

Arabs sign open letter urging Bush to shun Sharon

BEIRUT, Feb 13 (Reuters) - Twenty-two Arab intellectuals and politicians urged U.S. President George W. Bush on Friday not to meet Ariel Sharon when the Israeli prime minister visits Washington next month. They signed an open letter to Bush calling the Israeli leader an obstacle to the peace they say is crucial if democracy is to flourish in the Middle East. Sharon had been expected to travel to Washington in late February or early March although the trip might be delayed as he recovers from surgery. "We ask the U.S. president to decline meeting the current prime minister of Israel, who is a symbol of all that stands against human rights, coexistence and tolerance, and the chief obstacle to peace in the region," the letter said "There is no future for democracy in the Middle East without a comprehensive and just solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and vindication of the basic rights of the Palestinian people." Among the signatories were Iraqis including Mohammad Bahr al-Uloum, a Shi'ite Muslim cleric on Iraq's U.S.-appointed Governing Council, former opposition figure Rifaat Chadergi and writer Balqis Sharara. Azmi Bishara, an Arab member of the Israeli Knesset, put his name to the letter, which was also signed by academics and politicians from countries including Tunisia, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon.

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