

## Summary Report

# Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding



## Islamic Peace Education: *A Conversation on Promising Practices*



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We are committed to making that vision a reality.

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Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding  
254 West 31st Street, 7th Floor  
New York, NY 10001  
212.967.7707 | [Tanenbaum.org](http://Tanenbaum.org)

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# Islamic Peace Education: *A Conversation on Promising Practices*

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## Introduction

In a world where religion is too often viewed as the source of violent conflict, where different societies demonize people from different traditions, where the religion of Islam and the Muslims who observe have often been conflated with terrorism, the phenomenon of Islamic peace education may seem like an oxymoron. Yet it is a real field within the broader efforts to educate for peace, coexistence, multi-cultural respect and global citizenship. Exploring the work of these innovative educators and sharing their perspectives is important – so that this burgeoning movement can grow and be enhanced.

Knowing this, on June 22, 2013, the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding brought together four Muslim peace educators from vastly different backgrounds for a day-long workshop on promising practices in Islamic peace education. Tanenbaum had two goals for this workshop: first, to provide an opportunity for peace educators who work from Islamic perspectives to share their experiences across different contexts and techniques, and gain new skills and approaches through exchanges with their peers; and second, to provide peace educators and practitioners with new resources and promising practices by disseminating the workshop findings to a wider audience, thereby contributing to the growth and strengthening of the Islamic peace education field.



Photo by Trey Radcliff

The workshop proved to be an enriching experience for the participating Islamic peace educators, who connected on their shared values and deep commitment, exchanged ideas and advice, and brainstormed opportunities for continued discussion and future collaboration. This report shares their stories and peace education approaches, as well as the insights from their dynamic discussion together throughout the day.

Following a review of the history of the peace education field and of Islamic peace education, this report summarizes the participants' respective approaches to Islamic peace education. It then analyzes the themes that emerged from their conversations throughout the workshop, including challenges and promising practices. A central outcome of the workshop was the hope and commitment of the participants to have more such opportunities for networking, connection and collaboration with their fellow Islamic

peace educators from around the world. Often working in difficult and isolating contexts, whether in a zone of active conflict or as a voice for peace in the midst of louder voices of radicalism or cynicism, the opportunity for these peace educators to know and support each other is invaluable.



Photo by USAID

### **TANENBAUM | Center for Interreligious Understanding**

Tanenbaum is a practical, solutions-driven organization that promotes mutual respect by bridging religious differences and combating prejudice. A secular, non-sectarian, nonprofit organization, Tanenbaum's expertise spans several fields. In addition to its work in education, it vigorously supports religiously motivated, local peace activists in conflict zones around the world. With over 15 years in the still emerging field of religion and conflict resolution/transformation/peacebuilding, Tanenbaum's leadership is widely recognized.

Tanenbaum's *Conflict Resolution* program began in 1998 at the urging of the late Ambassador Richard Holbrooke. Recognizing the value in drawing attention to religiously motivated peacemakers around the world who—without recognition from Track I diplomats or the public—are easily marginalized, Ambassador

Holbrooke called on Tanenbaum to develop an initiative to protect them. Tanenbaum subsequently established the *Peacemaker in Action* program and has since recognized 28 *Peacemaker in Action* awardees in 21 conflict zones around the world. To support their efforts, Tanenbaum documents and promotes the work of these unsung religious peacemakers through in-depth case studies detailing their stories and techniques. To enhance their individual capacity, Tanenbaum regularly convenes the *Peacemakers* at week-long working retreats where they share information, effective techniques, and develop a community among people who are often isolated and alone.

In 2011, Tanenbaum and the *Peacemakers in Action* formally established the *Peacemakers in Action Network* with the purpose of contributing to conflict transformation and reconciliation and toward building a more peaceful, just and sustainable world. Since the founding of the *Network*, participation in the *Peacemakers Network* has grown and led to several on-the-ground collaborative projects aimed at building peace and promoting coexistence among divided communities. This workshop on Islamic peace education is just one example of how the *Peacemakers* continue to expand their collective knowledge and promote peace through the exchange and sharing of best practices.

### **The Rise of Peace Education**

Among peace education's earliest roots are those that emerge from the texts and practices of the world's great religions.<sup>1</sup> Such prophets as Moses, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad taught through their words and actions how to build peaceful societies through nonviolence, social justice, and the cultivation of inner peace.

<sup>1</sup> Harris, Ian. "History of Peace Education," in *Encyclopedia of Peace Education* (2008).

The practice and growth of contemporary peace education, however, most closely parallels peace movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly in response to the two world wars and nuclear proliferation. Its early focus was on reconstructing systems and building a culture for world order while preventing nuclear annihilation.<sup>2</sup> By the 1950s, peace educators were developing theories and practices of conflict resolution through critical analyses and new methodological approaches.<sup>3</sup> By the 1980s, peace education had entered a transformational phase; as the field continued to grow and strengthen, it began to seek a more holistic approach to preventing all forms of violence, including interpersonal and structural, as well as wars.<sup>4</sup>

As knowledge of peace education grew and evolved in the following decades, its practice also expanded significantly, as the number and variety of formal and informal peace and conflict resolution programs increased in schools, universities, and communities around the world. Currently, a growing number of governmental and intergovernmental agencies now focus on peace education, as do numerous nonprofit and community-based organizations working to promote peace education with various stakeholders.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Harris, Ian. "History of Peace Education," in *Encyclopedia of Peace Education* (2008); Köylü, Mustafa. "Peace Education: An Islamic Approach." *Journal of Peace Education* (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Kriesberg, Louis. "The Growth of the Conflict Resolution Field," in *Turbulent Peace*, edited by Chester Crocker, et al (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Reardon, Betty A. *Comprehensive Peace Education: Educating for Global Responsibility* (1988), pg. xi.

<sup>5</sup> Fitzduff, Mari and Isabella Jean. "Peace Education: State of the Field and Lessons Learned from USIP Grantmaking," *Peaceworks*. (2011), pgs. 6, 13-14.

The predictable result of this growth and experimentation is that there is no single definition of peace education, given its interdisciplinary character, and the variety of conflict situations it aims to address.<sup>6</sup> In its most basic form, however, peace education can be described as approaches that "teach people about peaceful conditions and the process of creating them."<sup>7</sup> According to Betty Reardon, widely acknowledged as a founder of the peace education discipline, its purpose is "... to transform the present human condition by changing the social structures and the patterns of thought that have created it."<sup>8</sup> As such, it is a broad but critical approach toward peacebuilding, which includes psycho-cultural models such as dialogue, counseling, and reconciliation work; institutional models that engage politics and governance; and structural models such as development, and minority and gender equality work.<sup>9</sup> In sum, peace education is a foundational step for transforming societies.

The pedagogy for teaching peace and social justice skills is as important to such transformation as the creation of peace education knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and leading advocate of critical pedagogy, has been influential in the development of peace education processes and pedagogy that focus on critical thinking, self-reflection, and

<sup>6</sup> Fitzduff, Mari and Isabella Jean. "Peace Education: State of the Field and Lessons Learned from USIP Grantmaking," *Peaceworks*. (2011), pg. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Harris, Ian. *Peace Education* (1988), pg. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Reardon, Betty A. *Comprehensive Peace Education: Educating for Global Responsibility* (1988), pg. x.

<sup>9</sup> Fitzduff, Mari and Isabella Jean. "Peace Education: State of the Field and Lessons Learned from USIP Grantmaking," *Peaceworks*. (2011), pg. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Harris, Ian. *Peace Education* (1988).

experiential learning.<sup>11</sup> Other scholars emphasize the importance of including a feminist or gender lens as part of a holistic approach to peacebuilding, given that sustainable peace for all people requires ending gender-based violence and achieving gender equality.<sup>12</sup>

While there are different ways to distinguish among peace education approaches, Gavriel Salomon suggests that the sociopolitical context is the most important distinction. Peace educators bring vastly different perspectives and experiences to the field, depending on whether they are working within regions of intractable conflict, interethnic tension, or relative tranquility.<sup>13</sup> In a recent report on the experiences and lessons learned by their peace education grantees, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) found that while the peace education field has been dominated by Western theories and approaches, it “is on a learning path when it comes to engaging with, understanding, and appreciating local and indigenous approaches.”<sup>14</sup>

The study of Islamic peace education practices, as presented in this report, is therefore an important contribution to building a more inclusive and adaptable

<sup>11</sup> Bartlett, Lesley. “Paulo Freire and Peace Education,” in *Encyclopedia of Peace Education*, edited by Monisha Bajaj (2008).

<sup>12</sup> Among the earliest peace educators to promote a feminist lens are Betty Reardon and Brigit Brock-Utne. See Reardon, Betty A. *Comprehensive Peace Education: Educating for Global Responsibility* (1988); Brock-Utne, Birgit. *Educating for Peace: A Feminist Perspective*. (1985).

<sup>13</sup> Salomon, Gavriel. “The Nature of Peace Education: Not all Programs are Created Equal,” in *Peace Education: The Concept, Principles, and Practices Around the World*, edited by Gavriel Salomon and Baruch Nevo. (2002), pg. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Fitzduff, Mari and Isabella Jean. “Peace Education: State of the Field and Lessons Learned from USIP Grantmaking,” *Peaceworks*. (2011), pg. 19.

peace education field of knowledge and practice.



Photo by Sean Clee

### History and Practice of Islamic Peace Education

Current realities make this a critical time for focusing on Islamic peace education. In the midst of pervasive Islamophobia and rising religious extremism, the importance of Islamic peace education as a countervailing force cannot be overstated. It is thus significant that a growing number of Islamic peace scholars, practitioners, and educators are demonstrating the critical contributions of Islamic practices and Muslim people in building a more peaceful world.

Just as peace education is an important component of peacebuilding broadly understood, Islamic peace education is important as a religious peacemaking approach. As Tanenbaum studied the *Peacemakers in Action*, a network of religious peacemakers from around the world, we identified key religious peacemaking techniques, including those that draw on religious texts and traditions, interfaith mobilization, and religious peace education.<sup>15</sup> Islam itself has a long history of nonviolent teachings and practices, from core tenets in the Qur’an to juridical

<sup>15</sup> Little, David, ed. *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion in Conflict Resolution*. New York: Cambridge University Press (2007), pgs. 9-19.

discourses on the ethics of violence dating as far back as the 9th century.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, one of the 99 names of God in the Qur'an is Al-Salaam, or "the author of peace, safety, and security."<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, among the most important concepts in peace studies is Johan Galtung's distinction between negative peace—the absence of direct violence—and positive peace, which also includes an absence of the various forms of indirect and structural violence.<sup>18</sup> As peace is not merely the absence of war in Islam but also "the *presence* of divine guidance and human responsibility [in building a peaceful world]"<sup>19</sup> one can say that Islamic peace concepts and education espouse a positive peace.<sup>20</sup>

Mustafa Köylü identifies one of the main obstacles for Islamic peace educators to be the theological misunderstandings among Muslims. Many of today's Muslim peace activists work within communities facing increasingly fundamentalist beliefs, political and economic instability, and violence.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Huda, Qamar-ul, ed. *Crescent and Dove: Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace (2010), pg. xvi

<sup>17</sup> Jafari, Sheherazade and Abdul Aziz Said. "Islam and Peacemaking," in *Peacemaking: From Practice to Theory*, edited by Susan Allen Nan, et al (2012), pg. 231.

<sup>18</sup> Galtung, Johan and Carl G. Jacobsen. *Searching for Peace: The Road to TRANSCEND*. (2000).

<sup>19</sup> Jafari, Sheherazade and Abdul Aziz Said. "Islam and Peacemaking," in *Peacemaking: From Practice to Theory*, edited by Susan Allen Nan, et al. (2012), pg. 228.

<sup>20</sup> Kalin, Ibrahim. "Islam and Peace: A Survey of the Sources of Peace in the Islamic Tradition," in *Crescent and Dove: Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam*, edited by Qamar-ul Huda. (2010), pg. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Crow, Karim Douglas. "Nurturing Islamic Peace Discourse." *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* (2000), pgs. 54-55.

"It is ironic that while Islam is identified with war and militancy, the very term *Islam* is derived from a root word one of whose basic meanings is peace."<sup>22</sup>

Islamic peace education draws on the efforts of a growing body of Islamic peace scholars and practitioners from a range of backgrounds, who are reexamining and reinterpreting Islamic resources, traditions, and practices on nonviolence and peacebuilding.<sup>23</sup> Chaiwat Satha-Anand's work, for instance, puts forward the powerful assertion that violence is unacceptable in Islam, especially when combatants and noncombatants are difficult to distinguish from one another, as is the case in modern warfare.<sup>24</sup> Köylü analyzes often misunderstood concepts of war and peace in Islam, such as *jihad*, which is disproportionately (and technically, incorrectly) associated with extremism and acts of terrorism.<sup>25</sup> Abdul Aziz Said, Nathan C. Funk and Ayse S. Kadayifci define an Islamic paradigm for transformation based on Sufi (mystical) principles and practices of peace as an "all-embracing harmony perceived through inward renewal and transformation of human consciousness."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Köylü, Mustafa. "Peace Education: An Islamic Approach." *Journal of Peace Education* (2004), pgs. 69, 73.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance: Abu-Nimer, Mohammed. *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice*. (2003); Bangura, Abdul Karim, ed. *Islamic Peace Paradigms*. (2005); Salmi, Ralph, et al. *Islam and Conflict Resolution in Islam: Precept and Practice* (2001); Funk, Nathan C. and Abdul Aziz Said. *Islam and Peacemaking in the Middle East* (October 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Satha-Anand, Chaiwat. "The Nonviolent Crescent: Eight Theses on Muslim Nonviolent Actions," in *Islam and Nonviolence*, edited by Glenn D. Paige, Chaiwat Satha-Anand and Sarah Gilliat (1993).

<sup>25</sup> Köylü, Mustafa. "Peace Education: An Islamic Approach." *Journal of Peace Education* (2004).

<sup>26</sup> Said, Abdul Aziz, Nathan C. Funk and Ayse S. Kadayifci. *Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam: Precept and Practice*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America (2001), pg. 21

Further, Kadayifci and Meena Sharify-Funk's work draws attention to the critical but often overlooked role of Muslim women peacemakers as agents of change.<sup>27</sup> Notably, three of the four Islamic peace educators profiled in this report are women.

Nonetheless, the scholarship on Islamic peace education continues to expand and be strengthened by the knowledge, experiences, and discoveries of educators such as those profiled here. The following sections summarize their stories—how they started their work, their personal motivations, and a description of some of their peace education initiatives—followed by analyses of the common themes, challenges, and promising practices that emerged from their discussions together.

### **Islamic Peace Education Workshop Summary**

In June 2013, four Islamic peace educators convened in Tanenbaum's New York City office. They were:

- Jamila Afghani (*Peacemaker in Action, 2008*) from Kabul, Afghanistan;
- Azhar (Azi) Hussain (*Peacemaker in Action, 2006*) from Dubai, UAE and Pakistan;
- Sarrah Buker from Holmdel, New Jersey; and
- Rabia Terri Harris from Stony Point, New York.

Even though they came from vastly different socio-political contexts, they shared a number of comparable experiences and perspectives. For instance, the peace educators' basic underlying Theories of Change (ToC)—or how their programs and methods aim to create change in

the respective societies—are similar. All aim for transformation at the local and individual level, focusing on building relationships within the communities in which they identify, live, and work. Their approaches are also comparable in that they are practical. Rabia summed up her approach as, “you have to work with what you have,”—an approach that easily applies to the other workshop participants' experiences as well.

### **Jamila Afghani Noor Educational and Capacity Development Organization Kabul, Afghanistan**

*Jamila Afghani began developing peace education programs for Afghan refugees in Peshawar Pakistan. Today, she is the founder and director of the Noor Educational and Capacity Development Organization (NECDO), which serves Afghan women, youth and children in Ghazni, Kabul, and Jalalabad with basic education, literacy, and job skills training. The organization also trains imams in Kabul, using Qur'anic texts to point out the rights of women under Islam. These religious leaders then spread this message in their Friday sermons. NECDO's education initiatives are rooted in Islam, and peace education remains a central part of NECDO's mission.*

Jamila Afghani dates her peace and human rights activism from the day she learned that 36 Afghan women and children had died from heat and hunger in a refugee camp in Pakistan. She and a group of friends, who were all living in Pakistan during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, came together in shock upon hearing the news. Together, they decided to respond. Starting with their own money and extra clothes, they then went door to door, collecting food, medicine, and other goods for women in the refugee camps. In just

<sup>27</sup> Kadayifci-Orellana, Ayse and Meena Sharify-Funk. “Muslim Women Peacemakers as Agents of Change,” in *Crescent and Dove: Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam*, edited by Qamar-ul Huda (2010), 179-203.



one month, these eight women, all of whom had physical disabilities, had managed to collect a large sum of goods for 7,000 families. Looking back, Jamila notes, “We came to know our strength. We learned that we can do so much.”

Soon after, Jamila established the Noor Educational and Capacity Development Organization (NECDO), choosing the word *noor*, or light, to emphasize the organization’s focus on education and empowerment. “We started with education. Although it’s a lengthy process, we believe that when our people become educated, they will be empowered, and will be in a position to help themselves.” NECDO’s first project was a community library stocked with Jamila’s own books and those donated by other community members. Over time, the library expanded from one rented room to four branches with over 7,000 books at each, along with audio and video resources. Support from Scholastic Corp provides them with a supply of children’s story books as well, an important resource for the library’s youth programs, designed to engage children in activities that are both fun and educational.

However, Jamila quickly noticed that while many men and boys were making use of the library, women and girls were not. So she came up with a strategy: each boy who recruited four female library members—whether their mother, sister, or cousins—received a gift. The incentive worked, and today they have over 2,000 female members. Working with women is a central component of Jamila’s peace education and human rights work. The organization itself is women-led and boasts women as 70 percent of its employees and beneficiaries. Among NECDO’s programs are women’s literacy classes, held in rooms rented from a trustworthy community member or in a mosque. To date, over

10,000 women and girls have been taught. Another initiative is a professional training institute, whose women graduates have become managers of banks and professionals working in the ministries of justice and the economy.

Yet NECDO’s successes were far from easy. “When we started our education activities, the first opposition came from imams. They stoned my organization in Ghazni province, and large gangs of men on motorcycles would terrorize my students.” Members of Jamila’s own family also objected to her work, claiming that her public leadership role and long travels were bringing them shame. Growing up in a successful business family, Jamila explained that many of her relatives did not prioritize female education, and assumed that their daughters would marry into a wealthy family. Yet because Jamila had a disability (she was contracted polio when she was young), her family decided to give her another option. “I went for education. This was a great blessing of God; it is a prestige and honor for me. Otherwise, I would have gotten married to a rich person and exiled to a room. But thank God, this disability gave me the opportunity to be in social life with people.”

Having gone to school herself, Jamila believes that it is critically important to provide educational opportunities for other women—and to involve imams and other influential community members who could stand in their way. NECDO thus undertook to begin training imams about women’s rights and the importance of peace education, drawing on religious resources. Today, it has a network of 1,000 imams in 15 provinces who are receiving training on the process of peace and reconciliation. Jamila uses adult education methodologies in her trainings, including lots of warm ups and games, group work, and presentations.

“Whatever we teach, we practically show them.” In one activity, imams are asked to spend one minute writing their name with their right or dominant hand. They then have one minute with their left or non-dominant hand. Jamila asks the participants: “If God has created both hands equally, with no difference in shape and strength, why is one better than the other?” The participants usually respond that they don’t have a chance to practice with their left hand, and habitually rely on their right. Jamila then says: “Men and women are the same as our two hands. Just like our right hand, we give opportunities and chances for men, but not for women.”

**Sarrah Buker**  
**Noor-UI-Iman School,**  
**Monmouth Junction**  
**New Jersey, United States**

*Sarrah Buker is a school administrator and head of the social studies department at Noor-UI-Iman, a private Islamic school that serves pre-K through 12th graders. Sarrah has over 15 years of experience in education and teaches American history, government and civil rights through an Islamic lens. Sarrah is also the adviser for Noor-UI-Iman’s model UN and model congress programs.*

Sarrah Buker finds innovative ways to incorporate peace education and social justice in the coursework of her Muslim students in New Jersey. The students at the Noor-UI-Iman School, now 20 years old, represent a diversity of ethnicities and religious and cultural practices of Islam, with the majority coming from Pakistan and India. The private Islamic school’s mission is to “provide an excellent academic and Islamic education within an Islamic environment to produce good citizens and strong leaders who have a commitment to individual excellence, family, community,

and humanity.”<sup>28</sup> Although she was the only social studies teacher when she first joined the school five years ago—following years of teaching first grade elsewhere and time spent living and working in Libya, where her family is from—she now heads a growing social studies department. “One of the benefits of teaching in a private school in New Jersey is that we don’t have a lot of red tape compared to public schools that have to teach for the test. Public schools don’t have as much room in their curricula to teach on conflict resolution and peace.”

The students access Islamic education in two ways. The first is through the more formal Islamic and Qur’anic studies classes and afterschool programs, in which students can elect to participate. The second is through the students’ regular classes, in which all the teachers are Muslim and regularly incorporate Islamic themes and examples. “The question of women’s rights comes up a lot for the students, since when people want to attack Islam, they often focus on this issue.” In response, she focuses on the U.S. women’s movement in her American history classes, showing the country’s long history of gender discrimination. She helps them discover that the fight for women’s rights in the U.S. is not that different from the struggles for gender equality happening in many other parts of the world. “My point in doing this is to show that we have to look at the oppression itself and see where it’s coming from. Human experiences are not that different from each other, we don’t have room for judgment.” Discussions on American labor unions, immigration, and even the creation of the constitution—which Sarrah connects to current struggles to create a constitution in her home country of Libya—offer further opportunities to bring a conflict resolution and social justice lens to her lessons.

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<sup>28</sup> Noor-UI-Iman School, [www.nuischool.org](http://www.nuischool.org).

Sarrah designs her activities to create a sense of community through respect for others' beliefs and experiences, as well as their own. "Self-awareness is very important. Especially since all the students are Muslim, when they learn to appreciate and understand their own religious beliefs, and make those beliefs their own, they begin to value that others have beliefs which are similarly important, and that it would hurt if those beliefs are attacked." She often does role play activities in which students take on differing positions at different stages of U.S. history, such as a white supremacist or a communist. "In school we have a captive audience! I insist on including these activities and lessons in these high school classrooms so that hopefully, in college, they see that it's not just about getting a degree, but about their role in changing the world."

A very popular activity in her school takes place on the U.S. holiday celebrating the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK day). While most schools are closed that day, the Noor-UI-Iman School opens for a half day of group activity and service. Sarrah has organized five such MLK day activities since joining the school, including: bringing in guest speakers such as Muslim peace activists and a chaplain from the Guantanamo Bay detention camp; assigning students to study different genocides and answer the question, "As a citizen of the United States and the world, what could I have done? Do I have any responsibility at all?" adapting the Howard Zinn Education Project on *Unsung Heroes*<sup>29</sup> by encouraging students to add more unsung social justice heroes from their own cultural backgrounds; and

<sup>29</sup> Zinn, Howard and Bill Bigelow. "Unsung Heroes: Encouraging Students to Appreciate Those Who Fought for Social Justice." The Zinn Education Project. For more information, see: <http://zinnedproject.org/materials/teaching-about-unsung-heroes/>.

reading the book *Besa: Muslims Who Saved Jews in World War II*,<sup>30</sup> after which the students created their own books on human rights.

This year, Sarrah organized the school's MLK day activities to focus on Muslims in America. Living Voices,<sup>31</sup> a New York-based theater group focused on bringing to life historical moments, performed an act for the students on the role of African Americans during the American Revolution. An imam then talked about the history of African American Muslims and the prejudices that continue to divide the American Muslim community. The students' service project focused on how to support the establishment of a Muslim women's shelter in New Jersey. They then watched the American presidential inauguration of Barack Obama. Student evaluations of the day were overwhelmingly positive, showing genuine engagement as many asked for even more time to implement their projects.

**Azhar (Azi) Hussain  
Peace and Education Foundation  
Islamabad, Pakistan**

*Across Pakistan, Azhar Hussein trains madrasa teachers and administrators in new teaching methods that emphasize critical thinking, human rights, and religious tolerance, all from an Islamic perspective. His approach empowers madrasa educators to examine their own tradition and motivates them to devise curricula that better reflect the peaceful values of Islam. In addition to taking these lessons to their students, Azi's workshop participants have also become activists, reaching out to peacefully resolve conflicts in their own communities. Azi has also worked with a group of these madrasa leaders to begin*

<sup>30</sup> Gershman, Norman. *Besa: Muslims Who Saved Jews in World War II* (2008).

<sup>31</sup> Living Voices, [www.livingvoices.org](http://www.livingvoices.org).

*creating a peace education curriculum grounded in their own Islamic scholarship.*

It would have been hard to guess that Azi would become an Islamic peace educator, given his background in accounting from Rutgers University. But his work in Pakistani madrasas is a natural outgrowth of his deep concern for his birth nation's new generation of youth, particularly those exposed to radical ideological thinking. "Especially since 9/11, and after Pakistan aligned itself with the United States, people are opting to send their children to madrasas because they don't trust public schools." Troublingly, a systemic integration of extremist violent jihad teachings colors the education system—of which the United States historically played a part. In providing the context for his work during Tanenbaum's Islamic Peace Education workshop, Azi showed a math problem from a fourth grade textbook that asked students to calculate how many seconds it would take for a bullet from a mujahid fighter to reach the forehead of a Russian some meters away. The printing and distribution of this text was supported through a \$50 million grant from USAID. Although this and other textbooks with violent imagery were revised by 1992, millions of the unrevised books had been distributed to refugee camps, madrasas, and teacher trainings, and can still be found in use today.<sup>32</sup>

Azi himself is also personally affected by the devastating violence within his country. Born into a Shia family, in the last ten years he has lost almost half his family as radical groups specifically target the successful members of the Shia community—including five of his cousins, who were doctors. "I see a very hopeless situation sometimes." Yet he also recalled a story once told by his

mother: "When Prophet Abraham was being burned alive, there was a small frog nearby who would fill its mouth up with water and spit it out on the fire. Everyone made fun of him for thinking his small actions could put out the fire. But he said: I will do whatever I can to save the Prophet. Because this is my duty to Allah." Although Azi now realizes with a smile that his mom may have made up this story, the lesson behind it stuck, and propels his work on madrasa reform: "I need to do whatever I can to put this fire out."

Azi started his work in the madrasas in 2004, where he saw many of those violent textbooks in circulation. The early years of his work were very hard, as he worked to establish trust with the madrasa leaders and quickly discovered key differences between his own expectations and perspectives and theirs. "The madrasas look at the concept of time differently, for them time is holistic. They will say Inshallah [God willing] rather than give time commitments." Having gone to high school and college in the United States, Azi often found himself frustrated at this lack of firm deadlines and how slowly projects moved: "I felt like I was the extremist in the room! I was getting so impatient. Whereas I wanted to focus on the numbers of people being killed right now, they wanted to look at the root causes, Genghis Khan, colonialism." He soon realized that while Americans expect quick changes, Pakistanis operate with a different concept of time and communication. "I really thought in two years we would be done [with our madrasa reform project]. I now see in reality, it will be 100 years. We have to be patient, and train multiple generations in order to see lasting change."

Working through the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) at the time, Azi first reached imams by partnering with one of the think tanks of Jamaat-e-Islami,

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<sup>32</sup> Davis, Craig. "'A' is for Allah, 'J' is for Jihad. *World Policy Journal* (Spring 2002), 92-93.

who convinced some of the key madrasa leaders to attend a ten-day workshop with Azi. He used a robust training module developed with his colleagues at ICRD that brings participants through a transformational process from the stages of denial and defensiveness to respect and ultimately appreciation.<sup>33</sup> Azi wanted “the training and workshop to be so interactive and effective that two out of twenty leaders would be interested to come back.”

Instead, Azi’s training received far greater interest and return than expected. The leaders invited Azi to their own madrasas to give the training to their teachers. “We only went where we were invited. I went and worked with youth who were training to be suicide bombers, but only because the leaders said I should go there and were able to take me there. It was a lot of work—networking, talking, elbow grease, and time.”

Today, over 3,400 men have taken part in Azi’s teacher training program, along with over 500 women at 111 female madrasas. He has reached 1,100 imams, the majority of whom report incorporating themes of peace, justice and human rights during their Friday sermons. Today he is taking his work one step further through a six-week training program that brings madrasa teachers to several of the country’s secular universities. While madrasa teachers have a history of not trusting secular schools, Azi explains that “we can’t do more on the social sciences unless we bring in theory and knowledge from these universities.” The teachers receive a certificate upon completion of the program, which Azi hopes to expand to 30 more universities across the country.

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<sup>33</sup> Azi and his colleagues at ICRD describe in detail their model of madrasa engagement in: Johnston, Douglas, Azhar Hussain, and Rebecca Cataldi. *Madrasa Enhancement and Global Security: A Model for Faith-Based Engagement* (2008).

**Rabia Terri Harris**  
**Dar Anwar as-Salam**  
**Stony Point, New York**

*Rabia Terri Harris is an author, chaplain, interfaith leader and peace activist. In 1994, Rabia founded the Muslim Peace Fellowship, which is dedicated to advancing the theory and practice of Islamic peacebuilding. She currently serves as the organization’s Executive Director. Rabia has decades of experience working in interfaith relations and educating young Muslims about Islamic principles of peace and justice.*

Rabia Terri Harris started her presentation during the Islamic Peace Education workshop by distinguishing herself from her fellow participants in one important aspect: she comes to her work on Islamic peace education and social justice as a convert to the religion. “I came to this in a different way from those who were born into the faith. I have a different take, a different perspective, a different attitude.” Born in the United States to an interreligious family of Jews and Christians, her “starting position is that there are different ways of looking at things.” As she searched for her own spiritual path and eventually became attracted to the Sufi tradition, this “freedom of imagination, which was my cultural heritage” remained with her, and continues to inform her peace work.

Religiously trained in the classical Turkish *tariqa* tradition, or Sufi order, and with her formal education in religion and Middle Eastern languages and cultures from Princeton and Columbia University, Rabia “went into the spiritual life for 29 years,” reading Ibn ‘Arabi, Rumi, and Imam al-Qushayri,” among other significant Sufi teachers, from whose work she draws for her own publications. One translation of

Abu-I-Qasim al-Qushayri's work<sup>34</sup> took her seven years: "I learned so much from that process, I was educated by that work."

After being inspired by a partnership between her Sufi community and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) that successfully supported 150 Bosnian Muslim university students during the Bosnian war, she joined the staff of FOR as the associate editor of its magazine. As soon as she arrived, she noticed that many Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist affiliate peace and justice associations were listed on the masthead of the magazine, but no Muslim groups. When she asked why not, her colleagues responded that there had been attempts to create such a Muslim peace group "but it didn't stick." Rabia thought, "I can't do any worse, so let me try."

In 1994, she established the Muslim Peace Fellowship, which has since served as a foundation for building a body of knowledge on Islam and nonviolence.<sup>35</sup> "Part of what I was interested in was the development of a theory of Islam and nonviolence, a theory of interreligious solidarity. Where are the roots of this within my tradition? Can we articulate them? I became more and more convinced that [these beliefs] are not only present, but foundational. What the Western community calls nonviolence is in fact central to [Islam's] origins."

Rabia has made important contributions to the building of Islamic peace theories, but the events of 9/11 instilled in her a desire to better connect and serve people on a personal level. She decided to attend the

Islamic Chaplaincy Program at Hartford Seminary, which reinforced for her "how to connect with people from a wide variety of backgrounds." It was this knowledge that brought her and the Muslim Peace Fellowship to the Stony Point Center. In particular, Rabia co-facilitates a five-week summer institute for youth ages 19-29 from the Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions. "Here we focus on the importance of living together and coming to a position of trust, so we can share what hurts, and then share the possibility of a future together."

The young participants, "encounter their own and each other's traditions, visit each other's places of worship, and meet scholars and religious educators from all three faiths." They also work together in two key ways: tending the community garden as a group, and supporting each other on a unique social justice project. Students apply with a project idea, such as on Islamophobia, violence within the community, or environmental awareness among young Muslims. For many, this is their first experience imagining, designing a project. "We ask them: what is driving you, moving you? What community need is your project answering? What are your assets and challenges? What are your action steps, and how will you evaluate success?" Students work together in small, mixed religion groups to offer each other support and feedback. Rabia has found that many past participants are staying in touch with each other via Facebook, and she hopes for the program to include more robust follow up work with its alumni in the future.

### **Cross-Cutting Themes and Promising Practices**

Following each of the workshop participants' presentations, the Islamic peace educators engaged in a dynamic discussion in which they asked each other questions, exchanged ideas and advice

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<sup>34</sup> Harris, Rabia Terri. *The Risalah: Principles of Sufism (Abu-I-Qasim Abd al Karim bin Hawazin Al Qushayri)* (2002).

<sup>35</sup> See *Islamic Nonviolence: Resources for the Work of Peace*. Muslim Peace Fellowship, <http://mpf21.wordpress.com/islamic-nonviolence/>.

on working with different populations and with different techniques, reflected on their needs as well as that of the broader Islamic peace education field, and brainstormed ideas for future collaborations. The following themes cut across their discussion, revealing important shared challenges as well as promising practices and opportunities for the strengthening of the Islamic peace education approach.



Photo by USAID/Wendy Stone

### **The Foundation: Establishing Authenticity**

One theme that surfaced frequently throughout the day-long workshop was the importance of the perceived *authenticity* of the Islamic peace educators. All agreed that, to be effective, the community in which they work must see them as authentic and true, both in word and action. As Rabia explained when she described how she approaches her work, “you have to work with what you have,” –and that includes being true to your identity, sociopolitical context, and available resources.

While authenticity is important for all educators and particularly peace educators, the workshop participants noted its particular impact in some of the settings in which they work. With the current misinformation and disinformation around Islam and Muslims in the U.S., it is important to be viewed as authentic so that what one teaching can be received as reliable

information. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, the challenges do not involve Islam so much as the suspicion that there is a hidden agenda by the educator. There, the work can only proceed where there is trust.

For Jamila, this has meant a firm commitment to and demonstration of her and her family’s deep respect for Islam and for Afghan culture. In a country in which bribes are the norm for many legal and illegal transactions, Jamila refuses to pay them. “This is against Islam. The Prophet says you will go to hell for paying a bribe. With bribes my work might be easier, yes, but we must be committed to our principles. A small issue may take six months without a bribe, but I don’t give up.”

Her husband comes from a prominent religious family that enjoys a great deal of respect. Deeply committed to Jamila’s work, he works closely with her during workshops and trainings with men. Often, she puts him “in the frontline” when working with men who are not used to seeing women in leadership positions. “I don’t go [up to the front] immediately, I go after two or three sessions and do just a few training sessions first, and then eventually more, so that the imams accept it slowly and gradually.” Jamila describes one incident in which a workshop participant started loudly laughing at and accusing her husband for “working under his wife.” Her husband responded: “Our personal relationship of husband and wife is in its own place. I accept her leadership, she is my boss, she is my manager, she is leading the team, and I am very happy to work with her. And as a religious person, there is no shame. It is such an honor for me, that I have such a wife.” On the third day of the training, Jamila recalls how that same man stood up and called her and her husband “a practical role model of husband and wife, an example for us.”

Similarly, for Azi, establishing the trust of the madrasa leaders is at the center of all his work. It is so critical, in fact, that he recently moved his family from the United States to Dubai. He also moved his madrasa program from within the ICRD, a Washington, DC-based organization, to Pakistan, where he formed an independent organization, the Peace and Education Foundation, with all Pakistani leadership and staff. “The [madrasa leaders] were so suspicious of me coming from Washington, DC all the time, but now I think we’re doing a little better; the trust has increased even more.” Now that he is closer to Pakistan from his new home base in Dubai, Azi is also able to spend more time within the villages and alongside the madrasa teachers and students. His work is dependent on years of careful effort to be understood as trustworthy and true to his principles.



Photo by Peter Morgan

In Sarrah’s work with her students and their families, her own personal ties to the religious school community, including her identities as a fellow Muslim American and a fellow parent of a student at the school are foundational to her effectiveness. On the other hand, Rabia’s identity as someone who converted to Islam makes the issue of authenticity more complicated. “I have different privileges of interpretation,” she notes. “But I also have very severe limits

of applicability – my experience of Islam is going to be different from most people’s experience of Islam. I can’t automatically generalize from my experiences to that of others. It became clear to me that I was going to lack traction as an activist because I will never have the credibility that someone born into the Islamic heritage of any social background was going to have.” However, what Rabia does bring to her work is her genuine commitment to Islam, and that garners respect and trust. Unlike her colleagues, however, Rabia believes that she has an “extraordinary amount of imaginative freedom, because I am not really responsible to anyone but Allah. That [freedom] is something which is in short supply in many communities. So if I do not take advantage of where I have been placed for the benefit of all of us, I am remiss.” As a result, she focuses on contributing to the building and strengthening of theories of peace and nonviolence in Islam. “I hope to be deeply at the service of transformational work, and have my theories be constantly interrogated and reshaped by the real experiences of people.”

### **Engaging Key Stakeholders | Creating Local Ownership**

A central finding by the participating peace education scholars and practitioners is that “local ownership of peacebuilding processes is critical and, if not already present, should be encouraged and developed from the start of an intervention.”<sup>36</sup> Most successful Islamic peace education strategies have found ways to engage key stakeholders: those individuals whose approval helps significantly in the incorporation of Islamic peace and social justice teachings.

<sup>36</sup> Fitzduff, Mari and Isabella Jean. “Peace Education: State of the Field and Lessons Learned from USIP Grantmaking,” *Peaceworks*. (2011), pg. 26.



Jamila started her imam training through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which recruited 25 imams from the most important mosques of Kabul. The training itself was based on a curricula that she shared with the ministry to get its feedback and buy in. She defines her strategy as one that engages the influential actors in the community as soon as possible, knowing that “if I light one candle, that one candle can light many others.” When challenges arise during the trainings with imams, such as when a participant disagrees on a religious interpretation on human rights, Jamila “keeps a low profile, allowing those imams who are already convinced to negotiate with the other imams and convince them.” Jamila lets the imams debate, at times interjecting with a point, but otherwise allowing them to discuss together. “This is how an educational environment is created between the imam and the community.”

Jamila also invites imams to her other projects, involving them “so that they understand we are doing something very localized and Afghanized, not that we are doing something out of the box.” She shared one story of a male teacher who, in the face of ongoing threats from the Taliban, would be escorted daily by various community members to and from the center where he teaches girls. “With community support, every day they show that we support this community center and that it is for our benefit. After this, we did not have issues with the Taliban in that community.”

Sitting on the board of the New Jersey Council for Social Studies, Sarrah frequently meets with its director to discuss civic education. Sarrah notes that, in some school districts in New Jersey, the majority of the student population is Arab, and the majority of the Arab population is Muslim. Since any reform of the social studies

curriculum will go through the Council, Sarrah finds ways to keep the conversation going about the state’s religious diversity, how it is a rich resource for the community and opportunities for peace education. Although educating American Muslims is not a top priority for many educators in the state, she uses her seat on this board, as well as in other networks of educators, to keep engaging others on the issue.

Azi similarly works with the National Madrasa Oversight Board, which consists of five madrasa boards affiliated with the five Islamic schools of thought in Pakistan. One of Azi’s projects is to integrate social sciences into the madrasa curricula—an initiative that will involve these madrasa boards. Because they do not trust the Pakistani government, it lacks the necessary trust to push for such a change. Conversely, Azi’s organization has greater capacity to shift the paradigm because it is “one of the only groups working to build trust with the madrasas, which we’ve done because we’ve been working with them for so long.”

### **Theological Considerations: Engaging Religious Texts and History**

Thought leaders in peace education increasingly find that using history and teaching modules that foster values of peace, recognize multiple narratives, and promote critical thinking and empathy are important components of peace education.<sup>37</sup> The Islamic peace educators in the workshop affirmed these approaches and use them. But they also invoke religious mandates and draw on texts that underlie the religion of Islam as well as Islamic communities and civilization, using it to build alliances, to train for educational change, and to underlie their peace education goals.

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<sup>37</sup> Fitzduff, Mari and Isabella Jean. “Peace Education: State of the Field and Lessons Learned from USIP Grantmaking,” *Peaceworks*. (2011), pg. 9.

Thus, Azi regularly focuses on Islamic civilization during the initial sessions of his workshops. He highlights examples of cultural and religious pluralism in Islam's history, such as the multi-cultural community in al-Andalus, as well as major Islamic contributions such as mathematic and scientific discoveries. As noted by Qamar-ul Huda, "Islam as a civilization and faith tradition has been anything but stagnant and intellectually dormant, and, as with other civilizations, there are both intolerant and tolerant voices."<sup>38</sup> In a setting where tolerance and diversity of belief are not widely recognized, Azi's approach often inspires pride while providing a new vision of what is possible in Pakistan today. This approach has been validated by others. In fact, USIP finds that history education and teaching modules that foster values of peace, recognize multiple narratives, and promote critical thinking and empathy are an increasingly important component of peace education initiatives.<sup>39</sup> In a vastly different setting, Sarrah's use of Muslim examples of peace and social justice work with her classes is another important example of peace history education.

In their guide for Muslims on interfaith dialogue, Muhammad Shafiq and Mohammed Abu-Nimer note that the Prophet's life is "full of examples of tolerance and nonviolent ways, even when Islam was in its early stages."<sup>40</sup> The Islamic peace educators in this workshop also draw upon the Qur'an and *hadith*, the sayings and deeds of the Prophet, in their peace work, just as do many other Islamic peace scholars and activists. For Jamila, "our entry point is Islam. Always. The Qur'an and *hadith* have always been the

protection shield for me, and the starting point." When she first started her education programs, she received much resistance from imams. To Jamila, this was not consistent with her religion. As she points out, "the very first verse [in the Qur'an] is about education! Since education is so important in Islam, why are imams not supporting us?"

Jamila received the greatest resistance within her own province of Ghazni. To address this problem, she invited imams who had been criticizing her work to join her for a dialogue. "When I started talking with them, I started with the language of the Qur'an. I said: give me a single quotation from Qur'an against this [peace education work] and I will stop everything. I have tens of justifications for you, from this verse and this *hadith*—are you telling me they are wrong?" Predictably, the imams said no, the verses could not be wrong. And quite soon, they shifted their positions and started to support Jamila's work, even motivating people to attend her center.

In her work with women, Jamila similarly starts with the Qur'an. In fact, the first six months of her program for women focuses on Qur'anic education. "In this way people come to understand this is an Islamic organization." She then asks the women, "what about literacy? If you are going to a doctor, you should at least be able to read sign boards." The women agree this is important for them and, soon after the literacy education begins, they start to address other issues, ultimately including women's rights from an Islamic perspective.

In Pakistan, Azi takes a similarly inductive and theologically grounded approach on the topic of gender in his trainings of madrasa teachers. Essentially, he challenges them to dig into their own texts. "I basically provoke them by saying:

<sup>38</sup> Huda, Qamar-ul, ed. *Crescent and Dove: Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam* (2010), pg. xv.

<sup>39</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Shafiq, Muhammad and Mohammed Abu-Nimer. *Interfaith Dialogue: A Guide for Muslims* (2007), 64.

I haven't seen much in the Qur'an or hadith about women being equal to men." Invariably, the teachers get upset at his apparent accusation, "filling three to four flipcharts of all the Qur'anic verses about how equal women are... I have four to five recorders' hands getting tired, and that's only on the Qur'an! They are excited to prove me wrong." This experience leads the group to a significant discussion, in which Azi asks them: "If this is such an important component of Islam, as you say, why is it not a part of your curriculum? If we are not teaching these things, we are not teaching an important part of Islam." The result is almost always the same. Workshop participants then begin talking about how such core principles can be integrated into their teachings.

These are ways to draw on values of inclusion from within Islam. But there are also controversial and misinterpreted verses on violence, women's rights, and the treatment of non-Muslims. Rabia offers a set of steps for addressing such difficult interpretations. First, "we have to start the work by acknowledging that there are multiple interpretations to text." In her workshops, she provides different interpretations of the same text side by side, asking participants to identify the differences among them. "Then, if you open up the possibility that there could be variant faithful readings of the texts, we can discuss what determines these differences in interpretation." After that, we can "get beneath the interpretation for its motive." This includes looking at the context in which a text was revealed, as well as the context of the text as a whole. If there are 114 *suras* [chapters of the Qur'an] and 113 of them begin with *Bismillah al-Rahmani al-Rahim* [In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful], this shows us that a very high percentage of everything that we are asked to take seriously in this

life is supposed to be and can only be consecrated in those words. Is the action you're taking *rahmani* [merciful]?"

In this context, Sarrah described a recent seminar she attended on the concept of *jihad* for public school teachers, which she found very useful. The Islamic history professor who led the seminar examined a variety of controversial verses, explaining them within the context of the text, when it was revealed, and for what purpose. This allowed for interpretation and new understanding of them.

Jamila summed up this discussion: "The only tool we have is to go back to the Qur'an and the hadiths of the Prophet." She shares that, for her, "this is a very beautiful experience. In my whole life I have recited the Qur'an many times. But when I face a new problem, I go to the holy Qur'an and read. And I totally feel that *this* is the time when it is revealed—it is just in accordance to the needs of my life. This is the miracle of the whole Qur'an. It speaks, and it shows you the way in how to solve your problems." For Rabia as well, "Islam holds one of the great keys to unlocking this door. I don't think the [global] situation which concerns lots of people is ever going to be unlocked without the participation of Muslims, and the Islamic tradition and its enormous treasure."

### **Inter- and Intra-faith Approaches in Islamic Peace Education**

Depending on the environment in which they work, the participating peace educators found that interfaith and/or intrafaith initiatives can be a powerful component of Islamic peace education but, that it may require extreme caution. Within the multi-cultural context of the U.S., Sarrah found that interfaith activities that exposed her students to differences are valuable. Volunteering at a Christian

soup kitchen and picnicking with other schools provided important opportunities for her New Jersey students to understand and appreciate the religious and cultural diversity within their community. Sarrah also uses role-playing activities, in which her students take on the persona of leading historical and contemporary figures, and are called upon to consider their perspectives; she believes this helps them internalize how “everyone is human.” She uses the students’ experiences of stepping into another person’s set of beliefs and perspectives as an opportunity to reflect not only on what motivates people but also on their vulnerabilities and humanness. From Sarrah’s experience, this technique increases the students’ ability to connect on a personal level despite differences. For Rabia as well, the interreligious interactions of her Muslim students during Stony Point’s summer institute, including their experiences living and collaborating with members of other faith traditions, is central to building accepting relationships and to her program.

For Azi and Jamila, however, such initiatives can be very dangerous, given the sectarian violence within their communities. Both have had to restrict their movements outside their homes and offices due to threats against their work. In fact, just one day before the Tanenbaum workshop, a suicide bomber took the life of three of Azi’s trainers at an intrafaith dialogue at a madrasa. In the last year, his Peace and Education Foundation lost 119 of its partners doing intrafaith work with Sunnis and Shias.

Nevertheless, as the Islamic peace educators shared their experiences on this topic, they generated ideas for new inter- and intrafaith activities. After learning about Sarrah’s use of role playing with her students, Jamila is now thinking about

“how this can fit in our society. Perhaps we can develop different case studies for our imams, with roles that they can read and practice.” After listening to Rabia’s presentation on the interreligious collaborations of her summer institute participants, Sarrah is now considering inviting other schools to participate in her school’s Martin Luther King, Jr. day of service. “While we’ve had interfaith dialogues before, this will be an opportunity for students from different backgrounds to do an activity together.”



Photo by Markus Spring

### **Embracing a Long-Term Vision**

Despite key differences in their sociopolitical contexts, all four of the Tanenbaum workshop participants agreed that Islamic peace education must be understood as a holistic and long-term endeavor that, ultimately, requires persistence and patience. Explains Sarrah, “to be a teacher, you must have long-term vision. Things aren’t going to happen right away. But I think it’s important to touch these kids today, before they go into college and get wrapped up in a world in which they’ll have even more distractions than now.” That said, there are challenges with fitting a full social studies curriculum and peace and social justice content into the available time in the school day.

Jamila similarly explains that “we work very slowly, carefully. This is about

changing mentalities.” She notes that becoming a democratic society is a “long and big journey. If we create tensions in the community by crossing people’s religion or culture, of course they react.” Yet comparing her work with other organizations, Jamila finds that she is doing “more work with more women and with less money. We are trying to be Afghanized and localized—this is how we have the trust of the people. Yet it is a very slow process.”

“Spiritual projects cannot be done in a massive way,” reflects Rabia, but must start at an individual, often deeply personal, level. “Sometimes you have to work on a small scale, at the level of the heart. But you can have individual encounters, and in turn these people can go on to have more individual encounters.” Similar to Jamila’s description of her work as lighting one candle that can then light many others, Rabia says, “there is no telling what that individual, personal spiritual transformation is going to do in the long term.”



Photo by Alejandro Chicheri/World Food Programme

### **The Challenges: Finding Funders and Funding**

Consistent with the experience of other peace educators,<sup>41</sup> the Islamic peace

<sup>41</sup> Fitzduff, Mari and Isabella Jean. “Peace Education: State of the Field and Lessons Learned from USIP Grantmaking,” *Peaceworks*. (2011), pg. 11.

educators in this workshop all agreed that their top challenge is funding. While peace education and peacebuilding projects are often underfunded Jamila has found that obtaining funds for Islamic peace education efforts can be even more challenging. At one conference, an imam from a conservative province approached her and said, “Jamila sister, the training we received from you, we gave to 2,000 of our imams. We are with you. Just tell us what to do.” Yet, when she talks with potential donors about funding more activities with these imams, they hesitate. “Donors are scared

of these religious activities. But if I cannot raise funds for more activities with the imams, I have the fear that I will lose them. They are a huge human resource, they are very active and supportive, but I may lose them.” Further complicating the situation is that many donors are winding down their involvement as American troops withdraw from Afghanistan. “They are closing their offices or reducing activities, and now many of our proposals have been accepted but are in a long-term pending condition.”

In addition to the challenges of accessing funds from mainstream donors, the workshop participants talked about the particular challenge of fundraising within their Muslim community. “Our mission is education, yet so much of our effort is on fundraising,” explains Sarah. “This is even though the American Muslim community, when it pools its resources, is very wealthy.” Rabia concurred, noting that “we [in the Muslim community] have the means to do so much, but we don’t do it.” The participants agreed this is a lost opportunity for Muslims to effect positive change in Muslim communities around the world. “My vision,” offered Rabia, “is that we [Islamic peace educators and activists] have the same support, financial and otherwise, that madrasas have.”



Photo by United Nations Photo

### **The Power of Sharing: Networking as Islamic Peace Educators**

Second to their need for funding, the workshop participants agreed that they would benefit significantly from increased opportunities to network and learn from each other. “We are so fragmented,” explains Rabia. “The major thing besides funds that I would like to access is the sort of thing we had here today [at this Islamic peace education workshop]. The ability to meet with people in the Muslim community who are doing parallel and complimentary work, and to build on those conversations, is a major thing.” Though the participants work in vastly different environments, such exchanges provide information on the different contexts, the opportunity to explore what is possible to use or adapt, and where key contextual differences preclude such adaptation – even though the techniques worked in other settings.

A clear difference in their contexts is that the freedom of inquiry and expression that has been so central to Rabia’s work is precisely the approach that could get someone in another part of the world killed. Rabia observed that in the U.S., educators have the “...*capacity to make experiments*. We do have horrible blindness about situations in other places, but we have some [opportunities] here. One is that we can meet lots of different kinds of Muslims

from all over, and we can sit down and talk about things and *experiment*.” Conversely, and notwithstanding Islam’s rich history of intra- and interreligious coexistence, discussion and peaceful debate, Azi sees today that there is “little space left right now in Islamic societies for such work.” Therefore, opportunities to share Islamic peace education experiences, perspectives, and resources between spaces with different levels of freedom of expression are crucial.

The workshop participants shared several examples of existing fruitful exchanges across networks. For instance, Jamila models much of her current work with imams on a similar project in the Philippines, about which she learned while attending the 2009 Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE) Conference in Kuala Lumpur. Azi finds that his work is often enhanced by being able to ask questions of other Islamic peace educators around the world, especially on handling controversial theological issues. Sometimes he will email out a question on a difficult situation that came up in a workshop, and by the end of the day have an answer that helps resolve the problem. He asked the other Islamic peace educators at the workshop if he can include them in such inquiries, and they all said yes, agreeing on the value of such exchanges for all of them.

Networking and other personal exchanges are also important techniques in the educators’ programs. Jamila’s organization is starting to link its youth groups with young people in other Islamic countries. “Right now they are learning from the experiences of their Malaysian Muslim brothers and sisters, as well as youth in Indonesia and Iran.” Sarrah tries to find Muslim peace and social justice activists who she can bring to her school as speakers, so that her students can

learn from their examples and see what is possible for their own lives. Providing role models for students is one way she inspires change.

During the workshop, new ideas for such exchanges emerged. Azi and Sarrah discussed the idea of offering volunteer opportunities in Azi's program for Sarrah's students, particularly those who already return to Pakistan and Afghanistan with their families during the summer. Some of the students' parents, such as those who are physicians, already volunteer in the villages during these summer visits. "These students come with a certain level of energy that is needed back home, in Pakistan," explained Azi. While a typical Westerner may not be welcome by the participants in Azi's programs, "Muslim American youth are different. Afghan and Pakistani youth would love to meet Muslim American youth." Of course, the safety of the students would have to be secured, but Sarrah and Azi agreed that such an experience could be powerful for the Muslim youth from each context.

Rabia's views on networking came from a spiritual perspective. She saw the opportunities for learning and connection as part of the intended spiritual experience of Muslims. "It used to be that once in a lifetime the fortunate or persistent would go on *hajj*, where they would encounter Muslims from all over. There would be this revelatory moment about diversity of Islam. But today, we don't have to wait for that once in a lifetime moment. Can we see this as something that was intended for us as a part of our religious experience, to encounter each other in that way? How can we have those interactions now?"

## Conclusion

The four Islamic peace educators profiled here come from vastly different sociopolitical contexts—from a region of intractable conflict and sectarian violence, to a comparatively stable nation that is daily challenged by tension surrounding its American Muslim minority community. Using a vast array of ideas and approaches - from teacher trainings to literacy courses, workshops, theological exercises, youth service days, theory building, role-play exercises, and a range of other methods for engaging youth, women, men, and religious leaders – the workshop participants all work within an Islamic framework of peace and human rights for all.

Despite their different contexts and approaches, the Islamic peace educators shared common experiences in their commitment to authenticity and local investment of their work, engagement of Islamic principles of nonviolence and social justice, and a necessarily long-term vision for peace education and peace. They also shared similar challenges in accessing funding and resources. As they left the workshop, each expressed a desire for more such opportunities to meet and network with fellow Islamic peace educators. In the often isolating work of peace advocacy from an Islamic perspective, which too often is drowned out by voices of radicalism, these Islamic peace educators proved to be a crucial resource for each other. Their examples also serve as important resources of promising practices for other peace educators in a range of Muslim and interreligious contexts.

As the day closed, Azi summed up his final thoughts. "One of the most important things to come out of this workshop for us is the question – how can we start to come together, to meet more often?"

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