

# WORLD



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DANIEL LIBESKIND and  
the remaking of Ground Zero



## Building a city

SPECIAL ISSUE

Finding street  
smarts in the  
new urban order

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
CHRISTOPHER W. WOOD

# Atlantic allies

From George Washington to Bush, Americans find common cause in Casablanca *by MINDY BELZ in Casablanca, Morocco*

**A**T THE ENTRANCE TO George Washington Academy stands an olive tree and a cherry tree. They tell a story few Americans know and help to explain why a private school named after America's Founding Father has a place in a Muslim country at the tip of north Africa.

When the Revolutionary War began, American traders who sailed under the British flag suddenly found themselves without protection against Barbary pirates operating in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. French protection was slow to come, and American merchant vessels had nowhere else to turn. The Brits, after all, ruled the seas.

But in 1777 the Sultan of Morocco, Mohammed III, declared that all American ships were to be given the right to freely enter Moroccan ports to "take refreshments and enjoy in them the same privileges and immunities

as those of the other nations." This was de facto recognition of American independence—the first—came as George Washington and his Continental Army hunkered at Valley Forge.

At war's end the two countries exchanged diplomats and in a letter dated Dec. 1, 1789, Washington wrote to thank the sultan for his vote of confidence: "This young nation, just recovering from the waste and desolation of a long war, has not, as yet, had time to acquire riches by agriculture and commerce. But our soil is beautiful, and our people industrious, and we have reason to flatter ourselves that we shall gradually become useful to our friends."



Thus began a little-noted friendship between a young largely Christian nation and an Islamic kingdom already dating back nearly a millennium. It also helps to explain the genesis of an American-style school serving both Moroccans and Westerners, Christians and Muslims, in the suburbs of Casablanca, a school sprouted in an olive grove and named for the man who made cherry trees famous.

George Washington Academy (GWA) opened in the city in September 1998 with 54 students and today has over 550. The school moved to a new campus in September 2005 (celebrated by the planting of the trees) two miles outside Casablanca's city limits in Dar Bouazza, a poor rural area quickly being transformed into a prosperous suburb of beachfront resorts and new middle-class housing developments. Over 300 students are Moroccan, with the remainder foreign nationals from the United States and elsewhere who live in Casablanca.

The school's support system is likewise multinational. GWA is the brainchild of Jack and Kathy Rusenko, its American founders, who have lived in Casablanca for the last 15 years, working in a variety



of education-related roles: directing the work of Global Education in Morocco, serving with the Semester at Sea study-abroad program, and advising the government and others on bringing the internet to Casablanca and other major cities.

Gradually the Rusenkos became aware of a population segment overlooked by existing schools: Casablanca's growing middle class. Many could afford to do better than inner-city government schools but could not afford pricey international private schools like the Casablanca American School, where tuition runs above \$12,000 annually.

With donations from an American businessman and help from a team of U.S. educators who put together a feasibility study and business plan, the Rusenkos

launched the school with students and a faculty also a mix of Moroccans and Americans. With the help of Ali Belhaj, a member of Morocco's parliament, Rusenko was able to run the gantlet of required approvals

## Casablanca

Urban core population:  
2.9 million

Square miles: 624  
Cost of Starbucks  
tall latté: n/a

Average price of a  
gallon of gas: \$4.77

## Cities with the highest cost of living

- 1 Moscow, Russia
- 2 Seoul, South Korea
- 3 Tokyo, Japan
- 4 Hong Kong, China
- 5 London, England
- 6 Osaka, Japan
- 7 Geneva, Switzerland
- 8 Copenhagen, Denmark
- 9 Zurich, Switzerland
- 10 Oslo, Norway and New York, USA (tie)



THE INDEX IS BASED ON COST OF LIVING EXPRESSED IN U.S. DOLLARS. SOURCE: CITY MAPS



**A MORAL INFLUENCE:** Moroccans and Americans at George Washington Academy.

from both the Moroccan government and the U.S. embassy.

The school operates a kindergarten through 12th grade program largely based on the American system and is a candidate for accreditation by Philadelphia-based Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. An expansive campus on rolling hills and red soil includes

faculty housing, a 33,000-volume library, open verandas outside classrooms, and athletic facilities for track, soccer, and basketball.

"I'm just an evangelical Christian man who's trying to have a culturally appropriate Christian witness in a Muslim country," said **Rusenko**, who also serves as warden in the Anglican Church. "I knew that if it was done properly it would be good for us and for our Moroccan neighbors."

The church has existed for over 100 years in Morocco. Five branches of Christendom are officially recognized—Greek and Russian Orthodox, French Protestant, Anglican, and Catholic—and churches officially include mostly Americans, Brits, sub-Saharan Africans, and other expatriates. While the recognized churches have more freedom to operate than in many Islamic countries,

the laws against proselytizing are clear, and anything considered coercing Muslims to leave Islam is a crime.

Still, **Rusenko** says that he has a good working relationship with the government's Islamic Affairs Ministry, which monitors all religious activity in the country. "There's no doubt that I'm a Christian. There's no doubt that many of our teachers are Christians. But we are not a Christian institution. We do have a moral influence, and in that sense we're welcomed by Muslims."

Casablanca, known simply as Casa by locals, is not the libertine seacoast city it was in the 1960s when storefront gospel chapels thrived on the Corniche alongside drug paraphernalia shops in what for a brief time was a hippie paradise. "We wore tank tops after 1968," recalls **Bouteina** Iraqui, who heads her own firm in Casablanca and is president of an association of businesswomen. "Now that would be considered naked, as religion has come back in recent years."

Head coverings are more prevalent now than 20 years ago, but many women, like **Iraqui** and her colleagues, opt freely for Western dress. As the financial capital and largest city of Morocco, Casablanca is a cosmopolitan mix of European and

Arab cultures, its souq, or Arab marketplace, a tiny relic surrounded by wide boulevards and roundabouts laid out by the French in colonial times.

Morocco is the first Muslim country to allow women to become imams and to liberalize seriously laws affecting divorce and women owning property. But it is young men that government and private groups seek to target with social programs. Casablanca has grown rapidly to a metropolitan area of 5 million, and 50 percent of that population is under age 30, largely male, and—despite a growing economy—predominantly unemployed. In a country where religious tension can surface, that means idle young men who can be radicalized by jihadist groups.

The 2003 bombing in Casablanca was the work of men ages 20-24 from an outlying neighborhood. They struck five locations simultaneously, killing 45 and injuring hundreds. And this month's bombing, where two men strapped themselves with explosives and one blew himself up in a Casablanca internet café on March 11, was also the work of locals in their early 20s. "This is a nightmare that we don't accept," said **Imane** Sallah, 17.

With her older brother **Nabil**, 23, **Imane** works in Casablanca's impoverished neighborhoods with youth associations collectively called *Réseau Maillage*, countering the teachings of radical Muslim groups with social gatherings and vocational training. Their slogan: "Ne touche pas mon pays," or "Don't touch my country."

**Imane** is often the group's feisty spokeswoman, who last year met President Bush at the White House as part of the

World Cup Soccer Youth Delegation—extending again the U.S.-Morocco friendship along with common ground in the war on terror. "I don't think the answer is all about the poverty. It is a moral and mental poverty," she told **WORLD**. "If you say they are poor, we are all poor. No one accepts this. If we know they are ready to blow themselves up, we should be ready to stop them."

With expanding educational and economic opportunities, **Imane** said Casablanca youth have more reason than ever to be optimistic about their future: "We are gaining back hope." ☺



**OPTIMISTIC:** Imane and soccer delegation meet Bush.