

What to Ask at Robert Azzi's 'Town Hall'

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Robert Azzi has been touring towns in New Hampshire, offering these “Ask A Muslim-Anything” events to benighted Infidels. If you have a chance, go to one of these shindigs, but go prepared. Even better would be to go with a small group of the like-minded (two or three others), who will ask similar difficult questions so that you will not appear to be a lone and hostile crank, easily dismissed, but instead one of an inquiring group of genuinely interested Infidels, seeking enlightenment. If you have assembled two or three others, you could meet in advance, writing out questions on notecards, and preparing responses to Azzi's likely answers, along with textual support – from the Qur'an and Hadith – for your position.

Here are some of those not-impossible questions:

1. “What are the duties of non-Muslims in a traditional Muslim

society? In other words, what do dhimmis have to do to be allowed to both stay alive and to practice their religion?"

This will upset Robert Azzi, for he now knows he is dealing with someone who understands the dhimmi condition, and if he doesn't answer more or less truthfully, he will be taken, rightly, to task.

He is likely to reply that dhimmis had mainly to pay the jizyah, which was only fair because they did not have to pay, as Muslims did, the zakat, and besides, they did receive protection from the Muslim government. Paying the jizyah, he may add, was a much better outcome for the Jews, who in medieval Christendom were often killed.

"Protection against whom?" you will ask. Robert Azzi, can only respond: "Against anyone, Christians, Muslims, other Jews."

"Isn't it really meant as protection against attacks by Muslims themselves?"

Azzi: "Some people say that. I think the picture is a bit more complicated."

You will then ask Azzi what, besides payment of the Jizyah, were the other onerous conditions placed on non-Muslims. He will be forced – but only because he suspects, rightly, that you already know – to detail them: the requirement that dhimmis ride donkeys but not horses; that they move out of the way of Muslims on roads and pathways, that they not be allowed to testify against Muslims in court, and so on. You will thus have gotten him to acknowledge that there was more to being a dhimmi than the payment of Jizyah.

Most of his audience of unwary Infidels will until now not have have heard anything about the dhimmi condition in Muslim societies, or about the payment of the Jizyah. This new information will disturb their equanimity.

2. “Mr. Azzi, I found in reading the Qur’an, one verse – 98:6 – that describes Unbelievers as ‘the most vile of creatures.’ And another – 3:110 – about how Muslims are ‘the best of peoples.’ Can you tell me if Muslims really believe that, and if so, what can or should be done about it?”

Again, Azzi cannot deny the existence of these verses. He can only offer something along this line:

Well, I’m a Muslim, and I don’t think you are “the most vile of creatures.” [Laughter.] Do you have Muslim co-workers, Muslim friends? Do your kids perhaps have Muslim schoolfriends? Do you think, as the conspiratorial Islamophobes want you to believe, that all these Muslims are merely hiding a deep contempt for you, that they really consider all of you “vile”? Look, let’s be sensible. This is just the kind of verse the extremists like to focus on. They’ll quote it, but they won’t tell you that no one except people like them take it seriously. They’re in the business of distorting our religion for the sake of their own sense of power – they want to conquer the world, make no mistake about it, but it’s got nothing to do with Islam, except in the sense that they want to exploit Islam for their own, un-Islamic ends. They want to be celebrities, the way bin Laden was. It’s not a good idea to give them the publicity they want. Sure, ISIS wants you to get all hot and bothered about these verses, wants you to think that not just ISIS, but the vast majority of moderate Muslims think that way. It’s utter nonsense.

Let me repeat what we all know. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims, maybe millions, are desperate to move to Europe. Hundreds drown in the Mediterranean making the attempt. You’ve heard these stories. Well, for heaven’s sake, why would hundreds of thousands, even millions of Muslims, want to live among those very people whom they supposedly believe to be the “most vile of creatures”? [Laughter.] Why would they want their kids to go school with “the most vile of

creatures"? [More laughter.] I rest my case.

You know, I always like to tell people that while we believe that the Qur'an is the literal Word of God, that it is not meant to be read literally. So don't take that verse literally. What does it really mean? It's a negative statement, greatly exaggerated for effect, against those – the "Unbelievers" – whom the Muslims were fighting at the time. It's not meant to apply to all non-Muslims, but only those with whom Muhammad was then in a state of war. Do you know the kinds of things that were written in this country during World War II about the Germans and the Japanese? It was a lot worse than being called "vile." And now Germany and Japan are two of our closest allies.

In trying to understand the Qur'an, remember it's a very difficult text in places, written in a classical Arabic quite different from modern Arabic, and the meaning is not always crystal clear. That shouldn't surprise anyone – the text is 1400 years old. I always tell myself that when a verse goes against what, in its totality, Islam stands for, then I just don't bother with that verse. If that verse says that Unbelievers are "vile," I just ignore it. I know it's not meant to apply outside its 1400-year-old context. That's got nothing to do with the Islam I converted to as a young man or that I've been happily practicing for a half-century, and I think if you ask any Muslims you meet, they'll tell you the exact same thing. Next question.

3. "It says in the Qur'an that a man can beat his wife if she is disobedient. Could you comment on that?"

Azzi:

Yes, I'm glad you asked that question. It's true that some 1400 years ago, and not just in the Middle East but in Europe, men had far more control over their wives than they do today. I'm not excusing it, just putting it in its proper

historical perspective. So yes, if a wife was considered disobedient, a Muslim husband could first of all reprimand her. If that didn't change her behavior, she would have to sleep in a separate bed. And if she still was disobedient, and only then, the husband could "beat" his wife but only very lightly, using an instrument as small as a "miswak" – a small natural toothbrush. It's a symbolic, not a real beating. Try hurting someone with a toothbrush. I rest my case.

And remember all that Muhammad did for women's rights. I've heard it said that "Muhammad was the greatest champion of women's rights the world has ever seen." He didn't want to force women to stay at home. His first wife Khadijah, who had a great influence on him, was no shrinking violet, but a successful businesswoman. The Qur'an provided women with explicit rights to inheritance, to property, the obligation to testify in a court of law, and the right to divorce. It made explicit prohibitions on the use of violence against female children and women as well as on duress in marriage and community affairs. That isn't gender equality in the modern sense, but it did give Muslim women greater rights than they had had in the pre-Islamic period. So I'd say that that verse about "beating a disobedient wife" should be seen in its proper context.

Next question.

4. "Could you comment on Muhammad's marriage to Aisha when she was nine years old?"

Azzi: "What makes you think Aisha was nine years old?"

Questioner: "It says so, in the Hadith of Bukhari, 5, Book 58, number 234." (A look of anguish passes quickly over Azzi's face, as he realizes he's now dealing with someone Who Knows Too Much.)

Azzi:

That may be, but there's several things to consider. First, marriage had to be between consenting adults. Adulthood was defined for a girl as when she entered puberty. Some Muslim scholars believe, on the basis of all the evidence, that Bukhari miscalculated her age, and that she was, in fact, possibly as old as 19. I'm no scholar of the Hadith, but I think all of them, including even Bukhari, could make mistakes. I can only say that I would be the first to be disturbed if Muhammad had married a nine-year-old girl, but I find the work of modern Muslim scholars, who believe she was much older, to be pretty convincing. I think it's one of those questions to which we'll never get a final answer. The Islamophobes will keep saying "nine years old, nine years old," while the scholars of Islam will carefully weigh all the evidence, as to the onset of puberty, which was how adulthood was defined in a woman, and arrive at a more nuanced and plausible answer. And let's not forget that in Medieval Europe, girls could be married at the age of twelve. That might have some bearing on Aisha's real age.

Yes, in the back.

5. "I'd like to ask you about the Verse of the Sword. It reads as follows: 'When the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way. God is forgiving and merciful.' Of course, if they "repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy" means that they have become Muslims, saying the Five Daily Prayers and paying the Zakat. But what happens if they don't?"

Azzi:

Well, I see you've chosen one of the seemingly most warlike verses in the Qur'an. I admit, the words, on the face of it,

are deeply troubling. That's why Qur'anic commentators are so important; they help us get beyond what seems to be the literal meaning. We need the context to understand those verses correctly. Read over that verse. You are supposed to "slay the idolaters wherever you find them." Who are the "idolaters"? They're the people who were fighting Muhammad at that time. Fight those idolaters, do what you can to defeat them. It's a kind of war-cry, designed to whip up fervor among your own troops. But the Islamophobes want you to believe, without the slightest evidence, that "idolaters" is supposed to refer to non-Muslims today, right now, and also to refer to all those people who, over the past 1400 years, were non-Muslims, even if they were on the other side of the globe. Does this verse really mean Muslims should slay people who had never met a Muslim in their whole lives, much less tried to oppose them in any way? Doesn't it make more sense to take this verse, as I and all mainstream Muslims do, as referring only to enemies whom the Muslims were fighting 1400 years ago? Or do you think it makes more sense to believe what the nut-jobs of ISIS and Al-Qaeda and their mirror images, the Islamophobes, maintain? Why should we take their word for it and assume that the word "idolaters" means all non-Muslims, everywhere, for all time instead of the enemies they were fighting at that very moment? I regard that as sheer madness. If that were true, why wouldn't the 57 Muslim-majority states be in a state of permanent war against all the non-Muslim countries? And why wouldn't the millions of Muslims all over Europe and the United States be trying to "kill the idolaters" – the very non-Muslims with whom their kids go to school, with whom they work, with whom they play sports or collaborate with on community projects, who are their neighbors and, as I know from a lifetime of such experiences in New Hampshire, their friends?

Just look around and you can see that the verses you referred to, and the others like them, must refer to specific enemies in 7th century Arabia. That's why it's so important, as I

say, that we not take the Qur'an literally. The Muslims who think those verses apply to non-Muslims today are the ISIS types. Nothing can be done to disabuse them of their view – they're fanatics – so they just have to be fought. And we moderate Muslims are doing the fighting, inside and outside the Muslim community. Believe me, we are fighting, to consign the ISIS and Al-Qaeda madmen to the dustbin of history. And we are taking our case, too, to non-Muslims, so that they don't lose faith in us or what we stand for – a tolerant, inclusive Islam, the kind that flourished in Islamic Spain where Christians, Jews, and Muslims got along so well, in what used to be called the "convivencia." I hope that answers your question.

Any more? Remember, I want you to ask me anything.

6. "What do you think is the future of Islam in America?"

Azzi:

Oh, I'm very hopeful. Yes, I have my worries – I do recognize that there is a powerful campaign being waged against us. I once described myself, at a low moment, as feeling that I had a crescent on my front and a target on my back! You know as well as I do that people are deliberately being made fearful about this Sharia supposedly taking over from our Constitution, and instead of "the Russians are coming" of the Cold War, we now have "the Muslims are coming" of the War on Terror, a fear of fifty million Muslims suddenly appearing on our doorstep, and so on and so forth. It's all ridiculous, of course, but the scary thing is that such fears can spread so easily. It's that need to create "the Other" that has been the curse of Western civilization. And that's the reason I've decided to devote so much of my time to holding these Muslim town halls, to encourage people to literally "ask me anything." And just in case you're wondering about that bogeyman, the Sharia, I would be the first to go out to

defend the Constitution if anyone tried to touch a hair on its magnificent 230-year-old head. As for the Sharia, that can safely be left to Saudi Arabia and Iran and Pakistan. They're welcome to it. But it's not for America; American Muslims count themselves blessed to be ruled by the Constitution and will accept no substitutes.

I think we – Muslims and those who defend them from the Islamophobes – are starting to win the information war. All over this country we've seen a groundswell of support whenever there is an attack on Muslims. We're especially pleased with how our Jewish and Christian brothers, and not just the progressive clergy, have been eager to stand with us against the haters. So have mayors and governors. And people are coming to these Ask-A-Muslim events and finding out what the mainstream Muslims think. And they're starting to shut down the venues of the Islamophobes, who are not being permitted to spread their hate quite as easily as they did before. Twitter and Google and Facebook are doing their best to direct traffic away from the Islamophobes and other hate groups. I applaud them for it. And I've noticed – have you? – more and more of those signs, in English, Spanish, and Arabic, that people put on their front lawns, and that say “No matter where you are from, we're glad you're our neighbor.” It's nice to see them showing up all over.

Not only do I think the future is bright for Islam, that is the real, moderate Islam, that if we just keep on spreading the truth and pushing back against the lies, I admit I wouldn't be surprised if some people found in Islam the same source of peace and strength that I find in it – a spiritual refuge from the frenetic pace of our so often too-worldly existence. Of course, other religions may provide that refuge. And I'm not about to be a missionary for Islam, but I am a witness as to the peace it has brought me. My task, even my responsibility, tonight, and on other nights, is to answer questions about the faith of Islam. That's enough for

me. You deserve answers about anything that's been unclear about Islam or, on the face of it, disturbing. The Qur'an wisely says – it's 2:256 for those of you who want to look it up – "there shall be no compulsion in religion." I agree with that – religion is a very personal choice. And I want you to know as much about Islam as you can, so you can make an informed choice.

7: "Mr. Azzi, you are a convert to Islam, as I understand it."

Azzi: "Yes. My parents were Lebanese Christians."

Question #7A: "And in your younger days, in the early and mid-70s, didn't you spend a lot of time in Saudi Arabia, and even published a 'Saudi Arabian Portfolio' with an introduction by his Royal Highness Prince Saud Al Faisal, in 1978?"

Azzi: "Yes. It's a fascinating country, and I was privileged to be allowed to shoot almost everywhere. The Saudi royals I met were salt of the earth types. I was just amazed at how down-to-earth and hospitable they were. And I think they've done a good job in holding that country together, when you compare it to the upheavals all around it, in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Egypt. The Saud family must be doing something right.

Question #7B: "Well, did your doing all this work in Saudi Arabia, and becoming friendly with members of the Saudi royal family, have anything to do with your converting to Islam? That would surely have pleased them."

Azzi:

No, not at all, I converted to Islam for private reasons. It's true, that the Saudi royals were wonderful to me, gracious hosts, and they extended to me every courtesy in making available parts of the country that no Westerner had

seen – those are in my portfolio of Saudi photographs. I'm still in touch with some of the royals today. But I just thought Islam as I saw it practiced, and not just in Saudi Arabia, seemed to provide people with such inner peace, such a sense of security and community – there was one fellow in particular, a friend of mine, and a Muslim, whose example made me want to look into Islam, and the more I looked into it, the more I studied its teachings, the more I felt it was the right choice for me, and it certainly has been.

Question #7C: “Did you find that Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia provided inner peace and a sense of security? Where apostates and homosexuals can be decapitated? Where the school textbooks preach hatred of Jews and Christians, where the Shi'a are denounced as Infidels? Where women can't drive, or work alongside men, and are constantly under the thumb of a male relative?

Azzi (a sudden hard look of displeasure passes over his features, but swiftly disappears):

I was talking about Islam. You want me to talk about Saudi Arabia, and not even about Saudi Arabia, but about the most far-out of extremists in Saudi Arabia. Those extremists – you've heard of the “religious police” or mutawwa? – are a holdover from the past. They are not Saudi Arabia's future. They do not even represent Saudi Arabia today, which is changing in ways you wouldn't believe. Just look at the new heir-apparent, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. He's only 31, a sign of real changes to come, as he will replace the King, who is now 81. The Saudi royal family is moving ahead, becoming more open to the world – I mean, the Saudi princes and princesses have all studied abroad, and they are possibly the best-travelled royal family in the world – though well aware that it has to be careful about changing things so fast that an armed opposition might develop among the religious fanatics, especially if whipped up by certain clerics. They

are determined to make progress. The foreign media like to beat up on Saudi Arabia – it's easy to do, just stick with that narrative about "Wahhabism" and depict the Saudi royals as frozen in time, unable to change. But if you look just at Saudi women, they have been clamoring for the right to drive, even staging drive-ins. In the old days, they would have quietly accepted their fate. Not anymore. How long do you think it will be before they obtain that right to drive? I think it might take a year or two, not more. Before, women did not have the right to vote, but in 2015, Saudi women for the first time could vote both in local elections and be appointed to the Consultative Assembly that advises the royal family. That's a big step forward. But you know – we hear practically nothing in our own media about how Saudi society is changing.

And as for the Saudis funding some conservative Muslim groups, it is true that in the past, the Saudis have supported some Salafi mosques and madrasas and imams, Salafism being the movement of Muslims who wish to return the practice of Islam to the traditions of the first Muslims, the forefathers (salaf). But 'Salafism' is purely religious in nature; it does not imply any particular politics.

Salafism was and is primarily a movement about belief and practice, and not about political power. The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, is determined to infiltrate governments, schools, workplaces, in order to push for rule by the Brotherhood, in the hope ultimately of establishing a global Islamic state. Now that idea terrifies the Saudi ruling family. The Saudi royals have a lot to lose if Saudi Arabia were ever to become part of a "global Islamic state," because they would then be sharing their oil wealth not with 20 million Saudis, but with 1.6 billion Muslims. And the Saudi royal family would no longer control its own territory in Arabia; that territory would now be part of that global Islamic state, to be run by members of the Muslim

Brotherhood, a mass Islamic movement.

So when you are told that Saudi Arabia is a supporter of dangerous Muslim groups, you can point out that the Saudis support, though with much less enthusiasm than before, Salafis whose aims are not political but a return to the Islam as practiced by the earliest Muslims. The Muslim Brotherhood, the most widespread and powerful pan-Islamic group, is overtly political, working for a global Islamic state, and its popularity has made the Saudis realize how dangerous it is to their interests. What country is doing the most today to weaken the Muslim Brotherhood? It's Saudi Arabia. They're the ones who are leading the Gulf Cooperation Council to put pressure on Qatar, the main financial supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, to completely end that support. It's the Saudis who insist that Qatar also close down Al Jazeera, which promotes the Muslim Brotherhood, and remains financially dependent on Qatar. Far from being its supporter, Saudi Arabia is the chief enemy of the Brotherhood, and always will be. And of course, Al-Qaeda and ISIS simply regard the Saudis as corrupt and too close to the Americans. Those are just a few of the convoluted alliances and enmities in the Muslim Arab world.

Voice from the audience: "That's fascinating. I had no idea that the Saudis were against the Muslim Brotherhood. I'm so grateful to you, Dr. Azzi, for taking us through this labyrinth."

Azzi:

Well, I'm not a doctor of anything. I'm just a proud Muslim and a proud citizen of New Hampshire. But I'm glad if I've been of some help. The politics of the Muslim Middle East, and especially in the Arab Gulf, can be quite confusing. It's taken me quite a while to understand the complexities myself.

And as to that other matter raised by the previous questioner

about the treatment of apostates and homosexuals, do I think apostates and homosexuals should be executed? Of course not. And neither do my Saudi friends, including some who are members of the Saudi royal family. I think if you look, you'll see that the number of executions has gone way down in recent years. But the royals who want to do away with such executions altogether – and there are many – have to move slowly, because of the possible reaction of the clerical establishment. I'm sure you'll see amazing changes in Saudi society in the next decade. All those Saudis, men and women, studying in the West, are returning home with ideas that are very different from those clerics. And under this next, very young king, I'm sure you will see more rapid changes. I'm very hopeful about the future of Saudi Arabia. I've been thinking about going out there and taking photographs of Saudi Arabia four decades after my first portfolio – what has changed, in the skyline of the cities of Riyadh and Jiddah, what the new universities look like, the building boom in hotels for pilgrims in Mecca, which architectural purists deplore, but which I'd like to see for myself and take some photographs. You know, if millions of people come on the hajj, you've got to have a place for them to stay. The Saudis are just being practical.

Next question.

8. “Mr. Azzi, you have written, and I quote: ‘In the wake of 9/11, America had a choice: either demonize and attempt to disenfranchise from the global community one-sixth of humanity known as Muslims, or respond, engage, educate and forge partnerships with peace-loving peoples in order to isolate, delegitimize and destroy the criminals that executed such violent acts.’ And then you wrote: ‘The Bush administration chose the first path.’ Do you really think that America has been trying to ‘demonize and attempt to disenfranchise from the global community one-sixth of humanity’? We have, after all, endless statements, by President Bush himself, that do

not demonize but celebrate Islam, time after time. I'd like to just read a handful of them, if you don't mind."

Azzi: "No, of course I don't, it's fine, go right ahead."

Questioner 8: "Here are just a few:

"America treasures the relationship we have with our many Muslim friends, and we respect the vibrant faith of Islam which inspires countless individuals to lead lives of honesty, integrity, and morality. This year, may Eid also be a time in which we recognize the values of progress, pluralism, and acceptance that bind us together as a Nation and a global community. By working together to advance mutual understanding, we point the way to a brighter future for all."

"Islam brings hope and comfort to millions of people in my country, and to more than a billion people worldwide. Ramadan is also an occasion to remember that Islam gave birth to a rich civilization of learning that has benefited mankind."

"Some of the comments that have been uttered about Islam do not reflect the sentiments of my government or the sentiments of most Americans. Islam, as practiced by the vast majority of people, is a peaceful religion, a religion that respects others. Ours is a country based upon tolerance and we welcome people of all faiths in America."

"We see in Islam a religion that traces its origins back to God's call on Abraham. We share your belief in God's justice, and your insistence on man's moral responsibility. We thank the many Muslim nations who stand with us against terror. Nations that are often victims of terror, themselves."

"Islam is a vibrant faith. Millions of our fellow citizens are Muslim. We respect the faith. We honor its traditions. Our enemy does not. Our enemy doesn't follow the great traditions of Islam. They've hijacked a great religion."

“Islam is a faith that brings comfort to people. It inspires them to lead lives based on honesty, and justice, and compassion.”

Azzi: “Well, I can’t disagree with any of that. But I think you’ve been cherry-picking what George Bush said. He also said some pretty awful things about Islam.”

Questioner 8: “No, I don’t think so. I didn’t go looking for favorable statements about Islam from President Bush. I just googled ‘President Bush’ and ‘Islam’ and saved whatever turned up – mostly these were related to messages at Eid al-Fitr. But I couldn’t find a single statement by Bush, or anyone in the Bush administration that ‘demonized Islam.’ Or that even criticized any aspect of Islam. And as for the second part of your sentence, about the ‘attempt to disenfranchise one-sixth of humanity, the Muslims’ – I just don’t think that stands up to scrutiny. Wasn’t the whole point of the invasion of Afghanistan to get rid of both Al-Qaeda and the Taliban that were terrorizing that country, and the peaceful Muslims? And what about the Presidential election in Afghanistan in 2014, that was declared by international observers to be both free and fair? That led to a peaceful transfer of power for the first time in the history of Afghanistan? Wasn’t that the same goal in Iraq, to get rid of the despot Saddam Hussein, so that the people of Iraq, the Muslim people of Iraq, would no longer live in terror but could safely hold democratic elections? Remember all those people holding up their purple thumbs? What America wanted, and still wants, is to encourage the spread of democracy, of enfranchisement, all over the Muslim world. Do you disagree?”

Azzi: “I can’t get into details, obviously, at this point, as we’re winding down, that I think support my position – it’s been a long evening and I know that many of you must be tired – but I’d be glad to talk to you one-on-one about it, just send me an email at theother.azzi@gmail.com and we’ll meet.

And yes, I do think that ever since Bush we've seen American administrations generally quite hostile to Islam, unable to make distinctions between the vast majority of peaceful Muslims, and the handful of sociopaths who try to claim Islam as an excuse for their intolerable acts."

Questioner 8: "I've learned a lot this evening. Real food for thought. And I'd like to mention how much I personally value both your candor and your kindness in coming out tonight to inform us of things we need to know, and that the mainstream media just won't tell us. I won't say it's a conspiracy, exactly, but I do sometimes wonder why we have so much coverage of the Islamic 'extremists' who represent only themselves, and so little coverage of mainstream Muslims who in order to get their message out about the real Islam have had to set up these Ask-a-Muslim-Anything Events. It's been a wonderful evening, and I think I speak for all of us when I say it's been one of the most eye-opening meetings I've ever experienced."

Sustained applause.

Azzi: "Thank you very much. And thank you all for coming. I hope you have learned something, as I always do, from these meetings. But before we break up, and since you've mentioned food for thought, I just wanted to let you know that, as my Lebanese grandmother always used to tell visitors, 'it is not permissible for anyone to leave my house hungry. I have to feed you.' So in the next room, I have some Lebanese specialties that you might want to try. Manakeesh, felafel, tabbouleh, fatoush, baba gannoush. And of course, baklava and mamoul with pistachios for dessert. The daughter of one of my Hezbollah friends – yes, I know, 'Hezbollah,' but please don't believe everything you hear about that group, which from long experience I know is only trying to defend the Shi'a in Lebanon and now Syria from both Israel and ISIS – who is spending the summer here in New Hampshire, made the pastries. So they're authentically Lebanese. Please stay a bit longer,

and let's break bread – or manakeesh – together.”

First published in