

## Interfaith Youth Movement Growing Worldwide

By Mohamed Elshinnawi

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**In many societies around the world where religious differences have boiled into armed conflict, young people are at particular risk. Often, they are recruited by religious extremists to join in terror campaigns against rival religious communities. But as we hear from in this report written by VOA's Mohamed Elshinnawi, a growing interfaith youth movement is working to counter the extremists, and to give young people the tools and training they need to build more peaceful, tolerant societies.**



From its headquarters in the midwestern city of Chicago, a private organization known as the Interfaith Youth Core is training what it hopes will be tomorrow's peace-makers. The not-for-profit American group teaches young people how to build bridges of friendship and understanding across cultures and faiths. It provides leadership training, program funding and support for networking projects among groups of young people around the world.

### Young Muslims at Forefront of Interfaith Youth Movement in U.S.

**The Interfaith Youth Core teaches young American Muslims value of religious tolerance**

Dr. Eboo Patel, a well-known Muslim and social activist in the United States, is the founder and director of

Interfaith Youth Core. He says young American Muslims are at the forefront of the interfaith youth movement.

"They use it as an opportunity to manifest the peace-building commands within Islam," Patel says. "They use it as an opportunity to articulate their very misunderstood religion in the world. And they use it as an opportunity to get to know people from different backgrounds with whom they share many values."

Young people comprise a large and growing percentage of the populations in many of the most religiously volatile corners of the world. These are often places, says Patel, where traditional socio-economic patterns are breaking down, where people from different backgrounds and faiths are interacting more closely and competing for influence, and where frictions are mounting between religious and civil law.

In this turmoil, Patel says, it can be difficult for young people of faith to understand the value of a pluralistic and tolerant society. He believes the interfaith youth movement he's helping to build focuses on some essential truths: that people of all faiths deserve to be treated with dignity and



IFYC Photo by Eileen Ryan

**Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, says young American Muslims are at the forefront of the interfaith youth movement**

respect, and that there can be no peace between nations without peace between religions.

### **Youth Recruit for Peace in Middle East**

Samuel Rizk is the founding member of the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue, a private group based in Beirut, Lebanon, that specializes in conflict resolution and religious dialogue. Rizk believes the interfaith youth movement has been an important counter-strategy against extremist recruiters.

"The [interfaith] youth movement can actually recruit them for peace initiatives," he says. "We can provide models for co-existence in different parts of the world; then clearly that would be a help to peace in the future.

Rizk says the movement's belief in religious pluralism is a key part of its efforts to help defuse seemingly intractable conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere.

"Now we are talking about relationships between Muslims and Christian young people. In another instance we are talking about relationships between Sunnis & Shias," Rizk says. "I think there will come a time, hopefully, when there is peace in the Middle East that we can expand to include Muslims and Christians and Jews."

### **Reaching Out to Young European Muslims**

The U.S government, too, recognizes the importance of this interfaith youth movement. Farah Pandith is a specialist with the U.S. State Department's Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. Her office works with young European Muslims interested in studying the American model of religious pluralism.

She is hopeful that they are "sharp enough and strong enough when they are dealing with their identity problem, and they are being told that they cannot belong, they are being told they are different, and they are being told that the Jews and the Christians are not their friends, that they have the ability to be able to push back against that insane ideology."

Farah believes that educating young Muslims in Europe and elsewhere, as they struggle to find their identities in today's chaotic world, can help them appreciate the value of peaceful interfaith dialogues, and so better resist the lure of religious extremism.



**Farah Pandith believes that educating young Muslims in various parts of the world can help them appreciate the value of religious tolerance**

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