

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana: Mission impossible: President Bush hijacks an iftar

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There is a long and a short version of this article:
This is the long version.

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

This article contrasts the genuine iftar of a Muslim family with the for-show-only iftar laid on by President Bush for 50 Muslim ambassadors. Iftar is the name for the modest meal which Muslim families take when breaking their dawn-to-dusk fast during the holy month of Ramadan. It is not a dinner party or an occasion like Christmas dinner. Ashutosh Vardhana, a non-Muslim writer living in Yorkshire, England, who has for many years enjoyed the close friendship of Muslim families, describes his very personal iftar experiences during the first two days of Ramadan. He concludes with a sideways look at the iftar charade put on at the White House for the benefit of the media. Note that we are in 2001, three months after the 9/11 Manhattan attacks.

Ashutosh Vardhana:

Mission impossible: President Bush hijacks an Iftar

***** 1 *****

Today is Friday, 16 November 2001, the Muslim holy day.

Last night Ramadan started. The fast will be broken at about 16.15h each day, the time of sunset. It will be about four minutes earlier each day from now on. The news came that the Afghanistan bombing will continue.

Today is the first day of Ramadan. The fast will end at 16.16 hours. I arrive at Husna's house at 16.10 hours. The children are in the sitting-room, the plastic tablecloth has been put on the floor and the 'table' is being laid. Kareema (Husna's widowed sister) and her 23-year-old daughter Aisha from across the road are there.

Husna and Kareema are bustling in the kitchen.

'Three more minutes,' the children call.

'Two more minutes.'

The hour and the minute has come. Ilyas (9) goes through the room with a plate with dates and offers one to each of us. Eating that date is the formal breaking of the fast. These are dried dates, but they are fresher and juicier than normal dried dates.

Everybody puts the date stones into a glass filled with water. They will be washed, dried and kept and will be used later, together with many others collected over the years, for 'counting' prayers (similar to the function of a rosary).

Husna's husband, a taxi driver with a degree in accountancy from Delhi University, is working. He will break his fast and eat his date somewhere in his cab. If the men are at home, they go to mosque to break the fast (by eating that date) and say the prayers of the hour. They can eat at mosque but most prefer to come home and eat with their families.

'Who fasts?' I ask.

Yunus, 12 years old now, does the full fast, like all adults. Ilyas and Idris (6) want to fast but they are allowed to only on Saturday when they do not have to go to school. They would, of

course, like to join the ranks of the adults. Fasting is not a punishment but a privilege.

A rich variety of food is spread on the tablecloth: chicken legs, samosas, pakoras, melons and other fruit - rich by the normal standards of the family, but nothing remotely comparable to, say, Christmas dinner in an English home.

Fruit is an important component of the Ramadan diet. It can be noticed even in the Muslim shops in town. During Ramadan the boxes with fruit are piled up much higher on the pavement than during the rest of the year, and housewives will buy more mangos and melon than normally, no matter whether they are in season or not.

Food is always treated with great respect. Children are taught to wipe their plates meticulously clean. Any food that is left over and wasted will be eaten by the devil (so the legend goes), i.e. it will be dishonoured. On the day of reckoning, when all things will testify for or against us and say what good or what bad we have done to them, the food we have eaten will say: 'She has rescued me from being eaten by the devil', and that will be a mark in our favour.

During iftar, the food seems better, more precious, and even more respectfully eaten, than during the rest of the year. Ramadan is a holy season, celebrated by fasting, it is not a time of mourning.

Fried chicken legs are not a luxury, but they are something special and during Ramadan seem just that little crisper, that little more tasty.

Husna is on the phone, anxiously trying to locate her youngest brother, Basim. Where is he? He does not answer his mobile phone. He is in none of the other houses of the extended family: where is he going to have iftar? She does not want him to miss the special occasion. It is not good to be left out, to be alone, during the iftar. Is he still at work?

After a while he arrives. Laden with presents as so often. He is the unmarried brother (31), the youngest, and therefore showers his affection on his nieces and nephews in all the families. His sisters are pressing on him to follow the tradition and to get married. He sweetly and steadfastly refuses, for reasons best known to him. He is a member of MENSA.

He cannot resist a bargain when he sees one. Today he brings two frozen pizzas from the supermarket, two pink cartons of fruit milk, and two heavy bags of sweets with honey centres. 'At that price, I had to take them,' he says and offers me one bag, since none of the children like honeyed sweets.

The fruit milk is a luxury, and the children are happy. But 12-year-old Yunus says it reminds him of hospital.

When he was younger, he had bone cancer and had to undergo chemotherapy. He lost a lot of weight and at that time they gave him special milk-based nutrient drinks, in cartons such as these.

I speak some French with Yunus. He has learnt a lot during his first year at the private grammar school he attends. It is mainly frequented by white middle-class boys. He is so intelligent and desirable to the school that he receives a substantial bursary. Speaking to me he makes an effort to understand even the words which he does not know. That distinguishes him from other children going to school in this town.



My family at iftar

***** 2 *****

That was Friday. On Saturday (17 November) I visit the house of Lateefa (Husna's sister).

16.10 hours: I drive into Inkerman Road in order to share the iftar with Lateefa's family. The fast will be broken at 16.12 hours. The street is deserted. There are no people on the pavement and no cars are passing. All cars are parked on either side of the road in front of their houses. There are no empty spaces. Everybody is at home. Even the Red Shop, which normally opens from 9.00 a.m. to 11.30 p.m., is closed.

Alimah (11) opens the front door and is munching her date. I have arrived just about in time. In the front room Kareema is still saying her prayers. Lateefa is in the kitchen preparing food. The children, including Basim, are sitting on the floor eating. I sit down with them.

Lateefa goes to the front room in order to say her prayers as well. After some minutes, she and Kareema return and sit down with us. We sit in a close group together round the food on the newspapers on the carpet which serve as a disposable table cloth. In India it would have been banana leaves. We sit closer than normal, and all, men and women, eat at the same time. Everybody is hungry now and has to eat.

There is no noise, and we are all silent, concentrating on the food.

This is a special time of the year, a holy time. The mortification during the month is less important than the holiness, i.e. the pleasure and the blessing that is associated with this time. There is no terrible event that is being commemorated during this month. This makes it different from Christian lent (passion tide) which is a period in which Christians are meant to repent their sins, as a result of which Jesus had to suffer, be crucified and die. That is the reason why in Christian lent, there is a strong element of sadness and penitence. Not so in Ramadan, even though outsiders often wrongly think so because they see only the 'hardship' associated with the fasting, which is uncommonly strict by comparison to what Christians and Westerners are used to. Muslims think rather of the special atmosphere of those meals and of those breakfasts that have to be taken before dawn.

One reason why the evening is quiet is also that, at long last, the television is off and does not continuously go on in the background.

Lateefa asks whether Idris (6) in her sister's house is fasting. Only on Saturdays, when he does not have to go to school, does his mother permit him to fast. She tells him that he can break the fast whenever he wishes. At two o'clock this afternoon, we

hear, he was still going strong: he was offered food but refused. Proud little fellow. So mischievous and troublesome normally.

The children are, of course, not happy that there is no television. They tried to negotiate with their mother: will she not at least allow them to see teletext? - No, not even that.

But as Lateefa goes into the kitchen to do the washing-up, they cheat and turn on the television, sound off, and go to Ceefax, in order to check the football results. For just about three minutes. But no 'graven images'! Basim (31), who has a sense of humour and understands human weakness, turns a blind eye and smiles while reading the football results in his newspaper. Then they quickly turn the television off again before mother can notice.

Lateefa gives me some of the food that is left over and makes some more chapatis with surplus dough she has prepared. I must take all this home, as I do whenever I visit my friends. I can come when I like or stay away when I like. There is always some space for me on the settee or the floor and it is always possible to find or make a chapati (if nothing else) for me. Ours is a solid unassuming friendship. Some people who are wary of Muslims do not know what they are missing.

***** 3 *****

On 20 November, BBC News announced: 'US President George W Bush has given a traditional Ramadan dinner - an iftar - at the White House for ambassadors from more than 50 Muslim countries.' That event took place on Monday, 19 November.



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Monday, 19 November 2001:
The President has fifty Ambassadors eating out of his hand.
As on all official occasions, one seat has been left empty -
for Osama Bin Laden in case he decides to pay a flying visit.

My Muslim friends' iftar was a very simple and relaxed occasion.

By contrast, President Bush, undertaking, as he is prone to, the impossible (like eradicating evil and the like), has an uphill struggle, steep as the hills of Afghanistan, when he 'hosts' an iftar, and a 'traditional' one at that.

We must give him credit though, he is well on his way to becoming a Muslim, for at least he is going through the motions.

Since he does not understand iftar and since he only 'respects' Islam and is still far from loving it, he is not invited and cannot go uninvited as I did (except into Afghanistan). So he has to put on his own show, 'host an iftar dinner' at the White House. He invites the ambassadors of all Islamic countries, who because of diplomatic courtesy cannot say No, to provide the necessary window dressing. Prayers are duly said. The table is laid as if it were an American Thanksgiving dinner. Rich food is provided, halal of course. Only three countries, Iran, Iraq and Libya, decline the invitation.

At my family iftar no speeches were made since everybody knows the significance of the occasion. All except me had fasted, and I, because of our close ties, was allowed to participate in their family occasion.

President Bush, however, does not host this dinner because he has fasted from dawn to dusk and now wants to share this holy and enjoyable occasion with his family, neighbours or close friends. It is not his habit to fast and break his fast with an iftar. He does not invite his Muslim friends into his own culture (which would be a proper thing to do). He rather tries to tell them what to do with theirs.

This is as if Ayatollah Khomeini had put on a Christmas dinner for President Reagan, even though the Ayatollah does not normally celebrate Christmas, and Christmas dinners are not something that he would have held on his own. This would have been a mere show to impress the guests. Ridiculous and unthinkable.

Bush's iftar dinner is a charade. Bush has hijacked a religious occasion from another culture in order to broadcast to the world a sentiment ('I am a friend of Islam') which is not his.

If he had done it without making speeches, left people to infer his sentiments (or invited the Ambassadors to Christmas dinner), he might still just about have got away with it. If he had been invited to a poor Muslim family and had sat down with them on the floor to eat, he might even just about have been believed.

But being desperate to ensure that his efforts should not be in vain, that his (that is America's) kindness and good intentions should not be overlooked, he and his helpers had to drive home the message with a sledgehammer (all his missiles being elsewhere deployed). This made the message ridiculous and unbelievable.

I quote from the BBC news about the President's event:

Mr Bush emphasised US humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan. Bombing in Afghanistan will continue; Bush said: 'The terrorists have no home in any faith. Evil has no holy days.'

BBC: 'By hosting the iftar, Mr Bush hopes to strengthen the support of Islamic countries for the coalition against global terrorism.'

Bush: "As this feast breaks the Ramadan fast, America is also sharing our table with the people of Afghanistan. ... We are proud to play a leading role in humanitarian efforts with air drops and truck convoys of food and medicine. America's children are donating their dollars to the Afghan children."

BBC: 'Earlier on Monday, piles of flour, wheat, cornmeal, blankets and coats of the kind the US is sending to Afghanistan were displayed on the lawn of the White House.'

His henchman Ari Fleischer (butcher) said: 'The White House is setting a table, not only for ourselves domestically, but for other nations, for the people of Afghanistan.'

These are political messages. They have nothing to do with Ramadan, nothing with iftar, and it is an abuse of the concept of iftar to use it for such a purpose. Muslims have no reason to be upset with Bush. His farce cannot harm Islamic customs and piety.

It harms the President and it harms America if the President appears to be a naïve, clumsy manipulator, which, as we all know, he isn't.

This is charity for public consumption. Instead of trying to ape Muslim customs, which they do not understand, Mr Bush's advisers would do well to take a leaf out of their own Holy Book and consider what Jesus said before he proceeded to teach us The Lord's Prayer:

'And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.' (Matthew 6:5-6)



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Yasser Arafat, still a happy man - breaking the fast with Palestinian refugees