

2018 International Observer Program-Kyrgyzstan

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

Bishkek - Baltimore, MD - New York, NY - Washington, DC - Bishkek

October 14 - 28, 2018

Summary Report

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Program at a Glance

October 14 – 18 (Baltimore and Silver Spring, MD)

- CECF Orientation
- Office of the Assistant U.S. Attorney for Maryland /Maryland Coordination and Analysis Center (MCAC)
- University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC)
- Al-Rahmah School
- Baltimore City Police Department (BCPD)
- Muslim Community Center (MCC)
- MCC Medical Clinic
- Montgomery County Faith Community Working Group (MCFCWG)

October 19 – 21 (New York, NY)

- Interfaith Center of New York (ICNY)
- Islamic Cultural Center of New York (ICCN)
- Cathedral of Saint John the Divine

October 22 – 26 (Washington, DC)

- U.S. Department of State
- Pew Research Center
- Georgetown University–Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim Christian Understanding
- Library of Congress
- Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)
- The United States Supreme Court
- United States Institute of Peace (USIP)

October 27 – 28 (Columbia and Baltimore, MD)

- Al Basheer Seminary
- CECF Pre-Departure Orientation

About the International Observer Program (IOP)

Promoting friendship and cooperation between people, countries and civilizations is critical in the world we live in today. Establishing these relationships begins by fostering mutual understanding, respect and appreciation of one another's culture, history, religion and way of life. We can do this in a number of ways, but face-to face interaction can help to break down barriers quickly and effectively. We all must become "Global Citizens" and realize that what happens in one area of the world has a global impact. Clergy, scholars, and teachers are essential in this endeavor. They have the ability to reach to the hearts, souls and minds of those with whom they engage. The IOP creates opportunities for these leaders to venture out and begin the process themselves. Throughout this report, you will read about and view a sampling of meetings, activities and the one-day conference in which the delegation was involved.

The IOPs are two or three-week journeys of intensive thought, observation and experiences designed for clergy members, scholars, educators and community leaders. Participants are invited through U.S. Embassies to observe and interact with communities around the U.S. and for training in specialized areas.

Throughout the program, the delegates travel with Imam Mohamad Bashir Arafat, a native of Damascus, Syria and founder of CECF. Accompanying the delegation is a highly qualified team, who have a great deal of experience with various Muslim cultures from around the world and can help the delegates make connections between each part of the program and their own unique religious, cultural, and professional backgrounds.

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

This particular IOP, entitled, Muslims in America: Community, Interfaith, Inclusiveness and Radicalization Prevention was developed to introduce the participants to the various experiences and issues within the vibrant and rapidly growing Muslim communities of the U.S. There is a focus on the fruitful interfaith relationships Muslims have developed with their neighbors of different faiths. Education is critical in addressing the need for understanding within and between religious groups, who are often ignorant of their own traditions as well as the traditions of others. Too often members of the Muslim clergy are not instructed on the importance of reaching out to those of different faiths. Cross-cultural and interfaith learning must be taught to inspire people to engage in collaborative efforts that positively impact every aspect of society, ranging from their community's most basic needs, to civic and international involvement.

IOP Kyrgyzstan Delegates

Shukur Shermatov
Zhorobai Shergaziev
Kadyr Malikov
Mambetasan Ibraev
Saidamir Dzheinaliev
Amina Usenalieva
Nurgul Esenmanova
Nadira Baiysheva
Chynarkul Karasartova
Samagan Myrzaibramov



The 2018 IOP-Kyrgyzstan consisted of four women and six men. They were chosen because of their dedication to anti-radicalization efforts and improving Kyrgyz society. The delegates work as religious and community leaders, university faculty members, Imams, and religious judges in Kyrgyzstan. The positions they have allow them direct access to not only the country's policy makers but the general public as well. All of them have spent time working at various institutions in Kyrgyzstan including Osh State University, Arabaev University and The Grand Muftiyat, of Kyrgyzstan. This journey was loaded with numerous stimulating and engaging meetings. For all of the participants this was life changing trip as it challenged their preconceived ideas of the United States and multi-cultural societies. They soon realized and embraced one of the main ideas of the IOP, which is the importance of acting locally but thinking globally. The 14-day journey marked for many their first true exposure to Western culture. The IOP gave them great insight into what is like to be a Muslim in a religiously pluralistic country.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

The 2018 IOP-Kyrgyzstan began with the arrival of the delegation at Washington-Dulles International Airport on October 14th. The group was met by Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat and members of the CECF staff. Following their arrival, the delegation was transported to the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Baltimore, MD.

The day after their arrival to the United States, the delegates received a two-day orientation with Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat, Father Bill Au, Pastor of the Shrine of the Sacred Heart and Al Basheer Faculty, and Robert Stucky, Al Basheer Faculty and Julianne Norman, CECF volunteer. 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.

Civilizations Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (CECF)

The arrival orientation conducted at the Hyatt Regency Baltimore Inner Harbor Hotel beginning in the afternoon following a good night's rest included the speakers and topics listed below:

- **Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat**, CECF President, gave an introduction to the delegates about "CECF and Its Activities in the U.S. and Abroad", the importance of the 2018 IOP-Kyrgyzstan focused on "*Muslims in America: Community, Interfaith, Inclusiveness and Radicalization Prevention*", and "*The Importance of Interfaith Dialogue - a Message Found Throughout the Qur'an*".

- **Robert Stucky**, Faculty at Al Basheer Seminary and Interfaith Center, gave an introduction on "*Spirituality and Religion in the U.S. - Evolution and Trends*".



- **Father William Au**, Pastor at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart and Faculty at Al Basheer Seminary and Interfaith Center, presented on *“Religion & Culture in a Pluralistic World: The History of Interfaith in America and Its Contributions Toward Preventing Radicalism”*.



- **Julianne Norman**, BUBW Program Coordinator spoke about her experiences during the youth leadership and interfaith conferences both in the U.S. and in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan called *“Better Understanding for a Better World (BUBW)”*.

- **Hamza Khan**, a young Muslim community activist from Montgomery County, MD, gave a presentation on Muslim political involvement and the diversity in Montgomery County, MD.



Maryland Coordination and Analysis Center (MCAC)



The delegation’s first meeting following the arrival orientation in Baltimore was with **Mr. Harvey Eisenberg**, Assistant U.S. Attorney for the District of Maryland and Coordinator of the Anti-Terrorism Advisory Council of Maryland. He was joined by **Mr. David Engel**, Director of the MCAC. Mr. Eisenberg and Mr. Engel gave a background on the MCAC and the multiple roles the agency plays in securing public safety. The MCAC is a multi-agency organization made up of various law enforcement entities from the federal level down to the local level. MCAC coordinates action and information among Maryland law enforcement.



The meeting turned from the overall goal of the MCAC to its anti-radicalization plan. The one point the delegates picked up on was that the MCAC is just as much pro-active as it is reactive in preventing radicalization, especially among young people. In other words, the MCAC can provide counseling services to members of a community that may be under dangerous influences. The discussion on radicalization rang true amongst the delegates as Kyrgyzstan is experiencing an influx of its citizens returning from service with IS and other terror groups. In many cases, the returning fighters are attempting to lure young men into extremist/radical activities. In addition to anti-radicalization efforts, there were other important topics discussed:

- How threats are evaluated
- Communication and coordination between the member MCAC law enforcement agencies
- Responsibilities of MCAC member agencies in addressing threats
- Creation of “Plans of Action” based on the threat



University of Maryland-Baltimore County (UMBC), English Language Institute

The next visit on this IOP was a meeting with the staff and faculty of the English Language Institute (ELI) at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County (UMBC) which is one of the most ethnically diverse universities in the country.

The presentation on the work of the ELI was given by **Sarah Gardenghi**, Senior Director of Professional Studies at the institute. The ELI was set up to accommodate the needs of the many international students who attend UMBC.



The services offered range from English language and grammar classes to professional development for visiting scholars and academics.

The ELI at UMBC has been an essential part of previous IOP delegations. The delegates observe the diversity at American universities as well as see that institutions of higher learning need to be multi-dimensional, they need to offer more than just classroom learning. It was a perfect fit for the delegation as many of them work in the academic field.



Al-Rahmah School

(Private Islamic School from Kindergarten through 11th Grade)

All members of the delegation are involved in education to some degree. In drawing up the itinerary for this IOP, CECF felt it essential to show the group an American school teaching secular and religious subjects while incorporating Islamic values. Therefore Al-Rahmah School, a private Islamic school from Pre-K to 11th grade, was included in the program.

The school has been in existence since 1984 and is part of the Islamic Society of Baltimore (ISB) located in Woodlawn, Maryland. The delegates had a meeting and light lunch with Principal, **Dr. Islaah Abd'al-Rahim** and **Donna Khan**, Program and Office Administrator.



Our hosts warmly welcomed the delegation and gave the group a tour and history of the Islamic Society of Baltimore (ISB) and Al-Rahmah School. The discussion that followed centered on the curriculum of the school and how the faculty blends Islamic values with secular subjects for their diverse student population.



One of the Kindergarten Classes with their teacher.

Baltimore City Police Department (BCPD)



The delegation attended a meeting with members of the Baltimore City Police Department (BCPD). Past IOP delegations have had the pleasure of meeting with the BCPD and its dynamic Community Outreach Coordinator, Chief Melvin Russell. Chief Russell stressed the importance of building trust between the residents of the city and law enforcement. During his candid discussion with the delegates, he gave insight into the recent troubles the BCPD has faced and how his department plans on re-building the cooperative relationship between the community and the police.

Muslim Community Center (MCC)

In their first excursion outside of the Baltimore area and on their last day in Maryland, the delegation headed to the Washington, DC suburb of Silver Spring, MD. Silver Spring is located in Montgomery County, which is not only a very diverse area, but also one of the wealthiest.

The delegation was welcomed by **Imam Mohamad Abdullahi**, a Somali born Imam, who moved to the U.S. with his family.



The visit to the MCC hit on two important points which were essential to this IOP – *“Islam in the U.S. is not homogenous, many mosques serve a myriad of ethnicities and madhabs”* and second, *“The importance of generosity and kindness towards others, a value which is stressed in the Qur’an”*

MCC has become a pillar of the community through its interfaith cooperation with churches, synagogues and the local government.

MCC Medical Clinic

In 2003, the above-mentioned Muslim Community Center (MCC) opened a medical clinic. The Muslim Community Center Medical Clinic (MCC Clinic) is dedicated to providing compassionate and high-quality healthcare services to the adult population of our community regardless of race, color, religion, ethnicity, or national origin of the recipient. The care is provided at a low cost or free depending on the patient's financial standing.



The MCC Medical Clinic has assembled a remarkable group of volunteer physicians and staff who not only share their vision, dedication and commitment but also donate their expertise and personal funds to this noble cause. This wonderful team has transformed a humble initiative into a model which is inspiring other faith-based groups to emulate. With the added enthusiasm and energy of new volunteers, the Clinic has dramatically increased its ability to deliver health care services to the uninsured.

The idea of a free medical clinic attached to a faith-based organization like MCC was stunning and impressive to the group.

Montgomery County Faith Community Working Group (MCFCWG)



We continued our journey through Montgomery County with a stop in Rockville, MD to meet with an interfaith organization, the **Faith Community Working Group**. This interfaith council, which contains representatives of eleven different faith traditions, is a part of the Montgomery County Executive's Office of Community Partnerships. The unique aspect of this organization is that its members are specially trained to respond to hate crimes within the community.

The overall mission of the group is to expand the community outreach of the county government and act as a liaison between county officials and houses of worship.

The group had a discussion with **Rev. Carol Flett, Dareen Daniel** and **Imam Faizul Khan**. The members of the panel explained the need for such a group and gave a summary on its initiatives within the community and how the group responds to hate crimes.

Interfaith Center of New York (ICNY)



Our first visit in New York City was to the Interfaith Center of New York. ICNY has been at the heart of interfaith activities since its inception in 1997. The work of the center greatly increased in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York.



The group met with **Rev. Chole Breyer**, Director of ICNY and **Hanadi Doleh**, Program Associate for Community Partnerships. During the meeting, our hosts fielded questions from the delegation pertaining to:

- How is the ICNY funded?
- What programs are offered by the ICNY?
- What is meant by “grassroots interfaith”?
- What is involved in the training of the city’s clergy for interfaith work?

The goal of this visit was to show how communities are strengthened by looking at the similarities between different faiths rather than focusing on doctrinal differences. The ICNY accomplishes this by also offering retreats and seminars for New York City clergy.

Islamic Cultural Center of New York (ICCNY)

Sheikh Saad Jalloh welcomed the delegation to ICCNY, which is unofficially the main masjid in New York City. The goal of this meeting was to learn about pluralism and inclusivity in American Muslim communities as well as giving another example of Islamic education in the U.S.

This center contains a private school serving children from preschool through 8th grade. The delegation was given a tour of the center and participated in Friday prayers. Following the khutbah, the group engaged in a discussion on the founding of the center, the diversity of the congregation in both ethnicity and Islamic thought and how it is currently run through self-funding. ICCNY offers many essential services to its members, including funeral arrangements, charitable distributions of the zakat and spiritual counseling. In a broader sense, ICCNY conducts training for the NYPD and participates in numerous interfaith events throughout the year.

The ICCNY is a wonderful example of a diverse Muslim community that keeps its members involved in many efforts. The center offers many classes for new Muslims, runs charity events, and operates many other activities.



Hop-On Hop-Off Guided Bus Tour of New York City

The delegates finally had some free time to explore New York City. Despite the wind and chill in the air, the delegates boarded an open-top bus to take in the sights and sounds of the city.

The tour took them throughout Manhattan to famous sites such as the Empire State Building, Central Park, Madison Square Garden and Wall Street. The city tour was the perfect pairing to the boat ride they took through New York Harbor on Friday following their visit to ICCNY.



Cathedral of St. John, the Divine



Visiting the Cathedral of St. John, the Divine to witness a Sunday service was one of the most important visits for increasing the delegation's awareness of why a house of worship needs to be a welcoming place. Although an Episcopal church, St. John's opens its doors to all looking for a peaceful setting to pray or meditate.

The delegates received a private, guided tour of the 19th century Gothic-Revival cathedral and learned about how people from many faiths and communities worship together in services held more than 30 times a week.

Visiting the Cathedral of St. John, the Divine, one of the world's largest Anglican churches, also marked the first time many of the delegates had entered a church. They were able to closely observe mass, communion, and the art and architecture of the sanctuary.

Following mass, the delegates had the opportunity to mingle with parishioners and share their thoughts on the U.S. so far.



WASHINGTON, DC

U.S. Department of State



The Washington, DC leg of the IOP began with a morning visit to the Department of State. The delegation met with **Michael Duffin**, Bureau of Counter-Terrorism, **Madeleine Wells**, Bureau of Human Rights and Labor, **Samir Hussein**, Office of Religious Freedom and **Michael Kim**, South and Central Asia Officer for Kyrgyzstan.

After the delegation gave their introductions the meeting began in earnest with the State Department panel describing the strategic importance of Kyrgyzstan in the fight against radical extremism. Members of the delegation echoed the sentiment and called for greater cooperation between the countries of Central Asia in countering violence committed in the name of Islam.

Mr. Duffin gave a summary on the new strategies being implemented by his office in countering extremism. Since more and more youth are becoming radicalized through on-line chat rooms and websites, U.S. programs are now focusing on youth empowerment through job training and education, steering them away from the on-line rhetoric.

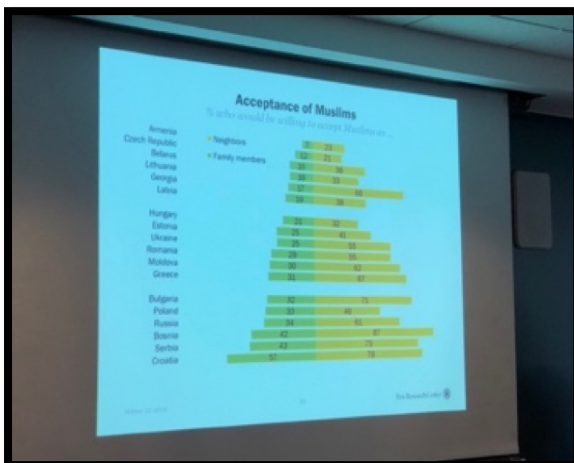


Pew Research Center

The meeting with researchers at Pew gave the group a tremendous amount of insight into the religious landscape of the U.S. and the state of Islam in the country. The researchers, **Drs. Besheer Mohamad** and **Scott Gardner** presented on “*Islam in America in comparison to Muslim Majority Countries*”. This was a multi-faceted presentation which touched upon the subjects of religious conversion, acceptance of Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries and the connection between religion and national identity.



To back up their research, the presenters laid out their methodologies and explained how this information is used by policy makers around the world.



Georgetown University

Seminar at Al-Waleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACMCU)

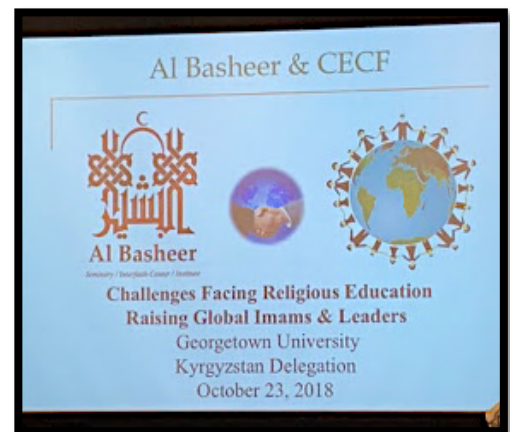
In order to create a balanced program, CECF put together a seminar on religious education in the U.S. and how Islamic Studies are taught at the various levels of the American educational system. The seminar was created in close cooperation with our host at Georgetown, **Dr. Susan Douglass**, Educational Outreach Coordinator at the ACMCU.

The delegates were very eager to explore the nuances of religious education in the U.S. as the separation between religion and government is enshrined in the Constitution. Dr. Douglass began the presentation with a summary of the separation of religion and government, why it is important and how this has shaped education.

The delegates were quick to pick up on the idea that teaching religion in a state funded school must be taught as a humanity course, i.e., the instruction is strictly academic, not devotional, instruction is for exposure to various religions rather than imposing beliefs and the aim is to inform rather than endorse.

To wrap up the seminar, Dr. Douglass spoke on the challenges of creating textbooks which conform to state guidelines while at the same time give complete views of various faiths.

The seminar helped the group understand that in a very diverse nation like the U.S., religious education is a protected right, but it cannot be given through the endorsement of the government.



Library of Congress

Following the seminar at Georgetown University, the delegates were able to tour the Library of Congress. The delegation was amazed not only with the scale and grandeur of the location, but also the country's dedication to the preservation of knowledge.



Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

CSIS is bipartisan and non-profit organization dedicated to providing information on security and economic issues to members of the U.S. government that shape foreign policy.

Dr. Jeffrey Mankoff, Senior Fellow of the Eurasia Program and **Cyrus Newlin**, Research Associate for Russia and Eurasia gave a background on CSIS and discussed the ongoing research the center is conducting in Central Asia.

The ensuing discussion focused on the strategic importance of Central Asia in several areas, most notably energy, trade and security. The delegation was very curious on the research and how their reports can affect U.S. policy in the region.



Private-Guided Tour in Russian of Washington, DC



The group was very excited for a private tour of Washington, DC. The tour was conducted in Russian by a guide named Igor and packed in many of the major sites of the city.

U.S. State Capitol Building
Thomas Jefferson Building
White House
National World War II Memorial
Freedom Wall
Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall
Lincoln Memorial
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial
Korean War Memorial
National Archives
Freedom Plaza
Washington Monument
National Mall
Smithsonian Institute
Jefferson Memorial
Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) Memorial
Washington National Cathedral

United States Institute of Peace (USIP)

The visit to USIP proved to be an eye-opening experience for the group. The delegation was welcomed by **Melissa Nozell, Program Officer for Religion and Inclusive Societies, Rachel Chang, Program Assistant, Barmak Pazhwak, Senior Program Officer for South and Central Asia** and **Kathleen Kuehnast, Director of Gender Policy and Strategy**.

All of our hosts at USIP have experience with Kyrgyzstan or Central Asian issues. Much like the State Department, USIP believes empowerment of the disenfranchised can resolve conflict and combat radical extremism. Ms. Nozell and Mr. Pazhwak gave a presentation on the grassroots programs USIP has in Central Asia which deal with religious freedom, gender issues and developing economic opportunities, all which tie into combatting religious extremism.

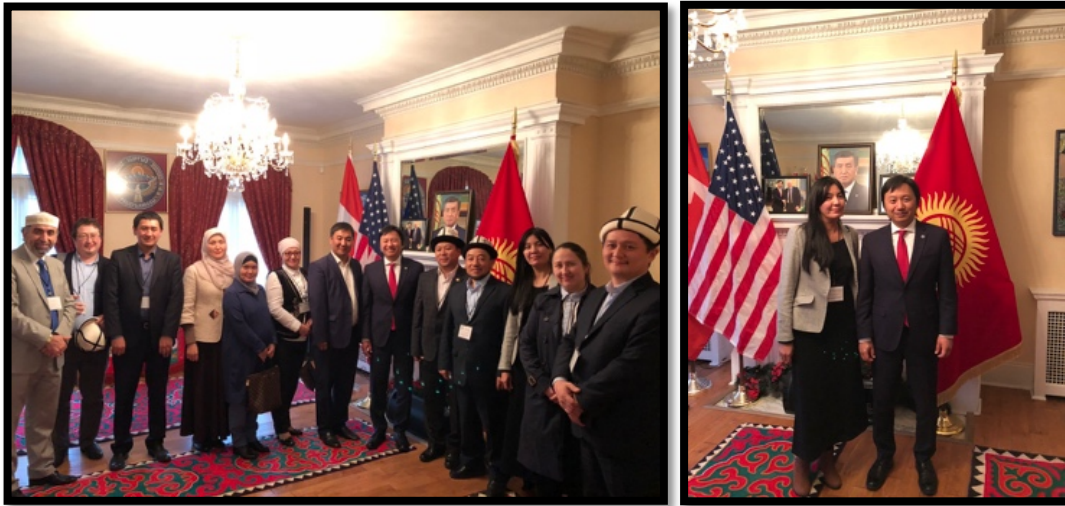


The Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic to the U.S. and Canada

The last full day in Washington, DC was capped off with a very exciting and eagerly anticipated visit to the Kyrgyz Embassy. The visit was a last-minute addition to the itinerary but a welcome one at that.

We were graciously welcomed by **Ambassador Kadyr Toktogulov** and members of the embassy staff. The visit gave the delegation an opportunity to speak with fellow countrymen, network a bit and most importantly get a taste of home.

We are very grateful to the Kyrgyz Embassy for accommodating the delegation's visit.



The Supreme Court of the United States

As our time in Washington was coming to a close, the delegation was given a tour of the Supreme court and briefing by **Supreme Court Fellow Lilia Alvarez**.

Ms. Alvarez, who is an attorney, gave a tour of the court and explained the duties and practices of the court, as well as fielded questions from the delegates. They were very interested to see there were more similarities than differences between constitutional law and Sharia law. This reinforced the idea that the two systems are not incompatible in most cases and can complement each other. The Supreme Court Fellow confirmed what both Imam Abdullahi of the MCC and Imam Bashar had stressed, that living by Islamic principles is in fact not inconsistent with American jurisprudence.



Farewell and Final Thoughts on 2018 IOP-Kyrgyzstan

An essential component of the IOP are the group reflection sessions. Within the 14-day excursion, 3 reflection sessions were built in to the itinerary. The sessions provided the delegates with an opportunity to reflect and express their thoughts on the program. The delegates were able to share with CECF staff their thoughts, ideas, concerns and the pre-conceived notions about the U.S. that may have changed. The sessions are conducted in a roundtable form so that all of the participants feel comfortable being open and honest in their statements.

Throughout these sessions, which are led by Imam Arafat, the delegates are reminded about the importance of following up with the connections they have made during the program. This is stressed because it is through continued communication that new programs come to fruition.

It is the sincere hope of CECF that the experiences of the IOP continue to influence the work and lives of the alumni. Imam Arafat continually travels to follow up with the IOP alumni to see how the delegates are putting the lessons learned to use in their home countries. Many of them still engage regularly with Imam Arafat and CECF staff seeking continued guidance, support and opportunities for cooperation. The IOP has taught them to see social issues with a new perspective and knowledge. They have had the benefit of experiencing life in America and how diversity is a source of strength rather than a source of conflict.

The delegates were chosen to participate in the IOP because of their desire to make their country a better place for all. They have and will continue to serve as catalysts of positive change, using their IOP experience to encourage dialogue and exchange ideas. They are committed to bringing peace and tolerance to their communities rather than accept the isolation and conflict that exists between peoples of different faiths and cultures.



End of the Program Evaluations & Certificates of Appreciation



The program struck accord with the delegates and it became even more clear to them that the youth in their country must be cared for and connected to their families and communities, as well as have opportunities for a promising future. After discussions with Imam Bashar, particularly on radicalization prevention on a local level, one of the delegates was inspired to research the possibility of establishing a **Center for Youth - focusing on leadership training**. Having a loving family, a good education, a supportive community, and career possibilities to aspire to is a solid foundation for a bright future.

Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation (CECF) would like to give special thanks to the U.S. Embassy in Kyrgyzstan for supporting the 2018 International Observer Program (IOP)

