



Council on American-Islamic Relations Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia Chapter

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**Welcoming Remarks by Jacob Bender, Executive Director, CAIR-Philadelphia  
CAIR's First Annual Ramadan Interfaith Iftar  
June 28, 2015**

Good evening, and welcome to CAIR-Philadelphia's First Annual Ramadan Interfaith Iftar. Inshallah, God willing, we will be meeting here during Ramadan for many years to come.

My name is Jacob Bender, and I am Executive Director of the Philadelphia Chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. I have the honor of serving as your host and MC for tonight's Iftar. One of the many wonderful things about my job is that my work brings me into daily contact with Muslims, Christians, Jews—as well as people of other faiths—all of whom have made the commitment to transcend the walls, sometimes self-imposed, sometimes not, that often encircle our communities. We should not underestimate how truly transformative our presence here tonight has the potential to be, nor how courageous, for it is all too easy to argue (as many of our co-religionists argue) that our place is with our own, not with “The Other.” How often have we heard one of our own declare that those people over there, they can't be trusted? They are the occupier, the terrorist, the extremist, the non-believer, the heretic, the enemy. And we are engaged in a titanic struggle, a clash-of-civilizations, with those people, and that's why we need to erect walls so as to preserve the purity of our way of life.

But walls are rarely the guarantors of either peace or security, something a “really really rich” and recently declared candidate for the office of the presidency of these United States has yet to learn, and probably never will.

I was thinking of all this on the day Ramadan began, as I sensed the aura of awe that seemed to be enveloping the Muslim community, and the exalted expectation with which the Muslims I have come to know and cherish waited almost breathlessly for the New Moon. It was the evening of June 17<sup>th</sup>. In the City of Charleston, South Carolina, members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church were gathered together to study their sacred text, as so many of us in this room do as well; harvesting the wisdom of its ancient words, learning its lessons, blessed by the revelations at the heart of our three traditions.

The shots that pierced that night were not only an attack on one African American church, but an attack upon hope. The real purpose of terrorism, and let us not be afraid to use that word to describe the Massacre of Charleston, is to instill fear in the hearts of the survivors, and the friends and relatives of the survivors, and the communities of the survivors; a sense of fear that the alleged shooter, and his ilk, mistakenly believe will paralyze those who struggle for justice across this land, and struggle for a vision of America that is the home of more than one religion, and more than one race.

It is not easy to always have hope, especially in dark days like those after Charleston, and in the past week when extremist violence erupted again in France, Kuwait, Syrian, Iraq, and Tunisia. Whenever I am filled with despair, I think of the words intoned by Bobby Kennedy to a crowd of his supporters at Indianapolis Airport announcing the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King: “Some men,” said Bobby, “see things as they are and ask why? I dream things that never were, and ask why not?”

It is this same hope in a better permeates that spirit of Ramadan with its obligation to help the poor, and the whole of Islam’s dedication to social justice. It is this same hope that fills the wine cups of Elijah and Miriam on the Passover Seder table, and symbol, a promise, that though he tarry, the Redeemer and the Redemption will yet come. And it is this same hope that permeates Matthew 5:

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.  
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”*

This is also the mission of CAIR, our nation’s preeminent Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization, hundreds of activists around the country who are dedicated to defending Muslim and Islamic institutions against discrimination and hate attacks, and who are motivated by their belief that at the heart of Islam lies a powerful vision of social justice and religious pluralism. As we read in the Quran (5:48): “If God had wanted to make us one religion, He would have done so, but He choose to make into different from one another, so we can compete with one another in Good Works.”

And so our new staff attorney Ryan Holden is expanding the free legal services we provide to ever expanding areas of the Muslim community. And so our resident Islamic scholar Iftexhar Hussain is busy travelling to churches and synagogues around the Delaware offering his unique 10-part “Intro to Islam” course. And so our Executive Committee member Asheq Fazullah has conducted dozens of “Know Your Rights” and “Anti-Bullying” workshops to hundreds of Muslim school children and their parents. And so our resident Professor, Dr Katera Moore, is offering a unique course title “Do It for The Deen” that seeks to prepare teen agers for the challenges they will face as adolescents. Working with them, and the rest of the Executive Committee and the CAIR community, has indeed been a privilege, and the turn-out tonight is indeed a testament to CAIR’s importance, as well as to the commitment of all of you in this room to mutual understanding and interfaith relations, and a fitting rebuttal to those who pay thousands of dollars to place ads of hate on our buses.

And now to our program.