



“Have a Wonderful Confusing Time!”

Posted on [September 13, 2011](#)

Introduction of fellows and partners. Institute of International Education. 12 Sept. 2011

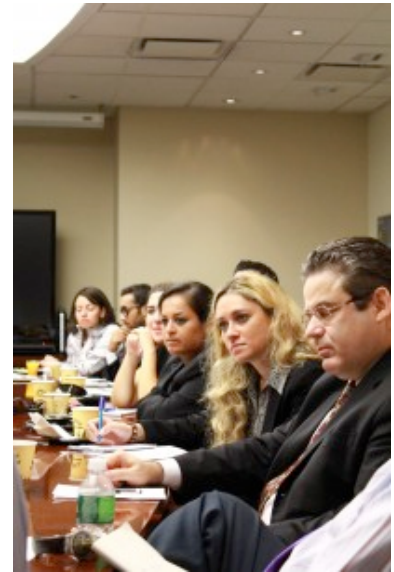
They are here. The UNAOC fellows from Middle East – North Africa have finally landed in New York last weekend and are ready for an intense trip across US and Europe. They symbolically arrived the day before 9/11 tenth anniversary. More than a coincidence this precise date of arrival sets the tone of the journey that is about to begin for those ten young Arab leaders.

The 911 attacks changed the world and the UNAOC has been created in the aftermath of it. The Alliance’s first mission has since been to overcome the sadness, the misconceptions, and the accumulation of fears this event has generated between the West and the Middle East.

The fellowship finds its roots in this very altruistic goal. Such a program aims to deconstruct stereotypes and to contribute to a better understanding between cultures, peoples and societies.

The goal of this two part trip across the United States and Europe, and across the Middle East later, is to build a more inclusive society where difference is seen as an asset and not as an issue. A pluralistic approach is going to be a central part of the learning process. It is a necessity for the leaders of tomorrow to acknowledge and to transcend the difficulties they will encounter in trying to translate pluralism into positive political decisions.

During an intimate introductory meeting, partners and fellows got the chance to exchange their views on the program and to discuss their expectations. Representatives of the UNAOC, the British Council, the Institute of International Education, and the ISESCO/OIC all agreed on the same idea: the aim of such fellowship is to build a solid network where people share the vision of a society where everyone has a place. They also expressed the necessity to extend this program to other countries in the region in order to welcome more young leaders from different parts of the Middle East. Both partners and fellows shared the view that focusing on media should be considered as a keystone of the intercultural bridge they are trying to build together. It is crucial to reach wider public audiences with such messages.



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Jean Christophe Bas (Senior Adviser, Strategic Developments and Partnerships, UNAOC) quoted William Fulbright to illustrate the spirit of such intercultural exchange program “We live in a world

of diversity. The legitimate, realistic aim of international education and leadership is neither to convert nor indoctrinate, but rather to encourage empathy and understanding between cultures.”



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The IIE representative clearly emphasized the role MENA fellows could have in the US. There is a lot of work that needs to be done in the country if it wants to fully understand what is happening right now in the Middle East with the Arab Spring. But she also acknowledged that American society is a melting pot and is not easy to understand. She told the group “The more you’ll see, the more you’ll get confused... So... Have a wonderful confusing time!!”

Most of the fellows are themselves active members of their own country’s civil society. Such engagement has been for some of them directly linked to 9/11 and its consequences on US Middle Eastern policies. Therefore, they have also expressed very clear expectations about the program.

They also mentioned their will to free Arab and Islamic terminology from misconceptions and to find a way to redefine those terms; and why not, to deconstruct stereotypes between Arabs themselves. They also talked about the idea to create virtual spaces of encounter for the Arab and global youth and the possibility to train bloggers on intercultural dialogue.

They finally concluded by saying that this trip will be a great opportunity for them to experience American and European societies, not only at both an elite and government levels, but also from inside.

Paloma Haschke

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Fellows Visit with UN and New York NGOs

Posted on [September 13, 2011](#)

8.30 – 10.00am:

Introduction of fellows and partners

Partners:

- The goal of the program is to help building a solid network of young leaders that can share the same vision of a society where everyone has a place.
- A quote that reflects the spirit of the fellowship “We live in a world of diversity. The legitimate, realistic aim of international education and leadership is neither to convert nor indoctrinate, but rather to encourage empathy and understanding between cultures.” (William Fulbright)
- There is a lot of work to do in the US to fully understand what is happening in the Middle East with the Arab Spring.

Fellows’ expectations:

- Increase intercultural understanding capacity
- Free Arab and Islamic terminology from all stereotypes and find new ways to redefine controversial terms such as *jihad* or *Muslim*
- Create virtual space of encounter for youth and train bloggers on intercultural dialogues

10.15 – 11.00am:

Visit of the UN Security Council and General Assembly

11.00am – 1.00pm:

UN inter-Agency meeting

- Mrs Lee O’Brian – Department of Political Affairs: In order to change the United Nations, State members themselves have to change. They are the UN. Such a change can only happen with a vibrant and active civil society asking for significant changes within international institutions.
- Mrs Anne Marie Goetz – UN Women: Women’s lack of education has been proven to have a critical impact on a country’s economy and society. One of UN Women’s biggest ambitions is to

promote the gender agenda as one piece of UN reforms. It is also to create an agency like UNICEF focused on women that would be dedicated to improve gender equality.

- Dr Azza Karam – UN Population Fund: Religious organizations are now massively investing to promote development. In some countries they are giving more money than government and non-religious NGO. This evolution has been acknowledged by donors and is changing development-funding mechanisms on a global level.

2.30 – 5.00pm:

The Bronx Transformation Project. Boricua College

- Health conditions in the Bronx are the worst in New York City. Infant mortality is atrocious and a woman of the South West Bronx has twenty times higher risk of dying from diabetes than a woman from the Upper East Side. Health statistics are terrible in the Bronx because of the lack of free and universal health care and education in the borough.
- There is a breakdown in the educative system. Incoming teachers are not trained properly and lack of skills in grammar and conversation ability. They are also losing their respect for their own profession and their student.

5.00 – 6.00pm:

Bronx Visit – Al Imam Community Center

- Only full Islamic school in the Bronx, it wants to form its students both as perfect American citizens and Islamic scholars. Created on September 11, 2001, this center also provides social care, foster care, and adoption services. It also runs a political organization whose aim is to help American Muslims to be heard on national levels.

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