



**Middle
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Monday, 11 October 2004

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

Dear Secretary Powell,

I am writing to add the voices of the board of the Middle East Studies Association to those of the Latin American Studies Association, the American Political Science Association, the American Historical Association and others to express our dismay regarding the rejection last week, without explanation, of some sixty-one visa applications from Cuban scholars and intellectuals who were to have participated in the LASA annual meeting 7-9 October.

This unprecedented rejection of Cuban scholars' participation in US academic foray would in and of itself be sufficient for deep concern regarding the US government position on free enquiry and open exchange of ideas. Such exchange has long been a hallmark of the US educational system; indeed, it has contributed to the strength and superior reputation of this system at home and abroad over the years.

We in MESA are particularly disturbed by this rejection, as it comes on the heels of the revocation – also without explanation -- of the visa of Tariq Ramadan, a prominent Egyptian-Swiss scholar of Islam, who was scheduled to assume a Luce Professorship at Notre Dame this semester, and about whom we wrote, expressing our dismay several weeks ago. Combined with other, similar, if less high profile, cases, we can only conclude that this rejection of visas for prominent scholars is part of an evolving trend which, whether intended or not, amounts to censorship, and leads to a circumscribing of free public intellectual and policy debate in this country.

Such developments are particularly surprising given the contents of the 2004 Report of the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, which carries the seal of the US Department of State itself in which "Exposure to American culture and values through personal relationships and understanding" is argued to be key to the success of long-term public diplomacy programs. (p. 18). The document also acknowledges the "increased perception that US borders are no longer open to friendly business people, students.... America's historical influence with international business leaders, students and other visitors will be lost unless the United States balances its visa policies with security concerns." (p.16) The experiences of the Cuban scholars, Dr. Ramadan and others will certainly further reinforce what is not just a perception, but a growing conviction, that the US is no longer open to a diversity of scholarly opinion.

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It is too late for a review of the case of these Cuban scholars. The damage done to the image of the US as such cases proliferate is hard to quantify, but must certainly be far greater than any gains being made through new public diplomacy initiatives at this critical time the international image of the United States has plummeted in an unprecedented way. As scholars who have ourselves benefited from programs and policies of exchange between the US and the Middle East, we are extremely disturbed by these developments. For a country with the tremendous resources of the United States there must be ways to ensure security without compromising the basic values that have contributed to the positive image people had of our country in the past.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L.A. Brand', written in a cursive style.

Laurie A. Brand
President
Middle East Studies Association