

## The SALAAM Initiatives in CAIRO: Project Report – Summer 2007

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**Summary:** Our project team created ‘Peace-Shirts’, t-shirts printed with messages of peace, made from Egyptian raw materials and employing the workmanship of young Egyptian adults. Another aspect of the project was organizing ‘Islam Means Peace’ visits for orphaned youth which engaged them in activities, games, and dialogue highlighting the many possible contributions individuals can make to build peaceful and equitable society. Aside from the 100 Projects for Peace grant, our project was assisted by a print shop that offered services at a reduced rate.

The project aimed, over the short-term, to provide materials and an organizational structure for a sustainable income-generating activity that could counter conditions of poverty for project’s participants and at the same time convey messages of peace. The project’s aims, in the long-term, are to demonstrate, in Egypt and in America, that Islam mandates individuals to strive for peace and equity within their society. This is a view endorsed by contemporary scholars of religion and peace studies whose notions have inspired this initiative. (For relatively concise further reading on this view, I recommend beginning with Abu-Nimer, Mohammed. “A Framework for Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islam” in the *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 15 No. ½. (2001): 217-265.)

**Results:** Seventeen individuals participated on the Peace-Shirt making team over the course of the project, including two women. Project participants were drawn from lower-income stratum using word-of-mouth recruiting, newspaper advertisements, and interviews. Groups of participants also visited orphan homes as part of their commitment to the community-building aspect of the project. The eight homes visited were located in Cairo, Giza and Port Said. A highlight of the experience was gifting Peace-Shirts to youth and staff and engaging them in games and dialogue about the prospects for peaceful society and the values that this goal entails. Approximately 150 youth of various ages were involved in this aspect of the project, along with 23 adult facilitators. This aspect of our project was in part a pilot to test the advocacy of such community engagement initiatives geared to teams of youth and young adult mentors. The near overwhelming enthusiasm of the youth—and some of their supervisors—suggests that a sustained initiative of this type would be socially profitable and mutually rewarding.

Recruiting participants and organizing the ‘Islam Stands for Peace visits’ was fairly straightforward, although we have had to navigate other challenges. During the initial stage of the project, one challenge was securing a project headquarters that would support all of our activities and still keep us within a budget. Networking and many treks through Cairo’s expanse proffered, finally, a suitable space. Headquarters managed to house all the equipment and be accessible via low-cost public transportation routes; however it was not in the downtown area and was unsuitable for co-functioning as a retail store, as originally desired. Thus, we have had to carve our niche supplying Peace-Shirts to other sellers. This is solution that puts multiple people between our production and retail sales, but it is more efficient. Another challenge was getting the necessary paperwork in a reasonable time, as operating without documents could have put the project in compromising legal situations. The expected delay in processing was overcome by forging relationships with local authorities. Fourthly, we decided to use Egyptian made materials were possible, which required traveling considerable distances to reach supply sources and negotiate reasonable prices, (prices which could fluctuate depending on the day and the mood of the merchant). We procured and transported all the essential equipment on multiple treks across Cairo’s urban sprawl and beyond, during the most scorching months of

the year, relying primarily on the city's severely overcrowded public transportation, traversing low lying smog clouds and horrific gridlock traffic.

Although skill-training for our participants was a considerably lighter task than was the initial stage of organization, it still posed multiple coordination challenges that demanded creative solutions. For instance, to keep commitments high and guide work-related tasks we adopted the acronym endorsed in English and explained in Arabic: Productivity, Effort, Achievement, Cooperation, Earnings = PEACE. The for-profit distribution of Peace-Shirts went slowly and through multiple stages of development. We are now looking at the prospects for supplying business-logo Peace-Shirts and designing athletic club Peace-Project sponsored team shirts. Plans are also, more generally, to increase awareness about the project and its mission, and possibly to incorporate as a non-profit in the U.S., allowing us to collect 'Peace-Pledges' to expand the initiative. *In sha' allah*—the Arabic expression to capture aspirations—we have had promising feedback and are working now to advance our outreach. One participant on the project expresses her desire to help the project continue toward reaching its biggest goals: *Al-humdu allah!*—she summarizes using the expression for hope and heartfelt appreciation. She has participated in the project trimming strings on the garments, attaching tags, packaging the Peace-Shirts, and ensuring the quality of our workmanship.

**Implications:** Investing in development is investing in peace; this investment is much needed in Egypt where large percentages of the population live in poverty, and where government is not in a position to address public need adequately. The need is so alarmingly tangible, that Egyptians often express a sense of frustration and even anger at times towards the more prosperous economies. In a small step towards addressing this tenuous situation, we have trained a group of Egyptians, provided them a source of income, a product to distribute, and immediate channels through which to spread notions of peace and social equity. The initial time-frame seems short to accurately gauge participants' personal developments, but individual economic empowerment, especially over the long-term, is a primary step toward alleviating conditions of poverty and countering stagnation.

As an up-coming senior this experience has shaped my career goals, and definitely, has increased my capability to organize such initiatives in Egypt: I am now working to expand the Salaam Initiatives to include an all women project site in the city of Port Said, and I'm writing a thesis for Princeton University entitled; "The Making of Peace: Islamic dialogues in opposition to political violence" developing therein some of my reflections over the course of the Salaam Initiatives. My career is now directed toward the field of social policy research and evidence based social intervention. In the long-term, I hope to see established a United World College to represent the Middle East region. This unique and progressive institution offers international education aimed at cross-cultural exchange, advocates nonviolent conflict-resolution strategies and enables promising young students to become socially conscientious professionals representing their regions' humanitarian concerns on the global forum.

The members of the Salaam team are proud to be building a sense of human community from America to Egypt; 100 Projects for Peace has inspired and logistically made possible efforts for poverty relief, job-skills training, and community involvement in orphan support centers. The team sends its warmest expression of gratitude and peace.



Project coordinators (left and right); distributing Peace-Shirts to a classroom of youngsters at *Dar al-Kefalat al-Yatim*, a privately sponsored mosque-affiliated orphan support home and school (Center)