



**Middle
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August 30, 2004

The Honorable Colin Powell
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Tom Ridge
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Secretary Powell and Secretary Ridge:

We, the Middle East Studies Association of North America's Committee on Academic Freedom and the Board of Directors for the American Academy of Religion, are writing to express our very grave concern regarding the decision of the Department of State, made public last week, to rescind the visa for the well-known scholar of Islam Dr. Tariq Ramadan. Dr. Ramadan was slated to take up an appointment in the religion department of the University of Notre Dame, beginning earlier last week. He had received his visa in April 2004, only to have it rescinded, without explanation, in early August. The Department of State's decision was reportedly taken on the basis of information provided by the Department of Homeland Security. Neither department has made public any reason for the decision. We request that you take the necessary steps to reverse this decision as a matter of urgency, in order that Dr. Ramadan can lecture and meet with students.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) comprises 2600 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa, and is the preeminent professional association in the field. The association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, and is committed to ensuring respect for the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression in the region and in connection with the study of the Middle East and North Africa.

The American Academy of Religion (AAR) is the major scholarly society and professional association of scholars and teachers in religion. With 10,000 members, the Academy fosters excellence in research and teaching in the field and contributes to the broad public understanding of religion and religions. The AAR publishes the flagship scholarly journal in religion and books in five series through Oxford University Press.

The decision to rescind Dr. Ramadan's visa is particularly troubling on two grounds. First, he had already received his visa, going through the rigorous screening process that your Departments have implemented for foreign visitors. As far as we are aware, neither Dr. Ramadan nor the University of Notre Dame were consulted regarding any problems or new information that might give cause to rescind his visa.

Second, the lack of explanation for rescinding the visa raises serious questions about the cause of the decision. In the absence of any explanation, we fear that pressures were applied to reverse the granting of the visa by people who disagree with Dr. Ramadan's views as a scholar and as a public intellectual. That fear is exacerbated by the unsourced comments in some media outlets about alleged "links" between Dr. Ramadan and terrorist groups. There is absolutely nothing in the public record regarding Dr. Ramadan, or in his scholarly production, that would indicate any basis whatsoever for such allegations—and Dr. Ramadan is a scholar very much in the public eye in Switzerland, where he resides and teaches, and in Europe more generally. To us, these allegations smack of a character assassination campaign designed to suppress Dr. Ramadan's voice at a prominent American university.

Denying qualified scholars entry into the United States because of their political beliefs strikes at the core of academic freedom. On that basis alone the decision to deny Dr. Ramadan access to our country is unacceptable. We also find the decision profoundly counter-productive to the stated aims of our national policy. As our country tries to understand better the Muslim world and to encourage interpretations of Islam which reject violence and terrorism, we will have to be open to dialogue with Muslims who hold political opinions that do not espouse violence but do differ from the opinions of some Americans or are critical of U.S. policies. If controversy is cause enough to deny someone a visa, our prospects for reaching out to Muslims around the world are very dim. The decision to bar Dr. Ramadan from teaching and meeting students and other academics, if allowed to stand, will represent a very low mark with regard to the Bush administration's commitment to the free exchange of ideas and freedom of expression.

We are aware of absolutely no evidence for allegations that Dr. Ramadan has advocated violence or been associated with groups which perpetrate violence. On the contrary, important scholars and reputable universities have testified to his academic credentials and his character as a researcher and teacher. If the U.S. government has evidence to the contrary, let it be made public, to reassure the American public that untoward political pressures are not affecting the government's decisions. In the absence of such evidence we can only conclude that denying Dr. Ramadan permission to enter the country constitutes a direct attack on academic freedom and freedom of speech. We respectfully urge you to reconsider this unfortunate decision and reinstate Dr. Ramadan's visa without delay.

Yours sincerely,



Amy W. Newhall
Executive Director
Middle East Studies Association
of North America



Barbara DeConcini
Executive Director
American Academy of Religion

cc: Hon. Paula Dobriansky, Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs
Hon. Elizabeth Jones, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs
Hon. William Burns, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs
Sen. Richard Lugar, Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Sen. Joseph Biden, Ranking Minority Member, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Rep. Henry Hyde, Chairman, House Committee on International Relations
Rep. Tom Lantos, Ranking Minority Member, House Committee on International
Relations

The Rev. Edward A. Malloy, President, University of Notre Dame

Professor Scott Appleby, Director, The Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, The
University of Notre Dame

Mr. Matthew V. Storin, Associate Vice President, Office of News and Information, The
University of Notre Dame

Professor Tariq Ramadan

Stephen Kinzer, Chicago Bureau for The New York Times