

President Barack Hussein Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

First of all, congratulations on your victory in November. Like so many others throughout the world, we find ourselves both hopeful and inspired. Your election is proof of America's continued promise as a land of opportunity, equality, and freedom. Your presidency presents a historic opportunity to chart a new course in foreign affairs, and particularly in the troubled relationship between the United States and the Muslim world.

We are heartened by your promise to listen to and understand the hopes and aspirations of Arabs and Muslims. By shutting down Guantanamo Bay and forbidding torture, your administration will inspire greater confidence between the United States and the Muslim world. Last month, in your first major interview, millions of Arabs heard your call for mutual respect on one of the Middle East's most watched television channels. They were encouraged to find that you hold a resolution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict as an urgent priority, as evidenced by the appointment of Senator George Mitchell as your envoy. Reaching out to the people of the region so early on in your presidency is a step of no small significance. But it is a step that must be followed by concrete policy changes.

Improving relations between the United States and Middle Eastern nations is not simply a matter of changing some policies here and there. For too long, U.S. policy toward the Middle East has been fundamentally misguided. The United States, for half a century, has frequently supported repressive regimes that routinely violate human rights, and that torture and imprison those who dare criticize them and prevent their citizens from participation in peaceful civic and political activities. U.S. support for Arab autocrats was supposed to serve U.S. national interests and regional stability. In reality, it produced a region increasingly tormented by rampant corruption, extremism, and instability.

In his second inaugural address, President Bush pledged that the United States would no longer support tyrants and would stand with those activists and reformers fighting for democratic change. The Bush administration, however, quickly turned its back on Middle East democracy after Islamist parties performed well in elections throughout the region. This not only hurt the credibility of the United States, dismayed democrats and

emboldened extremists in the region, but also sent a powerful message to autocrats that they could reassert their power and crush the opposition with impunity.

In order to rebuild relations of mutual respect, it is critical that the United States be on the right side of history regarding the human, civil, and political rights of the peoples of the Middle East. There is no doubt that the people of the Middle East long for greater freedom and democracy; they have proven themselves willing to fight for it. What they need from your administration is a commitment to encourage political reform not through wars, threats, or imposition, but through peaceful policies that reward governments that take active and measurable steps towards genuine democratic reforms. Moreover, the US should not hesitate to speak out in condemnation when opposition activists are unjustly imprisoned in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, or elsewhere. When necessary, the United States should use its considerable economic and diplomatic leverage to put pressure on its allies in the region when they fail to meet basic standards of human rights.

We recognize that taking these steps will present both difficulties and dilemmas. Accordingly, bold action is needed today more than ever. For too long, American policy in the Middle East has been paralyzed by fear of Islamist parties coming to power. Some of these fears are both legitimate and understandable; many Islamists advocate illiberal policies. They need to do more to demonstrate their commitment to the rights of women and religious minorities, and their willingness to tolerate dissent. However, most mainstream Islamist groups in the region are nonviolent and respect the democratic process.

In many countries, including Turkey, Indonesia, and Morocco, the right to participate in reasonably credible and open elections has moderated Islamist parties and enhanced their commitment to democratic norms. We may not agree with what they have to say, but if we wish to both preach and practice democracy, it is simply impossible to exclude the largest opposition groups in the region from the democratic process. At the same time, to reduce the future of the region to a contest between Islamists and authoritarian regimes would be a mistake. Promoting democratic openings in the region will give liberal and secular parties a chance to establish themselves and communicate their ideas to the populace after decades of repression which left them weak and marginalized. More competition between parties of diverse ideological backgrounds would be healthy for political development in the region.

In short, we have an unprecedented opportunity to send a clear message to the Arab and Muslim world: the United States will support all those who strive for freedom, democracy, and human rights. You, Mr. President, have recently relayed such a message in your inaugural address when you said: ***“To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.”***

We are fully aware that, with a worsening global economic crisis, and continuing challenges in Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, political reform and progress toward democratic reform in the Middle East will need to compete with a whole host of other priorities on your agenda. Policy is often about making difficult choices. However, as you work on other Middle East priorities, we urge you to elevate democratic reform and respect for human rights as key considerations in your engagement with both Arab regimes and Arab publics.

In conclusion, we are writing this letter to raise our profound belief that supporting democrats and democracy in the Middle East is not only in the region's interests, but in the United States' as well. Perhaps more importantly, what we choose to do with this critical issue will reveal a great deal about the strength of American democratic ideals in this new era – and whether or not we will decide to respect and apply them in the Middle East.

Signatures: 163 (107 from the US, 56 from overseas)

Coordination Committee:


Radwan A. Masmoudi

*Center for the Study of Islam &
Democracy*



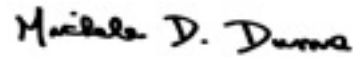
Shadi Hamid

Project on Middle East Democracy



Geneive Abdo

The Century Foundation



Michele Dunne

Carnegie Endowment for Int. Peace



Larry Diamond

*Ctr. on Democracy, Dev. & Rule of Law,
Stanford University*



Jennifer Windsor

Freedom House

American Scholars, Experts & Organizations:

Tamara Cofman Wittes
Saban Center, Brookings Institution

Francis Fukuyama
*The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced
International Studies*

Matt Yglesias
Center for American Progress

Mona Yacoubian
U.S. Institute of Peace

John L. Esposito
Georgetown University

Reza Aslan
UC Riverside

Morton H. Halperin
*Formerly Office of Policy Planning,
Department of State*

Will Marshall
Progressive Policy Institute

Randa Slim
Rockefeller Brothers Fund

Neil Hicks
Human Rights First

Robert R. LaGamma
Council for a Community of Democracies

Jack DuVall
Int. Center on Nonviolent Conflict

Robert A. Pastor
*Center for Democracy and Election
Management, American University*

Jean Bethke Elshtain
University of Chicago

Peter Beinart
Council on Foreign Relations

Bob Edgar
Common Cause

Rachel Kleinfeld
Truman National Security Project

Robert Kagan
Carnegie Endowment for Int. Peace

Dokhi Fassihian
Democracy Coalition Project

Dina Guirguis
Voices for a Democratic Egypt

Andrew Albertson
Project on Middle East Democracy

Nathan J. Brown
George Washington University

Marc Gopin
*Ctr for World Religions, Diplomacy, &
Conflict Resolution, GMU*

Graham E. Fuller
Simon Fraser University, Vancouver BC.

Rabbi Michael Lerner
Network of Spiritual Progressives

Farid Senzai
*Institute for Social Policy and
Understanding*

Frank Kaufmann
*Inter Religious Federation for World
Peace*

Ammar Abdulhamid
Tharwa Foundation

Arsalan Iftikhar
Islamica Magazine

Richard Bulliet
Columbia University

Seth Green
Americans for Informed Democracy

Joseph Montville
Toward the Abrahamic Family Reunion

Joseph K. Grieboski
Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Jim Arkedis
Progressive Policy Institute

Asma Afsaruddin
University of Notre Dame

Joe Stork
Human Rights Watch

Will Dobson
Carnegie Endowment for Int. Peace

Anisa Mehdi
Arab-American Journalist

Mohammed Ayooob
Michigan State University

Peter Mandaville
Center for Global Studies, GMU

Omid Safi
University of North Carolina

Sulayman S. Nyang
Howard University

Naiem A. Sherbiny
Ibn Khaldun Ctr. for Development

Louay Safi
ISNA Leadership Development Ctr.

Najib Ghadbian
University of Arkansas

Aly R. Abuzaakouk
Libya Human and Political Dev. Forum

Robert D. Crane
The Abraham Federation

Sally Painter
Global Fairness Initiative

Steven Brooke
Independent Academic

Sheila Musaji
The American Muslim

Hashim El-Tinay
International Peace Quest Inst.

Antony T. Sullivan
Near East Support Services

Clement Moore Henry
Dept. of Government, U of Texas at Austin

Ahmed Subhy Mansour
The International Quranic Center

Yvonne Haddad
Georgetown University

Shahed Amanullah
altmuslim.com

Hakan Yavuz
The University of Utah

Ibrahim Kalin
Georgetown University

Mumtaz Ahmad
Hampton University

Charles Butterworth
University of Maryland

John P. Entelis
Fordham University

Nahyan Fancy
DePauw University

Jeffrey T. Kenney
DePauw University

Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad
Minaret of Freedom Institute

Jamal Barzinji
International Institute of Islamic Thought

H. Ali Yurtsever
Rumi Forum

Abubaker al Shingieti
*American Muslims for Constructive
Engagement*

Nayereh Tohidi
California State University, Northridge

Nancy Gallagher
University of California, Santa Barbara

Safei Hamed
Alliance of Egyptian Americans

Ali Akbar Mahdi
Ohio Wesleyan University

Nader Hashemi
University of Denver

Timothy Samuel Shah
Council on Foreign Relations

Sondra Hale
Islamic Studies, UCLA

Lester Kurtz
George Mason University

Mehrdad Mashayekhi
Georgetown University

Fatemeh Haghightjoo
University of Massachusetts, Boston

Salah Aziz
American Society for Kurds

Ali Banuazizi
Boston College

Mehrangiz Kar
*Harvard University Human Rights
Program*

Tamara Sonn
College of William & Mary

Salam Al-Marayati
Muslim Public Affairs Council

Stephen Zunes
University of San Francisco

Mike Ghouse
World Muslim Congress

David A. Smith
University of California, Irvine

Ziad K. Abdelnour
US Committee for a Free Lebanon

Samer Libdeh
Center for Liberty in the Middle East

Javed Ali
Illume Magazine

Selahattin Oz
Georgetown University

Amin Mahmoud
The Alliance of Egyptian Americans

Maher Kharma
Islamic Society of Annapolis

Marah Bukai
Al Waref Institute, Washington DC

Sameh Hasan
Yale University

Maria Dayton
Voices for a Democratic Egypt

Rabbi Arthur Waskow
The Shalom Center

Samer Shehata
*Woodrow Wilson International Center for
Scholars*

M. Cherif Bassiouni
*International Human Rights Law Institute,
DePaul University*

John R. Van Eenwyk
*The International Trauma Treatment
Program, Olympia, WA*

Kathryn Cameron Porter
Leadership Council for Human Rights

Jacob Bender
"Out of Cordoba" Film Project

Jeffrey Boutwell
*Pugwash Conferences on Science and
World Affairs*

International Scholars & Organizations:

Saad Eddin Ibrahim
Ibn Khaldoun Center

Anwar Ibrahim
People's Justice Party, Malaysia

Radwan Ziadeh
*Carr Center for Human Rights Policy,
Harvard Univ.*

Mohammad Fadel
University of Toronto Faculty of Law

Atef Saadawy
Al-Ahram Democracy Review

Jamal Eddine Ryane
*Global Migration and Gender Network,
Amsterdam*

Obaida Fares
*Arab Foundation for Development and
Citizenship*

Najah Kadhim
*International Forum for Islamic
Dialogue-London-UK*

Mona Eltahawy
Commentator and public speaker, Egypt

Emad El-Din Shahin
Dept. of Government, Harvard University

Usman Bugaje
Action Congress, Abuja, Nigeria

Maajid Nawaz
The Quilliam Foundation, London, UK

Dogu Ergil
Ankara University, Turkey

Sameer Jarrah
*Arab World Center for Democratic
Development, Jordan*

Mohamed Elshinnawi
Journalist/Consultant

Ihsan Dagi
Insight Turkey

Santanina T. Rasul
Former Senator, The Philippines

Can Kurd
Kurdish PEN Club / Germany

Saoud El Mawla
*The Islamic Council for Dialogue, Justice
and Democracy, Lebanon*

Amina Rasul-Bernardo
*The Philippines Council on Islam &
Democracy*

Sayed Nadeem Kazmi
The britslampartnership Ltd, UK

Muhammad Habash
Islamic Studies Center, Damascus, Syria

Boudjema Ghechir
Algerian League for Human Rights

Kais Jawad al-Azzawi
Al-Jareeda Newspaper, Baghdad, Iraq

Rola Dashti
Kuwait Economic Society

Zainah Anwar
Sisters in Islam, Malaysia

Jafar M. Alshayeb
Writer and Advocate, Saudi Arabia

Daoud Casewit
American Islamic Scholar, Morocco

Anwar N. Haddam
Mvt. for Liberty & Social Justice, Algeria

Ashur Shamis
Libya Human and Political Dev. Forum

Hamdi Abdelaziz
*Journalist & Human Rights Activist,
Egypt*

Dalia Ziada
*The American Islamic Congress, Cairo,
Egypt*

Abdulkhaleq Abdulla
*Dept. of Political Science, United Arab
Emirates*

Wajeeha S. Al- Baharna
*Bahrain Women Association for Human
Development*

Abdullahi Mohamoud Nur
*Community Empowerment for Peace and
Integrated Development, Somalia*

Brendan Simms
*The Henry Jackson Society: Project for
Democratic Geopolitics, London, UK*

Alan Mendoza
*The Henry Jackson Society: Project for
Democratic Geopolitics, London, UK*

Ashraf Tulty
Justice & democracy for Libya

Hadi Shalluf
International Criminal Court, Paris

Aref Abu-Rabia
Fulbright Scholar

Omar Affifi
Hukuk Elnas

Jacqueline Armijo
Zayed University, United Arab Emirates

Sliman Bouchuiguir
Libyan League for Human Rights

Mohammed Mahfud
Al-Kalima Magazine, Saudi Arabia

Walid Salem
*Center For Democracy and Community
Development, East Jerusalem*

Lise Garon
Université Laval, Québec, Canada

Abdel Salam Sidahmed
University of Windsor, Canada

Munira Shahidi
*Z. Shahidi International Foundation,
Tajikistan*

Abbes Karim Asal
Human Rights for the New Iraq

Osama Kadi
*Syrian Centre for Political and Strategic
Studies*

Mahmoud Aldebe
Muslim Swedish Federation

Abdeslam Ballaji
Moroccan thinker and writer

Hafez Albukari
Yemen Polling Center, Yemen

Tarek Heggy
Author on Egypt's politics & culture

*(Names are listed in the order they were received.
Organizations are listed for informational
purposes only.)*