

Religion scholars join suit vs. Patriot Act: Groups say Patriot Act being used to stifle academic debate

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Highlighting the case of a prominent Muslim scholar barred from a tenured post at Notre Dame, the ACLU and three other groups, including the large American Academy of Religion, have filed a federal lawsuit seeking to strike down a USA Patriot Act clause they say is applied wrongly to stifle academic debate.

The suit was filed January 25 in New York City on behalf of Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss citizen who is currently teaching at Oxford University in England. Ramadan, also a plaintiff in the suit, has been denied a U.S. visa since July of 2004, when he was about to move to South Bend, Indiana, for the faculty position.

The 10,000-member American Academy of Religion said that Ramadan also was to have been an AAR plenary speaker that November but was forced to cancel despite his previous frequent speaking visits to America.

A provision of the Patriot Act bars foreigners who endorse terrorism from entering the country. But the AAR, the American Association of University Professors and PEN American Center, a writers' organization, ask that the federal court declare unconstitutional the provision of the controversial act, which they say has fostered ideological exclusion.

Though Ramadan, 43, is a frequent critic of U.S. policies in the Middle East, he has denounced terrorism as "anti-Islamic." Last August he was invited by British Prime Minister Tony Blair to take part in a counterterrorism task force after the London bombings in July.

"Preventing foreign scholars like Professor Ramadan from visiting the U.S.," said AAR executive director Barbara DeConcini, "limits not only the ability of scholars here to enhance their own knowledge, but also their ability to inform [others] who rely on scholars' work to acquire a better understanding of critical current issues

involving religion.”