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WASHINGTON REPORT ON MIDDLE EAST AFFAIRS

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Waging Peace

Interfaith Youth Movement for Peace

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) hosted a seminar on "Advancing the Interfaith Youth Movement for Peace" on June 10 in Washington, DC. The speakers represented a variety of organizations that are engaging young people around the world as partners and future leaders in interfaith works.

Eboo Patel, director and founder of Inter Faith Youth Core (IFYC) in Chicago, said that the interfaith movement should look beyond diversity and work for pluralism. The difference, he explained, is that the former is simply a fact of demographics, when people of different backgrounds live next to each other in the same place. Diversity becomes pluralism when these people engage each other through positive interaction. The aim of the interfaith movement, then, is for religious communities to move from simple coexistence to a working partnership for the common good.

Patel cited several factors in the importance of engaging youth in an interfaith context: the "youth bulge" that is bringing down the average age of the world's population; the inability of traditional livelihoods to provide income for the next generation; what it means to be an individual in this new globalized world; and the ongoing religious revival happening across the globe.

This last factor reflects a sea change from the popular understanding of the role of religion just a decade ago. Describing the late 1990s, when he studied Islam and religious diversity, Patel recalled, "The sentiment among many of my colleagues was that if you care about religion at the end of the 20th century you might as well be a member of the flat earth society."

According to David Smock, vice president of USIP's Center for Mediation and Conflict Resolution, "There now exists a healthy curiosity about other faiths, which is increasingly important as stereotypes are promulgated and as caricatures breed contempt and mutual hostility." He cautioned that "in places with inter-religious tension and where youth can be exposed to extremism" it is critically important to offer creative educational and interfaith encounters.

Unfortunately, the youth component of interfaith dialogue is often overlooked, even though religious extremism is most visible among the young, while interfaith collaboration is mostly seen with the old. "How then," Patel asked, "do we have young people more engaged as producers, as leaders of interfaith cooperation?"

One way is to appreciate the identity crisis that so many young people are feeling as cultures interact and the world becomes smaller. Unfortunately, the purveyors of religious extremism are very adept at manipulating this insecurity by offering what all young people seek—an identity and a way to make an impact.

Patel described several sectors that are critical to the promotion of the religious interfaith movement. Stand-alone nonprofits, many of which incorporate religion into their missions, are emerging in communities all over the world, he noted. Religious communities themselves will have to engage in the promotion of pluralism, as will universities and divinity schools. Civic organizations like the YMCAs of the world can also be utilized in a way that encourages pluralism. Finally, governments will have to promote discourse and policy that promotes an environment where pluralism can grow.

Farah Pandith, senior adviser in the U.S. State Department's Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, works on engaging Muslim communities in Europe with the United States. "We are getting the fact that young people matter more and more," she said. "We are bringing the best examples of America to places where we know they will make a difference." The goal, she explained, is that this young generation will have the "tools in their toolbox to push back" against extremist ideologies and protect their own communities from such a way of thinking.

Pandith described meeting with young Dutch Muslims in the Netherlands shortly before Geert Wilders, a right-wing Dutch parliamentarian, released a highly critical film about the Qur'an. "I asked them what they were going to do when this film came out, thinking that they would protest or something, and they said, 'Nothing. He wants us to be violent and we're not going to be.'" They had learned a lesson, they explained, from the violent incidents following the publication of the

Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. What the young Dutch Muslims did instead was form a virtual campaign that sent the message, "Poor Geert Wilders, his mother didn't love him enough. Let's give him a virtual hug." This campaign activated the youth, and spread all over Europe.

For more information visit <www.ifyc.org>.

—*Josh Walsh*

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