

Arab Dialogue Workshop

A workshop held in Amman, Jordan between July 30th and August 1st, 2008 brought together activists and organizations involved in interfaith dialogue in Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon. The workshop, which took place at the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies, is a follow-up on a research project on interfaith dialogue in the Middle East, which resulted in a book by Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Amal I. Houry, and Emily Welty. This book, entitled “Unity in Diversity: Interfaith Dialogue in the Middle East,” was published by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Press in June 2007 and aims to advance interfaith peacebuilding in Arab societies through the promotion of networking between the numerous different organizations and activists in the region.

The workshop was organized by Salam Institute for Peace and Justice, in partnership with the Intercultural Forum for Dialogue, which is launched and sustained by the Cultural Development Division of the Coptic Evangelical Organizations for Social Services (CEOSS). An invitation to participate in the workshop was extended to a number of individuals and organizations active in the field - some were interviewed for the book; others were new organizations that were created after the research was completed. Participants included representatives from the following organizations:

1. Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services- CEOSS (Egypt)
2. Center for Civilization Studies and Dialogue of Cultures, Cairo University (Egypt)
3. Arab Organization for International Cooperation (Egypt)
4. National Research Center (Egypt)
5. The Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies (Jordan)
6. United Religions Initiative (Jordan)
7. Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center- Wi'am (Palestine)
8. Nahwa Al-Muwatiniya- Towards Citizenship (Lebanon)
9. The Middle East Council of Churches (Lebanon)
10. Fokolari (Lebanon)
11. Offre-Joie Organization- Farah al-Ata' (Lebanon)
12. Forum for Development, Culture, and Dialogue (Lebanon)
13. Jousour (Lebanon)
14. Salam Institute for Peace and Justice (USA)

The workshop provided an open space for dialogue and discussion between participants and provided them with the opportunity to come in contact with each other to further build the capacity for interfaith work in the Arab world. By giving participants the opportunity to share their experiences, frustrations, and hopes regarding interfaith peacebuilding in the different countries, the workshop was an important starting point to help activists to meet and plan for future common work in the field.

The workshop accomplished many objectives: most importantly it provided a space for honest and open dialogue between the different organizations in the region; it introduced activists and organizations to each other (there were cases where participants from the

same country did not even know each other); it provided a space for shared experiences and expertise; and opened up the way for future cooperation in the field of interfaith peacebuilding. All participants agreed that interfaith dialogue is necessary and important in the Arab world, both as a counter force against fundamentalism and sectarian divisions and as a means to build sustainable and peaceful societies.

Participants agreed on the importance of establishing an Arab Network for Dialogue (religious, cultural, and civilizational). Such a network will provide a forum where activists in the field can share expertise, organize joint projects and activities, and continue the dialogue and discussion among the activists and organizations in the region.

Participants also emphasized the importance of focusing on the youth and the need to involve them in dialogue. This could be done through different activities that target this stratum of the population. Upon the completion of the workshop, participants decided to stay in contact with each other and organize periodic meetings. They vowed to continue discussions and efforts to establish an Arab Network for Dialogue and invited as many organizations as possible to take part in this endeavor.

