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United States. US Travel Bans and the False Promise of Tariq Ramadan

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Recently, two prominent scholars who had been banned from visiting the US for some years have been allowed back into the country after Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State herself, intervened on their behalf. The scholars are Adam Habib and Tariq Ramadan. You can read about their cases and their recent readmission to the US in several papers and journals, for example here:

<http://chronicle.com/article/US-State-Department-Ends-/63667/>

In a Democracy Now! interview last week, Tariq Ramadan's response to the question of what his readmission to the United States means included the following statements:

"It is quite clear that there is a shift in the American policy..."

"The banning of scholars is quite over, they [the government] want to change this, and they want to engage in open, critical dialogue, and I think that this is the way forward..."

Being banned from traveling to the US myself, a country that I had been visiting regularly since I was nine years old and where I spent some of my university years, I'd like to put these statements into perspective.

Adam Habib and Tariq Ramadan are two high-profile cases that have gotten a lot of attention and a lot of support ever since they were first banned from traveling to the US. I am happy that their bans have been lifted and that they are free to travel to the US again. However, they represent less than 1% of all the people who are currently banned from visiting the US for political reasons. Contrary to what Tariq Ramadan suggests in the above quotes, the watch lists keeping people from traveling to the US for political reasons have continued to grow under the Obama administration. The vast majority impacted by these bans remains without any reasonable means to fight them. No Secretary of State will ever intervene on their behalf.

As happy as I am for Mr Habib and Mr Ramadan, their cases do in no way affect the ongoing exclusion of non-US citizens and residents from the US on political grounds. Rather, they help to distort the reality and allow the Obama administration to appease liberal concerns. The documents that have been made available by the New York Times clearly confirm that in both cases, the Secretary of State has signed exemptions that "shall not have any application with respect to other persons."

<http://documents.nytimes.com/state-dept-order-on-tariq-ramadan-and-adam-habib>

Structural problems can never be solved individually. If two out of thousands who are banned are allowed back into the country because the Secretary of State has issued exemptions, and not because the system itself has been modified in any way, how can this be indicative of any policy change? Only collective action will bring such a change – action conducted on behalf of everyone, not just renowned scholars whose political affiliations are safe enough to garner prominent support.