



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation

Welcome to the USA from Imam Mohamad Bashir Arafat

It is my pleasure to welcome all of you to America, the country where people of different faiths, cultural traditions and backgrounds live and thrive, guided by one constitution under God. The respect for diversity is something not only appreciated, but celebrated. Year by year, I see the American people eager to learn more about other peoples' faiths and traditions.

During December 2008, you are going to witness a rare occurrence in which the season of Hajj (*Pilgrimage to Mecca*), Christmas and Hanukah (*Festival of Lights*), the three Abrahamic holidays, will be celebrated during the same month.

Civilizations Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (*CECF*) is dedicated to creating programs focusing on the common roots of the human family and to dispelling much of the mystery and misunderstanding among different cultures and faith traditions.

CECF currently provides a variety of services for the staff and volunteers of the organizations that administer the YES program, which is funded by the Office of Youth Exchange at the U.S. Department of State. While these services listed below were originally intended for the Muslim YES students, we welcome opportunities to serve the needs of all the students participating on the program regardless of religion, nationality or country of origin.

Services of CECF:

- **individual counseling**, if you find that you are having difficulty adapting to or resolving a situation (particularly if you feel there is a religious/cultural nuance)
- **resource** to help you transition into life in the U.S. by providing you with advice on issues of difficulty and web-sites or other resources for locating mosques, churches, synagogues, temples, qiblah, Islamic calendars, the prayer timings, Qur'ans, etc....
- **resource** for host families and area coordinators to ask questions as they, too, are learning about other cultures and sets of religious practices
- **orientations** for you upon arrival and just before departing to your home countries at the end of the year
- **training workshops** for the staff and volunteers of the grantee organizations, who placed you with host families to enhance their understanding of the practice of religion in America and how to support their cultural exchange students' adjustments
- CECF also offers the exchange students an opportunity to participate in our youth leadership and interfaith conferences "***Better Understanding for a Better World***" in Orlando, FL at Walt Disney World in February 2009, as well as in Baltimore, MD at the Inner Harbor in April 2009. If you are interested, be sure to ask your area representative about the selection process.

I would like to seize this opportunity to wish each of you blessed and rewarding holidays. If you are a Muslim and will be celebrating Ramadan, the 2008 Islamic Calendar for North America & Canada mark September 1st as the first day of Ramadan, October 1st the first day of Eidul Fitr and December 8th as the first day of Eidul Adha.

Students can also go to <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/islamicholidays.html> for information.

Christian students will find that most calendars in America contain the dates of holidays or you can visit <http://christianity.about.com/od/holidaytips/qt/seasonsofffaith.htm>.

Since there are quite a few holidays that may be celebrated by the Jewish students, please go to <http://www.chabad.org/holidays/default.asp> to obtain the dates and a brief description of each holiday's significance.

Hindu students can find a calendar and description of their holidays when they click on <http://members.tripod.com/jap5/hindufestivals/allyear.html>.

Please take a moment before your holidays begin to share your experiences with your host families. They will enjoy hearing about your celebrations at home and also cooking traditional dishes with you.

If you need assistance from me or any CECF staff member, please do not hesitate to contact us at cecf1@aol.com or call 410-944-6077.

Last, but not least, I would like to wish you a happy, successful and gratifying stay in America and greet all of you with the greetings of Salam, Peace, and Shalom.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Bashar Arafat', written over a horizontal line.

Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat
President