



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE

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Muslim Communities Participating in Society:
A Belgian - U.S. Dialogue
16-17 November 2005 Brussels

Schedule of Events and Program

Tuesday, November 15

6:30 pm

Welcome reception and dinner hosted by U.S. ambassador to Belgium, Tom C. Korologos, at the ambassador's residence

U.S. Ambassador's Residence

Rue Zinner 2
1000 Brussels

Wednesday, November 16

9:30 a.m.

Participants gather, sign in, and get settled

10:00-10:40 am

Opening Session

- Welcome by ambassador Korologos and Claude Misson, Director-General of IRRI/KIIB
- Overview of conference plan, ground rules, and dialogue process by facilitators Mark Hongenaert (Belgium) and Rick Rutherford (U.S.)
- Research presentations on Muslims in Belgium and the U.S. by Carole Chapelier (Belgium) of Intermedia and Zahid Bukhari (U.S.) of the Muslims in the American Public Square project
- Assignment into small working groups (15-20 people)

10:40 am-12:30 pm

First small-group dialogue session (break included) will begin a day-long, multi-faceted discussion on participation

in society with participants relating their personal experiences as Muslims in addition to their analyses of issues concerning participation

12:30-1:30 pm

Lunch with presentation by Michael A. Guido, mayor, Dearborn, MI

1:30-2:30 pm

Second small-group dialogue session, deepening the discussion on participation in society

2:30-3:00 pm

Break

3:00-4:00 pm

Third small-group dialogue session, *concluding the discussion on participation in society*

4:00-4:15 pm

Break

4:15-6:00 pm

Final total-group plenary session

Recap and processing of day one's conversations and a look ahead to day two

6:30-9:00 p.m.

Reception followed by dinner with entertainment
Belgian musician Moustu Largo and American comedian Azhar Usman

Thursday, November 17

9:30-10:40 am

Convene in small groups for ***topic-centered dialogue*** in the following areas:

- Civic life
- Media portrayal
- Women's issues
- Youth development
- Economic opportunity

10:40-11:00 am

Break

11:00-12:00

Topic-centered dialogue continues

12:00-1:00 pm

Lunch with presentation by Jef Gabriels, mayor, Genk, Belgium

<i>1:00-2:30 pm</i>	<i>Total-group</i> sharing of topic-centered dialogue sessions
<i>2:30-3:00 pm</i>	<i>Break</i>
<i>3:00-5:00 pm</i>	<i>Small-group sessions</i> to identify specific practices within the given topic areas that serve to facilitate Muslim participation in society
<i>5:00-6:00 pm</i>	<p><i>Final total group plenary</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comments and conclusions by the participants on insights gained and thoughts/plans going forward • Closing remarks by ambassador Korologos and Mr. Misson
<i>6:30 p.m.</i>	<i>Closing Reception</i>

Friday, November 18

<i>9:30 am</i>	<p><i>Press conference</i>, to announce</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights, and any communiqués, of the conference • Specific, follow-on initiatives
<i>12:30 pm</i>	<i>Inter-faith luncheon</i> (by invitation) at the ambassador's residence

Frequently Asked Questions

The following have been frequently asked questions on both sides of the Atlantic.

Why hold the conference?

The overall purpose of the conference is to engage and empower Muslims in Belgium and America as a means of enhancing their participation in society. To varying degrees, Muslims in both Belgium and America feel alienated and disaffected today, and the events of September 11 and its aftermath have created significant new tensions. At the same time, the vast majority of American and Belgian Muslims would favor greater participation in (not separation from) society (this finding based on substantial survey research in America and across Western Europe). As broad citizen enfranchisement in political, economic, and social life is fundamental to democracy, the conference can make an important contribution to the well being of both Muslim communities and their respective countries.

What, specifically, are the desired outcomes?

They're three-fold: (1) to create an honest, genuine dialogue between and among Belgian and American Muslims, (2) to exchange good practices for fostering participation in society, and (3) to look at specific, future engagement between the two sides (and to make concrete commitments to do so – for those so willing). This is not meant to be a one-time event but the beginning of an ongoing process.

Why engage just Muslims and not a cross section of both societies?

As important as this conference can be, it does not purport to be more than it is. It has a specific focus – allowing Belgian and American Muslims time and space to hold mutually beneficial and supportive dialogue. Conversations between Muslims and non-Muslims need to occur, and in fact are increasingly occurring in both the United States and Belgium. Facilitating Muslims' understanding of how they can best participate in society can only support their ability to enter into these broader conversations. Muslims can especially find in dialogue with one another understanding, support, encouragement, good ideas, and practical suggestions.

But doesn't a Muslim-to-Muslim focus only exacerbate a sense of "the other"?

No – no more than any meeting among members of a given religion or association or political party would create a sense of "the other." A certain degree of Muslim isolation in some quarters today is a fact of life. Again, the point of the conference is precisely to counter the very isolation that can lead to perception of "the other."

Why Belgium?

Two reasons: (1) the U.S. ambassador to Belgium, Tom C. Korologos, has taken the initiative to make this dialogue happen; and (2) the Belgian experience is intended as a prototype. This same conference could be taking place in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, or several other European countries. If the experience is positive, what has worked in Belgium could perhaps become a model for similar engagement elsewhere in Europe (and beyond).

But, why not make the dialogue European Union-wide?

That might make sense at some point. There needed to be a place to start, however, and Belgium is that place. The challenges of establishing a Belgian-U.S. bilateral dialogue are already considerable. Launching a U.S.-E.U. process would be very complex. In addition, the circumstances of Muslims vary across Europe. A bilateral approach facilitates accommodating unique circumstances in each country.

Why is the U.S. embassy involved? What's its role? What does it hope to gain?

The U.S. embassy in Belgium – by which we mean for the country of Belgium, not for the European Union or NATO – is the conference convener, together with Belgium's Royal Institute for International Relations. Ambassador Korologos believes strongly in bilateral dialogue as key to mutual understanding and sound relations between America and Belgium. What the embassy hopes to gain is nothing other than to achieve the purpose stated above – to engage and empower Muslims in Belgium and America as a means of enhancing their participation in society.

But isn't the embassy seeking some public relations benefit?

The embassy's focus in this project is on building relationships, not managing images. Still, Belgian public reaction is not unimportant, as positive sentiment about the conference within Belgian society can facilitate future engagement. If the participants feel the dialogue was constructive and is worth their time to continue, and are willing to speak to that as they leave the conference, that will be public relations benefit enough for the embassy.

What is the role of the Royal Institute for International Relations (IRRI)?

IRRI is the Belgian co-sponsor and co-convenor for the conference. Nothing in its association with this particular program is meant to suggest endorsement or commitment, financial or otherwise, to any future exchange or specific projects of engagement that might grow out of the conference.

Who's funding the conference?

The co-sponsors, the U.S. embassy in Belgium and IRRI, are the principal funders. At the same time, they acknowledge generous support from various private organizations, including the Daimler-Chrysler Corporation and **The United States Institute of Peace**, among others.

What is the conference program?

This will be a highly interactive and participatory event (not a traditional academic or association conference with expert panels, seated audiences, and Q&A sessions). The methodology will manifest dialogue itself through structured and facilitated small and large group conversations. Sessions will build upon one another to deepen understanding of the topic areas as well as the interpersonal dynamics. Topic areas will include civic life, economic opportunity, media, youth development, and women's issues. Small group assignments will be by topic areas. To foster closer relationships, participants will remain with the same set of participants throughout the small group work.

Who are the conference participants?

Participants will include national and grass roots civic activists, NGO staff, imams, social workers, business people, elected officials, filmmakers, broadcast and print journalists, students, educators, artists, and even comedians – in short, a robust gathering of people from all walks of life. Target attendance is 80-100 of whom 30-35 will be American. (Specific lists of confirmed attendees will be provided separately.)

How have the participants been selected?

Participants have been selected based on their professional roles and accomplishments relative to the conference topic areas with a view toward having a diverse cross section of the Muslim communities from both America and Belgium as well as non-Muslim representatives from both societies.

What's the participants' role?

Participants have no set roles to play. No prepared remarks are required or expected (or desired). The assignment is to enter wholeheartedly into dialogue with American and Belgian counterparts on the broad experience of being Muslim in Western secular society and on specific topic areas. This is about mutual listening and learning. It's

about relating one's experiences and life story. And it's about drawing on one's expertise to discuss success strategies for advancing Muslim participation in society. (The only exceptions to the above are short presentations to be given by the mayors of Dearborn, MI and Genk, Belgium, at lunch on Wednesday and Thursday, respectively.)

What do conference participants need to do to prepare?

Nothing.

How will the conference be managed?

A bi-national team of Belgian and American professional conference planners and facilitators has developed the conference program and will be on hand to manage it. A facilitator will be present in all conference discussions, both plenary and small group, to ensure all participants have the opportunity to icpnat.

What about the language differences – how will those be handled?

The conference will recognize and provide simultaneous translation in English (the main language of the U.S.) and French and Dutch (the main languages of Belgium).

Will there be media coverage?

To help ensure an environment conducive to open and candid dialogue, there will be no active media coverage during the conference. Media people attending the conference will be present as participants like everyone else, not working journalists. There will be absolutely no media coverage of the small group sessions. There will be, however, some, unobtrusive filming of plenary sessions to help create a visual record of the overall event.

Background on the Muslim Community in Belgium

(See also: <http://euro-islam.info/pages/belgium.html>)

Overview

The Muslim populace in Belgium, a country of just over 10 million people, forms nearly five percent of the total population. Although the Government of Belgium does not keep statistics on ethnicity or religion, most estimates for the total population of Muslims in Belgium range from 450,000 to 500,000. The largest representations of Muslims in Belgium are from Morocco (approximately 300,000) and Turkey (roughly 160,000).

Up to 40% of Belgium's Muslims are estimated to live in the greater Brussels metropolitan region, with estimates of 140,000 Moroccans and 80,000 Turks. The percentage of Muslims in the city of Brussels may approach 20% and some inner city neighborhoods are almost exclusively Muslim. Belgium's remaining 50,000 Muslims hail from a wide variety of countries including: Pakistan, Albania, Tunisia, Senegal, Algeria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Iran. There are also an estimated 10,000 Belgian-born converts. The population is young; up to 35% of the

Muslim population in Belgium is less than 18 years old. Belgium has over 350 mosques, although not all of them were originally built for this purpose.

Belgium is a federal state with three regions: Flanders in the north where Dutch is the official language; Wallonia in the south where French is the official language; and Brussels, the capital, where French and Dutch are both official languages. In addition, there is a small German-speaking minority of 70,000 in the south. The regions are empowered with a high level of autonomy, especially in the educational and cultural spheres. Many Moroccan immigrants can be found in Wallonia while Turks often settle in Flanders.

Immigration

The first wave immigrants arrived in Belgium at the end of the 19th century. Most came for mining jobs. In 1927, almost 15% of the miners in Belgium were Muslim, mostly from Algeria. Immigration was halted in the 1930s, and significant influxes of Muslims did not occur again until the 1960s. In order to fill labor shortages in areas such as the mining sector, Belgium made an official request in the summer of 1964 to recruit workers from Morocco and Turkey. In 1969 and 1970 similar agreements were signed with Tunisia and Algeria. During this time period Morocco was by far the country that sent the most immigrants to live and work in Belgium. Italy, however, has historically sent the most immigrants overall to Belgium. A leading politician, Elio Di Rupo, Minister-President of Wallonia, is Belgian-born with Italian roots.

In 1974, the Belgian government halted the immigration policy based upon work because of an economic crisis. Unlike the former wave of immigrants (who came mainly from Italy), the Muslim immigration wave of the 60s and early 70s was fully employed for just one generation. Subsequent generations have had to cope with this reality as they have struggled to find their place in the Belgian work force. At the onset of the economic crisis, many immigrants were poorly educated and badly adapted to finding other jobs. Thus, they suffered not only from high unemployment but also from an increasingly negative perception within Belgian society.

Belgian policies emphasizing the reunification of families have contributed to continued slow but steady growth in immigration. Belgium has also encouraged individual integration in society through naturalization. Under legislation such as the Gol Law of 1984 (amended in 1991) and the "Fast Belgian Law" of 2000, processes for acquiring Belgian citizenship were eased and streamlined. As a result, since 1984, more than 538,000 foreigners have become Belgian citizens. This means that nearly one in 20 Belgians has acquired citizenship during the past 20 years.

Government Recognition of Islam

The government of Belgium officially recognizes six religions including, since 1974, Islam. Official recognition by the government has numerous advantages, including the payment of imams' salaries and funding for the construction of mosques. Because there is no religious hierarchy in Islam, it has been historically difficult for the Belgian government to single out an entity with whom to liaise. The creation of the Muslim Council in 1999 filled that gap. The current Muslim Council is a general assembly body of 68 members (presided over by a 17 member executive) that represents the religious

and cultural interests of the Muslim community to the Belgian Government. Since 2001, it has been receiving state subsidies.

Elected in the spring of 2005, the current Muslim Executive Council is comprised of 8 Turks, 6 Moroccans, 2 Pakistanis, and one Albanian. The group is fairly evenly divided along language lines (French and Dutch). The executive elected a president in the fall of 2005. Among other duties, the president plays the important role of being spokesperson for the community.

Challenges: Prejudice and High Unemployment

Muslim integration and participation in Belgian society, like elsewhere in Europe, is an evolving and complex issue. In some communities, there are now three or more generations of Muslims: foreign-born grandparents who migrated to Belgium during the '60s and their Belgian-born children and grandchildren. Muslim integration into other cultures and societies has not always been easy. Some Muslims face documented discrimination in employment or housing as well as social prejudice based upon a combination of complex factors that may include: family name, outward religious symbols (such as a veil or scarf), or a perceived desire to "remain separate" or even a "refusal" to integrate.

Some far-right parties, most notably the Flemish Vlaams Blok, have anti-immigrant elements as part of their platforms. In 2004, Belgium's supreme court ruled that the Vlaams Blok party violated Belgium's anti-racism legislation. As a consequence, the party was denied funding and access to broadcasting on television, effectively shutting the party down. Later, the Vlaams Belang party emerged, espousing some of the same ideas as the Vlaams Blok, but with many of the overtly inflammatory views toned down. The Vlaams Blok has earned up to 25% of the vote in Antwerp and it remains a very real force in Flemish politics. As a result even some mainstream Belgian politicians, sensitive to their constituencies, have taken a harder line against immigrant communities. Whether the perception is real or not, there are some Belgians who do feel threatened by "non-Western foreigners" who have different customs and values and who stand out as separate from the relatively homogenous society.

Muslims in urban centers face high unemployment, particularly among the youth. All non-EU nationals, including Muslims, have higher rates of unemployment than their EU citizen counterparts. According to the scholars on the Euro-Islam.org web site, unemployment rates for non-Belgians average five times higher than for Belgian citizens (25% versus 5%). For some sectors of the population, unemployment rates are even higher than this. Muslim immigrants are often further handicapped by limited education or language proficiency in Belgium's two official languages. These very real educational and socio-economic factors can inhibit full integration.

Political Integration

Muslims have become a pivotal voting bloc in many constituencies. For example, Muslim voters were responsible for the defeat of the Francophone liberals in the

Brussels regional election of 2005 and, arguably, for their subsequent removal from the governing coalition of the Socialists. Further, more than a quarter of the Brussels Region parliamentarians are of Muslim heritage, although many are secular. Despite the many challenges confronting it, the Muslim community has had some success with entering into electoral politics, another important method of integration. This can pave the way for broader inclusion and representation at all levels of society.

Conference Distinguished Observers Program

Note: The following is the statement the conference organizers have sent to those wishing to observe, but not directly participate in, the proceedings.

“Muslim Communities Participating in Society: A Belgian-U.S. Dialogue” is a prototype initiative that has generated interest in selected circles in both countries and across Europe as a possible model for Muslim outreach.

In addition to the 90-100 conference participants, some 20-30 distinguished observers will attend the event, including representatives from the Belgian and U.S. governments, the European Union, Muslim organizations from around Europe, and others.

The conference planners have designed a separate program for observers that will allow them to witness part of the proceedings, meet and talk to participants during social sessions, and attend an in-depth briefing on the strategy and planning of the event as well as the follow-on press conference.

The observers program seeks both to allow non-participants to see how the conference works and to preserve intimacy and confidentiality in the small working groups – avoiding a “fishbowl” effect that could stifle discussion.

Schedule of Events for Observers

Wednesday, November 16	Dinner 7:00-10:00 PM
Thursday, November 17	Briefing on Conference Strategy and Planning 3:00-4:30 PM
	Conference Closing Session 5:00-6:00 PM
	Reception 6:30-8:00 PM
Friday, November 18	Press Conference 9:30-10:30 AM

Notes

The mayor of Dearborn, MI will speak at lunch on November 16, and the mayor of Genk, Belgium will speak at lunch on November 17. Both will address ethnic/minority integration in their cities. Dinner on November 16 is an integral part of the conference, featuring Muslim-oriented entertainment, to allow the participants to further their dialogue in a relaxed setting. The briefing on November 17 on the strategy and planning of the conference will delve into details that many have asked about (e.g., selection criteria for discussion topics and participants, use of advance research, design of the program, etc.). The closing conference session is when the conference participants will present ideas for specific follow-on projects. The press conference in the morning of November 18 will serve to announce specific, follow-on initiatives (being developed in advance).

Why this Dialogue, Now?

Europe and the United States increasingly acknowledge the political, economic, and security value of building productive relationships with both domestic and international Muslim communities. It is time to catalyze these relationships – to increase enfranchisement, ease alienation, and foster cross-cultural understanding. Muslims on both sides are natural interlocutors who share the aspiration and challenge of participating fully in their respective societies while honoring their faith and identity. This is a prototype initiative, beginning in Belgium. If successful, it could become a model for use across Europe.

Outcomes

This initiative seeks, first, to achieve genuine dialogue among the diverse participants; then, to explore issues of mutual concern and share “good practices” for fostering participation in society; and, finally, to identify concrete next steps for future exchange and cooperation.

Participants

Participants will include civic and grass roots activists, NGO staff, imams, social workers, business people, elected officials, labor leaders, broadcast and print journalists, students, and educators, among others. Target attendance is 80-100 of whom 30-35 will be American.

Format

This will be a highly interactive and participatory event (not a traditional academic encounter with panel discussions and audience Q&A). The methodology will manifest dialogue itself through structured and facilitated small and large group conversations. Sessions will build upon one another to deepen understanding of the topic areas as well as the interpersonal dynamics.

Modeling a New Public Diplomacy

Governments talk to one another via traditional diplomacy, but citizens can and must talk to one another, too, via people-to-people exchanges, or public diplomacy. Public diplomacy works best when predicated on dialogue (not monologue) and building relationships (not managing images) – on terms acceptable to and meaningful for both

sides. In keeping with these principles, this initiative is being developed as an inherently bilateral partnership with support from government, non-governmental organizations, and leading Muslim groups and individuals in both countries.

***Convened by Belgium's Royal Institute for International Relations
and The United States Embassy in Belgium***