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Acting Like Americans on Ramadan

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Last summer, I was honored to be invited to an Iftar dinner – the meal to break the daily fast during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan – hosted by Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano. The guests consisted of many high ranking government officials, including a large number of Muslim government employees. These Muslim officials seemed similar to other government employees I have met - highly professional, smart, personable, distracted by the constant buzz of their smart phones, and, for the most part, dead tired.

I recalled this dinner when I read about the malicious attacks launched by Rep. Michelle Bachmann and four other members of Congress on Obama Administration officials who are Muslim, claiming that they are advocating for the interests of the Muslim Brotherhood and a risk to our national security. Bachmann's letters named Huma Abedin, long-time, trusted aid to Secretary of State Clinton, but they implied that many other officials were part of this broad "infiltration" of the American government.

Besides disgust at Bachmann's guilt-by-association tactics reminiscent of the McCarthy period, I couldn't help but feel a deep sadness, for all of the hard working Muslim American officials with whom I celebrated the Iftar dinner, and by extension, millions of Muslim Americans whose lives have been complicated by 9/11 and the wave of anti-Muslim sentiment that has swept over segments of our population. They wake up every day, do their best to be both good Americans and good Muslims, and even then, a woman with the most impeccable credentials imaginable can be accused by five members of Congress of being a disloyal traitor. And this incident comes on the heels of so many other - the Qur'an burning by a Florida preacher, opposition to mosques being built around the country, a host of state laws targeting Muslim holy law, a presidential candidate saying the Muslims could not serve in his cabinet, and large scale protests against a proposed Islamic center near Ground Zero in New York.

Perhaps, if I were Muslim, I would be heartened by the bi-partisan defense of Ms. Abedin that has been mounted, led by Senator John McCain. But still, I would be depressed by the weight of distorted thinking that fueled the Bachmann attack in the first place, most of which McCain and the others did not really address.

What is plaguing our society is the deep ignorance about Islam that conflates the entire religion and all those who practice it with much that disturbs us around the world, whether it be terrorism and other forms of political violence, the Iranian nuclear program, discriminatory treatment of women and minorities, and intolerance by some Muslims of other religions. Bachmann's screed is laced with the paranoia that anyone who believes in Islam is religiously bound to the practices and political agenda of every Muslim organization, political party, or governing institution around the globe, many of which are antithetical to both U.S. interests and values. This is pure nonsense.

Bachmann's logic is akin to saying that I, as a practicing Jew, hold the same worldview and am responsible for the actions of ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel who are discriminating against women and believe that the West Bank should be cleared of Palestinians and incorporated into Israel. But I have much more in common with the Muslim Americans with whom I shared Iftar dinner with last summer than I do with these Jews. We read the same holy texts and love our religion very deeply, but that is about where the commonality ends.

The American public needs to understand that Islam is as diverse as our other great religions - it is practiced by many in a manner that is consistent with democratic values of pluralism and tolerance and it is used by other to justify violence and discrimination in the name of religion. Determining where organizations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood movement fit on this spectrum is a topic worthy of public debate. The violent terrorist organization Hamas is a spin-off of the Muslim Brotherhood. But many Muslim organizations in the United States that have had some linkages to the movement in the past operate firmly within U.S. law and our democratic traditions. We must demand that our leaders have the wisdom to make these types of distinctions.

The ultimate solution to this problem, like many others, is education and interaction. I hope that over the next month, Muslim Americans open their doors to many non-Muslims to share the experience of Ramadan. I am confident that non-Muslims who have the opportunity to observe the prayers and search for understanding, together with the social interaction (and eating!), that occur during these holy days will come to the same conclusion that I have. We Americans are pretty much all the same.

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