



# The East-West Foundation

*Scholarship, Spirituality, & Service*

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# THE EAST WEST FOUNDATION

## SCHOLARSHIP, SPIRITUALITY, & SERVICE IN ACTION

### Our Vision for a Thriving Community

The East West Foundation is animated by a singular, profound vision: to cultivate inclusive communities where every individual is valued, every child is empowered to learn and grow, every family has secure access to its basic needs, and every culture is celebrated and preserved for posterity.<sup>1</sup> This vision is not an abstract ideal but a practical commitment to strengthening the very fabric of society through the interconnected pillars of unity, education, and cultural preservation. The foundation's work is guided by a core operational philosophy of "Scholarship, Spirituality, & Service," a principle that ensures its initiatives are intellectually rigorous, ethically grounded, and tangibly beneficial to the communities it serves.

This commitment manifests through a holistic and integrated framework designed to address the complex, interlocking challenges that communities face. The foundation recognizes that societal well-being cannot be achieved by addressing issues in isolation. A child cannot thrive in an educational setting if their family is struggling with food insecurity; a community cannot achieve unity if the diverse faith traditions and cultural heritages within it are not understood and respected. Consequently, the foundation's strategic approach is built upon four foundational pillars that work in concert: fostering interfaith dialogue to build bridges of understanding; delivering quality early childhood education to provide a foundation for lifelong success; implementing food security initiatives to promote wellness; and championing heritage preservation to honor the stories that define a community's identity.<sup>1</sup> This model represents a sophisticated understanding of community development, viewing challenges not as discrete problems but as parts of a systemic whole. By simultaneously nurturing the intellectual, spiritual, physical, and cultural health of a community, The East West Foundation pursues a more resilient and sustainable form of social progress.





## Our Genesis: A Commitment Forged in Community



Figure 1: Brownsville's first community garden was established by the foundation

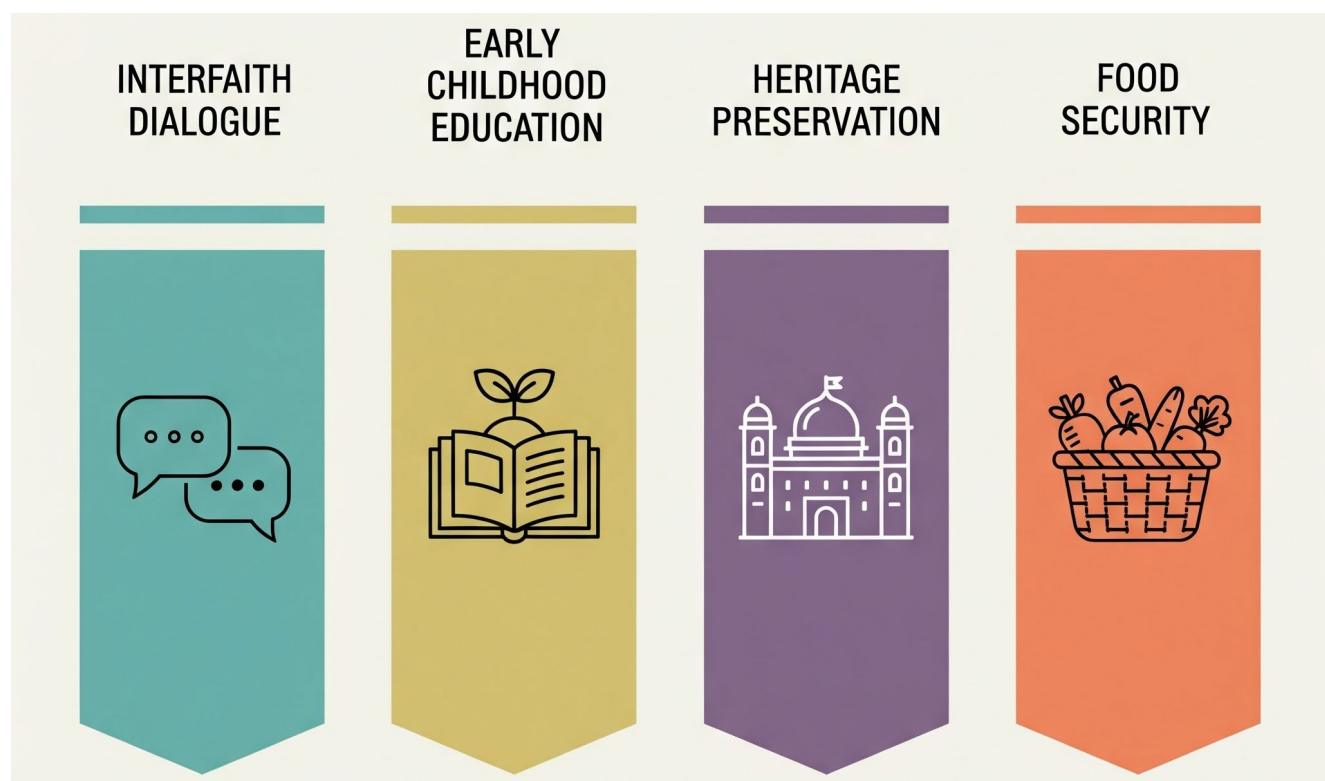
The East West Foundation was established in 2017 not from a detached theoretical perspective, but from a direct and deeply felt observation of lived reality. Its founders, a dedicated group of scholar-practitioners, were moved to action by the persistent and systemic inequalities they witnessed affecting the historically Black community in Brownsville. They saw firsthand how entrenched challenges restricted opportunities for residents to flourish, creating barriers that disproportionately impacted the community's children. This experience forged the foundation's fundamental purpose: to serve as a conduit for positive change by translating complex global and historical forces into actionable, localized strategies that empower a community to thrive.<sup>1</sup> The mission became one of narrating the stories that are too frequently overlooked, cultivating understanding in situations fraught with division, and ultimately equipping the community with the tools and resources needed for self-determination and prosperity.

The identity of the founders as "scholar-practitioners" is the defining characteristic of the organization and the key to its unique operational model. This term is not a mere descriptor but a declaration of methodology. It signifies a deliberate fusion of

rigorous academic inquiry with hands-on, community-embedded activism. This dual identity shapes every facet of the foundation's work, creating a powerful cycle of observation, research, and action. The process begins with a granular understanding of a local problem, such as the preservation of a historic building or the need for culturally relevant education. This is followed by in-depth, evidence-based research to develop a nuanced and effective strategy. Finally, that strategy is implemented as a practical, on-the-ground initiative. This model ensures that the foundation's interventions are neither detached academic exercises nor purely reactive acts of service. Instead, they are deeply researched, strategically sound, and culturally attuned solutions designed for sustainable, long-term impact. This scholar-practitioner approach is the unique value proposition of The East West Foundation, allowing it to address community needs with a level of sophistication and efficacy that sets it apart.

## A Holistic Framework for Change: Our Core Initiatives

The East West Foundation executes its mission through a portfolio of core initiatives, each designed to address a critical component of community well-being. These programs are not siloed efforts but are intentionally interwoven, creating a synergistic effect that amplifies their collective impact. From fostering interfaith harmony and preserving historical legacies to nurturing the next generation and ensuring basic human needs are met, this framework represents a comprehensive strategy for building resilient and flourishing communities.



## Bridging Divides Through Dialogue and Scholarship

At the heart of the foundation's work is a profound commitment to interfaith dialogue, aimed at bridging cultural and religious divides to build lasting relationships rooted in mutual respect and understanding.<sup>1</sup> This is pursued through direct, community-level engagement, most notably through programs that facilitate dialogue between local Jewish and Muslim communities. In an era of heightened global tensions, the foundation creates vital spaces for connection and understanding, demonstrating that even amidst contentious world events, local bridges of empathy and cooperation can be built and sustained.



INTERFAITHS

Figure 2: Interfaiths podcast of The East-West Foundation

This community-focused work is powerfully reinforced by a project of national scholarly significance. The East West Foundation received a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), an independent federal agency, to support a groundbreaking research initiative titled "Founding Principles in a Global Context". This project is undertaking the first-ever direct English translation of the 1796 Treaty of Tripoli from its original Arabic text. For over two centuries, American understanding of this pivotal treaty has been filtered through a flawed Italian translation, obscuring its true meaning.

The foundation's work will correct the historical record, offering a more nuanced view of the United States Founders' approach to international relations. It reveals a founding generation that was far more pragmatic, globally-minded, and respectful of Islamic legal frameworks than is commonly portrayed, and it highlights their foundational commitment to religious pluralism.

This scholarly endeavor is not an isolated academic pursuit; it is the strategic intellectual anchor for the foundation's contemporary interfaith work. By unearthing historical precedent for respectful engagement between the United States and the Muslim world, the foundation provides a powerful counter-narrative to modern prejudice and historical myths. This allows the organization to frame its local dialogue programs not merely as a hopeful aspiration for the future, but as a meaningful return to America's own founding principles. The project will culminate in a major academic



conference, "Free Trade, Faith, and Freedom," and its findings will be made publicly available through a dedicated website and a peer-reviewed publication, creating an enduring resource for scholars, educators, and the public.<sup>3</sup> In this way, The East West Foundation strategically leverages historical scholarship to legitimize and elevate contemporary interfaith dialogue, transforming community organizing into a project of national historical recovery and importance.

## Nurturing Generations Through Education

The foundation firmly believes that empowering children with quality early learning experiences is essential for building a thriving community, providing every child with the foundation they need to succeed.<sup>1</sup> The educational philosophy of The East West Foundation is distinguished by its commitment to place-based and culturally relevant pedagogy. Rather than importing generic, one-size-fits-all curricula, the foundation develops bespoke educational tools that affirm the unique identities of the children it serves and connect them to their immediate historical and natural environments. A prime example of this approach is the foundation's work in designing an early childhood curriculum focused specifically on Miami's Native and African history. This initiative is a direct response to the foundation's mission to narrate "overlooked stories." By centering the curriculum on the heritage of the very communities it serves, the foundation provides an education that is not only informative but also deeply affirming. This approach helps to build resilience, cultural pride, and a strong sense of self from the earliest stages of development.

This commitment to contextual learning extends to the foundation's environmental education programs. These initiatives are designed to promote biodiversity and the importance of plant-based nutrition, with the goal of encouraging healthier lives within the community. This education is not confined to the classroom; it is a hands-on experience, directly linked to the development of a community garden in the Brownsville neighborhood.<sup>4</sup> This living laboratory allows children and families to connect ecological concepts to tangible outcomes, such as



improved health, access to fresh food, and a deeper appreciation for their local environment. This model of education is a form of educational justice, equipping the next generation with knowledge that is not only academically sound but also personally relevant and empowering.



## Preserving Legacies, Securing Futures

The East West Foundation's heritage preservation work is a proactive and strategic effort to honor diverse cultures and ensure their stories continue to inspire future generations.<sup>1</sup> This work is animated by an urgent understanding that community heritage is under threat from the powerful contemporary forces of climate change and rapid economic development, which are inexorably altering the social and physical geography of cities.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the foundation views historic preservation not as a passive exercise in archiving the past, but as a vital tool for securing a community's place in the future.

The most prominent success of this initiative is a landmark achievement in American Muslim history. The foundation successfully led the effort to have the first mosque in the state of Florida officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>1</sup> This designation is far more than an honorific; it provides a significant measure of legal protection against development pressures and can unlock critical funding for maintenance and restoration. By securing this official recognition for a key physical landmark, the foundation has anchored the community's historical presence and narrative in a legally durable way, creating a permanent foothold against the forces of displacement and erasure.

Beyond this singular achievement, the foundation is continuously and actively engaged in the crucial work of preserving the narratives and voices of the pioneers who established the community.<sup>1</sup> This oral history and archival work ensures that the intangible heritage—the stories, struggles, and triumphs of a people—is not lost to time. This sophisticated strategy demonstrates a keen understanding of power dynamics in urban development. The East West Foundation is effectively using the formal mechanisms of federal historic preservation as a shield to defend the cultural and physical integrity of minority communities against the formidable socio-economic and environmental pressures they face.

## Promoting Wellness and Dignity

Underpinning all of the foundation's work is a commitment to the fundamental dignity of every family, which begins with ensuring access to basic needs. The food security initiatives are designed to address hunger directly while simultaneously promoting long-term community wellness.<sup>1</sup> This program serves as the connective tissue that binds many of the foundation's other initiatives together, perfectly illustrating its holistic and integrated model of community development.

The foundation's approach to food security transcends the traditional model of food distribution. Instead, it focuses on building sustainable, community-owned solutions. The centerpiece of this effort is the community garden established in Brownsville, which provides residents with direct access to nutritious, plant-based food.<sup>4</sup> This garden is a microcosm of the foundation's entire philosophy in action. It is a practical solution to an immediate need (hunger) that is born from scholarship (environmental and nutritional education). It serves as an outdoor classroom for the foundation's educational programs, a source of healthy food that promotes physical wellness, and a communal gathering space that strengthens social and spiritual bonds. By linking food security to education, environmental stewardship, and community



building, The East West Foundation demonstrates its capacity to create multifaceted solutions that nourish a community in every sense of the word.

## Visionary Leadership: The Scholar-Practitioner at the Helm



The innovative and impactful work of The East West Foundation is powered by the visionary leadership of its Founder and Executive Director, Iqbal S. Akhtar. An accomplished American academic and public intellectual, Akhtar's distinguished career uniquely embodies the "scholar-practitioner" ethos that defines the foundation's mission.<sup>4</sup> His extensive and remarkably diverse experience across the highest levels of academia, government, and philanthropy provides the strategic direction and intellectual capital that enable the foundation's success. The organization is, in essence, the institutional manifestation of his life's work synthesizing rigorous scholarship with practical, real-world application.

Akhtar's career trajectory demonstrates a rare ability to navigate and excel within disparate and demanding fields. He has delved into the complex geopolitics of the Muslim world as a Cultural Affairs Intelligence Officer for U.S. Northern Command during the Global War on Terrorism and has worked on the front lines of diplomacy on the Israel-Palestine Desk for the U.S. Department of State.

This high-stakes government service, which required a Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information (TS/SCI) security clearance and earned him the Armed Forces Civilian Service Award, represents the consummate "practitioner." Simultaneously, he has cultivated a distinguished academic career as an Associate Professor with a joint appointment in the Departments of Religious Studies and Politics & International Relations at Florida International University (FIU) and as a U.S. Fulbright Scholar in both Pakistan and Tanzania.<sup>4</sup> This is the dedicated "scholar." The

foundation's work sits at the perfect intersection of this expertise. It is through this unique lens that Akhtar is able to translate complex global dynamics into meaningful local strategies, applying his scholarly knowledge and diplomatic experience to solve community-level challenges. The foundation's ability to secure major federal grants and lead landmark historic preservation projects is a direct result of being led by an individual whose entire career has prepared him to bridge these worlds.

The following table provides a consolidated overview of the breadth and depth of Iqbal S. Akhtar's qualifications, illustrating the formidable expertise guiding The East West Foundation.

## **Landmarks of Impact: From Local Heritage to National Discourse**

The effectiveness of The East West Foundation's unique scholar-practitioner model is not a matter of theory; it is demonstrated through a record of concrete, significant, and verifiable achievements. Two case studies in particular highlight the foundation's ability to generate impact at both the highest levels of national discourse and the most tangible, local community level. Together, they offer definitive proof that the foundation's integrated approach yields powerful results.

### **Case Study 1: Correcting the Historical Record – The National Endowment for the Humanities Grant**

The foundation's capacity for influencing national conversations is best exemplified by its success in securing a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for its "Founding Principles in a Global Context" project.<sup>3</sup> The NEH is a prestigious independent federal agency that funds only the most rigorous and promising peer-reviewed proposals. The grant supports the foundation's ambitious effort to produce the first-ever direct English translation of the 1796 Treaty of Tripoli from its original Arabic. This scholarly work is poised to correct a two-century-old historical inaccuracy based on a flawed translation, thereby reshaping our understanding of the U.S. Founders' sophisticated engagement with the Muslim world and their commitment to pluralism.<sup>3</sup> The project's significance is further underscored by its alignment with the NEH's special focus on America's 250th anniversary, positioning the foundation's research as a vital contribution to the nation's commemoration of its history and founding ideals. This achievement demonstrates



the impact of the "scholar," showcasing the foundation's intellectual credibility and its ability to lead a project of national historical importance.

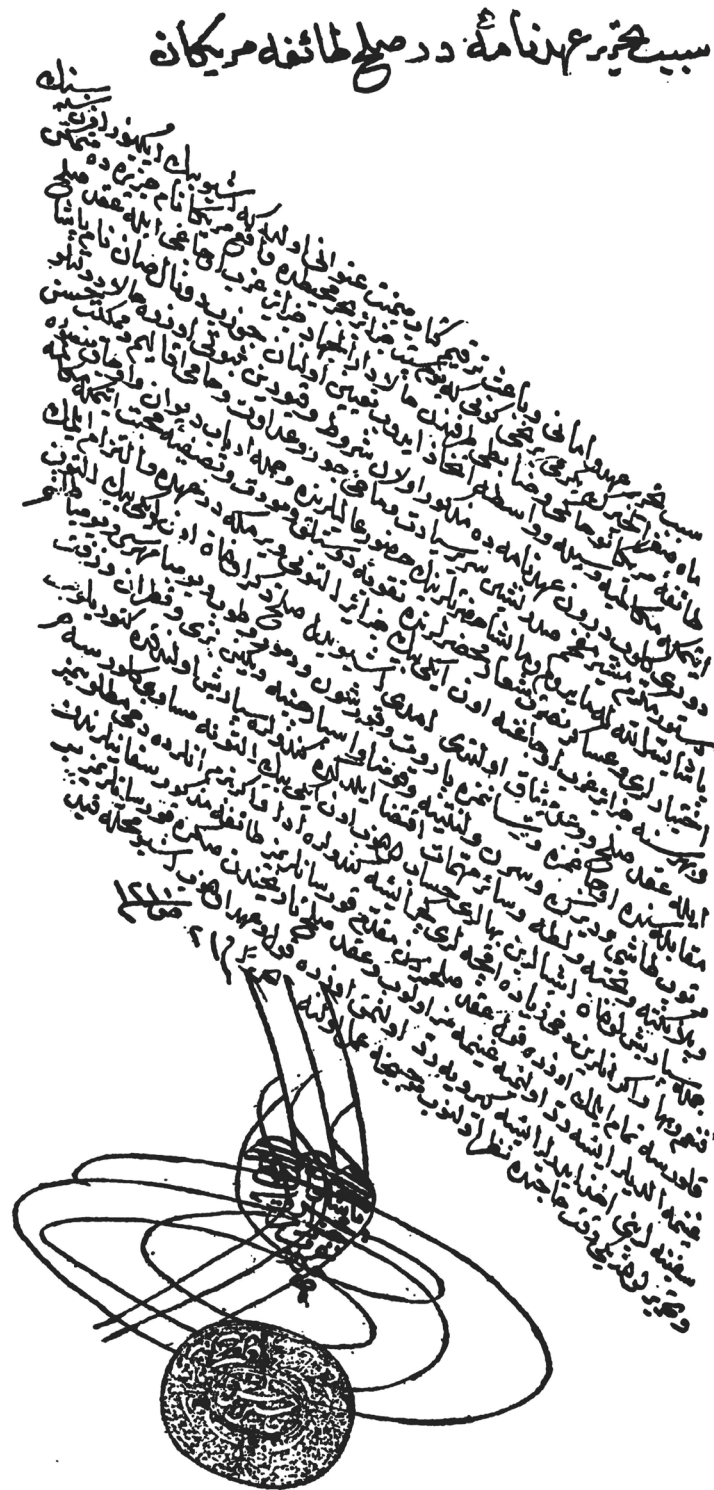


Figure 3: Folio from the Treaty of Tripoli

## Case Study 2: A Landmark of Faith and History – The First Mosque in Florida Project

Complementing its national scholarly impact, the foundation has delivered a landmark victory at the grassroots community level. The successful initiative to place the first mosque in Florida on the National Register of Historic Places stands as a testament to the impact of the "practitioner".<sup>1</sup> This was not merely a symbolic act but a strategic move to empower and protect a vulnerable community. The designation provides crucial legal protections and resources, creating a bulwark against the encroaching pressures of gentrification and economic development that threaten the area's social geography.<sup>1</sup> By securing the physical and historical legacy of this institution, The East West Foundation has provided the community with a powerful tool for cultural preservation and self-determination. This tangible achievement demonstrates the foundation's deep connection to the communities it serves and its ability to translate its vision into concrete, lasting change.

These two accomplishments, viewed together, are strategically complementary and serve to validate the foundation's entire operational model. The NEH grant affirms its elite academic credentials and its relevance to the national story. The mosque preservation project confirms its effectiveness as a grassroots advocate and its commitment to delivering real-world victories for local communities. This dual impact demonstrates that The East West Foundation is neither a remote ivory tower think tank nor a conventional service provider. It is a dynamic hybrid, and its power lies in the synergy between these two modes of operation.



Figure 4: Masjid al-Ansar, the first mosque in Florida that the foundation placed on the National Register of Historic Places



## Joining the Mission: Cultivating a Shared Future

The East West Foundation was born from the conviction that a more just, unified, and resilient society is possible. Through a sophisticated model that weds rigorous scholarship with dedicated community service, the foundation has demonstrated its ability to effect meaningful change—correcting the national historical record, preserving irreplaceable cultural landmarks, and nurturing the next generation with an education rooted in dignity and respect. The work of translating complex challenges into local solutions, of honoring overlooked stories, and of empowering communities to flourish is a profound and ongoing responsibility.

This vital mission is not one that can be accomplished in isolation. It requires a coalition of partners—donors who invest in sustainable change, scholars who contribute their expertise, community leaders who guide the work, and volunteers who dedicate their time and talent. The challenges of division, inequality, and cultural erasure are significant, but the foundation's record of impact proves that they are not insurmountable. The path forward lies in a shared commitment to the principles of understanding, education, and preservation.

The work of building resilient, educated, and unified communities is a collective endeavor. To learn more about the initiatives of The East West Foundation and to explore how you can become a partner in this crucial mission, a deeper conversation is invited.

Please begin this dialogue by visiting the foundation's home on the web at [theeastwestfoundation.org](http://theeastwestfoundation.org)



Figure 5: MOSAIC Interfaith Clergy Dialogue Meeting at Florida International University