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Barack Obama

Religions Tolerance in America: Address at Iftar Dinner

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Well, welcome to the White House. To you, to Muslim Americans across our country, and to more than one billion Muslims around the world, I extend my best wishes on this holy month. Ramadan Kareem.

I want to welcome members of the diplomatic corps; members of my administration; and members of Congress, including Rush Holt, John Conyers, and Andre Carson, who is one of two Muslim American members of Congress, along with Keith Ellison. So welcome, all of you.

Here at the White House, we have a tradition of hosting iftars that goes back several years, just as we host Christmas parties and seders and Diwali celebrations. And these events celebrate the role of faith in the lives of the American people. They remind us of the basic truth that we are all children of God, and we all draw strength and a sense of purpose from our beliefs.

These events are also an affirmation of who we are as Americans. Our Founders understood that the best way to honor the place of faith in the lives of our people was to protect their freedom to practice religion. In the Virginia Act of Establishing Religion Freedom, Thomas Jefferson wrote that "all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion." The First Amendment of our Constitution established the freedom of religion as the law of the land. And that right has been upheld ever since.



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Indeed, over the course of our history, religion has flourished within our borders precisely because Americans have had the right to worship as they choose -- including the right to believe in no religion at all. And it is a testament to the wisdom of our Founders that America remains deeply religious -- a nation where the ability of peoples of different faiths to coexist peacefully and with mutual respect for one another stands in stark contrast to the religious conflict that persists elsewhere around the globe.

Now, that's not to say that religion is without controversy. Recently, attention has been focused on the construction of mosques in certain communities -- particularly New York. Now, we must all recognize and respect the sensitivities surrounding the development of Lower Manhattan. The 9/11 attacks were a deeply traumatic event for our country. And the pain and the experience of suffering by those who lost loved ones is just unimaginable. So I understand the emotions that this issue engenders. And Ground Zero is, indeed, hallowed ground.

But let me be clear. As a citizen, and as President, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country. And that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in Lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances. This is America. And our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakeable. The principle that people of all faiths are welcome in this country and that they will not be treated differently by their government is essential to who we are. The writ of the Founders must endure.

We must never forget those who we lost so tragically on 9/11, and we must always honor those who led the response to that attack -- from the firefighters who charged up smoke-filled staircases, to our troops who are serving in Afghanistan today. And let us also remember who we're fighting against, and what we're fighting for. Our enemies respect no religious freedom. Al Qaeda's cause is not Islam -- it's a gross distortion of Islam. These are not religious leaders -- they're terrorists who murder innocent men and women and children. In fact, al Qaeda has killed more Muslims than people of any other religion -- and that list of victims includes innocent Muslims who were killed on 9/11.

So that's who we're fighting against. And the reason that we will win this fight is not simply the strength of our arms -- it is the strength of our values. The democracy that we uphold. The freedoms that we cherish. The laws that we apply without regard to race, or religion, or wealth, or status. Our capacity to show not merely tolerance, but respect towards those who are different from us -- and that way of life, that quintessentially American creed, stands in stark contrast to the nihilism of those who attacked us on that September morning, and who continue to plot against us today.

In my inaugural address I said that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus -- and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and every culture, drawn from every end of this Earth. And that diversity can bring difficult debates.



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This is not unique to our time. Past eras have seen controversies about the construction of synagogues or Catholic churches. But time and again, the American people have demonstrated that we can work through these issues, and stay true to our core values, and emerge stronger for it. So it must be -- and will be -- today.

And tonight, we are reminded that Ramadan is a celebration of a faith known for great diversity. And Ramadan is a reminder that Islam has always been a part of America. The first Muslim ambassador to the United States, from Tunisia, was hosted by President Jefferson, who arranged a sunset dinner for his guest because it was Ramadan -- making it the first known iftar at the White House, more than 200 years ago.

Like so many other immigrants, generations of Muslims came to forge their future here. They became farmers and merchants, worked in mills and factories. They helped lay the railroads. They helped to build America. They founded the first Islamic center in New York City in the 1890s. They built America's first mosque on the prairie of North Dakota. And perhaps the oldest surviving mosque in America -- still in use today -- is in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Today, our nation is strengthened by millions of Muslim Americans. They excel in every walk of life. Muslim American communities -- including mosques in all 50 states -- also serve their neighbors. Muslim Americans protect our communities as police officers and firefighters and first responders. Muslim American clerics have spoken out against terror and extremism, reaffirming that Islam teaches that one must save human life, not take it. And Muslim Americans serve with honor in our military. At next week's iftar at the Pentagon, tribute will be paid to three soldiers who gave their lives in Iraq and now rest among the heroes of Arlington National Cemetery.

These Muslim Americans died for the security that we depend on, and the freedoms that we cherish. They are part of an unbroken line of Americans that stretches back to our founding; Americans of all faiths who have served and sacrificed to extend the promise of America to new generations, and to ensure that what is exceptional about America is protected -- our commitment to stay true to our core values, and our ability slowly but surely to perfect our union.

For in the end, we remain "one nation, under God, indivisible." And we can only achieve "liberty and justice for all" if we live by that one rule at the heart of every great religion, including Islam -- that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

So thank you all for being here.

I wish you a blessed Ramadan.

And with that, let us eat.