

October 3, 2006

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20520  
Fax: 202-647-2283

Dear Secretary Rice:

We, the Middle East Studies Association of North America's Committee on Academic Freedom, are writing to express our grave concern and dismay over the Department of State's denial of a visa for a second time to a world-renowned scholar of Islam, Professor Tareq Ramadan. It is apparent that this decision was made on purely political grounds, in clear violation of the principles of academic freedom and free speech, both of which are critical to the functioning of a healthy democracy. We urge you in the strongest terms to review and reverse this decision without delay.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has more than 2600 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

On August 30, 2004, we wrote asking for clarification regarding the Department of State's then-recent decision to revoke the visa Dr. Ramadan had already been granted so that he could take the prestigious Luce Chair at the University of Notre Dame. As specialists in the region familiar with Ramadan's record, we stated that there was absolutely no evidence for the allegations then circulating in some media outlets claiming that Dr. Ramadan had advocated violence or had been associated with groups that perpetrate violence. On the contrary, numerous reputable scholars from prestigious universities had testified to his academic credentials and his character as a researcher and teacher.

In response, in a letter dated 3 September and addressed to MESA's Executive Director, Dr. Amy Newhall, the State Department stated that the visa had been revoked "prudentially based on information that became available after the visa was issued" and that "Due to the confidentiality of visa records, as provided for in the Immigration and Nationality Act, [the Department of State] was not able to provide any details concerning this matter."

Following the June 2006 ruling by a federal court which ordered the State Department either to grant the visa to Dr. Ramadan or provide an explanation for not doing so, Department spokeswoman Janelle Hironimus stated that Dr. Ramadan was denied a visa "for providing material support to a terrorist organization." This charge is apparently based on the fact that he made donations between 2000 and 2004 in the amount of 600 euros to French and Swiss organizations that provide humanitarian aid to the Palestinians – donations which Dr. Ramadan himself disclosed in his visa application. Thus, in denying him a visa, the US government is apparently using Section 411(a)(1)(A)(iii) of the Patriot Act, related to excluding individuals believed to have provided "material support" for terrorism.

That contributions to European organizations seeking to provide humanitarian aid to Palestinians living under Israeli occupation is viewed by the US government as constituting support for terrorism, already speaks volumes about the administration's lack of understanding of the region and the quality of its stated concern to promote freedom and democracy in the Middle East. It is also unreasonable to expect that Dr. Ramadan should have had advance knowledge that the United States would at a future date put the organization to which he was contributing on its list of groups supporting Hamas; it figured on no such list at the time he made his donations.

Dr. Ramadan is a leading scholar and public intellectual whose writings and statements make clear his opposition to violence and terrorism. Indeed, the basic concern that motivates much of his work is one of reconciliation and interfaith coexistence. It seems clear that Dr. Ramadan's charitable contributions in fact have nothing at all to do with the visa denial: its origins lie elsewhere. By his own account of the visa interviews conducted at the US embassy in Switzerland, the focus of the questioning was his positions on Palestine and Iraq. On these questions, like many others, Muslims and non-Muslims, Americans and non-Americans, scholars, intellectuals, and average citizens, Tareq Ramadan has been a critic of US policy in Palestine/Israel and Iraq. It appears that this visa denial has nothing whatsoever to do with his donations, but instead is punishment for his political views.

As we stated in our letter of 2004, “denying qualified scholars entry to 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 US policy, which is to develop a better understanding of Muslims and the Muslim world. It is clearly in US interests to encourage dialogue and exchange with Muslims, particularly prominent and highly regarded members of Muslim communities who do not espouse violence, regardless of what their positions on US foreign policy may be. How does it serve the interests of the United States, which is currently seeking to improve its ties with and image in the Arab/Islamic world, to exclude from entry one of that world’s most highly regarded thinkers and scholars?

We are deeply troubled by this second denial of a visa to Dr. Ramadan. It is a clear violation of academic freedom and of the principle of free speech. We respectfully request that you review and reverse this decision without delay.

Sincerely,

Juan R.I. Cole  
MESA President

Cc: Ambassador Karen Hughes  
ACLU