

Iftar 2018: Get Me Rewrite

by Hugh Fitzgerald



For some reason Donald Trump thought he should hold an Iftar dinner this year. He didn't hold one last year, and contrary to some predictions at the time, the sky did not fall. No doubt his advisers thought this would be a suitable way to show goodwill toward Muslims.

But some American Muslim groups – CAIR, MSNA – loudly proclaimed their intention, if invited, not to attend. Why not? Because Donald Trump has put in place, they falsely claim, a “ban on Muslims.” No matter how many times this charge is made, it has to be answered, wearily, yet again. Of course there is not, and never has been, a “Muslim ban.” There is, however, a ban on giving visas to people from eight countries. Six of those countries are Muslim-majority: Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, and Chad. Two are non-Muslim: Venezuela and North Korea. Two Muslim countries, Iraq and Sudan, were first included in the ban, and then subsequently dropped from the list. Most of these eight countries have been

anti-American, some violently so; every one has been experiencing upheaval of one kind or another – economic, political, military – and almost all have some connection to terrorism.

Thus, this supposed “Muslim ban” affects non-Muslim countries, and more important, only six of the 57 Muslim-majority states in the O.I.C. (Organization of the Islamic Cooperation) are affected. If this were intended to be a “Muslim ban,” then why were two Muslim states, Iraq and Sudan, removed from the list, while two non-Muslim states were added? And why were 51 Muslim states, including the three largest in population, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, never covered by the ban at all? Surely the reason for the ban is, as the Trump Administration has always maintained, national security. Those who come from Muslim countries recently convulsed in violence – as Syria, Libya, Yemen – are, it is reasonable to assume, likely to bring that violence with them. Some of the countries on the list contain terrorist groups – branches of Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State – or local groups, too, such as Al Shabaab in Somalia. Iran is a state sponsor of terrorism both directly and through its support for the terrorists of Hezbollah; it routinely denounces America as the Great Satan, and calls for its destruction. In other words, the list reflects not anti-Muslim bias, but the considered judgment of homeland security officials that people from these countries pose unusual security risks, too high to ignore.

CAIR and MSNA, as well as the usual free range suspects such as Linda Sarsour, were furious that they were not invited to the White House Iftar. But what did they expect? They are all continuous and vicious critics of Trump, denouncing him at every turn, and they had already announced that if invited to his Iftar Dinner, they would refuse to attend. Why should the White House have invited those whom it already knew would then reject the invitation and, further, would exploit the occasion of their refusal to publicly denounce Trump yet again for his

“Muslim ban,” his moving the embassy to Jerusalem, and all his other acts of supposed “islamophobia”? The media, eager to have another anti-Trump tale, would have delighted in asking Muslims to explain in indignant and more-in-sorrow fashion why they felt they had to turn down the invitation from Trump, and then to add, all sweetness-and-light, that “we look forward to the day when a different president, one who considers himself a president for all Americans, including the more than 3 million Muslims who are proud of their faith and happy to share its traditions, will invite us to an Iftar dinner at the White House. And then we will be happy to accept.’”

But what about other Muslims in America? We know that a Muslim army chaplain, Imam Agbere, was invited – and indeed, was singled out for praise by Trump in his words of greeting. But there is no evidence of other Muslim Americans being invited. It is possible that those known to be favorable to Trump were not invited to spare them subsequent problems. For if they had accepted, their identities would have become known, and they would immediately become targets for CAIR and similar Muslim groups, depicted as traitors to the umma for attending the Trump-hosted Iftar; they might even become the target of physical attacks.

Of course, the many Arab and Muslim ambassadors who did attend the Iftar Dinner at the White House without incident are in a different category altogether from Muslim Americans, and cannot be intimidated by the likes of CAIR; no doubt they now have only glowing words for their host. That will allow Trump, at some point, in reply to negative remarks by CAIR and Company, to declare that “CAIR may not like it, but apparently the Saudis, the Egyptians, the Moroccans, the Tunisians, the Indonesians, the Kuwaitis, the Jordanians (fill in a dozen more names here) were happy to celebrate the Iftar Dinner with us.”

Trump can also issue a statement about how those “those ambassadors understand perfectly that there is no ‘Muslim ban’

– there is only a ban on handing out visas to people from countries connected recently to violence or terrorism. They understand because they suffer from the same threats from the same people, and are with us in the same fight.”

What about Trump’s remarks on Islam? He hailed Islam for its message of “peace, clarity [he surely meant “charity”], and love.” If he meant this, then he needs, and quickly, a re-education on the subject of Islam. If he did not mean it, however, it becomes semi-acceptable, an example demonstrating that for Trump, too, “war is deceit.” Some will still find his remarks on Islam unforgivable. I’m inclined to think that Trump thought it was okay to practice his own form of taqiyya, offering a modicum of praise of the faith where none was due. He assumed that his supporters would understand that he was doing the minimum, as he saw it, to satisfy his diplomatic guests with this insincere pro forma praise. Yet others have pointed out that some non-Muslims may have been confused by his remarks, and may even have taken them at face value. Since absolutely everything we know about Trump’s views on Islam, before he became the Republican candidate, while he was running, and ever since he became President, flatly contradict his praise of Islam at this Iftar dinner, it is much more likely that he did not mean it.

He did not dilate on the wonders of Islam, but limited his praise to calling Islam one of the “world’s great religions” – an ambiguous remark whose meaning can be clarified by Trump if he starts to describe it, as he should, as one of the “world’s major religions.” That’s a comment on size, rather than on moral worth.

Reading over his whole speech, it’s got his usual rhodomontade – everything is “great...great month...great friends...great things. a lot of great things...great honor.” These are not the only words where the meaning has been hollowed out. Here are the first few paragraphs, which reach the usual heights of banality:

*Please sit down. Thank you. Good evening, and thank you all for joining us – this iftar dinner – as we celebrate the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. It's a **great month**. A lot of friends, **a lot of great friends**.*

*I want to thank Vice President Pence, Secretary Mnuchin, Secretary Ross, Secretary Chao, Secretary Azar, and Administrator Linda McMahon for being with us tonight. Thank you all very much. Appreciate it. We had a very busy day, a very successful day in Washington, D.C. **A lot of great things** are happening. Tremendous economy – best we've ever had. And we have a wonderful administration; they're doing **a lot of great things**. So that's really terrific.*

*I also want to thank the members of the Muslim community at home and abroad for joining us. And a special thanks to Imam Agbere and all of the folks at the U.S. Army. Imam, where are you? Imam? Very nice. Thank you very much for being with us. It's **a great honor**. Thank you. (Applause.)*

At tonight's dinner, we especially are pleased to welcome members of the diplomatic corps, representing our friends and partners across the globe. And a very warm welcome to all of the ambassadors here tonight representing Muslim-majority nations. We're greatly honored by your presence, and thank you very much for being here. Some very good friends. To each of you and to the Muslims around the world: Ramadan Mubarak.

So far, so empty of meaning. We wait to see if it will lead into something significant. But that something significant never appears. There are a few more paragraphs about what good friends Trump has made among the ambassadors, about the great two days he spent in Saudi Arabia (without naming the country), about what great things are going to be accomplished.

The paragraph, containing the phrase that most offends, is this:

*In gathering together this evening, we honor a sacred tradition of one of the world's great religions. For the Islamic faithful, the Iftar dinner marks the end of the daily period of fasting and spiritual reflection that occurs throughout the holy month of Ramadan. **Iftars mark the coming together of families and friends to celebrate a timeless message of peace, clarity[sic] and love.** There is great love. It's a moment to call upon our highest ideals, and to give thanks for the many blessings we enjoy. Thank you very much.*

What if this one paragraph were rewritten? It might go, more acceptably, like this:

"In gathering together this evening, we mark the tradition of the Iftar dinner, which breaks the Ramadan fast in the faith of Islam, one of the world's major religions. Muslims the world over spend this month in fasting, to commemorate the first revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad. And the Iftar dinners by which they break their fast are a time for families and friends to come together and share. And while we may not be family, many here I certainly consider to now be friends, and I think it appropriate to share this Iftar dinner at the White House with all of you. Thank you very much."

This reduces Islam from a "great" to a "major" religion, leaves out the offending phrase about a "timeless message of peace, clarity [sic for "charity"], and love," yet still manages to maintain a positive tone and end on a note of human warmth.

Meanwhile, CAIR and Company, sputtering their rage, held a demonstration outside the White House while the Iftar Dinner was being held. There are about 3 million Muslims in America. For this anti-Trump's-Iftar rally, CAIR managed to attract less than a few dozen. That cannot be described as a success.

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