

Obama pleads for tolerance in first visit to U.S. mosque

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [March 2, 2016](#) issue

In a time of rising Islamophobia, President Obama made a plea for religious tolerance during his first presidential visit to an American mosque.

In keeping with local Muslim tradition, Obama removed his shoes and began by noting that many Americans have never been to a mosque.

“This is where families come to worship and express their love for God and each other,” he said.

Speaking to about 500 members of the suburban Islamic Society of Baltimore on February 3, Obama said he knows that Muslim Americans bear an outsized burden of religious bigotry in the United States and are called upon to condemn crimes committed by a few Muslims when the vast majority abhors violence.

Few expected all white people to condemn the white supremacist who targeted an African-American church last spring, he said. “I recognize that sometimes that doesn’t feel fair.”

But the president asked American Muslims to speak out despite prejudice against them and to proudly showcase their successes and patriotism.

“This mosque, like so many in our country, is an all-American story,” Obama said, praising the hard work of the immigrants who make up many of the 3,000 who typically attend Friday prayers here.

The president also spoke of the Founding Fathers’ commitment to religious tolerance—and the fact that both Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin owned copies of the Qur’an.

He also spoke of the threat of extremism. “The question is, How do we move forward together?” he said. “It can’t be the work of any one faith alone.”

After the speech, Sarah Khan of Baltimore, who attends the mosque, said she was particularly taken with Obama’s interfaith message.

“I like how he tied all the religions together,” she said. “He said it’s not just Christianity or Judaism or Islam in the United States. It’s all of us together as a family.”

Before Obama’s speech, an honor guard of children bearing the U.S. flag and the Maryland state flag recited the Pledge of Allegiance. A recitation of a verse from the Qur’an followed, as well as words from the president of the Islamic Society of Baltimore, Muhammad Jameel. Jameel described the founding of the now-expansive mosque in 1969 in a room at a local college.

“This community is part of the fabric of American society,” he said. —Religion News Service

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