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Muhammad Ali, Other Prominent U.S. Muslims Appeal to Ayatollah Khamenei to Release American Hikers

21 Leading American Muslims Publish Letter to Iran's Supreme Leader Urging Islamic Mercy and Compassion

WASHINGTON, D.C., May 24, 2011 – American icon and boxing legend Muhammad Ali and other prominent U.S. Muslim representatives and clergy made a public appeal today to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, to release American hikers Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal after nearly 22 months in prison.

Ali, a three-time World Heavyweight Champion, and his wife Lonnie joined some of America's most respected Muslim leaders, members of Bauer and Fattal's families and released hiker Sarah Shourd at a news conference in Washington, D.C., where they urged Ayatollah Khamenei to free the two men in the Islamic spirit of mercy and compassion.

“As the American Muslim community, we appeal to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, to release Shane and Josh on the basis compassion and kindness following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who God sent as mercy to mankind. Our hope is that the leadership in Iran will hear our call and reunite Shane and Josh with their families,” said Imam Mohamed Magmagid Ali, President of the Islamic Society of North America.

Ambassador Dr. Akbar Ahmed, the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at the American University in Washington D.C.; Dr. Parvez Shah, Secretary General of the Universal Muslim Association of America; Bauer's parents Cindy Hickey and Al Bauer; and Fattal's mother Laura and brother Alex also took part in the news conference.

Speaking on behalf of the hikers' families, Shourd said: “Everyone who cares deeply for Shane and Josh – first and foremost their families – is extremely grateful to Muhammad Ali, Imam Mohamed Magmagid, Ambassador Ahmed, Dr. Shah and other American Muslim leaders who have raised their voices to end the tragedy of Shane and Josh's imprisonment without delay. Justice and mercy are human values that unite us all, regardless of nationality, religion or race. Shane, Josh and I have always tried to live our lives consistent with these values.”

Bauer, Fattal and Shourd, all graduates of the University of California at Berkeley, were detained by Iranian forces on July 31, 2009 on the unmarked border with Iran while they were hiking during a vacation in Iraqi Kurdistan. Shourd, Bauer's fiancée, was released on humanitarian grounds on September 14, 2010.

In a letter to Ayatollah Khamenei unveiled at today's news conference, Mr. Ali and 20 of America's most prominent Muslim leaders spoke of the pain and distress of the hikers' families since Bauer and Fattal were detained 622 days ago and their concern for the two men's mental and physical well-being.

Among the signatories were leaders of groups including the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA); the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR); the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA); the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), the Universal Muslim Association of America (UMMA); the Fiqh Council of North America; the Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation; and others.

"After listening to the families, we believe that these Americans did not seek to cause any problems between the United States and Muslim world or the United States and Iran, but were in the region for the opposite purpose, to promote dialogue and understanding," the letter said. "Sarah, Shane, and Josh are committed to continuing to build bridges between people of differing cultures and religions. Please show them Islamic compassion, mercy, and forgiveness and allow them to continue on this mission."

The letter added: "We feel confident that your example of Islamic mercy and compassion could help create a more positive image of Islam and help American Muslim scholars and organizations foster a reputable community within American society."

Bauer and Fattal, both 28, have been allowed to make only three brief telephone calls to their families since their arrest, most recently on May 22. Bauer, a freelance journalist, and Shourd, 32, a teacher of English and women's activist, were living in Damascus, Syria, until their detention. Fattal had been visiting his friends after completing an international teaching program in environmental health.

"When I was in prison, we often spoke about how determined we were to come out better people, with an even deeper resolve to stand up for what is right and a love for humanity strengthened by our long isolation," Shourd said.

"Josh and Shane have now been there eight months longer than I was; we pray that Ayatollah Khamenei will hear this appeal and show the same compassion to Shane and Josh that he demonstrated through my release. Each day that passes deepens the awful agony of separation for Shane and Josh's families and is a day lost for the work we all want to do to help create a more just and peaceful planet," Shourd added.

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