



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation



2018 European Imams Conference: Promotion of Interfaith Relationship Building, Radicalization Prevention & Countering Violent Extremism



In partnership with the U.S. Embassy, Rabat

Summary Report

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Submitted By:

Sarah Arafat

Programs Coordinator

Email: sarafat.cecf@gmail.com

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European Imams Conference (EIC): Promotion of Interfaith Relationship Building, Radicalization Prevention & Countering Violent Extremism

Civilizations Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (CECF) was delighted to partner with the Cultural Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Rabat and the Ministry of Al Awqaf and Islamic Affairs in Rabat. This conference was funded by the U.S. Embassy of Rabat for selected Imams of Moroccan descent living in Belgium, Spain, France, Italy and the Netherlands. During the conference, there was simultaneous translation into English, Spanish and Arabic to accommodate all participants.

CONFERENCE OBJECTIVES

- Sharing each other's experiences and the challenges faced when dealing with youth
- Identifying the most important traits when dealing with violent extremist ideology
- Identifying what is working in Morocco in comparison to Europe when faced with radicalization among the youth.
- Creating a network of support between CECF, the IOP Alumni and Imams in Europe (Belgium, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Italy) and Morocco, who can collaborate together on future projects that benefit these countries
- Building cooperation between the alumni, influential Imams in Europe, CECF, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs' Imam Training Center and Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas to get the most out of these efforts of peacebuilding, conflict resolution and countering violent ideologies

TOPICS

- Countering violent extremist behavior and ideology among the youth and religious scholars
- Explore the challenges of the participating Imams in Europe
- CECF IOP Alumni Experiences: Activities to engage and connect alumni, influential Imams in Europe, CECF, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs' Imam Training Center and Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas and create a support network
- Introducing the Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas and their efforts in P/CVE
- Successful techniques used by Imams in Morocco and European Imams, in preventing and combating radicalization among youth

LIST OF 2018 EIC SPEAKERS:

Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat- CECF President

Mr. Ahmed Atif- Representative of the Ministry of Al Awqaf & Islamic Affairs

Dr. Mohammed Ek Mentar- Representative of Al Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas

Mr. Brian George- Public Affairs Officer at U.S. Embassy, Rabat

Ms. Sara Nirheche- Member of Risky Behaviors Unit at the Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas

Mr. Said Ait Bajja- Comedian and President of Association ISSIL

Ms. Merieme Addou- Film Producer

Ms. Yasmina Sarhriuny- Chief of Party at Creative Associates

Ms. Mounia Terraz: IOP Alumni & Chief Editor of Religion & Thoughts section at the Daily Evening News

EIC PARTICIPANTS:

The Netherlands

1. Yassir Houtch (Country Representative)
2. Yassin El Forkani
3. Mohamed Ofkir
4. Aissa Zanzen

Belgium

5. Said Aberkan (Country Representative)
6. Brahim Bouzarif
7. Tijani Boulaouali

Italy

8. Youssef Zahir (Country Representative)
9. Hassan El Alaoui Ismail

France

10. Abdelhali Nadimi (Country Representative)
11. Mohamed El Abouri
12. Rachid Mouyh

Spain

13. Mohammed Halhoul Debboun (Country Representative)
14. Rachid Bussian Mohamed
15. Karim Mohamed Mohamed
16. Mohamed Mohamed Mohand



Group Dinner at Ziriyab in the old medina



SESSION SUMMARIES:

Panel: *Drivers and Enablers of Violent Extremism* moderated by Imam Arafat

Overview: This session included discussion on the complex interactions between “push” factors such as socioeconomic and political conditions, and “pull” factors such as ideological appeal and recruitment mechanisms. It also looked at the interaction and overlap between the drivers of violent extremism and drivers of other forms of political violence and conflict, as well as the nexus between violent extremism and development issues. Participants contributed insights and perspectives on local, national, and sub-regional drivers across Europe.



- **Imams are not regulated, held accountable or speak a common language:** Spanish Imams stressed the necessary regulation of Imams in order to properly represent Islam, transparency of mosques, and a key benefit of staying engaged in society. Regarding the regulation of Imams in Spain, Islam is represented by lone individuals when it can be argued that Muslims would benefit from having a qualified representative. The lack of accountability allows for anyone who can recite Quran well to lead communities as Imams when this isn't sufficient. How can parents entrust their children to a leader without credentials? An Imam should be a community technician. Additionally, Imams aren't paid well and therefore are easily influenced by different currents. Returning to the issue of accountability, there are no current regulations regarding issues like an Imam's eligibility to lead a congregation if he has a criminal record. There are no terms for him to accept. If he calls people to extreme views, should he be able to preach? The ideal value of keeping government and religion separate becomes murky if we need these things to be regulated.

A crucial piece of being an Imam involves speaking the language of the country and of the people. This is not currently always the case which severely hinders progress, a view that resonated with representatives of all 5 countries.

- **Alienation of non-Muslims from mosques:** According to Spanish Imam Halhoul, mosques in Spain are not inviting and according to Italian Imam Zahir, mosques or “associations” in Italy are underground. Members don't invite non-members inside to look around and get an idea of what happens within. By doing that, it further alienates both parties.
- **Lack of qualified Imams to de-radicalize prison inmates:** Said Aberkan, a Belgian Imam, discussed the potential role of Imams in countering terrorism that breeds in prisons. He discussed how many attackers are radicalized in prisons and compares prisons to schools for radicalization. By giving a more important role to supervised religious leaders with degrees in Islamic education, he argued that they can counteract the radical version of Islam with moderate views, provided they speak the language of the people.

- **Loss of identity among the youth:** Zahir, an Italian Imam, stressed that Muslim youth don't know who they are which makes them vulnerable to manipulation by those with impure interests. According to Zahir, "Youth aren't grounded in their culture; they hear about it from their parents, but don't feel a connection." Children also feel resentment against the state due to politicians who attack Islam and Muslims. This leads to a larger and more general feeling of resentment among the Muslim community who now view the government as the enemy. Politicians don't take into account the effects of their hate speech.

A possible solution is to bring kids back to the masjid where diversity is celebrated. Youth only make up 5-10% of mosque attendees because Imams aren't currently able or trained to connect with them. At this point, El Forkani, a Dutch Imam who has dealt with exactly this issue, shared his successful strategy for Imams to provide this connection. Firstly, it is important to understand that first generation Moroccans who moved to Holland view Islam as a religion which is also part of their culture. In contrast, second generation children have trouble separating religion from culture when in reality they are completely separate entities. Providing moderate view based religious education support is crucial in order to correct misunderstandings and prevent manipulation.

- **Space missing for youth to discuss issues and debate religious issues with an Imam:** Houtch, from Holland, suggested that one of the umbrella approaches to CVE is dismantling the atmosphere of breeding extremism through education. El Forkani and his community recognized that youth have a passion for debate, science and analysis. They want facts. There is a disconnect between youth who want to ask questions but can't and Imams who want to share main ideas and not details. While Friday sermons are beneficial for communities, provided there is a positive message, debates are necessary to draw back and engage the youth in lively conversations held in mosques.
- **Individuals predisposed to radicalization:** Many participants contributed to the thought of certain people being predisposed to being radicalized. Houtch from Holland argued that divorce catalyzes extremism. Affected children show suspicious behavior and intervention is necessary. People with severe financial needs are also more likely to be swayed, then paid, for adopting radical religious views.
- **Lack of dialogue within and between communities:** The most commonly agreed to strategy to build bridges among people is dialogue. Not only is it a component of Sunnah, in its absence there is chaos. Finding common ground is a great way to humanize one another. Ismail added that in order to do this, again there must be a common language between the Imam and community.
- **Need for circulated moderate views:** Extremism can only be combated by moderate views; to reach peace and coexist, they are essential. The problem currently is where to get these moderate views and how to most effectively circulate them to the public.

Best Practices from Morocco in CVE Youth Programs

Overview: Established Moroccan leaders across a variety of fields fostered a dialogue of best practices in implementing youth programs that counter violent extremism.

Sara Nirheche - Member of the Risky Behaviors Unit, Rabita Mohammedia of Ulemas

Nirheche shared some of the Rabita's unique approaches to CVE and PVE that go beyond publishing articles. For example, they understand the ripple effect youth can have on other youth. To use this ripple effect to their benefit, they train youth who can influence their peers. Additionally, there is a notable shift in the number of youth that are interested in theater and arts. To benefit from that shift, the Rabita now uses drama as a method of spreading moderate views. Aside from the arts, the Rabita trains people in many fields. They organize peer prisoner, prison staff and prison director training. Also, in coordination with the Canadian Embassy, they study the drivers of extremism. With this information they use their website "**Chababe.ma**", an online platform, to counter violent extremism online. Within their website are areas to clarify misinformation and another area that hosts debates on hot topics. Chababe.ma is not just a website, but a TV station and radio network also. The Rabita clearly is making great efforts to promote moderate views of Islam from a host of directions.

Said Ait Bajja - President of Association ISSIL and Comedian

Bajja's company ISSIL takes a more comedic and satiric approach to CVE. They create plays to perform in front of society and prisoners convicted of terrorism that highlight how misinterpretations occur without knowing. One prisoned inmate was a PhD graduate of Islamic law, yet he was incarcerated for acting on his misunderstandings of that particular subject. Bajja stressed that extremism begins from changes in the smallest details and believes that his art form can really make a change.

Merieme Addou - Film Producer

Addou combats violent extremism through educational media production. At the conference, she shared a ten-minute clip of her feature length documentary "Casablanca Calling". The story revolves around the crucial role of Morshidat, Muslim female scholars trained in Morocco since 2006. The lead Morshidat in the documentary is a CECF Alumni of the **International Observer Program (IOP)** to the U.S. in 2011. She highlighted the challenges women face living in a relatively "male dominated" society. Her active role in society includes dealing with a variety of women's issues of all ages and even within prisons.

Yasmina Sarhriuny - Chief of Party of the Creative Associates project, "Fostering Peaceful Communities in Morocco"

Sarhriuny is leading a project that is taking a personalized and technical approach to countering violent extremism in Morocco. The community leaders that she trains in Fez, Sale, Casablanca and Beni Mellal start with the basics of defining violent extremism and analyzing the factors that push or pull someone in that direction. Some of these factors include history, geopolitics and finances. Only after coming to an agreement on that foundational platform will they develop programs in the field.

Creative Associates' project is working all over Morocco in various large cities, but they also work in small isolated areas. They also give special attention to the women in society who have very stressful lives. Busy moms also have to deal with



children who are constantly plugged into their devices which is where recruitment often happens. Along with providing trainings to many groups of people in society, Sahriuny and her team want to bring back the value of religious leaders.

Working Group Exercise and Presentation/Discussion

Overview: Building on the prior discussions, participants worked in five small groups (one from each country) to identify priority areas for P/CVE strategies and identify key actors to support and engage in developing P/CVE strategies and initiatives. Representatives from each of the working groups presented their outcomes to the plenary. Participants were encouraged to provide feedback, ask questions, and critically reflect on each other's proposals and ideas. The main issues discussed were:



- Adding an orientation to world religion to children's educational curriculum would allow religion to be a desensitized academic subject. It can become normalized and if we introduce it accurately, the next generation would be informed earlier in life. This would not just apply to public schools, but also religious schools. Introducing interfaith academically early can have a ripple effect in society.
- Renewing the content of religious discourse is imperative. Communities need sermons that are applicable to their daily lives and reflect their reality and their interests. Participating Imams in attendance stressed the nature of their non-traditional Islamic communities. Traditional religious sermons do not always connect with the congregation.
- Imams need to renew the way they communicate in their communities. Firstly, communication needs to be done in the language of the people. After a common language is established, an Imam needs to learn the society to navigate its individual concerns to address in religious discourse. They can have a huge impact on the youth if they are able to communicate with them effectively.
- In order for Imams to independently and fully invest their energy into bettering their community, they need to be taken care of financially. Imams are very busy individuals who are spread thin so making sure that they have a salary that they can live off of is imperative to a community running successfully.
- Consider adding a second Imam to the masjid to address all the needs of the community.
- Outside of religious communities, societies at large need to develop campaigns for children from different backgrounds to be able to coexist peacefully with one another. Children are easily influenced, and this innocent nature of children should be applied wisely and practically. One of the many benefits of such a campaign would be the elimination of stereotypes of Muslim children in the minds of non-Muslim children.
- Refreshing the role of mosques can have many benefits. Historically in the time of the Prophet, a mosque is not simply a place to offer the five daily prayers, but it is a podium; it is a space to clarify misconceptions and to enlighten people. Additionally, by hosting debates and societally

relevant conversations, Muslim youth would return to mosques and engage with the community. This is a strategy currently applied in the Netherlands with much success.

- By providing religiously intellectual and spiritual care to prisoners and inmates, Imams have the potential to de-radicalize extremists within the prisons. According to the Imams in attendance, without such care, prisons become breeding grounds for radicalization.
- To counter the narrative of Muslims portrayed in the media, Muslims need to become more involved in their communities to make human connections with other members of society. One way to do that is through volunteering. Community service produces open-minded people and bridges of trust are built between them.
- To create avenues of trust between Muslim communities and law enforcement, communities should delegate a liaison to create such a space for communication and coherence.
- Youth are very well educated in terms of social media and have countless virtual connections to other people. They can use that platform to spread a positive message about Muslims and Islam. Also, if educated on identifying violent extremist propaganda, they can assist law enforcement if they come across it online.
- Since youth spend so much time online, the few reliable and verified online resources available to them should be circulated. For example, the Rabita has their website with a debate forum and their radio show which can be an enlightening platform for those without a helpful contact in their Islamic communities. While we can always work on producing additional online resources, we can start circulating the reliable ones we have.

Challenges and Capacity Gaps in Developing National P/CVE Strategies

Overview: This session included a discussion on the existing challenges and gaps faced by religious leaders and other partners seeking to develop and implement inclusive P/CVE strategies. Participants were invited to contribute their own experiences, challenges, and opportunities, which will help inform potential P/CVE capacity-building initiatives. The main issues discussed were:



- Mosques are not currently “safe spaces” for curious members of the community to discuss sensitive and potentially societally relevant issues. Youth specifically want spirituality and scientific answers to hard questions and current Imams are not all equipped to address these needs.
- There is an unclear line of how far Imams should be involved in state-funded community work. Each country has boundaries of state versus religion, but there is an argument to be made for the importance of involving Imams in problems related to the Muslim community. He may be able to address social issues from a religious and spiritual perspective that state employees would not be able to. This boundary between the government and religion is also felt when trying to get religious education taught in public schools especially in secular societies.
- According to the Spanish participants, the government in Spain does not address violent extremism at all, so places like Catalonia have become breeding grounds for terrorists.

- Most of the current Imams are not interacting with the few youth that go to the mosque. They lead prayers, officiate marriages, and conduct funeral services. When it comes to their community's individual concerns, they are not well versed.
- A majority of the Muslim youth, in the countries represented at the conference, do not go to the mosque once they have reached an age where they have graduated from the language or culture programs that their parents pushed them to attend. This absence at the mosque is felt when youth are in trouble for acting on misinterpreted religious information which could have been clarified at the mosque.
- While countries like Belgium and Holland have dedicated time in high school where religious theology is taught academically, this practice is not applied in most other European countries. There may be other effective approaches to educate the public, but without a clear approach there can be no progress. Each country needs a plan to prevent and counter violent extremism within their own cultures and societies.
- Not enough attention is given to women in societies. Mothers are the first educators of children and the ones who most likely know them the best. By educating women, especially mothers, specifically in regard to detecting signs of radicalization, they can have an impact in their children's lives and other children in their communities. Researching ways that women can counter violent extremism is a worth-while avenue to invest in.

The Roles of Various Stakeholders

Overview: Examining the roles of various stakeholders (religious, political and cultural leaders, youth and women) in identifying, preventing, and countering violent extremism effectively and in coordination and cooperation among a multitude of stakeholders.

- This was by far the most challenging session for the participants. After brainstorming, the consensus was that connections with embassies in each country could assist them in their efforts to engage youth in their communities. While many of the participants were unclear regarding how to establish a working relationship with someone in the embassy, Erica Thibault, the Cultural Affairs Officer in Rabat, Morocco pointed out that it all starts with a request for a meeting with the Public Affairs of Political sections. A perfect opportunity to reach out is Ramadan and invite the PAO to an Iftar that your community holds. In this way, the PAO gets to know your community and over a meal, a potential working relationship may be born. She also mentioned that some Embassies have funding for small grants for NGOs that focus on P/CVE projects.



Concrete Steps & Follow Up By CECF

Overview: Participants discussed the concrete steps they will take in their respective countries to develop inclusive P/CVE strategies.

- Most of the participants in this session were Imams, and the rest are influential community leaders. Regardless, all of them decided to encourage interfaith within their own community before developing any P/CVE strategies.
- Through each of the participants' organizations, professionally communicate with embassies and enquire about their small funds to run projects on P/CVE. For example, propose vulnerable youth communication programs or discuss the possibility of starting Imam training in your country.
- The Ministry of Islamic Affairs of Morocco is currently training Imams from France and African nations through its Imam Training Center, so French communities can take advantage of this if interested.
- Provide spaces for youth to discuss and debate topics they do not understand at the mosque.
- Try alternative methods of P/CVE through the arts and theater as demonstrated and described by Sara Nirheche, Said Ait Bajja and Yasmina Sarhriuny.
- Imams need to begin understanding their communities starting with the language they speak.
- Have the youth and older influential community members go on exchange programs. When they return to their community, they will be able to share their experience and the community can benefit second-hand.
- Meet with the Office of Moroccans Living Abroad in Europe to garner support for your projects.
- If interested, the Rabita leads a variety of programs and would accept invitations to France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Italy.
- CECF shared and are willing to partner with the participants on several programs in each of their countries:
 - Sports & Dialogue
 - International Observer Program
 - English Language for Imams & The Culture of Pluralism
 - Better Understanding for a Better World Conferences for Imams



REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPACT OF THE 2018 EIC:

During the lunch hosted by Erica Thibault the day after the conference at the U.S. Embassy Rabat, some of the remaining participants from Italy were in attendance as well as CECF staff. It was clear through the discussion that this conference was completely different from all other Imams conferences in Europe. It was unique because it was funded by the U.S. Embassy, transparent and the topics were engaging and highly relevant to society today. While some of the participants confessed the skepticism from their community regarding the U.S. Embassy funding such a conference, the participants left feeling the sincerity of the U.S. in engaging with Imams from Europe and want to help be part of a positive change.



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation

CECF would like to thank the U.S. Embassy, Rabat for its partnership and support without which the program would not be possible. The EIC and programs like it seek to develop religious and societal understanding and improve perspectives thereby preventing conflicts and alleviating unnecessary tension between people of varying backgrounds. CECF appreciates and is proud that this program plays an important part in achieving the goals of improving and strengthening relationships among societies, America & the Muslim world.

