# The Road to Peace, One Person at a Time:
## Sister Cities International and Its Role in Persistent Conflict

*a paper submitted to ASD-SOLIC&IC's Symposium on Persistent Conflict*
*by Patrick Madden and Christopher P. Dufour*

The vicious attacks of September 11, 2001, placed the spotlight on the need for a heightened world consciousness, in light of increased globalization; whereby people, resources and ideologies are transported across national borders. This need takes the form of a global requirement for engagement: for debate and open discourse between cultures. While our response to 9/11 took the form of a conventional military approach, the subsequent eight years have mandated a new approach to persistent conflict. This approach, called Citizen Diplomacy, is best exemplified by the non-governmental organization *Sister Cities International (SCI)*.

Citizen Diplomacy can be defined as the role and ability of individuals in one country to reach out to those in another and cement the bonds of friendship that lead to dialogue, not violence, during times of crisis. In our ever-shrinking world, globalization brings all peoples of the world closer together, informationally, economically, and ideologically. However, it is in between the seams of these interactions where our connecting world at the same time creates many of the same conflicts that resulted in disasters like 9/11.

Sister Cities International is a nonprofit Citizen Diplomacy network founded in 1956 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower that creates and strengthens partnerships between U.S. and international communities. Sister Cities strives to build global cooperation at the municipal level, promote cultural understanding and stimulate economic development with the mission of promoting peace through mutual respect, understanding and cooperation – one individual, one community at a time.

SCI is a leader for local community development and volunteer action. SCI motivates and empowers private citizens, municipal officials and business leaders to conduct long-term sister city programs. SCI has long advocated the requirement and effectiveness of Citizen Diplomacy to address differences between cultures. SCI's goals include:

- Developing long-term municipal partnerships between U.S. cities, counties, and states and similar jurisdictions in other nations.
- Promoting U.S. and international communities working together on exchange programs as equal partners.
- Providing opportunities for city officials and citizens to experience and explore other cultures through long-term community partnerships.
- Creating an atmosphere in which economic and community development can be implemented and strengthened.
- Stimulating environments through which communities will creatively learn, work, and solve problems together through reciprocal cultural,

educational, municipal, business, professional and technical exchanges and projects.
  • Collaborating with organizations in the United States and other countries which share similar goals.

In the human dimension of persistent conflict, where special operators have recently been calling upon the skills and expertise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to assist in their efforts abroad, Sister Cities has been engaged for far longer. What special operators describe as persistent conflict can be seen merely as business as usual for Sister Cities. With hundreds of cities in the U.S. and beyond participating in inter-cultural exchanges on a daily basis, the network for Citizen Diplomacy already exists and is in full swing. We shall now take a look at some of the programs SCI conducts.

**Muslim World Partnership Initiative Program**

It should come as no surprise that an increasingly popular anti-American sentiment exists across the globe. A Pew Research Center poll shows that more Americans feel that the international community has a depreciating respect for the United States: an observation noticed by 65% of Americans in August 2006, now held by 71% of Americans as of June 16, 2008. Of those polled by the Pew Research Center, negative sentiments of the United States are concentrated in the Muslim nations of the Middle East and in Central Asia. A large contributing factor to this is the poor public image of the United States abroad and disagreements with US foreign policy. It also should be noted that Americans, especially post-9/11, have negative impressions of Arabs and the Muslim world. According to a *Washington Post* poll, 46% of Americans have a negative view of Islam, 7% higher than in the months directly following September 11.

The negative impressions of both the United States and the Muslim world are often fueled by stereotypes, ignorance, miscommunication, and an "us versus them" mentality that instills fear and alienation of "the other." In an effort to engage the Muslim world, to combat these negative perceptions, and to create the space for tolerance, mutual understanding and respect, Sister Cities International developed the *Muslim World Partnership Initiative*. The initiative's goals include:

  • Strengthening the existing Sister Cities partnerships between U.S. communities and communities in Muslim majority countries and forming new partnerships.
  • Demonstrating through these partnerships that mutual respect and understanding can be built and sustained through the United States and Muslim world
  • Articulating the remarkable stories of these partnerships and programs to help inform and educate the American public about the positive impact from citizen diplomacy.

Currently there are 97 relationships between US and Muslim world communities, with the goal of reaching 100 by the end of 2008. In its short existence, the Muslim World Partnership Initiative has already begun to make a difference and bridge the gap between the peoples of the U.S. and Islamic communities. SCI likes to think of these relationships as outbound exchanges, but one example of inbound support was in the small Iowa city of Elkader.

Following the 2008 flood of Elkader, one of its Sister Cities - Mascara, Algeria - fundraised and donated $145,000 for emergency services, medical aid, reconstruction, and humanitarian support. Mascara, itself a  perpetual victim of violence due to the French occupation of northern Algeria, still found the goodwill within its citizens to reach out and help their Sister City despite the imbalances in wealth and ideology between them and Elkader. This is a concrete example of what Citizen Diplomacy can achieve. To commemorate this relationship a "peace pole" has been erected in Elkader and a similar one has been sent to Mascara.

To further the objectives of the Muslim World Partnership Initiative, Sister Cities is currently creating partnerships in Muslim majority countries with no current American relationships such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Libya. In July of 2008, Sister Cities also hosted a group of Palestinian mayors representing different cities in the West Bank. Most of the mayors expressed an interest in forming relationships with U.S. communities and promptly posted their city profiles on the *"Cities Seeking Cities"* portion of the Sister Cities website. Sister Cities is currently working on identifying potential cities for partnerships with these Palestinian cities and helping to cultivate and foster the relationship.

**The Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program**

Within the Middle East, the United States' occupation of Iraq has been an issue of great tension and concern to peace-builders. Among a variety of strategies to repair the relationship between Iraqis and Americans, individuals from both nations hope that the use of Citizen Diplomacy will engender more mutual understanding. A 2008 study conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau finds that almost half of Iraq's population is below the age of 19. By engaging youth in Citizen Diplomacy, Sister Cities intends to develop a new rapport between new generations of young leaders with the hope of deep respectful cultural exchanges between our peoples in the future..

In an effort to foster the development of youth exchanges between the United States and communities in conflict, Sister Cities collaborated with the Department of State, AMIDEAST, the Gainesville Sister Cities program, and Legacy International to develop the *Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program (IYLEP)*. The program consisted of various segments like a youth conference, home hosting of exchangees, a Global Youth Village, and Civics Week. All of these elements were designed to bring Iraqi students to the United States for a month to learn leadership skills, explore U.S. government and civil society, foster a sense of

community service, and build relationships between U.S. students and their families.

Through this highly important program and in close coordination with the US government, Sister Cities was able to create a lasting Citizen Diplomacy network of youth, all of whom advocate for peace and open dialogue as a viable alternative to violence and extremism. This is especially important to note given recent articles and data that show that youth, in communities of conflict, are often the ones who are vulnerable and therefore targeted for radicalization under the varying motivators for violence in Iraq. Imagine the possibilities for similar such youth de-radicalization programs in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, and other areas of persistent conflict.

**The Transformation of Ramadi – The Search for a Sister City**

After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, al-Anbar Province became the center for violent insurgent activity. In 2006, Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, then al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq declared Ramadi the capital of his "Islamic State of Iraq." Once AQ took over, local government ceased to exist, businesses closed, and public utilities did not operate. AQ also committed horrific atrocities against the citizens of Ramadi.

Shortly after the AQ takeover and massacre of the city, local tribes and citizens began to rise up and fight with U.S. forces to rid their city of al-Qaeda's presence. Their city was destroyed in the process. This was the birth of "al-Anbar Awakening," a movement that vowed to transform Ramadi from one of the most dangerous places in Iraq into one of the safest.

In April 2007, the local government in Ramadi was reestablished. In May 2008, the Mayor of Ramadi, Mr. Latif Obaid Ayadah, pledged to "give back to the citizens the services they need and deserve so we can bring this city back to the beautiful city it once was." In an effort to do this, Mayor Latif reviewed and approved Ramadi's entrance into the Sister Cities International program. Sister Cities will match Ramadi with a U.S. community with the goal of promoting peace through mutual respect, understanding and cooperation. In an effort to nurture this idea into fruition, Sister Cities is partnering with the embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team in Ramadi to facilitate partnership development.

Currently a U.S. partner city, St. Paul, Minnesota, has been identified as a likely and interested match for Ramadi. Both cities are in the exploration phase of developing a Sister City relationship. St. Paul business owners are organizing economic outreach and training to assist Ramadi citizens in reestablishing their own businesses and growing them into new enterprises. Americans from St. Paul will also determine to what extent a Youth Exchange may be supportable and how they can help the PRT in reconstructing Ramadi's school system. Due to the unique situation of communities in Iraq, both cities recognize that finalizing this relationship may take longer than other Sister City relationships, but both committed to pursuing the partnership.

## Conclusion

More than 30 U.S. Government reports have shown that exchanges between the U.S. and international communities are effective and have measurable impact in promoting understanding, tolerance and peace. It is a powerful message when people band together regardless of politics, religion, gender, or race. Ultimately, Citizen Diplomacy is about people and the human connection. At the end of the day, troops can go home and even diplomats rotate out at some point. But there will always be the people. What is more "sustainable" than memories formed and experiences undertaken in these communities to bridge the gaps of cultural and religious differences?

Sister Cities International has built and perfected a model and a membership to continue promoting international cooperation and exchange. Conventional warfare may exist as a mechanism for global influence, but it is a far smoother and more precise skill to wield the tools of Citizen Diplomacy. This is the true human dimension of persistent conflict, and special operators must remember that networks like Sister Cities have existed and will exist long before and long after they are gone from a conflict zone. Next time before they deploy, perhaps they should call their local Sister City first and see what they can do to support the operations in peace already ongoing in the community of interest.

World peace is attainable, one person, one community at a time.

*For more information about Sister Cities International, to find a Sister City near you, or to donate or volunteer, go to* [http://www.sister-cities.org/](http://www.sister-cities.org/) *or call at 202.347.8630.*



*Patrick Madden is President and CEO of Sister Cities International. Named chief executive in 2007, he has led delegations to China, Egypt, France, Ghana, Holland, and Northern Ireland to advance the organization's mission. He was selected to chair the Steering Committee for the 2009 Global Mayors Forum in Hong Kong, an event expected to bring more than 300 mayors and 1000 people together from around the world to discuss city-to-city partnerships. Madden previously served in senior level positions at the Association of Performing Arts Presenters and Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery. In both positions he worked on a variety of international projects, including immigration matters for foreign artists and international touring exhibitions. He is an adjunct faculty member at George Mason University, where he teaches a graduate seminar on fundraising. He holds two degrees from Ohio University, a Bachelor of Music and Master of Arts.*

*Christopher P. Dufour is an SAIC contractor working in support of the Irregular Warfare Support program, an ASD-SOLIC&IC combating terrorism initiative. He is responsible for the direct program management of several strategic communication and influence based projects supporting multiple users in the information warfare domain. He is a graduate of the Johns Hopkins University Zanvyl Kreiger School for Arts & Sciences, where his master's thesis, "Strategic Service: Reforming the U.S. National Security Apparatus," earned him high honors and recognition. The opinions in this paper are his own and do not reflect the opinions of SAIC, IWSP, or ASD-SOLIC&IC.*