

June 5, 2023

The Honorable Antony Blinken
United States Secretary of State
The State Department
2201 C Street Northwest
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
301 7th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretaries Blinken and Mayorkas:

As pro-Israel organizations representing Jewish Americans, many of whom have familial and other close ties to citizens of Israel, we very much look forward to Israel joining the Visa Waiver Program. We believe that Israel should enter the program as soon as it meets and demonstrates compliance with all the requirements that every country must meet for eligibility.

We applaud the Biden Administration's tireless efforts to work with Israel to help it meet those requirements. We also appreciate US officials' clear [confirmation](#) that the key benchmark of reciprocity requires Israel to allow all Americans — including those of Palestinian, other Arab or Muslim descent — to enter, leave and transit through Israel on equal terms.

We therefore share the concerns of United States Senators who [wrote](#) to you on May 24, 2023 that Israel “does not appear to be on the path” to fully meeting this critical requirement. The Senators rightly noted a number of ways in which Israeli law, policy and practice fall short of providing reciprocity to all Americans. As the State Department has long [warned](#) in its online travel information website, “Some U.S. citizens of Arab or Muslim heritage (including Palestinian-Americans) have experienced significant difficulties and unequal and occasionally hostile treatment at Israel’s borders and checkpoints.”

Israel also restricts the movement of US citizens who hold a Palestinian ID. Rules promulgated by the Coordinator for Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) require such individuals to apply for a permit to enter or exit Israel, even if they are traveling in Israel or the territories for less than 90 days. What’s more, the State Department [notes](#) this “may apply even if an individual is not aware of being listed on the [Palestinian Authority] population registry, does not

possess a Palestinian ID card, and does not desire such status.” These restrictions do not apply to any other Americans, including those visiting Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Clearly, these long-standing practices do not reflect a system in which every US citizen may enter, exit and travel freely within Israel and the territories in which it controls such movement under the same terms as all other Americans, without regard to race, ethnicity, national origin or religion. The presence and power of anti-Palestinian extremists in the government of Benjamin Netanyahu, including far-right Minister Bezalel Smotrich who has authority over COGAT, raise additional concerns about the ability of Israel’s government to follow through on corrective action it pledges to take in order to gain entry to Visa Waiver Program.

Any agreement permitting Israel entry to the program must therefore entail it not only promising to end such practices, but verifiably doing so on a permanent basis. Ensuring Israeli compliance with the obligations it undertakes is especially important in light of the Netanyahu government’s recent actions in the West Bank that [violated](#) Israel’s commitments to the United States under the February 2023 Aqaba agreement and the critical 2004 Bush-Sharon understanding on Israeli settlement activity.

Accordingly, the Israeli government should first have to demonstrate compliance with the program’s reciprocity requirements over a meaningful period of time -- certainly more than just a few weeks -- before entry to the program. Israel’s continued participation should also be subject to a suspension mechanism in the case of noncompliance, like those to which the United States has [agreed](#) with other countries.

We look forward to celebrating Israel’s entry into the Visa Waiver Program and the benefits it will bring for Americans and Israelis of all faiths and backgrounds, once such changes have been fully and demonstrably implemented, and thank you again for your work toward that goal.

Sincerely,

ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal
Ameinu
Americans for Peace Now
J Street
New York Jewish Agenda
Partners for Progressive Israel
T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights