

THE TANDEM PROJECT

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UNITED NATIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS, FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

MUSLIM GIRLS IN MINNEAPOLIS JOIN AMERICAN GIRL SCOUTS

Issue: Helping Preserve Cultural and Religious Identity by International Human Rights Law

For: United Nations, Governments, Religions or Beliefs, Academia, NGOs, Media, Civil Society

Review: MINNEAPOLIS - *To Muslim Girls, Scouts Offer a Chance to Fit In* is a front page story in The New York Times by Neil MacFarquhar, 28 November 2007. It is a story about young Somali Muslim girls living in Minneapolis, Minnesota that is a reflection of **tension** in many parts of the world as immigrant families struggle to reconcile differences in religious and cultural traditions in a new country. Minneapolis has the largest Somali immigrant population in the United States. The Issue Statement has a proposal to preserve cultural, religious and non-religious identity through human rights education.

Objective: Build understanding and support for Article 18, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights –Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion - and the 1981 UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Encourage the United Nations, Governments, Religions or Beliefs, Academia, NGOs, Media and Civil Society to use these international human rights standards as essential for *long-term solutions* to conflicts based on religion or belief.

Challenge: In 1968 the United Nations deferred work on an International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Religious Intolerance, because of its apparent complexity and sensitivity. In the twenty-first century, a dramatic increase of intolerance and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief is motivating a worldwide search to find solutions to these problems. This is a challenge calling for enhanced dialogue by States and others; including consideration of an International Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief for protection of and accountability by all religions or beliefs. The tensions in today's world inspire a question such as:

- Should the United Nations adopt an International Convention on Freedom of Religion or Belief?

Extracts: Extracts are presented under the Eight Articles of the 1981 U.N. Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Examples of extracts are presented prior to an *Issue Statement* for each Review.

4. 1 *All States shall take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all fields of civil, economic, political, social and cultural life.*

The New York Times

November 28, 2007

To Muslim Girls, Scouts Offer a Chance to Fit In

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR



MINNEAPOLIS — Sometimes when Asma Haidara, a 12-year-old Somali immigrant, wants to shop at Target or ride the Minneapolis light-rail system, she puts her Girl Scout sash over her everyday clothes, which usually include a long skirt worn over pants as well as a swirling head scarf.

Scattered Muslim communities across the United States are forming Girl Scout troops as a sort of assimilation tool to help girls who often feel alienated from the mainstream culture, and to give Muslims a neighborly aura. Boy Scout troops are organized with the same inspiration, but often the leap for girls is greater because many come from conservative cultures that frown upon their participating in public physical activity.

By teaching girls to roast hot dogs or fix a flat bicycle tire, Farheen Hakeem, one troop leader here, strives to help them escape the perception of many non-Muslims that they are different.

Scouting is a way of celebrating being American without being any less Muslim, Ms. Hakeem said. “I don’t want them to see themselves as Muslim girls doing this ‘Look at us, we are trying to be American,’ ” she said. “No, no, no, they are American. It is not an issue of trying.”

The troop leader distributed supplies: hot dogs followed by s’mores for dessert. All was halal — that is, in adherence with the dietary requirements of Islamic law — with the hot dogs made of beef rather than pork.

But a more common concern among parents is that the Girl Scouts will somehow dilute Islamic traditions.

Troop leaders win over parents by explaining that various activities incorporate Muslim traditions. In Minneapolis, for instance, Ms. Hakeem helped develop the Khadija Club, named for the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, which exposes older girls to the history of prominent Muslim women.

Ms. Hakeem, the troop leader, said she tried to find projects to improve the girls' self-esteem, like going through the Eddie Bauer catalog to cut out long skirts and other items that adhere to Islamic dress codes.

Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. does not issue religious badges, but endorses those established by independent groups. Gulafshan K. Alavi started one such group, the Islamic Committee on Girl Scouting, in Stamford, Conn., in 1990. The demand for information about Muslim badges, Mrs. Alavi said, has grown to the point where this year she had the pamphlet listing her club's requirements printed rather than sending out a photocopied flier. She also shipped up to 400 patches awarded to girls who study Ramadan traditions, she said, the most ever.

"It is kind of cool to say that you are a girl scout," Asma said. "It is good to have something to associate yourself with other Americans. I don't want people to think that I am a hermit, that I live in a cave, isolated and afraid of change. I like to be part of society. I like being able to say that I am a girl scout just like any other normal girl."

ISSUE STATEMENT: The Secretary-General of the United Nations has launched an initiative, sponsored by the Prime Ministers of Spain and Turkey, for an Alliance of Civilizations. The Alliance of Civilizations website, <http://www.unaoc.org>, states; "Events of recent years have exacerbated mutual suspicion, fear and misunderstanding between Islamic and Western societies. This environment has been exploited throughout the world."

"Only a comprehensive coalition will be able to avert any further deterioration of relations between societies and nations, which could threaten international stability. The Alliance seeks to counter this trend by establishing a paradigm of **mutual respect** between civilizations and cultures." The Alliance of Civilizations is a credible and viable attempt at local and international levels to diminish dangerous tensions between diverse societies. At the macro level the Alliance sponsors High-Level Group discussion between distinguished world leaders and diplomats. At the local level the Alliance looks for local practices to implement the United Nations vision.

The Minneapolis article "*To Muslim Girls, Scouts Offer a Chance to Fit In*" is an opportunity for local and international discourse on how to build respect for cultural, religious and non-religious identity, in **tandem** with international human rights law that protects *theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief*, against intolerance and discrimination in all matters relating to freedom of religion or belief.

The Constitution of the Boy Scouts of America requires an oath to do my duty "to God" and my country. This has been a problem in the United States as the Boy Scout movement has an affiliation with the government and boys who are atheists or non-believers are required to make the pledge to become scouts. In the United States this may be in tolerance and discrimination under international human rights standards on freedom of religion or belief, if there is an official connection with the national government.

The Constitution of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts founded in 1910, safeguards the Fundamental Principles and Original Promise; "On my honor, I promise that I will

do my best: To do my **duty to God** and the King; or God and my country.” This may have been a major stumbling block to Muslim girls in America not because they are unwilling to make a pledge to or a higher deity, but because they are Muslims from another culture with different religious traditions and practices.

The Minneapolis Girl Scouts make their pledge in this way: “On my honor I will try: To serve God* and my country, To help people at all times, and to live by the Girl Scout Law.” The asterisk in their pledge states; “The word ‘God’ can be **interpreted** in a number of ways, depending on one’s spiritual beliefs. When reciting the Girl Scout Promise, it is okay to replace the word ‘God’ with whatever words your spiritual beliefs dictate.”

This allows Muslim girls and their families to adhere to their Islamic beliefs and traditions as Americans and girl scouts. A platform to exclude atheist boys and girls is only a problem if the Girl Scouts of America have an **official affiliation** with the United States government, which, like the Boy Scouts of America, present problems of intolerance and discrimination based on international human rights standards. Even this more flexible interpretation does not address the problem of government affiliation for young girls who profess atheist or non-spiritual beliefs and want to be girl scouts.

This Issue Statement proposes a human rights dialogue with Muslim organizations at the local level in Minneapolis and internationally through the Alliance of Civilizations and the United Nations, on Article 5.3 of the 1981 UN Declaration on Freedom of Religion or Belief;

- *The child shall be protected from any form of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. He shall be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood, respect for the freedom of religion or belief of others and in full consciousness that his energy and talents should be devoted to the service of his fellow men.*

The Tandem Project: a non-profit, non-governmental organization established in 1986 to build understanding and respect for diversity of religion or belief, and prevent discrimination in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief. The Tandem Project has sponsored multiple conferences, curricula, reference materials and programs on Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion - and the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. The Tandem Project initiative was launched in 1986 as the result of a co-founder representing the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA) at a 1984 United Nations Geneva Seminar, *Encouragement of Understanding, Tolerance and Respect in Matters Relating to Freedom of Religion or Belief*, called by the UN Secretariat on ways to implement the 1981 UN Declaration. In 1986, The Tandem Project organized the first NGO International Conference on the 1981 UN Declaration.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights First Preamble: “*Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.* This principle suggests all States recalling their history, culture and constitution, provide equal protection by law for *theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief.* This is international law under the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. International Human Rights Standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief are essential for *long term solutions* to conflicts based on religion or belief.

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The Tandem Project is a UN NGO in Special Consultative Status with the

WORD DOCUMENT ATTACHED

**THE 1981 U.N. DECLARATION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL
FORMS OF INTOLERANCE AND OF DISCRIMINATION
BASED ON RELIGION OR BELIEF**

Proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations
25 November, 1981 (Resolution: 36/55)

Considering that one of the basic principles of the Charter of the United Nations is that of the dignity and equality inherent in all human beings, and that all Member States have pledged themselves to take joint and separate action in co-operation with the Organization to promote and encourage universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion,

Considering that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights proclaim the principles of non-discrimination and equality before the law and the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief,

Considering that the disregard and infringement of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or whatever belief, have brought, directly or indirectly, wars and great suffering to humankind, especially where they serve as a means of foreign interference in the internal affairs of other States and amount to a kindling hatred between peoples and nations,

Considering that religion or belief, for anyone who professes either, is one of the fundamental elements in his conception of life and that freedom of religion or belief should be fully respected and guaranteed,

Considering that it is essential to promote understanding, tolerance and respect in matters relating to freedom of religion or belief and to ensure that the use of religion or belief for ends inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations, other relevant instruments of the United Nations and the purposes and principles of the present Declaration is inadmissible,

Convinced that freedom of religion or belief should also contribute to the attainment of the goals of world peace, social justice and friendship among peoples and to the elimination of ideologies or practices of colonialism and racial discrimination,

Noting with satisfaction the adoption of several, and the coming into force of some conventions, under the aegis of the United Nations and of the specialized agencies, for the elimination of various forms of discrimination,

Concerned by manifestations of intolerance and by the existence of discrimination in matters of religion or belief still in evidence in some areas of the world,

Resolved to adopt all necessary measures for the speedy elimination of such intolerance in all its forms and manifestations and to prevent and combat discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief,

Proclaims this Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief:

ARTICLE 1: LEGAL DEFINITION

1. 1 *Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practices and teaching.*

1. 2. *No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have a religion or belief of his choice.*

1. 3 *Freedom to manifest one's religion or belief may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.*

ARTICLE 2: CLASSIFYING DISCRIMINATION

2. 1 *No one shall be subject to discrimination by any State, institution, group of persons or person on the grounds of religion or other beliefs.*

2. 2 *For the purposes of the present Declaration, the expression 'intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief' means any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on religion or belief and having as its purpose or as its effect nullification or impairment of the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis.*

ARTICLE 3: LINK TO OTHER RIGHTS

3. 1 *Discrimination between human beings on grounds of religion or belief constitutes an affront to human dignity and a disavowal of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and shall be condemned as a violation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and enunciated in detail in the International Covenants on Human Rights, and as an obstacle to friendly and peaceful relations between nations.*

ARTICLE 4: EFFECTIVE MEASURES

4. 1 *All States shall take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all fields of civil, economic, political, social and cultural life.*

4.1.4: Social; 4.1.5: Cultural Life

The complete article *To Muslim Girls, Scouts Offer a Chance to Fit In*, is available at the end of this Document.

4. 2 *All States shall make all efforts to enact or rescind legislation where necessary to prohibit any such discrimination, and to take all appropriate measures to combat intolerance on the grounds of religion or other beliefs in this matter.*

ARTICLE 5: PARENTS, CHILDREN, STATE

5. 1 *The parents or, as the case may be, the legal guardians of the child have the right to organize the life within the family in accordance with their religion or belief and bearing in mind the moral education in which they believe the child should be brought up.*

5. 2 *Every child shall enjoy the right to have access to education in the matter of religion or belief in accordance with the wishes of his parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, and shall not be compelled to receive teaching on religion or belief against the wishes of his parents or legal guardians; the best interests of the child being the guiding principle.*

5. 3 *The child shall be protected from any form of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. He shall be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood, respect for the freedom of religion or belief of others and in full consciousness that his energy and talents should be devoted to the service of his fellow men.*

5. 4 *In the case of a child who is not under the care either of his parents or of legal guardians, due account*

shall be taken of their expressed wishes or of any other proof of their wishes in the matter of religion or belief, the best interests of the child being the guiding principle.

5. 5 Practices of a religion or belief in which a child is brought up must not be injurious to his physical or mental health or to his full development, taking into account Article 1, paragraph 3, of the present Declaration.

ARTICLE 6: NINE SPECIFIC RIGHTS

In accordance with Article 1 of the present Declaration, and subject to the provisions of Article 1, paragraph 3, the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief shall include, inter alia, the following freedoms:

6. 1 To worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes;

6. 2 To establish and maintain appropriate charitable or humanitarian institutions;

6. 3 To make, acquire and use to an adequate extent the necessary articles and materials related to the rites and customs of a religion or belief;

6. 4 To write issue and disseminate relevant publications in these areas;

6. 5 To teach a religion or belief in places suitable for these purposes;

6. 6 To solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions from individuals and institutions;

6. 7 To train, appoint, elect or designate by succession appropriate leaders called for by the requirements and standards of any religion or belief;

6. 8 To observe days of rest and to celebrate holidays and ceremonies in accordance with the precepts of one's religion or belief;

6. 9 To establish and maintain communications with individuals and communities in matters of religion or belief at the national and international levels.

ARTICLE 7: NATIONAL LEGISLATION

7. 1 The rights and freedoms set forth in the present Declaration shall be accorded in national legislation in such a manner that everyone shall be able to avail himself of such rights and freedoms in practice.

ARTICLE 8: EXISTING PROTECTIONS

8. 1 Nothing in the present Declaration shall be construed as restricting or derogating from any right defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights.

The New York Times

November 28, 2007

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By NEIL MacFARQUHAR



MINNEAPOLIS — Sometimes when Asma Haidara, a 12-year-old Somali immigrant, wants to shop at Target or ride the Minneapolis light-rail system, she puts her Girl Scout sash over her everyday clothes, which usually include a long skirt worn over pants as well as a swirling head scarf.

She has discovered that the trademark green sash — with its American flag, troop number (3009) and colorful merit badges — reduces the number of glowering looks she draws from people otherwise bothered by her traditional Muslim dress.

“When you say you are a girl scout, they say, ‘Oh, my daughter is a girl scout, too,’ and then they don’t think of you as a person from another planet,” said Asma, a slight, serious girl with a bright smile. “They are more comfortable about sitting next to me on the train.”

Scattered Muslim communities across the United States are forming Girl Scout troops as a sort of assimilation tool to help girls who often feel alienated from the mainstream culture, and to give Muslims a neighborly aura. Boy Scout troops are organized with the same inspiration, but often the leap for girls is greater because many come from conservative cultures that frown upon their participating in public physical activity.

By teaching girls to roast hot dogs or fix a flat bicycle tire, Farheen Hakeem, one troop leader here, strives to help them escape the perception of many non-Muslims that they are different.

Scouting is a way of celebrating being American without being any less Muslim, Ms. Hakeem said.

“I don’t want them to see themselves as Muslim girls doing this ‘Look at us, we are trying to be American,’ ” she said. “No, no, no, they are American. It is not an issue of trying.”

The exact number of Muslim girl scouts is unknown, especially since, organizers say, most Muslim scouts belong to predominantly non-Muslim troops. Minneapolis is something of an exception, because a few years ago the Girl Scout Council here surveyed its shrinking enrollment and established special outreach coordinators for various minorities. Some 280 Muslim girls have joined about 10 predominantly Muslim troops here, said Hodan Farah, who until September was the Scout coordinator for the Islamic community.

Nationally, the [Boy Scouts](#) of America count about 1,500 youths in 100 clubs of either Boy Scouts or Cub Scouts sponsored by Islamic organizations, said Gregg Shields, a spokesman for the organization.

The [Girl Scouts](#)’ national organization, Girl Scouts of the U.S.A., has become flexible in recent years about the old trappings associated with suburban, white, middle-class Christian scouting. Many troops have done away with traditions like saying grace before dinner at camp, and even the Girl Scout Promise can be retooled as needed.

“On my honor I will try to serve Allah and my country, to help people and live by the Girl Scout law,” eight girls from predominantly Muslim Troop 3119 in Minneapolis recited on one recent rainy Sunday before setting off for a cookout in a local park.

Some differences were readily apparent, of course. At the cookout, Ms. Hakeem, a former [Green Party](#) candidate for mayor, negotiated briefly with one sixth grader, Asha Gardaad, who was fasting for the holy month of Ramadan.

“If you break your fast, will your mother get mad at me?” Ms. Hakeem asked. Asha shook her head emphatically no.

The troop leader distributed supplies: hot dogs followed by s’mores for dessert. All was halal — that is, in adherence with the dietary requirements of Islamic law — with the hot dogs made of beef rather than pork.

It was Asha’s first s’more. “It’s delicious!” she exclaimed, licking sticky goop off her fingers as thunder crashed outside the park shelter with its roaring fire. “It’s a good way to break my fast!”

Women trying to organize Girl Scout troops in Muslim communities often face resistance from parents, particularly immigrants from an Islamic culture like that of Somalia, where tradition dictates that girls do housework after school.

In Nashville, where Elisha King of [Catholic Charities](#) helps run a Girl Scout troop on a shoestring to assist Somali children with acculturation, most parents vetoed a camping trip, for example. They figured years spent as refugees in tents was enough camping, Ms. King recalled.

But a more common concern among parents is that the Girl Scouts will somehow dilute Islamic traditions.

“They are afraid you are going to become a blue-eyed, blond-haired Barbie doll,” said Asma, the girl who at times makes her sash everyday attire. Asma noted that her mother had asked whether she was joining some Christian cabal. “She was afraid that if we hang out with Americans too much,” the young immigrant said, “it will change our culture or who we are.”

Troop leaders win over parents by explaining that various activities incorporate Muslim traditions. In Minneapolis, for instance, Ms. Hakeem helped develop the Khadija Club, named for the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, which exposes older girls to the history of prominent Muslim women.

Suboohi Khan, 10, won her Bismallah (in the name of God) ribbon by writing 4 of God’s 99 names in Arabic calligraphy and decorating them, as well as memorizing the Koran’s last verse, used for protection against gossips and goblins. Otherwise, she said, her favorite badge involved learning “how to make body glitter and to see which colors look good on us” and “how to clean up our nails.”

Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. does not issue religious badges, but endorses those established by independent groups. Gulafshan K. Alavi started one such group, the Islamic Committee on Girl Scouting, in Stamford, Conn., in 1990. The demand for information about Muslim badges, Mrs. Alavi said, has grown to the point where this year she had the pamphlet listing her club’s requirements printed rather than sending out a photocopied flier. She also shipped up to 400 patches awarded to girls who study Ramadan traditions, she said, the most ever.

Predominantly Muslim troops do accept non-Muslim members. In Minneapolis, Alexis Eastlund, 10, said other friends sometimes pestered her about belonging to a mostly Muslim troop, although she has known many of its members half her life.

“I never really thought of them as different,” Alexis said. “But other girls think that it is weird that I am Christian and hang out with a bunch of Muslim girls. I explain to them that they are the same except they have to wear a hijab on their heads.”

Ms. Farah, who served as an outreach coordinator in Minneapolis and remains active in the Scouts, said she used the organization as a platform to try to ease tensions in the community. Scraps between African-American and Somali girls prompted her to start a research project demonstrating to them that their ancestors all came from roughly the same place.

Ms. Hakeem, the troop leader, said she tried to find projects to improve the girls' self-esteem, like going through the Eddie Bauer catalog to cut out long skirts and other items that adhere to Islamic dress codes.

All in all, scouting gives the girls a rare sense of belonging, troop leaders and members say.

"It is kind of cool to say that you are a girl scout," Asma said. "It is good to have something to associate yourself with other Americans. I don't want people to think that I am a hermit, that I live in a cave, isolated and afraid of change. I like to be part of society. I like being able to say that I am a girl scout just like any other normal girl."