



Civilizations Exchange & Cooperation Foundation

The Spirit of Interfaith in America

By Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat
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Dear YES Students,

I hope that this letter reaches each of you as you enjoy and take full advantage of the opportunities presented to you, while on program here in America. We know that the YES students and their host families come from quite diverse backgrounds and faith traditions. Listed below is a brief mention of a few holidays that you may experience in America this month.

During *Christmas*, Christians commemorate the birth of Jesus (peace and blessings be upon him). Popular customs include decorating a Christmas tree and perhaps your house or yard, gift-giving, Christmas music, a special meal, and caroling throughout the local neighborhood. This particular holiday comes a week before you will experience the New Year celebration on January 1st, according to the "Western Tradition."

Hanukkah, also known as the Festival of Lights, is an eight-day Jewish holiday which commemorates the rededication of the Holy Temple (the Second Temple) in Jerusalem at the time of the Maccabean Revolt of the 2nd century BCE. The festival is observed by lighting each light of a unique candelabrum, the nine-branched Menorah.

Muharram is the first month of the Islamic Lunar Calendar of 1434 and one of the four most sacred months of the Islamic calendar. Muslims celebrate this because Prophet Moses and the sons of Israel obtained victory of the Pharaoh of Egypt. Many fast the 9th and 10th of Muharram or the 10th and 11th of Muharram. The choice of fasting is left up to each individual. The month of Muharram is also commemorated by Shi'a Muslims, who remember and mourn the death of Imam Husain.

Kwanza means "First Fruits of the Harvest" in Swahili and is a week-long celebration in the U.S. from December 26th to January 1st. It was originally created to honor the African heritage in the African-American culture, but since 1997, it has become a "Celebration of Family, Community, and Culture." Kwanza is ideological with seven core principles that are considered "the best of African thought and practice in constant exchange with the world." Families decorate their houses with objects of art, traditional African *kente* cloth and fresh fruits and women may wear the traditional dress of *Kaftans*. At the end of a wide variety of celebratory rituals, there is gift-giving and a feast.

It is the spirit of "Interfaith" in America that allows us to talk about these holidays in a way that you do not see in many predominately Muslim countries. I say this to help the YES students understand that regardless of your background, it is an American tradition to recognize and celebrate religious and cultural diversity. This rich legacy helps make immigrants to the U.S. feel comfortable and consider the U.S. their home away from home.

Others might not be able to describe the details of "your" holiday, but they welcome your right to celebrate it. It is in this spirit of respect for our cultural and religious diversity here in America that I invite you to make your exchange experience a special year in your life; one that helps you see the beauty of diversity that was created by our Loving Lord. He made us different, but asked us to learn about one another and celebrate diversity, which leads us to harmony and mutual respect. I would also like to encourage you to wish your host families a "Happy Holiday Season."