Conference

Islam and Social Justice

Speech by David Green CMG, Director-General of the British Council

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Today marks an important milestone for us in the British Council by being able to host this conference on Islam and Social Justice in partnership with the Islamic Foundation, the Citizens' Organising Foundation and Islamic Relief.

Our partner organisations in this event are not, of course, strangers to us – we were delighted when both the Citizens' Organising Foundation (COF) and the Islamic Foundation were involved when we launched our Connecting Futures initiative on understanding between the UK and countries with predominantly Muslim populations.

International misunderstandings in recent years have been mitigated in part by a growing understanding among people in the UK of the shared heritage of Islam and the West – typified by the Muslim world having been the bridge to us during Europe's Dark Ages for the transmission of the great disciplines and sciences originally founded by the Ancient Greeks, such as algebra, philosophy, astronomy and navigation, to name only a few.

Less well understood is the work of many in the Muslim world promoting social justice. Across the world British Council staff are aware of, and engage with, those Muslim organisations and individuals who, with great courage and integrity, work in difficult circumstances to promote social justice.

This conference is intended to challenge the dominant stereotype of the Muslim fanatic by offering both theory and practical examples of where Muslims are involved in trying to create fairer societies.

With a population of more than 1.5 million, Britain's Muslim communities are a well-established part of the United Kingdom. It is right and proper that – in our work internationally – we should ensure that their particular experience forms part of the global dialogue about creating a just world with opportunity for all.

So I am delighted that this conference will give the opportunity for a real international exchange of experience – drawing in part on the Islamic Foundation's thirty years of work, and on the partnership which it and the COF have developed, particularly in strengthening civil society in some of our most disadvantaged inner-city areas.

I am also pleased to see the participation of Islamic Relief, the international organisation dedicated to alleviating the poverty and suffering of the world's poorest people. It is a sad fact that UNHCR (the UN refugee agency) statistics show that eighty-eight per cent of the world's refugees are Muslims.

May I also take the opportunity to welcome Dr Iman Baybars from the Association for the Development and Enhancement of Women in Cairo. She will be explaining about her association's micro-finance project for women in Egypt.

Each of the participating organisations brings a different cultural perspective to this event. But our objective is the same: to share our knowledge and experience about how local communities and grassroots associations in the UK and abroad – be they faith based or not – can work together to promote social change and social justice.

I wish you well in your deliberations – and will join you again at the reception this evening.