

Remarks at the Iftar Dinner

August 10, 2012

Thank you, everybody. Please, please have a seat. Good evening, everyone. And welcome to the White House.

Of all the freedoms we cherish as Americans, of all the rights that we hold sacred, foremost among them is freedom of religion, the right to worship as we choose. It's enshrined in the First Amendment of our Constitution, the law of the land, always and forever. It beats in our heart, in the soul of the people, who know that our liberty and our equality is endowed by our Creator. And it runs through the history of this house, a place where Americans of many faiths can come together and celebrate their holiest of days, and that includes Ramadan.

As I've noted before, Thomas Jefferson once held a sunset dinner here with an envoy from Tunisia, perhaps the first Iftar at the White House, more than 200 years ago. And some of you, as you arrived tonight, may have seen our special display, courtesy of our friends at the Library of Congress, the Koran that belonged to Thomas Jefferson. And that's a reminder, along with the generations of patriotic Muslims in America, that Islam, like so many faiths, is part of our national story.

This evening, we're honored to be joined by members of our diplomatic corps; Members of Congress, including Muslim American Members of Congress Keith Ellison and Andre Carson; as well as leaders from across my administration. And to you, the millions of Muslim Americans across our country, and to the more than 1 billion Muslims around the world, *Ramadan Kareem*.

Now, every faith is unique. And yet during Ramadan, we see the traditions that are shared by many faiths: believers engaged in prayer and fasting, in humble devotion to God; families gathering together with love for each other; neighbors reaching out in compassion and charity to serve the less fortunate; people of different faiths coming together, mindful of our obligations to one another, to peace, justice, and dignity for all people, men and women. Indeed, you know that the Koran teaches, "Be it man or woman, each of you is equal to the other."

And by the way, we've seen this in recent days. In fact, the Olympics is being called "the year of the woman." [*Laughter*] Here in America, we're incredibly proud of Team U.S.A., all of them, but we should notice that a majority of the members are women. Also, for the very first time in Olympic history, every team now includes a woman athlete. And one of the reasons is that every team from a Muslim-majority country now includes women as well.

And more broadly—[*applause*]*—*that's worth applauding, absolutely. More broadly, we've seen the extraordinary courage of Muslim women during the Arab Spring. Women, right alongside men, taking to the streets to claim their universal rights, marching for their freedom, blogging and tweeting and posting videos, determined to be heard. In some cases, facing down tanks and braving bullets, enduring detentions and unspeakable treatment, and at times, giving their very lives for the freedom that they seek, the liberty that we are lucky enough to enjoy here tonight.

These women have inspired their sisters and daughters, but also their brothers and their sons, and they've inspired us all. Even as we see women casting their ballots and seeking—

standing for office in historic elections, we understand that their work is not done. They understand that any true democracy must uphold the freedom and rights of all people and all faiths. We know this too, for here in America, we're enriched by so many faiths, by men and women, including Muslim American women.

They're young people, like the student who wrote me a letter about what it's like to grow up Muslim in America. She's in college. She dreams of a career in international affairs to help deepen understanding between the United States and Muslim countries around the world. So if any of the diplomatic corps have tips for her—*[laughter]*. She says that "America has always been the land of opportunity for me, and I love this country with all my heart." And so we're glad to have Hala Baig here today.

They are faith leaders like Sanaa Nadim, one of the first Muslim chaplains at an American college, a voice for interfaith dialogue who's had the opportunity to meet with the Pope to discuss these issues. We're very proud to have you here.

They are educators like Auysha Muhayya, born in Afghanistan, who fled with her family as refugees to America and now, as a language teacher, helps open her students to new cultures. So we're very pleased to have her here.

They are entrepreneurs and lawyers, community leaders, members of our military, and Muslim American women serving with distinction in government. And that includes a good friend, Huma Abedin, who has worked tirelessly in the White House, in the U.S. Senate, and most exhaustingly, at the State Department, where she has been nothing less than extraordinary in representing our country and the democratic values that we hold dear. Senator Clinton has relied on her expertise, and so have I.

The American people owe her a debt of gratitude because Huma is an American patriot and an example of what we need in this country: more public servants with her sense of decency, her grace, and her generosity of spirit. So, on behalf of all Americans, we thank you so much.

These are the faces of Islam in America. These are just a few of the Muslim Americans who strengthen our country every single day. This is the diversity that makes us Americans, the pluralism that we will never lose.

And at times, we have to admit that this spirit is threatened. We've seen instances of mosques and synagogues, churches and temples being targeted. Tonight our prayers, in particular, are with our friends and fellow Americans in the Sikh community. We mourn those who were senselessly murdered and injured in their place of worship. And while we may never fully understand what motivates such hatred, such violence, the perpetrators of such despicable acts must know that your twisted thinking is no match for the compassion and the goodness and the strength of our united American family.

So tonight we declare with one voice that such violence has no place in the United States of America. The attack on Americans of any faith is an attack on the freedom of all Americans. No American should ever have to fear for their safety in their place of worship. And every American has the right to practice their faith both openly and freely, and as they choose.

That is not just an American right; it is a universal human right. And we will defend the freedom of religion here at home and around the world. And as we do, we'll draw on the strength and example of our interfaith community, including the leaders who are here tonight.

So I want to thank all of you for honoring us with your presence, for the example of your lives, and for your commitment to the values that make us "one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:40 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Sanaa Nadim, chaplain, Interfaith Center at Stony Brook University; Pope Benedict XVI; Auysa Muhayya, upper school language department head, Sidwell Friends School; Huma M. Abedin, former Deputy Chief of Staff, Department of State; and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Iftar dinner.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Abedin, Huma M.; Baig, Hala; Carson, Andre; Clinton, Hillary Rodham; Ellison, Keith; Muhayya, Auysa; Nadim, Sanaa; Pope Benedict XVI.

Subjects: Civil rights : Freedom of religion; Holidays and special observances : Ramadan; Immigration and naturalization : American "melting pot"; Middle East : Democracy efforts; North Africa : Democracy efforts; Sports : Olympic Games; State, Department of : Secretary; United Kingdom : 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London; Wisconsin : Shootings in Oak Creek.

DCPD Number: DCPD201200632.