April 22, 2016

The Honorable Richard Stengel  
U.S. Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C St. Washington, DC 20520

Dear Under Secretary Stengel,

On behalf of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), we are writing to express our deep concern regarding the recent regulations altering the visa waiver program (ESTA) for European and other country participants. This is already having a particularly dramatic effect on our ability to host visitors, specifically academics, who have been to any one of several different Middle Eastern countries in the past five years.

Under the new regulations, the new ESTA permit must now be accompanied by an in-person US visa application for anyone with a stamp from seven targeted nations: Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia. The barrier to scholarly exchanges is already becoming apparent: we have seen a British scientist, an expert on schistosomiasis, who could not make it to his plenary address because of the visa stamp for his work in Sudan (the Nile is an epicenter for the disease). We are also aware of a Swedish anthropologist who was detained in Logan airport for five hours and told she is forever tagged in the system for interrogation at U.S. ports and required to have a US visa for every visit. The in-person visa interview requirement involves a lead time of at least three months, travel to a US consulate, and visa costs.

As of April 1, all ESTA travelers are now required to have an electronic passport to travel to the US on the ESTA system. In a world where cross-cultural understandings are ever more important to reduction of armed conflict and the enhancement of more just and sustainable economies, these barriers to scholarly exchange are highly unproductive.

Founded in 1902, the AAA is dedicated to advancing human understanding and addressing the world's most pressing problems. It is the world's largest professional anthropology organization with more than 10,000 members in all 50 states as well as in many nations around the world.

We believe that academics should be included in the list of those exempt from these requirements and strongly urge you to reconsider these new regulations.

Sincerely,

Alisse Waterston  
President  
American Anthropological Association

Ed Liebow  
Executive Director  
American Anthropological Association