

## **Iftar - Bringing us together**

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends all:  
Salaam Alikum

This is the third year that I am holding an Iftar, here in my home, in America's home in Brussels. I remember my first one well. I was a stranger in Belgium. And, truth be told, back then, I was a stranger to the Muslim Communities and the members of the communities were strangers to me. I knew little of Ramadan.

Back then, I knew simply that together we had to do better. I knew that for too long, together, we had let misunderstanding and mistrust dominate our relationship where brotherhood and pursuit of our common goals should have ruled.

I learned much that evening, I made many friends that evening, and I loved that evening greatly. I learned that for those within the brotherhood of man, we are indeed alike – Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jews -- we answer the call to prayer and we seek peace and prosperity for our family, our society and our planet. We can differ on our practices, but together we know that if we practice what is in our hearts, no differences can truly separate us.

I waited with expectation for my second Iftar last year, this time to see then old friends as well as to meet new ones. And following it, I got a surprise that remains today among the highlights of my brief diplomatic career. My dear friend Abdallah, the then Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Belgium who has now gone on to even greater responsibility representing his country at the U.N., reported on our Iftar in a column in the newspaper in Jeddah, echoing the sentiments of peace and friendship that we share.

But this Iftar here in my third year is by far the most important one and I have waited with excitement to get together again with old friends and to meet the new faces. Indeed, I am truly honored to join with you again tonight to break the fast this evening, during this holy month of Ramadan. Ramadan Mubarak. And let me just pause to offer my apologies for my wife's absence, who also greatly wanted to be here. We have been blessed to have her parents, who are back in Washington – age 92 and 89 – remain healthy and they are moving to an apartment because staying in my home in Washington is too much work. So Michelle has returned home for a few days to move her parents into their new apartment. But she joins me in sending her best wishes for Ramadan.

I say that this Iftar is the most important for a couple of reasons. First, in many Muslim communities this year the voice of change has been heard. A voice of greater citizen input and a voice of liberty. In some communities this voice has come with a price in terms of lives and suffering. We mourn together for any loss. And in some communities, it has necessarily left uncertainty about the direction we will travel as we move to the future. We must work together to ensure that the current void of uncertainty

is gradually replaced in the future by the certainty of peace, mutual respect and movement towards mutual prosperity. This Ramadan, I suspect that that is our wish together.

And this Iftar is the most important I have held as well because, truth be told, after three Iftars here and after nearly three years of the Obama administration, I know that some skepticism and suspicion still exist, in some communities and indeed among some even in this room. I have at times heard that skepticism from the rich and from the less advantaged; in Muslim communities and Jewish communities; from Europeans and in the Middle East, Indeed, disagreements may still exist around a range of topics, perhaps ranging from the path to economic prosperity to the best route to achieve lasting mutual prosperity in the Middle East.

But this Ramadan holds a message about disagreements among colleagues who are motivated by mutual respect. As seen in the United States, with vigorous disputes sometimes between political parties or in Belgium, with disputes between the linguistic communities, the issue is not whether we may disagree, for find me people with freedom of voice and I will find you sources of disagreement. Rather the issue is how we act to bridge and resolve those disagreements. And by this Ramadan, we have indeed come a long way in understanding each other, trusting each other, and working together as hard as we can to reach our shared goal of a safer, more peaceful planet for us all and mainly for our children.

Yet can we not still do better? Don't our children deserve better? Don't we all realize that the problems that we face that unite us are far greater than any differences or prejudices that have previously divided us? Don't we know that in Washington, Brussels and Cairo; in Ankara and Rabat; in Tel Aviv and Amman? Don't our children know it now?

We think hard about this message of peace, of mutual prosperity, of brotherhood during this period of Ramadan, of intense devotion and reflection. Indeed though we have come so far, we have so much more to do. And with your help, I will go into Islamic centers and living rooms in Muslim communities across Belgium. We will have more meals, but not as Muslims, Jews, Catholics, or Protestants, not even as Americans or Belgians, but as parents and children, as husbands and wives, as citizens of our planet.

It doesn't happen with just one iftar, or two, or even three. But we have no time to waste.

So thanks to all of you for joining with us tonight. I wish you a very blessed Ramadan.