

Beat: Miscellaneous

REMARKS BY THE U.S. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA AT ISLAMIC SOCIETY OF BALTIMORE

BALTIMORE IN MARYLAND

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USPA NEWS - Remarks by the United States President Barack Obama at Islamic Society of Baltimore on February 03, 2016.

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THE PRESIDENT : Well, good afternoon. And, Sabah, thank you for the wonderful introduction and for your example -- your devotion to your faith and your education, and your service to others. You're an inspiration. You're going to be a fantastic doctor. And I suspect, Sabah, your parents are here because they wanted to see you so -- where are Sabah's parents? There you go. (Applause.) Good job, Mom. She did great, didn't she? She was terrific.

To everyone here at the Islamic Society of Baltimore, thank you for welcoming me here today. I want to thank Muslim Americans leaders from across this city and this state, and some who traveled even from out of state to be here. I want to recognize Congressman John Sarbanes, who is here. (Applause.) As well as two other great leaders in Congress -- and proud Muslim Americans -- Congressman Keith Ellison from the great state of Minnesota -- (applause) -- and Congressman Andre Carson from the great state of Indiana. (Applause.)

This mosque, like so many in our country, is an all-American story. You've been part of this city for nearly half a century. You serve thousands of families -- some who've lived here for decades as well as immigrants from many countries who've worked to become proud American citizens.

Now, a lot of Americans have never visited a mosque. To the folks watching this today who haven't -- think of your own church, or synagogue, or temple, and a mosque like this will be very familiar. This is where families come to worship and express their love for God and each other.

There's a school where teachers open young minds. Kids play baseball and football and basketball -- boys and girls -- I hear they're pretty good. (Laughter.) Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts meet, recite the Pledge of Allegiance here.

With interfaith dialogue, you build bridges of understanding with other faith communities -- Christians and Jews. There's a health clinic that serves the needy, regardless of their faith. And members of this community are out in the broader community, working for social justice and urban development. As voters, you come here to meet candidates. As one of your members said, 'just look at the way we live...we are true Americans.'

So the first thing I want to say is two words that Muslim Americans don't hear often enough -- and that is, thank you. Thank you for serving your community. Thank you for lifting up the lives of your neighbors, and for helping keep us strong and united as one American family. We are grateful for that. (Applause.)

Now, this brings me to the other reason I wanted to come here today. I know that in Muslim communities across our country, this is a time of concern and, frankly, a time of some fear. Like all Americans, you're worried about the threat of terrorism. But on top of that, as Muslim Americans, you also have another concern -- and that is your entire community so often is targeted or blamed for the violent acts of the very few.

The Muslim American community remains relatively small -- several million people in this country. And as a result, most Americans don't necessarily know -- or at least don't know that they know -- a Muslim personally. And as a result, many only hear about Muslims

and Islam from the news after an act of terrorism, or in distorted media portrayals in TV or film, all of which gives this hugely distorted impression.

And since 9/11, but more recently, since the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, you've seen too often people conflating the horrific acts of terrorism with the beliefs of an entire faith. And of course, recently, we've heard inexcusable political rhetoric against Muslim Americans that has no place in our country.

No surprise, then, that threats and harassment of Muslim Americans have surged. Here at this mosque, twice last year, threats were made against your children. Around the country, women wearing the hijab -- just like Sabah -- have been targeted.

We've seen children bullied. We've seen mosques vandalized. Sikh Americans and others who are perceived to be Muslims have been targeted, as well.

I just had a chance to meet with some extraordinary Muslim Americans from across the country who are doing all sorts of work. Some of them are doctors; some of them are community leaders; religious leaders. All of them were doing extraordinary work not just in the Muslim community but in the American community.

And they're proud of their work in business and education, and on behalf of social justice and the environment and education. I should point out they were all much younger than me -- (laughter) -- which is happening more frequently these days. And you couldn't help but be inspired, hearing about the extraordinary work that they're doing. But you also could not help but be heartbroken to hear their worries and their anxieties.

Some of them are parents, and they talked about how their children were asking, are we going to be forced out of the country, or, are we going to be rounded up? Why do people treat us like that? Conversations that you shouldn't have to have with children -- not in this country. Not at this moment.

And that's an anxiety echoed in letters I get from Muslim Americans around the country. I've had people write to me and say, I feel like I'm a second-class citizen. I've had mothers write and say, 'my heart cries every night, thinking about how her daughter might be treated at school. A girl from Ohio, 13 years old, told me, 'I'm scared.' A girl from Texas signed her letter 'a confused 14-year-old trying to find her place in the world.'

These are children just like mine. And the notion that they would be filled with doubt and questioning their places in this great country of ours at a time when they've got enough to worry about -- it's hard being a teenager already -- that's not who we are.

We're one American family. And when any part of our family starts to feel separate or second-class or targeted, it tears at the very fabric of our nation. (Applause.)

It's a challenge to our values -- and that means we have much work to do. We've got to tackle this head on. We have to be honest and clear about it. And we have to speak out. This is a moment when, as Americans, we have to truly listen to each other and learn from each other. And I believe it has to begin with a common understanding of some basic facts. And I express these facts, although they'd be obvious to many of the people in this place, because, unfortunately, it's not facts that are communicated on a regular basis through our media.

So let's start with this fact: For more than a thousand years, people have been drawn to Islam's message of peace. And the very word itself, Islam, comes from salam -- peace. The standard greeting is as-salamu alaykum -- peace be upon you. And like so many faiths, Islam is rooted in a commitment to compassion and mercy and justice and charity. Whoever wants to enter paradise, the Prophet Muhammad taught, 'let him treat people the way he would love to be treated.' (Applause.) For Christians like myself, I'm assuming that sounds familiar. (Laughter.)

The world's 1.6 billion Muslims are as diverse as humanity itself. They are Arabs and Africans. They're from Latin America to Southeast Asia; Brazilians, Nigerians, Bangladeshis, Indonesians. They are white and brown and black. There's a large African American Muslim community. That diversity is represented here today. A 14-year-old boy in Texas who's Muslim spoke for many when he wrote to me and said, 'We just want to live in peace.'

Here's another fact: Islam has always been part of America. Starting in colonial times, many of the slaves brought here from Africa

were Muslim. And even in their bondage, some kept their faith alive. A few even won their freedom and became known to many Americans. And when enshrining the freedom of religion in our Constitution and our Bill of Rights, our Founders meant what they said when they said it applied to all religions.

Back then, Muslims were often called Mahometans. And Thomas Jefferson explained that the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom he wrote was designed to protect all faiths -- and I'm quoting Thomas Jefferson now -- 'the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mahometan.' (Applause.)

Jefferson and John Adams had their own copies of the Koran. Benjamin Franklin wrote that 'even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach to us, he would find a pulpit at his service.' (Applause.) So this is not a new thing.

Generations of Muslim Americans helped to build our nation. They were part of the flow of immigrants who became farmers and merchants. They built America's first mosque, surprisingly enough, in North Dakota. (Laughter.) America's oldest surviving mosque is in Iowa. The first Islamic center in New York City was built in the 1890s. Muslim Americans worked on Henry Ford's assembly line, cranking out cars. A Muslim American designed the skyscrapers of Chicago.

In 1957, when dedicating the Islamic center in Washington, D.C., President Eisenhower said, 'I should like to assure you, my Islamic friends, that under the American Constitution " and in American hearts "this place of worship, is just as welcome "as any other religion.' (Applause.)

And perhaps the most pertinent fact, Muslim Americans enrich our lives today in every way. They're our neighbors, the teachers who inspire our children, the doctors who trust us with our health -- future doctors like Sabah. They're scientists who win Nobel Prizes, young entrepreneurs who are creating new technologies that we use all the time.

They're the sports heroes we cheer for -- like Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Hakeem Olajuwon. And by the way, when Team USA marches into the next Olympics, one of the Americans waving the red, white and blue -- (applause) -- will a fencing champion, wearing her hijab, Ibtihaj Muhammad, who is here today. Stand up. (Applause.) I told her to bring home the gold. (Laughter.) Not to put any pressure on you. (Laughter.)

Muslim Americans keep us safe. They're our police and our firefighters. They're in homeland security, in our intelligence community. They serve honorably in our armed forces -- meaning they fight and bleed and die for our freedom. Some rest in Arlington National Cemetery. (Applause.)

So Muslim Americans are some of the most resilient and patriotic Americans you'll ever meet. We're honored to have some of our proud Muslim American servicemembers here today. Please stand if you're here, so we can thank you for your service. (Applause.)

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TO BE CONTINUED PART II...

Ruby BIRD
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