

Cary, N.C. - Good afternoon! It's a pleasure to be here on this gorgeous fall day to kick off this Fourth Annual Eid Festival with all of you. It's great to see so many friends and familiar faces here today. I want to offer a special thanks to the festival's organizers, including the Chair of the NC Eid Festival Board, Dr. Nadeem Iqbal, and of course to Mayor Weinbrecht, Councilman Jack Smith and the Town of Cary for its sponsorship of this celebration. And what a celebration it is! One quick look at today's program should leave no doubt that this is truly, as advertised, a "festival without borders." From Puerto Rico to Pakistan to the Philippines, you really have brought together a dizzying array of cultures and traditions from around the world.

This intercultural theme is fitting for the occasion for several reasons:

First, it's a reflection of the rich and growing diversity of our community – all around the Triangle, but especially here in Cary. Just a couple decades ago, few would have imagined that we would one day be able to grab a delicious Lebanese meal on Maynard Road, take in a Chinese dance performance at a local theater, and then catch a Bollywood movie at the Galaxy Cinema!

This diversity has strengthened the fabric of our State and made the Triangle an even more attractive place to relocate for families or businesses from around the world that are looking for a close-knit community and a high quality of life.

Second, the theme is fitting because Islam is truly a religion without borders: its traditions and teachings are woven throughout the cultural and religious fabric of every country in the world, including our own. Just as the world's other major religions are far from monolithic, so too is Islam a religion of diversity, tolerance, and respect for local values and customs.

This is especially the case in the United States: A recent Gallup poll of American Muslims found that Islam was by far the most ethnically diverse religion in our country.

Third, and related, the theme of bringing all cultures together is important because of the significance of the two holy days which this festival commemorates:

The first "Eid" (Eid al-Fitr) is a celebration of the end of the holy month of Ramadan, in which Muslims are called upon to rededicate themselves to worship and devotion. And while this holiday is unique to Islam, the principles and traditions it embodies – fasting as a tribute to the divine, breaking of the fast with friends and loved ones, and promoting peace and brotherhood in the community – are central to every religious tradition.

The second "Eid" (Eid al-Adha) commemorates a story with which we are all familiar – the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his child on Mount Moriah as a test of his faith. Like Abraham himself, this tale of sacrifice and devotion is central to the three Abrahamic faiths, and its lessons are relevant for the religious and non-religious alike, as is the emphasis that is placed during Eid on ensuring that the poor have enough to eat.

This common thread in our religious traditions should serve as a reminder that even in today's fractured world, we have much more in common than we have apart, and an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to striving constantly for unity and brotherhood among all races and religions.

This message is particularly poignant these days, as a small but growing number of Americans seem to be susceptible to anti-Muslim sentiment and simplistic equations of Islam with violent extremism. This trend is deeply disturbing, and all of us must be vigilant about educating our neighbors that Islam is a religion of peace and understanding. But what is even more disturbing – and disgraceful – is that some politicians seem to be exploiting this sentiment for their own political gain, as we have witnessed in the manufactured controversy over the Islamic Center in New York City.

Our nation is better than that. Our strength is and has always been rooted in our diversity, our tolerance and respect for all cultures and traditions, and our constitutional guarantees of free expression and freedom of religion.

And so I hope that the recent signs of anti-Muslim sentiment in our country are an aberration and not a trend, and that our nation rises above such base and simplistic appeals and finds its strength in unity and common purpose, as it always has before during times of national challenge.

As your representative in Congress, I have tried to do my humble part by advocating for greater U.S. engagement with the Muslim world and a more balanced approach to vexing foreign policy challenges such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the rise of Islamist political parties – and by speaking out strongly against those who lump Muslims together with terrorists or adopt a black-and-white approach to the world's problems.

I have also engaged with Muslim leaders directly as the chairman of the House Democracy Partnership, a bipartisan commission that works to build stronger, independent legislatures in 14 countries around the world, including five majority-Muslim nations: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Indonesia, and Kosovo.

And of course, I've tried to promote greater religious tolerance and understanding among my colleagues in Washington. I was honored to invite Duke University's first-ever Muslim chaplain, Abdullah Antepli, to offer the opening prayer in the U.S. House earlier this year. As many of you know, Abdullah has acquired quite a following in our community: he showed up in D.C. with at least fifty of his friends and students, and we had to reserve a special section of the House balcony just to hold them all! We're pleased to see him here today.

But your actions right here in the community are immeasurably more important than mine. And so today, as we celebrate the great diversity of our region and our world, I encourage all of you to rededicate yourselves to promoting tolerance and understanding every single day: in your homes, your schools, and your places of work.

For it will be through the positive actions and attitudes of individuals, and individual communities like this one, that we rise above our divisions and form, in the words of our founding fathers, a more perfect union for our children and grandchildren.

Thank you again for inviting me here today, and I wish all of you an "Eid sa-yeed" [happy Eid].

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