

At Institute of Peace religions play role in peacemaking efforts

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [February 22, 2011](#) issue

Just steps from the Lincoln Memorial, a new building—topped by a translucent white roof that resembles the wings of a giant dove—is puzzling tourists and commuters alike.

What is it? Who works there? The answer is the United States Institute of Peace, which is often followed by some variation of "The what?"

The new headquarters of the 27-year-old independent institute, scheduled to open to the public in September, is designed to raise the profile of the agency.

The new building was likened to a temple by Qamar-ul Huda, a senior program officer in USIP's Religion and Peacemaking program. All over Washington "we have monuments to those who fought in wars," he said, "and rightly so, but we don't recognize the peacemakers. This building helps." Its closest neighbors at the northwest corner of the Washington Mall will be the Korean War and Vietnam War memorials.

The new site could draw attention to Huda's small but increasingly active program, which studies the role of religion in war and peace and engages religious leaders in peacemaking.

Plenty of universities and independent think tanks are working at the nexus of religion and peace, said Ambassador Dane F. Smith, a senior adviser on Darfur at the State Department who has written a book about American peace-building institutions.

But USIP is a congressionally chartered, taxpayer-funded institute. Its willingness to work with religious leaders contrasts with the conventional approach elsewhere in government, said Smith. "The guidance to diplomats in the field is that they can meet with religious leaders—but don't go too far," Smith said.

The 325 employees at the nonpartisan institute work outside the administration's foreign policy apparatus at the neighboring State Department, and they can't make government policy. The board, appointed by the president, must be equally divided between Republicans and Democrats.

USIP's annual \$44 million operating budget is dwarfed by the State Department's—\$54 billion in fiscal year 2010. Congress allotted \$100 million for the new, 150,000-square-foot headquarters, which was designed by Massachusetts-based architect Moshe Safdie and will cost \$183 million. USIP must raise the balance from the private sector.

A group of donors has paid for a wing named for Madeleine Albright, secretary of state in the Clinton White House, who probed the role of religion in foreign affairs in her 2006 book, *The Mighty and the Almighty*. Chevron Corporation donated a wing named for George Schultz, who held the job under President Reagan, and defense contractor Lockheed Martin endowed a lecture series with a \$1 million gift.

With advanced teleconferencing capabilities, the building will allow peacemakers from the world over to meet virtually. A large interactive exhibition space is expected to draw up to 500,000 visitors annually to highlight the institute's scholarship and work in the field.

That fieldwork includes efforts to integrate former rebels in the Niger Delta back into their communities, creating a database on human rights violations in Afghanistan and hosting a roundtable of experts on the developing crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

The institute's Religion and Peacemaking program, which has a \$1 million budget and four staffers, focuses on places where religion may hold the keys to peace.

For example, the program is organizing exchanges between Muslims in Iran and the U.S. In Afghanistan, it is teaching conflict management skills to Islamic religious scholars. In Colombia, it helped organize a conference of Catholic and Protestant women seeking ways to reduce violence through their churches.

David Smock, who heads the Religion and Peacemaking program, helped broker a 2005 peace agreement between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria.

An ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, Smock worked with a Nigerian pastor and imam at the negotiating table. Their story was featured in a documentary, *The Imam and the Pastor*, which the agency dubbed into Arabic and sent to Iraq to be used as a model of successful interfaith cooperation.

Huda also leads a project to distribute a textbook on conflict resolution to Islamic schools in Pakistan. Written in Urdu by Huda and a group of Pakistani religious scholars, *Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam: A Textbook for Students* explores the personal and societal roots of conflict and encourages students to examine their own biases. It is now used by 100 teachers in 60 madrassas.

Huda holds a doctorate in Islamic studies from UCLA, and he also studied in traditional Islamic seminaries in Pakistan, Egypt and Syria. He said USIP staff—as government employees—are mindful of the separation of church and state and are careful not to promote any religion. But they also don't shy away from trying to work with religionists and draw upon religious traditions to foster peace.

Seeing religion less as a root of conflict and more as an opportunity for

peace is welcome and rather rare within American foreign policy circles, said Lisa Schirch, a professor at Eastern Mennonite University's graduate Center for Justice and Peacebuilding.

"Current research is showing how the U.S. government often underplays the role of religion in diplomacy," Schirch said. "For too long, it has overlooked religious leaders' moral influence, and their power to promote peace outside more formal diplomatic channels." —RNS