October 23, 2002

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your recent letter, *How We Can Coexist*, which 153 of you publicly released in Riyadh in May of this year, in response to our letter, *What We’re Fighting For*, which 60 of us publicly released in Washington, D.C. in February of this year. We welcome your communication.

We know that your decision to write to us at all, as well as some of the comments in your letter, have caused some in your country to criticize you publicly. We appreciate the spirit of civility and the desire for mutual understanding which are reflected in your letter. In that same spirit, and with that same desire, we wish to continue the conversation.

**Where We Agree**

*C*iting the words of the Qur’an and the example of the Prophet, you write that the human person is “inherently a sacred creation.” Accordingly, you write that killing any human being unjustly is offensive to God and thus a betrayal of religion. You write that it is forbidden to impose a religious faith upon a person. You write that all human relationships must be based on high moral standards and good conduct. You write that justice is a universal value, and that just treatment is an inalienable right of all persons.

We note, and agree with, your strong emphasis on the universality of these fundamental human values. You write that these values “are shared by all people” since they are “in harmony with the innate nature of the human being.” You also write that these values and guiding principles as enumerated in your letter “agree to some extent with some of the principles that the American intellectuals put forth in their paper,” and that these important areas of underlying philosophical agreement provide “a good platform for discussion.” Later in your letter, you write: “A

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1 The two letters, *What We’re Fighting For: A Letter from America* and *How We Can Coexist*, can be read in English in their entirety (along with other related responses and analyses) at [www.americanvalues.org](http://www.americanvalues.org).

2 Some of these criticisms are reported in an article by Neil MacFarquhar, “A Few Saudis Defy Rigid Islam to Debate Their Own Intolerance,” *New York Times*, July 12, 2002.
number of values mentioned by those American thinkers are not exclusively
American values. They come from many sources and represent the contributions of
many civilizations, among them Islamic civilization.”

We strongly agree. Much of our letter was an attempt to present a moral argument
in universal terms. Your response, coming from the land of the two mosques and
the cradle of Islam, which we respect, adds weight to that universality and gives us
further reason to believe that, notwithstanding our differences, it may indeed be
possible for us to reach a broadly shared understanding of the human person and
civil society.

Emphasizing the importance of justice, you say that “power is not the only way to
guarantee security.” We agree. More specifically, in criticizing our letter you seem
to call on us to avoid resorting to “the language of power.” We accept the impor-
tance of your advice. But at the same time we remind you that politics, which con-
cerns the ordering of our lives together, is in part about the just uses of power and
can never evade the issue of power. We hope you agree that it is better to acknowl-
edge this fact openly, rather than to presume a condition unknown to actual polit-
ical and even religious life.

You insist that Islam as a religion is not “an enemy of civilization” or “an enemy of
human rights.” We fully agree. You write that political violence and radicalism is not
“intrinsically tied to religion” or “restricted to one particular religion.” We fully agree.

In this vein, we recall with regret that some Americans have made reckless and
even malicious statements about Islam. Some of these statements have been wide-
ly reported. At the same time, there is much evidence that these remarks do not
reflect the views of the great majority of U.S. citizens.

You call upon us as U.S. intellectuals to “earnestly review” our “position on Islam”
and to “open up channels of dialogue with prominent Islamic thinkers represent-
ing the broad current of Islamic thought.” That is precisely our intention, as evi-
denced in part in our desire to respond to your letter.

Where We Misunderstand One Another

Regrettably, our frequent use of the term “American values” in our letter may have
caused some confusion, for at one point in your letter you state, with disapproval,
that we in the U.S. are calling upon Muslims to “adopt American values.” We
intended, and should have made clearer our intention, to ground our argument in
universal, not national or particularistic, values. We hereby affirm that the core val-
ues upon which we take our stand are not exclusivist at all.

In discussing U.S. values in our letter, we did write that “the best of what we [in the
U.S.] too casually call ‘American values’ do not belong only to America, but are in
fact the shared inheritance of humankind.” In addition, in part what we termed “American values” reflect the ways in which, throughout our history, we have been enriched by the traditions and understandings brought to these shores by immigrants from diverse societies across the globe. In these respects, our ultimate affirmation of the universality of core human values is quite similar to certain arguments that you make in your letter.

Another area of apparent misunderstanding concerns our use of, and your understanding of, the English terms “secular” and “secularism.” Your letter says that we favor “secularism.” In fact, we state specifically in our letter that we reject “secularism,” which we define as “a way of seeing the world based on rejection of religion or hostility to religion.” On the other hand, we do defend the principle of a “secular” government, by which we mean a constitutional order in which government officials do not hold office by virtue of religious standing or as a result of appointment by religious authorities. Being in favor of a “secular” state does not necessarily imply an embrace of “secularism.” Indeed, for us, more the opposite is the case, which is why we wrote: “At its best, the United States seeks to be a society in which faith and freedom can go together, each elevating the other.” And: “Spiritually, our separation of church and state permits religion to be religion, by detaching it from the coercive power of government.”

Some of this misunderstanding may stem from problems of translation. For example, the Arabic word *almani*, suggesting hostility to religion, may be the word that you would often use as a basis for translating both “secular” and “secularism,” whereas the Arabic word *dunyawi*, suggesting merely the temporal, without any connotations of hostility to religion, may be a more accurate translation of what we are endorsing.

More broadly, the prevalence and consequences of ideological secularism in the U.S. and in other western societies, as well as the relationship across societies between religious faith and religious freedom, would be important subjects for further discussions between us.

**Where We Disagree**

Our most important disagreement with you is that nowhere in your letter do you discuss or even acknowledge the role of your society in creating, protecting, and spreading the *jihadist* violence that today threatens the world, including the Muslim world.

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3 We are aware of the multiple historical meanings of the word *jihad*. But tragically, Muslim groups today who believe that the imperative of changing societies in order to establish an Islamic order is justifiably pursued by violence frequently describe themselves as *jihadists*. Some of you believe — and many of us agree — that these groups are wrongly taking over and twisting the meaning of an important term. But this usage, however unfortunate, is currently a widespread fact.
For example, speaking of those who murdered 3,000 innocent persons on September 11, you do not speak in your letter of perpetrators, but instead of “alleged perpetrators.” These words sadden and disappoint us. Do you expect us to believe that you are not aware that 15 of the 19 murderers of September 11 were Saudis? Or that their leader, Osama bin Laden, was a Saudi? Or that their organization, al-Qa’ida, has for years received substantial financial support from sources in Saudi Arabia? Or that a high proportion of Qa’ida and Taliban fighters captured by U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan are Saudis? Or that the spread of violence by Islamist groups across the world, from Afghanistan to Indonesia to the United States, is clearly traceable, in part, to the ongoing financial, political, and religious support for such activities in your country?

These facts are well known and are beyond empirical dispute. Yet your letter incorrectly suggests that these facts are not facts at all, but instead mere “allegations,” and that this entire subject — who are these terrorists and who is supporting them? — is somehow irrelevant to the present crisis.

We are aware of some of the possible reasons for your reluctance to discuss this issue. However, if we wrote to you suggesting that slavery was merely “alleged” to have once existed in our country, or that Native Americans only “allegedly” have been the victims of injustice, we suspect that you might reply, correctly, that such fundamental denials of reality render futile any attempt at honest communication. Accordingly, to continue productively our dialogue beyond this present letter, we ask you in good faith to address specifically your perspective on the important roles played by some members of your society in the attacks of September 11 and in the worldwide spread of violence perpetrated by groups citing Islamic sources as justification.

You write that if the U.S. would “withdraw from the world outside its borders,” then Muslims “would not be bothered” about the values and practices of U.S. society. This statement may be true, at least in part. At the same time, we do not think it wise or responsible for our country (or any country, for that matter) to “withdraw from the world outside its borders.” We further note that many leaders and groups in your society energetically promote their own interpretations of Islam not only in the United States, but also in many countries around the world that show little intent or capacity to exercise significant influence “outside their borders.”

You write that “most of the Islamic movements throughout the Muslim world and elsewhere are essentially moderate” and that it is therefore “necessary to maintain this situation.” We do not claim to know with precision the current balance and direction of ideological influences in the Muslim world. We do, however, clearly recognize the current tension in the Muslim world between Islam itself, a great religion for which we have respect, and those radically intolerant religious-political groups that claim (falsely in our view) to speak for Islam. As for the merits of “maintaining” the current “situation,” that situation is one in which growing numbers of innocent
people around the world, including Muslims, are being murdered by radical Muslim
groups, some of which are supported and encouraged by voices from your coun-
try, and some of which are currently seeking access to chemical, biological, and
nuclear weapons. We have no wish, therefore, to “maintain this situation.”

Opposing those in the U.S. whom you call “conflict mongers,” you write that “sta-
bility is the basis for rights and freedoms throughout the world.” We believe that
you have largely inverted cause and effect — we believe that rights and freedoms
are the basis of stability. For this reason, some of today’s conditions in many
Muslim societies — very little freedom of expression, an absence of democratic
norms and institutions, and poor recognition by the authorities of academic free-
dom and other basic human rights — suggest to us that stability in your society, no
less than elsewhere, will ultimately hinge in some important measure on the will-
ingness and ability of leaders, intellectuals, and ordinary persons to demand basic
rights and freedoms for everyone in society. We also hope that our own govern-
ment will be more forthcoming and consistent in supporting movements toward
democracy in the Muslim world.

Your major theme and ultimate conclusion, stated repeatedly in your letter, is that
the attacks of September 11 in particular, and Islamist violence generally, are pri-
marily the fault of the United States and its allies. You brought this upon yourselves,
seems to be your basic message to us. You write, for example, that much of the
instability and unrest in the Muslim world has “come about under the umbrella of
Western policy and quite possibly due to the direct actions of the West.”

Similarly, you write that “many of the extremist Islamic groups — as they are called
— did not want to be that way when they started, but were forced into that catego-
ry” by political, military, and media pressures from the U.S. and its allies. You insist
that this process of social change due to outside pressure “is the major cause for the
extremism of Islamic movements and groups.” The U.S. resort to military force against
violent Islamist groups, you tell us at several points in your letter, is only intensifying
this trend. Most of all, you repeatedly insist that Israel, and U.S. support for Israel,
constitute the root cause of virtually every problem discussed in your letter.

We recognize that U.S. policy, for good or for ill, is an important influence in the
world, and in particular, that you strongly disagree with U.S. support for Israel.
These are legitimate subjects of debate, and issues on which people of good will
can, and often do, disagree. Looking to the future, many of us generally believe —
as some of you may believe, and as some other Saudis may believe — that a two-
state solution in the Middle East, with a viable Israel and a viable Palestine living
side by side in peace and security, would be good for the Middle East and good
for the world.

At the same time, we ask you sincerely to reconsider the tendency, evident in your
letter, to blame everyone but your own leaders and your own society for the prob-
lems that your society faces. At times, some political leaders apparently find it useful to exploit and foment hatred of the external “other,” or “the enemy,” largely, it seems, in order to divert popular attention away from more immediate problems. But we urge you as intellectuals to consider whether the most urgent challenges facing your society — unemployment, the lack of democratic freedoms, the failure to build a modern, diversified economy, and the nurturing and exporting of Islamist violence — can be adequately solved through a strategy that consists largely of scapegoating other people and other nations.

The U.S. has many of its own problems, some of them quite important. Criticizing the U.S. is perfectly legitimate and, in our view, sometimes necessary. Many of us frequently do it ourselves. But the rise of Islamist violence as a threat to the world, including the Muslim world, is not a phenomenon that you in Saudi Arabia can simply blame on someone else. To do so would be irresponsibly to avoid confronting some important questions.

Here, from our perspective, are three such questions in need of clarification. First, do you believe that Islamic piety as practiced in Saudi Arabia is inconsistent with militant jihadism? Second, if you do believe that the two are inconsistent, how do you explain the prominent role of Saudis in the attacks of September 11 and, more generally, in the rise of militant jihadism as a world-threatening phenomenon? Finally, do you believe that Saudi intellectuals and religious leaders who hold that the two are inconsistent have an obligation to explain publicly and concretely why the ideas and activities of al-Qa`ida and similar groups are wrong and dangerous from an Islamic point of view? We await your response.

Can We Reason Together?

In a world threatened by violence and injustice, made anxious by war and discussions of war, and facing the grim prospect of religious and even civilizational polarization, is any task facing us as intellectuals from East and West more important than finding a time and place to reason together, in the hope of finding common ground on the dignity of the human person and the basic conditions for human flourishing?

We earnestly wish to be a part of such a dialogue, with you and with other intellectuals from the Muslim world. We recognize that the only preconditions for participating in such an initiative are good will, the recognition of our common humanity, and the willingness and freedom to engage in critical introspection as well as careful criticism of others’ views.

Your decision to write to us shows that you may have a similar aspiration. We hope to find ways to continue and deepen this conversation.
Thank you again for writing to us.

Signed by:

John Atlas  
*President, National Housing Institute; Executive Director, Passaic County Legal Aid Society*

Jay Belsky  
*Professor and Director, Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues, Birkbeck University of London*

David Blankenhorn  
*President, Institute for American Values*

David Bosworth  
*University of Washington*

R. Maurice Boyd  
*Minister, The City Church, New York*

Gerard V. Bradley  
*Professor of Law, University of Notre Dame*

Allan Carlson  
*President, The Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society*

Lawrence A. Cunningham  
*Professor of Law, Boston College*

Paul Ekman  
*Professor of Psychology, University of California, San Francisco*

Jean Bethke Elshtain  
*Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics, University of Chicago Divinity School*

Amitai Etzioni  
*University Professor, The George Washington University*

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese  
*Eleonore Raoul Professor of the Humanities, Emory University*
Hillel Fradkin  
*President, Ethics and Public Policy Center*

Samuel G. Freedman  
*Professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism*

Francis Fukuyama  
*Bernard Schwartz Professor of International Political Economy, Johns Hopkins University*

Maggie Gallagher  
*Institute for American Values*

William A. Galston  
*Professor at the School of Public Affairs, University of Maryland; Director, Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy*

Claire Gaudiani  
*Senior research scholar, Yale Law School, and former president, Connecticut College*

Robert P. George  
*McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and Professor of Politics, Princeton University*

Carl Gershman  
*President, National Endowment for Democracy*

Neil Gilbert  
*Professor at the School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley*

Mary Ann Glendon  
*Learned Hand Professor of Law, Harvard University Law School*

Norval D. Glenn  
*Asbel Smith Professor of Sociology and Stiles Professor of American Studies, University of Texas at Austin*

Os Guinness  
*Senior Fellow, Trinity Forum*

David Gutmann  
*Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry and Education, Northwestern University*

Charles Harper  
*Executive Director, John Templeton Foundation*
Kevin J. “Seamus” Hasson  
*President, Becket Fund for Religious Liberty*

Sylvia Ann Hewlett  
*Chair, National Parenting Association*

The Right Reverend John W. Howe  
*Episcopal Bishop of Central Florida*

James Davison Hunter  
*William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies and Executive Director, Center on Religion and Democracy, University of Virginia*

Byron Johnson  
*Director and Distinguished Senior Fellow, Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, University of Pennsylvania*

James Turner Johnson  
*Professor, Department of Religion, Rutgers University*

John Kelsay  
*Richard L. Rubenstein Professor of Religion, Florida State University*

Diane Knippers  
*President, Institute on Religion and Democracy*

Thomas C. Kohler  
*Professor of Law, Boston College Law School*

Robert C. Koons  
*Professor of Philosophy, University of Texas at Austin*

Glenn C. Loury  
*Professor of Economics and Director, Institute on Race and Social Division, Boston University*

Harvey C. Mansfield  
*William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of Government, Harvard University*

Will Marshall  
*President, Progressive Policy Institute*

Jerry L. Martin  
*President, American Council of Trustees and Alumni*
Richard J. Mouw  
*President, Fuller Theological Seminary*

Daniel Patrick Moynihan  
*University Professor, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University*

John E. Murray, Jr.  
*Chancellor and Professor of Law, Duquesne University*

Anne D. Neal  
*Executive Director, American Council of Trustees and Alumni*

Virgil Nemoianu  
*WJ Byron Distinguished Professor of Literature, Catholic University of America*

Michael Novak  
*George Frederick Jewett Chair in Religion and Public Policy, American Enterprise Institute*

Rev. Val J. Peter  
*Executive Director, Boys and Girls Town*

David Popenoe  
*Professor of Sociology and Co-Director of the National Marriage Project, Rutgers University*

Michael Radu  
*Director, Center on Terrorism and Counter Terrorism, and Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Research Institute*

Gloria G. Rodriguez  
*Founder and President, AVANCE, Inc.*

Robert Royal  
*President, Faith & Reason Institute*

Nina Shea  
*Director, Freedom House Center for Religious Freedom*

Fred Siegel  
*Professor of History, The Cooper Union*
Theda Skocpol
*Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology, Harvard University*

Katherine Shaw Spaht
*Jules and Frances Landry Professor of Law, Louisiana State University Law Center*

Max L. Stackhouse
*Professor of Christian Ethics and Director, Project on Public Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary*

William Tell, Jr.
*The William and Karen Tell Foundation*

Maris A. Vinovskis
*Bentley Professor of History and Professor of Public Policy, University of Michigan*

Paul C. Vitz
*Professor of Psychology, New York University*

Michael Walzer
*Professor at the School of Social Science, Institute for Advanced Study*

George Weigel
*Senior Fellow, Ethics and Public Policy Center*

Roger E. Williams
*Mount Hermon Association, Inc.*

Charles Wilson
*Director, Center for the Study of Southern Culture, University of Mississippi*

James Q. Wilson
*Collins Professor of Management and Public Policy Emeritus, UCLA*

John Witte, Jr.
*Jonas Robitscher Professor of Law and Ethics and Director, Law and Religion Program, Emory University Law School*

Christopher Wolfe
*Professor of Political Science, Marquette University*

George Worgul
*Executive Director, Family Institute, Duquesne University*
Daniel Yankelovich  
*President, Public Agenda*

Signatories’ affiliations are listed for identification purposes only. This statement is published under the aegis of the Institute for American Values. For more information, please visit our website at [www.americanvalues.org](http://www.americanvalues.org) or write to us at: Institute for American Values, 1841 Broadway, Suite 211, New York, NY 10023; email: info@americanvalues.org.