

Remarks by The President at the Annual Iftar Dinner, July 14, 2014

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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East Room

9:03 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Good evening everyone and welcome to the White House. Every year, our Iftar is a chance to join in fellowship with friends, old and new, and to celebrate the incredible diversity of our great nation. And I want to recognize members of our diplomatic corps who are here -- and it's wonderful to have you back -- as well as members of Congress who are joining us here tonight. We have leaders from my administration. And most importantly, we welcome Muslim Americans from across the country. So I want to thank you all for being here -- Ramadan Kareem. It's late. You're hungry. I will be brief. (Laughter.)

Tonight, we honor the traditions of one of the world's great faiths. For Muslims, Ramadan is a time to reflect and to remember that discipline and devotion is the essence of a life of faith. And for all of us, whatever our faiths, Ramadan is a reminder of just how much we share. The values of peace and charity, the importance of family and community -- these are universal values. The command to love one another, to uphold justice, and to care for the least among us -- these are common threads in our faith traditions.

Tonight we reaffirm a simple truth. Fundamental to the character of our country is our freedom of religion -- the right to practice our faith as we choose, to change our faith if we choose, or to practice no faith at all and to do all this free from fear of. All of us are deserving of an equal opportunity to thrive -- no matter who we are, what we look like, what we believe, or how we pray. And all of us have an obligation to do our part -- to help others overcome barriers, to reverse the injustice of inequality and to help more of our fellow citizens share in the promise of America.

In Islam, there is a hadith that says God helps the servant as long as the servant helps his brother. In other words, we're summoned to serve and lift up one another, and that's the lesson of several of our guests here tonight.

I'm just going to mention a couple. Kelly Carlisle served our country in the Navy. And more recently, she founded Acta Non Verba -- deeds, not words. And in a tough part of Oakland, California, she started an urban farm where local children can grow and sell fresh food, which Michelle would appreciate very much. (Laughter.) Then, Kelly deposits 100 percent of the profits they earn into individual savings accounts for those children, because studies show that a child with a savings account is more likely to attend college. So thanks to Kelly, these boys and girls are not only learning the value of hard work at an early age, they're changing how they think about themselves and opening their minds to what's possible in their lives. So we want to thank Kelly for that great work. (Applause.)

Growing up in Pakistan, Muhammed Chaudhry and his family -- part of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community -- were mistreated because of their beliefs. They immigrated to America, and in California, Muhammed saw world-changing technologies being launched in the same neighborhoods where too many students struggled just to stay in school. Today, he runs a foundation that works with schools, parents and local IT startups to better prepare students to embrace science and math. And they've started turning the tables -- thanks to Muhammed's foundation, so many of these students are now taking classes that put them on track for college. So we want to thank Muhammed for being such a great example. (Applause.)

And you see the kind of impact Muhammed's work can have -- how each generation can help bring along the next -- in young people like Aala Mohamed. Aala's family immigrated to the United States from Sudan. Both her parents worked several jobs in order to send her to a good high school in Chicago, a great town. I added that. That's not in the remarks. (Laughter.) But, according to Aala, applying for college was a depressing time, because she didn't know what opportunities were out there and she didn't know how her family would pay for her college.

But with the help of a nonprofit that focuses on young people like her, she set her sights high. She earned admission to Yale, which I understand is quite good. (Laughter.) She graduated with a double major. Today she works in finance, and now she's paying it forward by developing a curriculum to inspire Muslim high school students, especially girls, to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and math. So we want to thank Aala for that. (Applause.)

So these three individuals are just an example of the wonderful work that is done. You've made it your mission, each in your own way, to help others overcome barriers and to push back on those forces of inequality and to help the next generation share in the American Dream. These folks realize that sometimes all a young person needs is knowing that somebody cares about them and believes in them. I know I'm only here because a few people -- my mother and my grandparents and dedicated teachers -- took time to invest in me.

And so, we've got to do everything in our power -- as a nation and as individuals -- to make sure more Americans have the opportunity to move ahead and move up, whether it's good wages that reward hard work, good jobs that help provide for a career and a

family, or the education that allows every child to realize his potential or her God-given potential. And that's my mission as President. I want to thank all of those here tonight who in their respective communities try to do the same thing.

And, finally, tonight reminds us of our responsibilities to each other beyond our borders, as well as within. Even as we celebrate all that we have in common, we know that in too many corners of the world we see violence and terror of those who would destroy rather than build. These are particularly difficult times in the Middle East. In Syria, the Assad regime continues its brutality against the Syrian people, and so we continue to help Syrians stand up to Assad and deal with the humanitarian crisis and push back against extremists. In Iraq, where ISIL's attacks on civilians and destruction of religious sites seek to inflame sectarian tensions, we continue to call for a new government that can unite Iraqis and show all communities in Iraq that they can advance their aspirations through the political process.

Separately, the pictures we are seeing in Gaza and Israel are heart wrenching. People here in the United States care deeply about what's happening there, and I know there are strong views, as well as differences, about how we should move forward, which is part of American democracy. We welcome that debate. That makes us stronger.

Our goal has been and continues to be peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians. And I will say very clearly, no country can accept rocket fired indiscriminately at citizens. And so, we've been very clear that Israel has the right to defend itself against what I consider to be inexcusable attacks from Hamas. At the same time, on top of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza that we've worked long and hard to alleviate, the death and injury of Palestinian civilians is a tragedy, which is why we've emphasized the need to protect civilians, regardless of who they are or where they live.

I believe further escalation benefits no one, least of all the Israeli and the Palestinian people. So we're going to continue doing everything we can to facilitate a return to the 2012 cease-fire. We are encouraged that Egypt has made a proposal to accomplish this goal, which we hope can restore the calm that we've been seeking. More broadly, however, the situation in Gaza reminds us again that the status quo is unsustainable and that the only path to true security is a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, where differences are resolved peacefully and in ways that respect the dignity of all people.

Here at home, even as we're vigilant in ensuring our security, we have to continue to remain true to our highest ideals. In the United States of America, there is no place for false divisions between races and religions. We are all Americans, equal in rights and dignity, and no one should ever be targeted or disparaged because of their faith. And that, too, is what makes us stronger.

So tonight, as we gather to celebrate Ramadan, let's renew our obligations to one another. Like Kelly and Muhammed and Aala, let's help lift up our neighbors so more people share in the American Dream. Let's commit ourselves -- as nations and as individuals -- to

pursue the peace we seek in our world. And let's remember whatever our faith, we are servants of God, summoned to care for our brothers and sisters. So God bless you all, God bless America, and may you and your families have a blessed Ramadan.

That went a little longer than I expected, but please get back to the soup, which I understand is quite good. Thank you. (Applause.)

END

9:12 P.M. EDT