

Dialog in times of terror

In a time when the rift between the Muslim and the Western worlds seem to be widening, a small organization is set to bridge the gap via the internet. We talked to the CEO of *Soliya*, Shamil Idriss, about dialog in times of terror.

INTERVIEW: FRANK STERN

Mr. Idriss, when you look at the world today, do you really think the profound divisions and conflicts can be solved by virtual Round Tables of students on internet platforms like the one *Soliya* has established?

15 or 20 years ago, if a pastor in Florida with fewer than 50 people in his congregation threatened to burn the Quran nobody would have cared, nobody even would have known who this guy was. But now these things go viral so quickly. The only conclusion I draw from this is that we have to build up the willingness, the interest and the skills of a much larger group of people to foster cooperation

across societies. And the only way I think you can do that is through virtual means because exchange programs are too expensive and too difficult. Right now fewer than two percent of young people participate in any kind of study abroad program or exchange experience. We've got to use the virtual means to connect a much larger group of people. And not just connect them. They have to have a really profound cross-cultural experience, not just a facebook link. If we could reach a critical mass of let's say 15 percent of the population across the board with our programs, then I think we could build a real constituency to make a difference.

How far should cross-cultural dialog go? Where is the line between tolerance and giving up your own values?

It can be legitimate for government representatives to refuse to engage with certain parties because they don't want to legitimize them. I'm much less understanding of the refusal for people to speak to people. And I think often the best way for people to learn about their own positions is through engaging others who disagree with them. I think whatever your values are you will benefit from engaging with people and having those values challenged. You may come out questioning some of those values or you feel

all the more confident about your position. I think a much bigger danger is to live in a metaphorical bubble.

But how can you find common ground with a perception of society that was overcome in Europe with the era of Enlightenment?

I don't accept the notion that you can't start dialog between people who come from different intellectual traditions and societal histories, that there are two succinctly defined and static intellectual traditions that are mutually exclusive. You have much more fluid realities both in the West and in Muslim

societies today. Especially now where many Muslim societies are really questioning a lot of fundamental assumptions.

According to a professor from Egypt who took part in your program some of the Muslim students were shocked when first confronted with Jews.

There is a combination of policy differences and fears, stereotypes and ignorance among people. The best way to deal with those stereotypes is through connecting people to real people and having that experience where your assumptions are turned on their head. There were students who quite



Hatred of the West: the suspected Boston bombers

literally thought that Jews look different – it's shocking but I mean this is what students think who have never met a Jew, who have grown up in a world where the view about Jews is purely negative. For them it's a very profound experience to have a face-to-face encounter. So when you ask, can it solve the problem – I actually think on the people-to-people ignorance side of the equation, the internet is indispensable.

Some could say Soliya is infiltrating the Western phalanx, others might suspect you are a collaborator.

We've had it on all sides. People are often suspicious at the outset.

Which is understandable. In the eyes of Muslim students it must be ominous that the US government is funding the program.

First, we actually haven't had US government funding for our *Connect* program. We had US government funding for the fellowship afterwards. It's an important question because we do get asked who funds the program. So we are always very transparent with that. We do take some pride that we have Swiss and Norwegian government funding. But we also have funding from the Alwaleed Bin Talal Foundation, from the Ford Foundation, from the Allianz Foundation for North America and other sources. That diversity of funding is actually really important for this reason.

Many of the colleges you are cooperating with are located in Egypt where the Muslim Brotherhood is the ruling party now. What will Soliya's future in Egypt look like?

I don't know. Before the Brotherhood, we were dealing with an autocratic regime in

Egypt and I was at least as worried then. I tell you what the more exciting indicators are. One is students who go through our program, who are Brotherhood advocates and participants. That's part of society. You can't get away from the importance of religion in the society there. But they love the program too. Al-Azhar is the oldest school of Sunni Muslim thought in the Muslim world. We run the program at Al-Azhar in two classes there. And they are interested in a vast expansion. That's a very big deal for us. So we're seeing people coming from religious perspectives actually being really interested in these connections.

At the moment it looks as if Egypt is following a path towards a new autocratic development.

Well, it depends from which perspective you look at it. Last year's elections were seen as legitimate elections.

The Nazis in Germany came to power via elections too.

This danger is present in any transitional society. I don't think it's a foregone conclusion though. I don't know whether President Mursi is Idi Amin or if he is Abraham Lincoln. I challenge anyone to definitively say which he is. It's not that I would defend all that Mursi does but what I am suspicious of is that people on either side of the ideological equation are so convinced. I think the situation is much more complicated. Yes, there is a danger that it could go into that antidemocratic direction. But I also don't think that is a foregone conclusion. When looking at any transitional society one of the challenges is impatience. This societal experiment is going to take at least a generation to work through and maybe more. So we are talking 30 years. Minimum.

You cooperate with more than 100 universities in 27 countries all over the world. If you want to cross ideological divides, why is there not even one from Israel?

We do have Israelis participating in the fellowship that we run. We have fellows from Israel being trained as facilitators. And we've had Israeli participants in our *Connect* Program. As for the university partnerships, unfortunately, it's so challenging right now in the Middle East. Lebanon and Israel are still officially at war. It could become quite difficult and dangerous for students, whose universities have official contacts to an Israeli institution. For a lot of universities from Arab countries participating in our program it's a very challenging situation.

A situation which virtual discussions won't change.

Our program is a long-term endeavour in the sense that we have to maximize the numbers of participants over time. I think if we were already doing this with a million students a year they'd already be changing the world. It's urgent that we scale-up these kinds of connections between people. Because the other side of things can still go wrong with hate-mongers influencing the agenda, a ridiculous video stirring up emotions or something goes viral and sets our societies on a collision course. We need to stop that.

We have to cooperate across a lot more divides than we ever did before to solve our problems as a human race. It's an urgent requirement now that we maximize the number and the diversity of people who have the willingness and the skills to foster that cooperation across divides. Governments are decreasingly influential in the



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PROFILE

Shamil Idriss has been CEO of *Soliya* since 2009. He is an American of Syrian and Turkish ancestry and an expert in the field of conflict mediation. In 2005, he was appointed by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as Deputy Director of the UN Alliance of Civilizations, which was set up to counter extremism and polarization in the world. He has worked for the World Economic Forum and as an adviser to Search for Common Ground (SFCG), an organization for conflict resolution with offices in 17 countries. The 40-year-old New Yorker is a member of the Muslim Leaders of Tomorrow network and the Young Global Leaders network of the World Economic Forum. Idriss lives with his wife and two daughters near New York.

world today. The broader issue we have is not the Clash of Civilizations but the deep-running differences in the world. If you look at my own country, the divide between secular and religious, between far left and far right is very polarizing and it's getting so extreme that we are more and more dysfunctional in our ability to do what is necessary.

Maybe you should set up a dialog program just for the US.

There are many European societies which are also very much divided. So forget the clash between Islam and the West. If we aren't even able to foster connections across divides in our own societies we won't be able to solve fundamental problems of humankind as a whole. We need to be able to cooperate across our differences.

As long as the Palestinians don't have their own state the rift won't go away.

This is the tinderbox. I agree with you, I don't think that if you solve that conflict everything will go away. But I'm sure that if you don't solve that conflict you will always be very limited in what you can do. In my view, the key to solving that conflict is increasingly building up constituencies that are able to talk to each other and have an impact on the solution. There are countless other conflicts in history that seemed inevitable or intractable. But in the end, they were eventually solved.

To read the long version of this interview please go to: [HTTP://KNOWLEDGE.ALLIANZ.COM/JOURNAL](http://knowledge.allianz.com/journal)