



Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy



URGENT & Open Letter

May 22, 2009

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.

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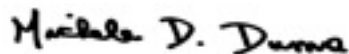


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