

July 14, 2014

President Barack H. Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

In 1996, I was involved in organizing the first Ramadan event at the White House with First Lady Hillary Clinton. So I am familiar with and generally supportive of the recognition of an important tradition within the Muslim American Community. This year, we have some grave concerns that must be raised lest the Iftar be considered a superficial get-together.

Currently, I am the Board Chairperson of a humanitarian organization that was in the middle of our annual Ramadan program in support of farmers and impoverished families in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As a result of the ongoing bombardment of Gaza, we have had to suspend our operations in the interest of the safety of our staff and beneficiaries. In addition to suffering from death and destruction, the larger population will also go hungry as food insecurity is at an unbelievably high level of over 50%.

I had the opportunity to visit my large extended family in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead in 2009 and again last April. The children of my cousins have now been exposed to three military assaults in their lifetime. There are no bomb shelters in Gaza, warning sirens, no teams of psychological experts who can help them cope, no outlets for expression, no chance for escape. I worry about the long-term effects of such an exposure to violence on their young lives.

No one knows when this onslaught will end. The US government as the main supporter of Israel has all of the tools at its disposal to implement an immediate cease-fire. As an American taxpayer, it is hard for me to understand why the State Department and White House are unable to leverage American support to bring the attacks to a halt.

Ramadan is a time of reflection not only on our own lives as Muslims, but on the lives of others who don't have the luxury of breaking their fast with a satisfying meal at the end of the day. It also is a time for us to read and study the Qur'an which admonishes us over and over again to stand on the side of justice.

Hosting an event in Washington, DC serves as an opportunity for the government to present its point of view to the guests attending, while not offering a meaningful chance for the attendees to engage in often difficult conversations around policy issues. That is why many in the community are asking for a boycott of government sponsored Iftars. I myself declined to attend the State Department Iftar.

Without the chance to raise our concerns in a thoughtful, substantive forum, I feel that attending the reception would somehow be misconstrued as an endorsement of the political reality in Washington that paralyzes our government at times like these.

I hope that you, President Obama, and those working with you to represent the views and interests of all Americans will take the steps to lead and give Palestinian children a chance to believe in a brighter future by working to implement an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

Sincerely,

Dr. Laila Al-Marayati
KinderUSA Chairwoman