

YOUNG AMERICAN MUSLIMS ENCOURAGED TO SEEK PUBLIC-SERVICE CAREERS

By
Jane Morse
USINFO Staff Writer

WASHINGTON, JULY 20 -- Young American Muslims should make their voices heard in American mainstream society and consider careers in public service, U.S. government officials say.

Officials at the U.S. Department of State met July 12 with 27 highly accomplished individuals aged 20 to 25 from across the United States.

There is a "huge receptivity to ideas" at the State Department, according to Ambassador Shirin Tahir-Kheli. She said the State Department and the Bush administration are committed to reaching out to young Muslims.

Tahir-Kheli is the senior adviser on women's empowerment issues to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Of Pakistani heritage, Tahir-Kheli said she is the first Muslim to be appointed as a U.S. ambassador.

Among the State Department officials available to answer the young people's questions was Seema Matin, who joined the State Department in 2002 and currently is a public diplomacy officer working for Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes. Matin has been recognized for her contributions to one of Hughes' "War of Ideas" initiatives, which focuses on countering ideological support for terrorism.

Matin, who was born in the United States of Pakistani immigrants and chooses to wear the hijab, told the group of young American Muslims that her head covering signals the world that highly educated professional women can wear this expression of their faith proudly. (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2006&m=November&x=20061129163534GLnesnoM0.5619928>).

Matin told USINFO that she is grateful to see more young American Muslims becoming interested in careers in politics, journalism and nongovernmental organizations.

Also on hand was Kareema Dauod, who works for the State Department while studying for her doctorate in Arabic linguistics at Georgetown University. The daughter of a German mother and a Palestinian father, Dauod urged the group of American Muslims to become more involved in the American public sphere and more engaged civically. "Citizens, whether they be Muslim or not, have a responsibility to engage and collaborate with their government on issues that affect the common well being. Being proactive means having a goal in mind, addressing

those individuals who can help actualize that goal, and then following through on the steps necessary to making that goal a reality,” she said.

The young adults’ trip to Washington was arranged by the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), which describes itself as “a public service agency working for the civil rights of American Muslims, for the integration of Islam into American pluralism, and for a positive, constructive relationship between American Muslims and their representatives.”

Although it was founded in 1988, this is the first time MPAC has organized a nationwide Youth Leadership Conference such as this, according to Salam al-Marayati, MPAC’s executive director. During their two-day stay in Washington, the group met with members of the U.S. Congress, officials at the departments of Justice and Homeland Security, and visited the White House to talk to the director of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

In assessing the conference afterwards, al-Marayati told USINFO that the group found it an “empowering experience” and appreciated meeting with officials who explained opportunities in the U.S. government for Muslim-Americans.

“It’s even more important for U.S. government officials to recognize the willingness of Muslim-Americans to help government without giving up their faith,” he said. He added that the participants of the Youth Leadership Conference have strong views on Islamic identity in the United States.

“We want to define ourselves as having a Muslim-American identity,” al-Marayati said, “and show that U.S. values are compatible with Islam.”

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