

# The Fruits of Diversity

By RT HON BARONESS AMOS

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Valerie Amos has a degree in Sociology from the University of Warwick. She was Chief Executive of the Equal Opportunities Commission and an adviser to the Mandela Government, a UK Foreign Office Minister, Secretary of State for International Development, Leader of the House of Lords, Lord President of the Council and UK High Commissioner to Australia before joining the UN as Undersecretary

General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief. Baroness Amos became Director of SOAS University of London in September 2015 and the following year was made a Companion of Honour in the Queen's Birthday Honours list.

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The word 'Mecca' means more than just a city. It has become a byword for magnetic hubs that attract large, diverse crowds from around the world for one reputable reason or another. In this way, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London is certainly a 'Mecca' for intellectual and cultural nourishment.

SOAS students come from all corners of the globe, with a collective ambition of improving themselves academically and personally, all of which contributes to making our institution one of the most international in the UK. Such diversity is crucial to the unique learning experience created on campus, with each student bringing a set of cultures, norms and traditions that not only do we actively encourage as part of the educational process, but we believe to be core to their development as global citizens.

Much like their institution, one cannot parochially label the SOAS graduate. They are poets, bankers, actors, diplomats, employees of NGOs, royalty, entrepreneurs and so on. Yet they retain an idiosyncratic SOAS gene – one that allows them to see the world beyond their own biases and conditioning – which gets embedded during their institutional experience. This is equally a product of our evolving curriculum, but also crucially as a result of the diversity that

they interface with individually and institutionally. The beauty of diversity is that it allows the opportunity to learn from one another, widen our perspective and grow as individuals, institutions and as societies. It breaks the barriers of mistrust and hatred.

The original Mecca (Makkah) is certainly an inspiration for all cities and institutions that believe in the beauty of diversity. Being the central heartbeat of the Muslim world, calling upon its 1.8 billion adherents worldwide to frequent it, it is by its very nature the perennial epicentre of diversity. Not being Muslim myself, I have had to contend with the many wonderful accounts relayed to me of the spiritual and cultural journeys experienced by friends and colleagues in Makkah. A particular thread always seems to jump out from these conversations: the synchronicity of unity and diversity. Pilgrims are all different in their race, gender, language, nationality and age, yet when they don the ihram and circle the Kaaba, they collectively symbolise the unity of the human race, all gathered for a common purpose.

Whether it is the Holy City or our humble institution in Bloomsbury, London, whether the aspirational context is spiritual or educational, it is apparent that the fruits of diversity seemingly transcend them all.

This year, we at SOAS have been celebrating our Centenary. Founded to improve the education of civil servants operating in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, SOAS' relevance as an educational and cultural bridge between East and West is arguably as important today as it was in 1917. We live in a time of growing division and mistrust, an example being the misunderstanding of what Islam and Muslims represent, and it must be the role of institutions like ours to explore solutions.

We do this every day by uniquely combining language scholarship with disciplinary expertise and regional focus. A prime example is our renowned Centre for Islamic Studies, led so ably by our King Fahd Professor of Islamic Studies, Professor M.A.S. Abdel Haleem. Founded in 1995, the Centre aims to promote scholarship and research in all areas of Islamic Studies, as well as dealing with Islamic thought in European, African and Asian languages, whilst promoting the study of Islamic culture and relations between Muslims and the wider world.

Moreover SOAS' longest serving member of the Governing Body, Professor Nasser D. Khalili is not only a prominent art collector of international standing but also an outstanding scholar and benefactor, incidentally custodian of the greatest collection of objects related to Makkah and the Hajj. He has also been championing interfaith dialogue between the Abrahamic faiths for decades. This is the type of legacy we wish to promote with all of the students that attend SOAS, including the hundreds that we proudly receive from the Islamic world every year. **E**