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**Islamic Reform Conference
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Opening Statement

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In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Brothers and sisters from all corners of the Islamic world:

I salute you and welcome you in the name of the Ibn Khaldun Center and its staff to the first gathering of the Islamic Religious Reform Program in Cairo. I thank you for accepting the invitation to participate, and putting up with the trouble of travel, from the Philippines in the east to the United States in the west. I wish you a pleasant stay along the banks of the Nile, and ask God Almighty to bless this gathering for the benefit of Muslims, the faithful and believers in humanity everywhere.

Modern Muslims are living a grave crisis because of their understanding, interpretation, and the actions of some of them regarding their religion. Because of this serious crisis, we meet to reach a common ground.

Islam has never been the problem. It has always been the comprehension and practice of the holy writ under ever-changing temporal conditions, and the discord between Muslims on the rules for a standard for comprehension, interpretation, disagreement and management of these disagreements through wisdom and beautiful preaching.

Because we have not done this among ourselves, we Muslims have harmed ourselves, the non-Muslims that live in our countries, and humanity as a whole. This crisis reached its zenith on Sept. 11, 2001, and its disastrous aftereffects that continue to shake us and the entire world, from Afghanistan to Iraq to Chechnya.



Among the first to recognize the Muslims' crisis among modern Muslims was our great brother Jamal Al-Banna. Ever since he joined the board of the Ibn Khaldun Center, he has been insisting that we take the initiative in the challenging battle of reforming Islamic thought to renew it, and to reach a living, ever-changing jurisprudence that fits the spirit of this age and adapts to its speedy changes.

Brother Jamal Al-Banna's insistence transformed into a deafening shout as I sat in my prison cell in Turra, after the horrifying events of September, as I read about what he wrote on those events. He did not bow to the misguided mainstream that had somehow engulfed the Arabs and Muslims, who either were in denial that the attacks had taken place or that some Muslims were responsible. He did not deny nor doubt either fact. He repeated his mantra: reform, reform, reform.

We responded to his call after the Ibn Khaldun Center and its staff were found not guilty of the trumped-up charges against them. The greatest joy after the historic ruling by Egypt's highest court was the reopening of the Ibn Khaldun Center, and having the Religious Reform Program be its first event.

What are the goals of the Reform Program, which begins with this gathering?

First: Affirming the openness of religious interpretation, and launching a jihad to make sure it remains open till the Day of Judgment. Among other things, this means defending freedom of thought and expression. Not only in religious affairs, but in all affairs. Freedom cannot be compartmentalized. Our guiding light will be the sincere attempt to interpret, and anyone who attempts this will be rewarded by God.

Second: Affirming that scholars must disagree, but they respect their differences and disagreements and commit themselves to managing it through wisdom and beautiful preaching, without abuse or accusing one another of blasphemy and treason.

Third: We must work together to collect and publish the conclusions of Islamic scholars in an accessible language for the masses and elites, and for all generations, from children to adolescents to the elderly, and for Muslims and non-Muslims who would like to learn about Islam.

Fourth: We must commit a mass jihad to end the state of marginalization that has been imposed on Muslim scholars attempting re-interpretation, whether by their governments or official religious institutions, which have turned into a semi-theocracy unto themselves, or by the extremists and zealots who have hijacked Islam and turned it into an instrument of horror and terrorism across the globe.

Fifth: We want our re-interpretations in the fields of religious and the temporal world to be relevant to the concerns of modern Muslims who live in this global village. In this village, the traditional boundaries of time no longer exist, and due to the communications

revolution have been rendered “virtual boundaries.” Among the most important issues at the turn of this century are freedom; democracy; justice; human rights; social, political, racial and religious pluralism; and a healthy, representative management of this pluralism.

These are the five goals of our Religious Reform Program. They are subject to amendment. Those who have embarked on the implementation of this program bear no illusions of how easy it will be. Even in its fetal stage one of the main members of the program was subjected to a campaign of monitoring, harassment, confiscation and slander. But he withstood the pressure with God Almighty’s help, and through his steadfastness inspired millions of Muslims who followed his battles on the pages of the newspapers. The battles of Jamal Al-Banna and his book, “The Responsibility for the Failure of the Islamic State,” continue to be a model of the never-ending battle. Scholars must prepare for similar battles spiritually, intellectually and politically.

Islam is a great heavenly religion, followed by 1.2 billion human beings in every continent and society worldwide. Each day, countless people convert to Islam, and it is too important to be left to governments, theocrats or extremists to toy with it, hijack it, or terrify humanity with it.

Let us begin In the Name of God. “And say: ‘Work (righteousness): Soon will Allah observe your work, and His Messenger, and the Believers.’” (9:105)