of one another's culture, history, religion and way of life. We can do this in a number of ways, but personal and professional dialogue and face-to face interaction helps to break down barriers more quickly, in order to achieve this lofty goal. We all must become "Global Citizens" and realize that what happens in one society impacts societies globally. Clergy, scholars, and teachers are key players in this endeavor. They have the ability to reach to the hearts, souls and minds of those with whom they engage. We must make opportunities for these leaders to venture out and begin this process themselves. Throughout this report, you will read about and view a sampling of meetings, activities and other events in which the delegation was involved.

IOPs are two or three-week journeys of intensive thought and experience designed for clerics, scholars, religious educators and community leaders. Participants are invited through U.S. Embassies to take part in and observe communities around the U.S. and for training in specialized areas.

As societies around the world become increasingly religiously and culturally diverse, dialogue and cooperation has become a global necessity in order to achieve common goals in a mutually respectful manner. Authentic moderate religious education is critical and should be emphasized in the 21st century to inspire people to engage in collaborative efforts that positively impact every aspect of society, ranging from their community's most basic needs to political involvement.

The United States offers countless examples of the importance of both individual and collective success in the areas of interfaith, community, democracy and inclusiveness. It is only when everyone feels their voices are being heard and their contributions are welcome, will you have the necessary elements for a sense of safety, a secure foundation and a future full of hope.

2018 IOP-Belgium Journey

The **2018 IOP-Belgium** uniquely combined a group of four men and two women from diverse backgrounds who serve as religious and community leaders, government professionals and PhD researchers. This trip was marked with numerous enriching and engaging moments. For many participants this was a journey of self-exploration, challenging their preconceived notions and moving them towards being not just Belgians, but citizens of a global society and leaders in the world. The 16-day experience marked for many the first exposure to American culture and interaction with people of many different faith and cultural traditions. It challenged their preconceptions of what it is to be a Muslim in a multicultural and multi-religious society such as the U.S. where Muslims are the minority.

2018 PROGRAM AT-A-GLANCE

IOP

July 15 – July 19 (MD)

CECF Orientation
Office of the Secretary of State in Annapolis
Assistant Federal State Attorney for the MD District
Al-Basheer Seminar
Muslim Community Center (MCC)
MCC Clinic
Montgomery County Faith Community

July 20 – July 22 (NY)

Interfaith Center of New York
Islamic Cultural Center of New York
United Nations
Cathedral of St. John The Divine
Muslim Officers Society of the New York Police Department

July 23 – July 28 (DC & VA)

Pew Research Center
Georgetown University
Karamah
Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington
Religious Freedom Institute
US Department of State
United States Institute of Peace
ADAMS Center
Supreme Court
Capitol Building
Library of Congress
ISNA Headquarters
Tour of DC

July 28 – July 30 (MD)

Diyanet Center
Centennial Park
Reflection Session/Pre-Departure Meeting

Delegates



1. Tijani Boulaouali
2. Chaima Ahaddour
3. Betul Demirkoparan
4. Mohamed El-Aissati
5. Abdelnasser Otmani
6. Najim Kaldoun

This final report highlights the key events of the journey which the delegation experienced while traveling in America. The examples selected for this report show experiences from which the scholars can apply to both their professional and personal lives in Belgium. These examples exemplify key objectives of the Program that include, but are not limited to:

- Understand that the culture of pluralism plays a huge role in the way a community treats its members
- Become acquainted with the social, religious, cultural and political affairs of the Muslim American community.
- Realize the need for training on religious and cultural pluralism.

Baltimore, MD

The day after their arrival to the United States, the delegates received a two-day orientation with *Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat*, CECF President, *Kimberly King*, CECF Programs Director, *Sarah Arafat*, CECF Program Officer, *Dominic Dorsey*, CECF Program Assistant, *Father William Au*, Pastor of the Shrine of the Sacred Heart and Al Basheer Faculty, *Hamza Khan*, Founder of The Pluralism Project and *Dr. Thomas Little*, Pastoral Associate for Evangelization and Faith Formation Our Lady of the Fields Church. During the orientation, the delegates were given an overview of CECF's activities, learned about the history and progress of interfaith in the United States, and discussed the importance of cultural diversity programs for clergy in the Abrahamic faiths. The orientation also enabled the delegates to witness the successful working relationship and friendship between a Muslim Imam and Catholic Priest.

Orientation Presentations

- **Imam Bashar** presented on: “Religion and Culture in a Pluralistic World: The History of Interfaith in America”.
- **Father Bill Au**, Al-Basheer Faculty, presented on “Interfaith Efforts in the U.S. and the Sultan and the Saint - Christian Perspectives”.
- **Hamza Khan**, Founder of The Pluralism Project, presented on “Muslim Youth Growing Up in America and Running for Office”
- **Dr. Thomas Little**, Pastoral Associate for Evangelization and Faith Formation Our Lady of the Fields Church, presented on “Spirituality in America”



After the delegates explained their very unique backgrounds, **Imam Bashar** discussed how his religious education and primary religious education professor and mentor shaped his life journey. One of the most insightful remarks made during this orientation session was that “where ever you can use your tongue, there is no need for the sword” which set the tone for the program straight away. Imam Bashar also shared about how he’s managed to start a non-profit organization in the United States with a mission to learn from civilizations’ past mistakes and cooperate for a better future. Civilizations Exchange and Cooperation Foundation aims to foster dialogue between communities of different religious and ethnic backgrounds to alleviate misconceptions about Islam, and he takes his work internationally to remove misconceptions about America and explain how freedom of religion works in our great nation.

Father William Au, Al-Basheer Faculty, a member of CECF Board of Advisors and the Pastor at Shrine of the Sacred Heart, lead the next session beginning with a story of the Sultan Kamel of ancient Egypt and St. Francis of Assisi, and how they managed to make peace during the fifth crusade due to their interfaith dialogue. This story is a source of inspiration for Fr. Au and he continues to interweave the lessons learned in his preaching at his parish. He discussed how in the Qur’an, it is written if God had willed, He could have made us all one community. This is clearly not the case and instead we are blessed with diversity around the world. According to Fr. Au, having to engage in dialogue forces us to clarify cultural accuracies of our religion. One goal of the IOP is to see how our faith can positively affect our actions. At the end of an interfaith dialogue, we should be able to see others not as the “other” but as a reflection of God and ourself. CECF creates these types of opportunities where spiritual transformations and evolutions are possible.

Hamza Khan is the Founder of The Pluralism Project, an organization that trains underrepresented minorities to run for office to make a change in their communities.

His very engaging and interesting presentation came from the perspective of an ethnically Afghani-Pakistani young man born and raised in the United States. He had to face a harsh reality of Islamophobia in high school post 9/11 and has since become grounded in his multi-faceted identity and not only embraces it, but teaches others how to represent their communities of underrepresented people.



Dr. Thomas Little, an expert in adult education, proved to be a valuable addition to the orientation. He emphasized the program theme “community” and explained its importance in every other aspect of the program. He shared his belief that we are called to be available to help others and if we aren’t then we have failed our responsibility to our community.

According to Dr. Little, no matter our political or economic progress in the world, if we don’t share this aim then we can’t make real change for the better. He shared a biblical example of how Jesus used farming examples to illustrate the necessity of diversity. If a farming plot of land grows the same crop over and over, the soil dies. If instead we farm new crops each time, representing diversity in ideology and age, then we have rich soil, representing a successful society. This creative metaphor proved effective.

Meeting at the Office of Secretary of State in Annapolis

At the Office of the Secretary of State in Annapolis, we met with Deputy Secretary of State in Annapolis **Luis Burundi**, the Director of Interfaith Outreach for the Governor’s Office **Jennifer Gray**, the Governor’s Director of International Affairs **Mary Nitsch**, and the Administrative Director for Governor’s Commissions on African and Middle Eastern American Affairs **Kevin Kraft**.



This meeting was a great opportunity for sharing on both ends. The IOP delegates shared their hopes for the program, what they've learned so far, what they hope to learn and their experiences of Belgium's limitations on religious expression and freedom which are shaping their views. The people we met with took turns sharing their efforts and specifics of their jobs which highlighted how much the Maryland government value diversity and truly believe it's a benefit to society.



Ms. Gray explained how her job is to foster relationships with all faith groups in Maryland. She visits them and among many things, she teaches them how to protect themselves from attacks on many levels and offers them resources for societal problems like how to help their communities deal with anyone suffering from Opioid addictions.

Mr. Kraft works with many commissioners to help them deal with any issues that community members need assistance with including providing legal resources to those in need.

Ms. Nitsch's work is involved in setting meetings up for international delegations who wish to meet with representatives from the Governor's office.

Ms. Gray specifically was able to offer very specific suggestions on how to potentially get the interfaith ball rolling in Belgium, based on her perspective as an American. She advised the Muslim community to partner with Christian and Jewish communities to organize cultural activities at first for which they could invite government officials to attend. Later on, as relationships are formed with Government officials, new ideas and initiatives can be proposed. Even if policy changes are not made, the Muslim community will have found allies in multiple other communities with overall similar goals.

We also discussed how in the United States, due to the clear explanation of religious freedom in our constitution and the history of religious freedom in Maryland, Muslims are free to wear the hijab in public places, open private schools to teach Islamic education, hold religious events, etc. The one thing that was interesting to the delegates was that even though these previously listed services/institutions may be opened with Muslims in mind, they must be open for non-Muslims to benefit from so long as they follow the protocols of the community that begin the initiative. This type of freedom of religious expression was very inspiring for the Belgian delegates to hear about. They all left the meeting eager to learn more.

Meeting with the Assistant Federal Attorney for the MD District

At the Maryland Coordination and Analysis Center (MCAC), the group was met by **Ms. Carrie Dayton**, a special agent in Baltimore assigned to MCAC, **Mr. David Engel**, the Executive Director of MCAC and **Mr. Harvey Eisenberg**, the Assistant US Federal Attorney.

At the MCAC, their aim is to share information between government agencies while keeping everyone's civil liberties intact due to the consultation of the constitutional advisory board. Agent Dayton explained the use of the 24 hour watch center and how while they accept all complaints and suspicions, the ones without substance are left behind. Very few items reported actually translate to arrests.



Seminar at Al-Basheer

- **Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat:** *Radicalization Prevention from Within - Imams Training Session on Global Citizenship & Outreach*
- **Lt. Melvin Russell and Officer Robert Horne:** Representatives of the Baltimore County Police Department presenting on *Countering Violent Extremism in Baltimore Including White Supremacist Groups and Religious Extremism*
- **Abdul Rashid Abdullah,** Executive Director and Co-founder of the National Association of Muslim Americans on Scouting and Crew, Advisor for Crew 114 (NAMAS) discussing *Muslim Scouts Program in America and How Engaging Youth in These Activities Serves as a Method of Radicalization Prevention*



In a very powerful session lead by **Police Chief Lt. Col. Melvin Russell and Officer Robert Horne from the Baltimore City Police Department**, the delegates and CECF staff were astonished with their conviction, mission and strategy to bring peace back to the streets of Baltimore. Lt. Col. Russell described how “relational equity” between the police and the community is invaluable when solving crime and beneficial for the community as a whole. The delegates were able to make comparisons between the law enforcement’s approach to community relations in Belgium versus Baltimore, MD. The delegates all agreed that it would be a good first step to invite law enforcement officers to a Muslim community event to establish community relations which echoed the message they heard from Lt. Col. Russell and while in Annapolis.

When Officer Horne was asked about radicalization in prisons, his answer was not expected. Firstly, the rise of Salafi-Islam can be identified in prison systems due to the influence of Saudi trained chaplains. One of the ways that Officer Horne and his team try to combat this is by restricting the type of Islamic material that enters the prisons and by vetting the Muslim chaplains that enter to preach in the prison systems. They have found that their approach is successful and has kept peace among the Muslims in prisons even though they may revert to violence when the former inmates return to the streets due to the prevalence of gangs.

Abdul Rashid Abdullah, the Executive Director of the National Association of Muslim Americans on Scouting (NAMAS), began his session by leading the delegates in the scouting pledge and the American pledge of allegiance. He then began a discussion on the similarity between the ideals and value of Islam compared to Scouts. The similarities were obvious in many areas including positive character building, cleanliness, thinking of others, etc. He also explained the structure of Scouts and how while the organization isn't exclusive to Muslims, it certainly welcomes them. Scouts are worldwide and are presently active in countries including Saudi Arabia. Mr. Abdullah's belief is that by keeping any child involved in scouts, they will become more well-mannered, disciplined, happy, feel part of a unique community and stay grounded in their beliefs.



Meeting at the Muslim Community Center Clinic and tour of the Mosque

The delegates visited The Muslim Community Center (MCC) of Silver Spring, MD, where Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat spoke with the delegates in regards to the efforts of one of the largest Islamic communities in Maryland.

We toured the complex including their mosque and their remarkable community health clinic, where Dr. Rashid Chotani, a Pakistani-born physician trained at the world- renowned Johns Hopkins Hospital, shared the wide range of medical services they provide. Such services are provided on a sliding fee scale, based on patients' ability to pay.



The delegates were impressed that their medical services are not only available to Muslims but to non-Muslims in the community as well.

A poster on the lawn outside the mosque caught the attention of all the delegates: it stated in bold letters and multiple languages, including English, Arabic, Hebrew, Spanish, Chinese and Korean, **“There is No Place for Hate Here”**.



Meeting with the Montgomery County Faith Community (MCFC)

The Montgomery County Faith Community Working Group (MCFCWG) is a faith volunteer response team that provides interfaith support in a variety of situations. This Community Working Group has a representative from the Governor’s Office, the Count Executive’s Office, the local police department and the local fire house. One such member of our meeting was Egyptian American Police Officer **Omar Sheriff**. He shared his experience as a Muslim American living in the U.S. and also his experience as a Muslim American Police Officer. He explained that when he occasionally



interacts with someone who is outwardly racist or unfriendly, people generally tend to relax when you speak to them. Officer Sheriff and **Ms. Mimi Hassoune**, a female Muslim politician representing Montgomery County, both stressed the value of education. This working group developed a county model for school systems to educate the community on and accommodate religious diversity. Every calendar has 5 days of excused absences, there is a publicly available PDF for religious diversity, there are multicultural dialogues on racism and hate that can be attended publicly and there is a parent academy to address any community concerns. One suggestion for the delegates to make new connections with police or government officials was to bring people together around art or food in order to build relationships - a suggestion that is echoed in many meetings.

New York City, NY

Meeting at the Interfaith Center of NY



At the Interfaith Center of New York (ICNY) the delegates met with **Ms. Hanadi Doleh**, the Program Associate for Community Partnerships. Ms. Doleh shared the major interfaith activities that happen in New York City like the 40-50 interfaith iftars during Ramadan.

ICNY also developed a program called Summer Institute which allows teachers to experience different faiths for 6-8 weeks in order to more accurately teach world religion in public schools.

After hearing about how the U.S. has a strong separation of church and state, they were intrigued to hear that this institute is funded by a federal grant which started a conversation on how that is possible. Ms. Doleh shared how the interfaith communities rally together in times of racism or prejudice and her most recent example was during the travel ban. The ICNY also put out a political statement condemning the treatment of the Palestinians.

The last topic we discussed was intrafaith. The delegates are aware that there are separate sects of Muslim communities within NYC and they wondered what the ICNY's opinion on that was. Ms. Doleh first shared that everyone is Muslim and that's all the ICNY cares about and her own personal belief is that Islam specifically doesn't need us to protect it, we just need to represent it.

Meeting at the Islamic Cultural Center of NY (ICCNY)

At the Islamic Community Center of New York (ICCNY), the delegates were met by **Sheikh Saad Jalloh** who shared the center's activities and then lead the Friday Jumma service.

The goal of this meeting was to learn about pluralism and inclusivity in American Muslim communities as well as Islamic education in the U.S. The diversity of the center is the first thing noticed when entering the prayer halls. Each hall is absolutely full of Muslims from around the world. Additionally, many of the delegates were delighted to see a large number of Muslim police officers in uniform attending the Jumua service.



ICCNY is a uniquely large masjid in NYC and not only offers two Friday services but also a full time school for children in grades Kindergarten to 8th grade. Additionally they offer a free summer camp which keeps the children engaged in activities and off of the street.

We were given a tour of ICCNY and engaged in a deep discussion on the founding of the center, how it is currently run and the fact that now it is self-funded. According to Sheikh Mashhour, 1-2 people convert each day. The center offers many classes for new Muslims, runs charity events, and operates many other activities. Sheikh Jalloh mentioned that the mosque receives 35 to 36 thousand visitors a year and the delegates left him with a suggestion to open a small museum to share information on things like Islamic art or history.

Mass at St. John the Divine & Meeting with Reverend Deacon Steven Lee M.Div

The delegates received the warmest welcome of all of our meetings at the Episcopal Diocese of NY: Cathedral of St. John the Divine where we experienced a typical Sunday mass.

During mass, the religious leadership of the cathedral and representatives of the community welcomed us. This was the first time for many of the delegates to attend a Catholic mass and speak at length with a priest. Attending mass was interfaith in action. Taking time to understand how Catholics pray and receive their spiritual nutrition helped the delegates to appreciate another faith as well as their own.

The delegates all spoke with different members of the congregation as they made their way out of the Cathedral. The delegates really enjoyed speaking with the everyday common person and wished that they had an opportunity to do more of it during the program. They spoke with regulars who have been coming to mass here for years and international tourists who made a stop here because it was highly recommended. Overall, they enjoyed engaging with the community. Lastly, there was a light lunch prepared for us in a different section of the Cathedral where the priests and other members of the Cathedral leadership community were waiting. They spoke with us at length about the community service activities they're involved with and mentioned how they aren't too involved in interfaith, yet it is an avenue they are looking to strengthen.



Meeting with the Muslim Officers Society of the New York Police Department

The New York Department Muslim Officers Society (MOS) welcomed the delegation for a late lunch at a local Turkish restaurant in Brooklyn. In addition to this being their first time in Brooklyn, the delegates were also excited to speak with some officers in uniform. **Lt. Adeel Rana**, the president of the MOS greeted us along with **Captain Walid Akbar**, the first Captain of Pakistani origin, **Mr. Mohamed Ayman**, Detective for the Community Affairs Bureau and Muslim Liaison, **Ms. Sameena Alam**, a female police officer of four years, who are all involved in the MOS in different capacities. Together they shared how diverse the NYPD is with close to 1600 Muslim Police Officers, including women in hijab, in New York alone.



The MOS not only acts as a support group, but it also hosts activities for the community like youth sporting events to build relationships between the officers and the community members. This was a completely new concept for the delegates as the community is extremely distant from the police force on normal circumstances. The MOS stressed that it is very easy to keep your roots intact and be integrated in the American society as police.

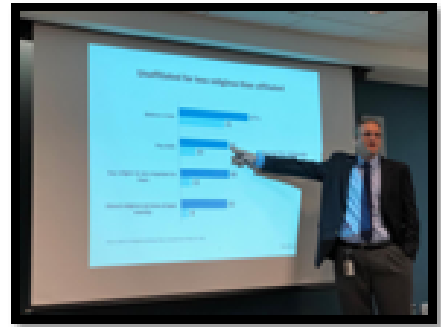
Washington, DC

Meeting at Pew Research Center

For our researchers in the delegation, this was a major highlight of the IOP. Hearing fresh statistics from the experts themselves was right in line with their work as academic researchers. **Mr. Greg Smith** presented on “The Religious Landscape in the United States”. Data collected from 2007-2014 suggests that the US is a very religious country with a significant majority of the population identifying as Christian. There is also a significant increase in the number of “religious nones” who include those who don’t claim association to a particular religion but may still be religious in the sense that they pray and believe in God; it also includes atheists and agnostics. United States hosts 1% Muslims, 2% Jews, 1% Buddhist and less than 1% Hindus. From their data, Pew researchers hypothesize the main reason suggested that secularism is slowly increasing in the US due to generational replacement; each following generation feels less and less tied to formalized religion. Even so, the country is still overwhelmingly Christian and will be so, according to the data, for centuries.



The second presentation was done by **Mr. Besheer Muhamed** on “Muslims in America”. Aside from the differences in methodology and sample size, his presentation also shared very different information. According to his research, in contrast to the Christians who are holistically becoming less religious, Muslim youth may not be attending religious services as much, but still hold a consistent level of importance for religion in their lives. American Muslims feel content in American society and feel like they are well integrated and have an equal chance at opportunities in life. This led to much discussion on the difference between reality in Belgium versus America on issues of integration and not assimilation to reach this type of satisfaction in life.



Meeting and Lecture at Georgetown University



At the world-renowned Georgetown University, **Dr. Susan Douglass** presented on *Teaching about Religions in Public Schools*. She explained how religious accommodations work, how far they extend, how government regulations can affect the formation of school curriculums, and her own guidelines she developed on how to accurately teach religion academically. This sparked much conversation on how in American public schools, religious education is taught solely academically while in Belgian public schools it is taught mainly devotionally.

Meeting and Seminar at KARAMAH

KARAMAH is a non-profit organization with a mission to provide the community with Islamic jurisprudence that emphasizes gender equity and encourages intellectual growth, conflict resolution and leadership development. While the delegates only attended one lecture on “The Constitution between the Prophet Muhammad and the People of Medina” with the other participants of the 2018 Law and Leadership Summer Program (LLSP), they also had the opportunity to briefly introduce themselves to and hear from **Dr. Azizah Al-Hibri**, the founder of Karamah.



The delegates appreciated the existence of such an academic environment for women to become educated in this field, but also felt that while the organization claims to be making strides in human rights, they don't feel the same impact from the branch in Belgium. Dr. Al-Hibri acknowledged this and shared that they are trying to strengthen their newer branch in Belgium, but it's a work in progress.

Meeting at the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington



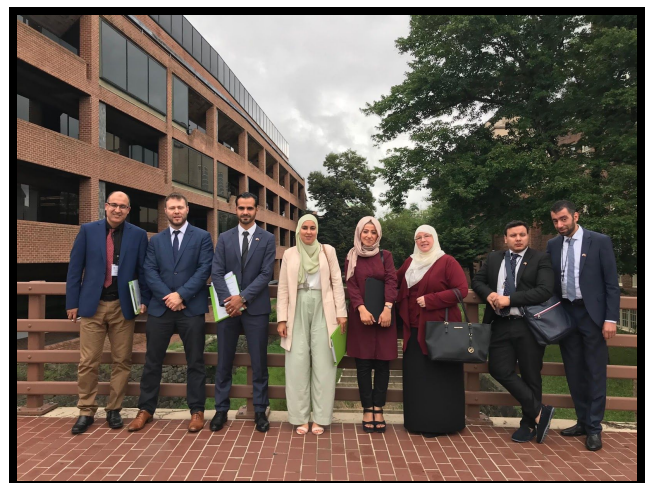
Created in 1978, the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington (IFC) brings together eleven historic faith communities to promote dialogue, understanding and a sense of community and to work cooperatively for justice throughout the DC region. IFC members currently include the Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Jewish, Latter-day Saints, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Sikh and Zoroastrian faith communities.

The delegates met with Executive Director **Rabbi Gerry Serotta** who works towards creating a just community through coalition-building, education, training and advocacy. He believes that interfaith communities

uniting in solidarity is a very effective way to combat hate and they do this by holding public events including concerts, award ceremonies, lectures, unity walks and public dialogues.

Meeting at the Religious Freedom Institute

The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a source of national and international security. They achieve this goal by convincing stakeholders in select regions that religious freedom can help them achieve their own goals—political, economic, strategic, and religious. While the meeting was originally set to discuss the aims of RFI, the delegates instead met with **Ismail Royer** and heard the testimonial of someone who at the young age of 19 converted to Islam, was radicalized, imprisoned, de-radicalized and restarted his life at RFI. It was truly a unique meeting to attend.



Meeting at the U.S. Department of State

Upon arrival to the U.S. Department of State Department, the delegates introduced themselves and the following State Department officials introduced themselves and their respective offices:

- **Mr. Michael Duffin**, Countering Terrorism Office
- **Mr. Kareem Shora**, Department of Homeland Security and works on community engagement
- **Mr. Oliver Wilcox**, Deputy Director of CVE in the Countering Terrorism Division
- **Mr. Hunter Tressador**, Global Engagement Center



This meeting was an opportunity to hear about how religion fits into government. The delegates were briefed on the separation between church and state, but in this meeting they learned how the government engages religious authority figures. Additionally, each of the State Department officials noted the importance of working towards the promotion of greater ties in the world and increasing cooperation. The delegates engaged in a deep discussion with Mr. Tressador and Mr. Shora on this subject especially. Mr. Shora also shared his experience on how to get communities to trust him and his office. His main points were that they don't stigmatize the Muslim community by only engaging with them, they let the community set the agenda, engage in dialogue and highly recommend and support community policing.

Meeting at the United States Institute of Peace

The United States Institute of Peace's (USIP) mission is to resolve and prevent conflict in the world by indirectly engaging in conflict zones. While USIP is an independent institution, they are congressionally funded. With said funds, they fund local organizations' projects and collect research from areas of conflict. By doing this the USIP is able to provide collected information and resources to agencies working towards peaceful resolution. In our meeting, members of the countering terrorism team met with the delegation and shared some of their work in various regions.

While the delegates inquired about the presence of USIP in Europe, the attendees shared how USIP has a greater presence in Asia and Africa than Europe.



Meeting with Imam Mohammed Majid of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society



The ADAMS center is an Islamic organization centered in the Muslim community of Northern Virginia and is very involved in interfaith dialogue, youth programs and programs for those contemplating conversion to Islam. Unfortunately, we didn't visit their center and school, because **Imam Mohammed Majid** was involved in a last minute meeting at the U.S. Department of State. Fortunately our hotel was near the State Department and the delegates did get to meet with Imam Majid in our hotel conference room.



ADAMS Center developed programs and employs specialists to help families with a variety of issues. Examples include internet safety training for parents and Imams training in dealing with domestic violence. They have a social worker on the premise, employ a youth director to keep the youth engaged in healthy activities, promote youth scouting and train American-raised khateeb (sermon givers) to give Friday sermons on relevant topics to the community. Overall, Imam Majid shared how his community is well- integrated and how all

of the pluralism, even within the 10 branches of ADAMS center, is a strength not a weakness.

Briefing at the Supreme Court

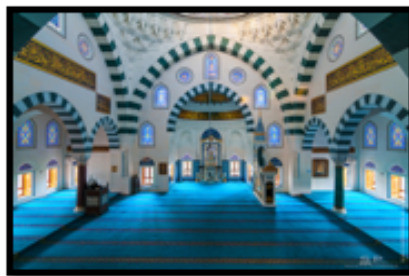
Our presentation at the Supreme Court was very informative and specifically illuminated how the separation of church and state protects religious freedom. The delegates learned about the branches of government and the reasons for their separation, how a case makes it up the court system, how supreme court justices are elected and how controversial issues related to constitutionality are debated. The delegates also enjoyed their private tours of the official court room and judicial library.



Excursions in Maryland, New York and Washington, DC



Interspersed throughout the weeks of meetings was free time to sightsee in Baltimore, MD, Washington, DC and New York City, NY. Providing time for the delegates to explore each city's offerings and streets enabled them to experience first-hand the diversity of America's citizens, its pluralistic nature, and pieces of its history.



In Maryland, the delegates spent time at the Baltimore Inner Harbor and Annapolis, Maryland's State Capital enjoying the diverse cuisine, sights and shopping. They also had a tour of the Diyanet Center, the largest Turkish Mosque in the country and enjoyed a farewell picnic in Centennial Park before departure.



In New York, the delegates ventured into Times Square for gift shopping while witnessing the melting pot of people from a variety of cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds who claim New York as their home, as well as those visiting from around the world. Some delegates spent a day sightseeing and went on a Liberty Cruise where they took pictures in front of the Statue of Liberty and famous bridges in New York. We also had a private tour of the United Nations Headquarters and learned more about their mission and objectives.



In Washington, DC, the delegates enjoyed Afghani and Turkish restaurants for lunch and dinner. They received private guided tours of the Library of Congress, the Headquarters of the Islamic Society of North America and the notable historic sights throughout DC. Everyone returned with pictures taken in front of the U.S. Capitol Building, White House, Lincoln Memorial and Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial just to name a few sites.

Reflections on the Impact of the 2018 IOP-Belgium

Throughout the delegates' two-week trip, CECF organized time to reflect. The sessions provided the delegates with an opportunity to reflect and be debriefed on their program experiences. The delegates were able to share with CECF staff their thoughts, ideas, comments, and concerns from their IOP experience, as well as discuss their next steps once they return to Belgium.

Many of them expressed to CECF how much their perspectives of the United States had shifted over the course of the program. They were pleasantly surprised to find the American people kind and friendly and admired how people from other faiths and minority groups are included and accepted here.

There were many other important insights shared over the course of the program, including:

- It is important to visit different places of worship to enhance understanding and develop relationships with people of other faith traditions.
- It is important that Imams help their congregation to learn the context of verses in the Qur'an.
- Through observing the friendship and respect between Imam Bashar and his Catholic counterpart, Father Bill Au, interfaith collaboration is possible, if it is built on trust, friendship and a shared vision.
- It is important to listen to understand, not only to defend.
- Interfaith exists and is alive in America, which allows many faiths and minorities to live together in love and cooperation. This experience could and should be shared with others.

Since returning to Belgium, the program continues to influence the delegates. Many of them still engage regularly with Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat and CECF staff seeking continued guidance, support and opportunities for cooperation as they see issues with a new perspective and knowledge learned during the 2018 IOP-Belgium.

They have had the benefit of experiencing the practice of Islam in America in a very diverse society. They have and will continue to serve as ambassadors of positive change passing this knowledge and experience on to their communities and encouraging dialogue and exchange rather than isolation and conflict between people of diverse faiths and cultures that exist in our world today.



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation

CECF would like to thank the U.S. Embassy – Belgium for its support without which this program would not have been possible. We also value our partnership in Belgium with the Platform of Flemish Imams & Muslim Experts.

The IOP and programs like it seek to develop cultural and religious understanding and improve perspectives thereby preventing conflicts and alleviating unnecessary tension between people of varying backgrounds.

CECF appreciates and is proud that exchange programs play an important part in achieving the United States' goals of improving and strengthening relationships among cultures, America & the Muslim world.

