



## ISNA 2.0: Overhauling the Governance Structure

BY ALTAF HUSAIN

**T**HE GOOD NEWS FIRST. A NEAR UNANIMOUS VOTE BY ISNA'S MEMBERS during Dec. 2017 resulted in a complete overhaul of the organization's governance structure. This is a significant milestone, and one in which the members, donors, former and current board members, along with key stakeholders, can take great pride. How did we get here? How has the governance structure been amended? What comes next for ISNA?

### BACKGROUND

ISNA has essentially had the same governance structure since its founding in 1981. Often described as a wagon with two wheels, one serving students and the other serving the community, ISNA emerged from the strategic planning efforts undertaken by the leadership of the Muslim Students Association of the United States and Canada (now MSA National). The governance structure included a Majlis Ash-Shura (Majlis), a body comprised of individuals elected directly by the members, the presidents of

constituent organizations and individuals elected to represent the House of Community Representatives. When the ISNA elections were held in 2014, the highest governing body, the Majlis, comprised 23 members; the Executive Council was responsible for the headquarters' day-to-day operations; and the Majlis and its appointed committees were entrusted with policy and personnel matters, as well as approving the budget.

### SOMETHING IS JUST NOT RIGHT

Anyone with even a cursory understanding

of American nonprofit governance and operations could see that the original structure was unsustainable due to its sheer size and almost annual ad-hoc reconstituting of the governing board due to the turnover of the constituent organizations' presidents. It seemed that every ISNA president felt the weight of this unwieldy structure; however, pressed both by the burden of maintaining tradition and handling day-to-day matters, no substantial changes were ever introduced. Under the leadership of former ISNA presidents Shaikh Abdalla Idris Ali, Dr. Muzammil H. Siddiqi, Shaikh Muhammad Nur Abdullah, Dr. Ingrid Mattson and Imam Mohamed Magid, ISNA held three strategic planning retreats in 2003, 2007 and 2012, respectively. Although well attended and well intended, the retreats' attendees did not tackle the structure at all, but focused

primarily on ISNA's programs and services. In 2013 Imam Magid commissioned an outside firm to conduct an operational audit. Although the firm's report recommended substantive changes in both governance structure and staffing and operations, there was no sense of urgency to implement them.

## **IT WAS HEARTENING TO SEE THAT THE MEMBERS, SPEAKING IN A NEAR-UNANIMOUS VOICE, APPROVED THE OVERHAUL OF THE BYLAWS. NEARLY 37 YEARS AFTER ITS FOUNDING, THE MEMBERS HAVE REFORMED THE ORGANIZATION'S GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE AND THEREBY USHERED IN A NEW ERA: ISNA 2.0.**

With the election of President Azhar Azeez in 2014, far more concerted attention was given to finding a way to improve ISNA. The arrival in 2015 of a new secretary general, Hazem Bata, was instrumental in moving ahead with a robust process to consider reorganization and strategic planning. In 2016 the Majlis authorized the Strategic Reorganization and Planning Committee (SRPC) to conduct in-depth conversations with key ISNA stakeholders and analyze internal data sources. The SRPC is comprised of a team of passionate ISNA supporters who, most importantly, have the skill sets and experience to undertake this awesome burden. Despite the obvious discomfort any organization's leadership would feel during such a process, the SRPC began by asking a simple question: "Should ISNA exist?" The resounding and expected answer from over 75 interviews was: "Yes, ISNA should exist." However, there was tremendous variance as to what ISNA does well and should do going forward.

The internal data sources led to questions such as "Why, at a time when other Muslim organizations are experiencing unparalleled growth, ISNA is experiencing an unchanged budget for over 20 years of approximately \$3.6-\$4 million maximum?" "How did ISNA reach a point of operating with unchanged revenue streams but steadily increasing expenses, a shrinking and greying donor base, an alarming decline in membership of both individual and affiliates as well as a

steady decline in the number of paid registered attendees at regional conferences and the annual convention?"

Encouraged by the Majlis and key stakeholders, the SRPC team members challenged each other and pressed ahead with recommendations for transformational change

so that ISNA could position itself as a mission-driven, highly impactful and successfully operating organization. The data led to the recommendation that ISNA pay more attention to four key areas: (1) Governance: How do we manage our organization? (2) Operations: How do we run our organization? (3) Strategy: What activities do we focus on? and (4) Location: Where do we work from?

### **GETTING IT RIGHT: RECOMMENDATIONS**

With almost all Majlis members in attendance, history was made at the Dec. 3, 2016, meeting of the Majlis at the ISNA headquarters in Plainfield, Ind. The SRPC presented its recommendations for the first major area — governance — and the Majlis, after a full day of deliberations, adopted substantive reforms to overhaul the original structure and pave the way for ISNA 2.0. The language in the original bylaws was revised to reflect best practices in the governance of American non-profit organizations.


The Majlis ash-Shura has been renamed the Board of Directors, the secretary general is called the executive director and the general secretariat is referred to as the directorate. The governing board was right-sized from 23 members to between 9 to 13 members by shifting the representation of constituent organizations and the House of Community Representatives to an Advisory Council, replacing the Executive Council with an Executive Committee comprised

from within the Board of Directors and dissolving the Zonal Councils. The new Advisory Council, a major part of the overhaul, allows ISNA leadership direct access to the diverse expertise and experiences of constituent organizations and other organizations aligned with ISNA's mission/vision.

The Board of Directors is comprised of a mix of directors elected by the General Assembly and appointed by the Board. The number of appointed members will never exceed the number of elected members. In addition, the executive director is now envisioned as a more empowered position and a formal search will be initiated to fill this position. The incumbent will serve as the organization's chief executive officer unencumbered by the original, complex and multiple reporting and oversight layers.

The rationale for these bylaws reforms was presented during the business session convened at the 2017 convention in Chicago, and two webinars were held in July and August to allow members to review the proposed bylaws and ask questions in real time. Ultimately, the bylaws were mailed, with a cover letter signed by the current and five former ISNA presidents, to all ISNA members with ballots to vote. The 500-member quorum was reached on Dec. 2017. It was heartening to see that the members, speaking in a near-unanimous voice, approved the overhaul of the bylaws. Nearly 37 years after its founding, the members have reformed the organization's governance structure and thereby ushered in a new era: ISNA 2.0.

### **WHAT'S NEXT FOR ISNA 2.0?**

The SRPC will remain fully engaged with the Board of Directors to turn our attention to the next phase: ISNA operations. It will conduct a thorough assessment in order to prepare the development of a long-term strategic plan. When the new executive director is hired, he or she will assume a central role in strategy development, assisted by the Board of Directors and the Advisory Council. What strategic priorities will guide ISNA's work? Where will the ISNA headquarters ultimately be located? These questions have yet to be answered, and it is our hope that all ISNA members will remain fully engaged and provide input and encouragement. Stay tuned for more information about the search for the executive director and the continued strategic planning process! 

Altaf Husain serves as ISNA Vice President—USA and Chair of the Strategic Reorganization and Planning Committee.