

A Letter to Ahmadinejad

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H.E. Mr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
President of the Islamic Republic of Iran
Tehran, Iran

Dear Mr. President:

I am writing to appeal to you to intercede with the appropriate authorities for the immediate release of my friends Shane Bauer, Sarah Shourd and Josh Fattal from detention in Iran.

I traveled from Damascus to Iraqi Kurdistan on vacation with Shane, Sarah and Josh in July. Several of our friends in Damascus had previously visited northern Iraq and recommended that we too make the trip to a region they told us was beautiful, peaceful and safe. We set out the day after celebrating the wedding of local friends at Shane and Sarah's apartment and had planned to be away for one week. That was three months ago.

Had I not had a cold and remained behind at our hotel when my friends hiked to the Ahmed Awa waterfall near your country's border, I would undoubtedly be in detention with them now. I was, in fact, en route to meet them when I received Shane's call that they had been taken into custody.

On August 6, I published a statement about our trip to northern Iraq, which I attach to [this letter](#). I had hoped the statement might clarify why we were in the area and help the authorities understand that Shane, Sarah and Josh had no intention of entering Iran. As I said in that statement, if they did so, it was because of a simple and very regrettable mistake.

Since then, I have maintained silence in deference to the investigation. As much as my friends' absence has been acutely painful, I understood that investigators would want to clarify the circumstances of their trip. I had hoped that the misunderstanding would be resolved quickly. Three months have now passed, and I cannot imagine what more the Iranian authorities might have to learn about my friends or what they were doing in the area. To help put to rest any such questions, I would like to offer to submit a notarized statement to your country's mission to the United Nations vouching for my friends and detailing the circumstances of our trip. If this is not sufficient, I would be willing to come to Tehran to attest to their characters in person.

Mr. President, by continuing to deprive Shane, Sarah and Josh of their liberty, Iran is working against some of the very causes it supports. Each of these three has a long and public record of contesting injustice in the world and addressing some of the inequities between rich and poor which you have spoken about through their humanitarian work in their own country and overseas.

I first met Shane in October 2005, after we had corresponded about our common interest in the Balkans, where I had lived for a time and where Shane had worked for one year in "Balkan Sunflowers," an independent organization helping Albanian and Roma youth in post-war Kosovo. Back in the United States, Shane continued his work with the underprivileged, as

illustrated by his excellent "Hotel Poverty" photographic essay for the San Francisco Chronicle, and his article "Divorcing the US," from a trip we took to the poorest county in our country.

As a fluent speaker of Arabic, Shane has focused on injustices in the Arab world, in Iraq and Palestine in particular. The Christian Science Monitor published Shane's January 7 interview with Musa Abu Marzook, the only English-language interview with a Hamas leader during Israel's attack on Gaza. Two of his articles on the American occupation of Iraq were published as cover stories of major magazines just this summer.

Sarah and I met, by coincidence, the month after Shane and I met, when we found ourselves in the same car from San Francisco to New Orleans to help poor people begin to rebuild their homes after Hurricane Katrina. We both appear in a documentary entitled "Solidarity Not Charity" made about our group of volunteers. In Oakland, Sarah worked for one year in "Just Cause," which helped poor people fight evictions from their homes in the US.

I met Josh a week before we left on our trip, and was immediately drawn in by his warmth and humor. In the time we spent together, I was struck by his passion for justice, environmental sustainability, and intercultural understanding, as attested by his work with the Aprovecho community in Oregon, and as a teaching fellow on a study abroad program for university students.

I would like to mention one more friend who may be relevant. Earlier in July, Shane and I traveled to an Israeli hospital to spend time with Tristan Anderson, an American peace activist with whom Shane, Sarah and I have been close friends for many years. Tristan was shot in the head and critically wounded by an Israeli soldier after attending a non-violent protest against Israel's separation wall. He continues to fight for recovery. Shane and Sarah also visited Tristan in late March with Sarah's mother Nora, a nurse who counseled Tristan's family. There's a very simple explanation for these trips: We wanted to show solidarity with a dear friend whose support for Palestinian rights has been acknowledged in the Iranian media, throughout the Middle East and beyond.

I hope that this letter will help the Iranian authorities understand the true character of my friends. They have now been in custody for almost 100 days, which I hope you agree is more than sufficient punishment for their mistake. Please do everything you can to ensure that they are immediately released into the arms of their loving friends and families, who miss them more than my words can express.

Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Shon Meckfessel