

The Blockade of Tariq Ramadan
Diana L. Eck
Harvard University
September 26, 2006

The case of Professor Tariq Ramadan strains the mind to the point of incredulity. What point is the U.S. trying to make in denying a visa, yet again, to one of Europe's deepest and most articulate Muslim thinkers? In 2004, when Ramadan, a Swiss citizen, was offered a professorship in Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, his visa was suddenly and inexplicably revoked by the State Department on the advice of the Department of Homeland Security. They said he had "endorsed" or "espoused" terrorism. Those of us who knew his work in the American academic community were astonished. His widely published speeches and writings gave no evidence whatsoever of this charge. Quite the opposite. Ramadan is one of the leading exponents of a serious dialogue between Islam and the West, encouraging young Muslims not to shun civic life, but to become involved as citizens, to participate in democratic processes, and to engage with Christians, Jews, and secularists to be a "rich, positive, and participatory presence" in Europe and North America. Ramadan is one of the most powerful exponents of a reformist, moderate, self-critical and dialogical Islam. He is a leader who speaks to the dilemmas of young Muslims in the West and to those of all faiths who recognize the importance of bridge-building across cultures and the chasms that divide us.

Ramadan's visa was revoked in August of 2004. After months of inquiry and patient waiting, after months of stony silence on the part of the U.S. government, Ramadan finally had no alternative but to resign his professorship at Notre Dame. His furniture and household belongings were sent back from South Bend to Geneva. Oxford University offered him a professorship in Islamic studies. Ramadan went on to become an adviser to the British government and an invaluable asset in speaking to the concerns of young and sometimes disaffected Muslims in Britain. In September 2005, he applied yet again for a visa to the U.S., hoping to clear his name of baseless accusations. He was told it might take two days or two years.

By January 2006, he had heard nothing. Three American organizations -the American Association of University Professors,

the American Academy of Religion, and the writers' PEN America Center joined an ACLU lawsuit, charging the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security with "ideological exclusion," barring Tariq Ramadan from the U.S. on the grounds of his beliefs and views and depriving our members of the opportunity to engage directly with him. The U.S. District Court in Southern New York supported the suit and ordered the U.S. Government to issue Ramadan a visa or to state reasons for denial within ninety days.

Last week on September 21, 2006, ninety days later, the U.S. Government responded. Once again, a visa was denied, but no evidence was presented for espousing terrorism as previously charged. But in this instance, a new tactic was advanced by the government. What was at issue was not his ideas, but his generosity. Ramadan had contributed some \$700 to a French charity supporting humanitarian aid to Palestinians. Thus, the government claimed he provided "material aid" to a terrorist organization.

For any thinking person, this seems to be grasping at straws. The charity in question is legitimately recognized by the French government. Ramadan's stated intention was to provide humanitarian aid to Palestinians. Moreover, it was he himself who disclosed this donation in an interview with consular officials. Tens of thousands of American citizens have contributed to Palestinian relief, to Palestinian schools and hospitals, and to Palestinian human rights concerns. Is it "material aid" to terrorists? What exactly is the point here?

Recently, the U.S. government's rhetorical strategy has been to cast the world in which we live as a "global struggle against the followers of a murderous ideology that despises freedom and crushes all dissent." (George W. Bush, July 4, 2006). One wonders if the President's intention to spread "the hope of freedom across the world" is not seriously undermined by the exclusion of thinkers of Ramadan's caliber, and if the crushing of dissent is not becoming our problem too.

In his recent address at the U.N. President Bush insisted, "Every civilized nation, including those in the Muslim world, must support those in the region who are offering a more hopeful alternative."

Then why exclude the hopeful voice of Ramadan as if he were a threat when he offers the vision articulated in such books as *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* and in his many speeches and writings? How ironic and tragic that our government continues to bar from our shores a religious thinker who has earned a professorship at a major university, a man whose work has been read and discussed in English, French, and Arabic, a man who has been invited by the American Academy of Religion to address its annual convention of 10,000 scholars.

This ongoing blockade of a progressive Muslim theologian, a voice so urgently needed in our reach for constructive and informed dialogue, sends shockwaves through the world of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. Far from protecting us from whatever potential threat is imagined in our quest for "homeland security," this publicly visible injustice does inestimable damage to institutions of higher education in the United States, undermining our very commitment to academic freedom and the civil exchange of ideas.

In closing his address to the UN last week, President Bush spoke of a more "hopeful world" where "extremists are marginalized by the peaceful majority." Many who are watching will see this case as one in which government exclusion has become truly "extremist" and the "peaceful majority," Ramadan included, marginalized. This is not the signal of a hopeful world, but a sign of real danger. It imperils the very spirit of academic inquiry in a free society.

Diana L. Eck