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The Jerusalem Fund
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US CAMPAIGN FOR PALESTINIAN RIGHTS

Civil Society Organizations United in Opposition to Israel's Admission into the Visa Waiver Program

Washington, DC - September 27, 2023: Civil society organizations representing tens of thousands of Palestinian Americans, Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and allied communities are expressing deep concern and outrage regarding the United States' decision to admit Israel into the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP) despite Israel not fully meeting the requirements outlined by the law.

Israel's admission to the Visa Waiver Program starkly contradicts the principles of the program itself. Despite being given an answer key to the program's requirements, Israel has yet to fulfill its obligations. And it has had no incentive to do so. Instead of requiring Israel to comply with the statutory requirement of reciprocity, the agreement signed between the U.S. and Israel completely flouts this principle by allowing Israel to implement different entry procedures that distinguish between U.S. citizens based on ethnicity, the IDs they hold, and various other factors. Compounding this, the U.S. government's truncated evaluation period provided no real opportunity for assessment. To be clear, adherence to this agreement is not adherence to reciprocity.

We have no faith that Israel will fully abide by the rules and regulations set forth by the Visa Waiver Program, especially after being officially admitted. Many crucial questions about the decision's ethical implications have been raised, given Israel's long history of discriminatory actions against U.S. citizens and Palestinians in contravention of the program's requirements and international law. These ethical concerns underscore the importance of not disregarding a country's past behavior when considering such privileges.

We call upon the U.S. government to reconsider its decision and prioritize the reciprocity, security, and international cooperation principles underpinning the Visa Waiver Program. The admission of any country into this program must be based on precise adherence to the established criteria and a demonstrated commitment to the program's core values.

The Biden administration must remember that reciprocity cannot be negotiated or compromised. Concessions that allow Israel to pick and choose which points of entry U.S. citizens can access and implement different entry processes for some Americans not only diminish the integrity of the VWP itself but enshrine discrimination against U.S. citizens into law.



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QUOTES FROM ORGANIZATIONS:

Executive Director of Americans for Justice in Palestine Action (AJP Action) & American Muslims for Palestine (AMP), Dr. Osama Abu Irshaid, said, “This announcement encapsulates the imbalance in the American-Israeli relationship. While Israel continues to violate its obligations under international law and undermine U.S. efforts to attain some kind of a peaceful settlement in the Middle East, which ironically favors Israel, successive American administrations continue to reward Israel for its bad behavior. The Biden administration is no exception in this context. Despite the administration's repeated condemnation of Jewish settlement expansionist policies in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, Israel has never suffered political consequences.

Israel's admission into the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP) falls in the same context. It cements the conventional wisdom that Israel enjoys the right to and immunity from ignoring America's demands and damaging its standing in the world. The prevailing view is that the U.S. always backs down in the face of Israel's arrogance.

In the face of Israel's intransigence, the Biden administration yielded to its racism, which implemented a discriminatory two-tiered system of entry, especially for U.S. citizens residing in the West Bank and Gaza, contradicting the U.S. principles of reciprocity. This humiliating American concession makes it appear that Israel is doing the U.S. a favor by accepting to join the VWP, not vice versa.”

Nihad Awad, Executive Director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) National, said, “It is clear that Israel is not currently in compliance with the Visa Waiver Program admission requirements, and the Biden administration must not rush to admit Israel into the program at the expense of the requirement of reciprocity for all U.S. citizens. CAIR and human rights organizations strongly urge Secretary Blinken and the Biden administration to heed the concerns raised by Palestinian and Muslim Americans and to deny Israel's admission into the Visa Waiver Program until it can fully comply with all of the requirements and not harass and discriminate against American travelers.”

Abed Ayoub, Executive Director of ADC National, said, “By endorsing a tiered system for U.S. citizens, our government has given its tacit approval to Israel's prejudiced policies and apartheid actions. This decision broadcasts a stark message: not all American passport holders are viewed equally. ADC does not accept that message and will be using every available option to fight it.”



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Hanna Hanania, Government Affairs Committee Co-Chair and Past President of the American Federation of Ramallah, Palestine (AFRP), said, “Although we were repeatedly assured that the core principle of the U.S. VWP is ‘blue is blue’, today’s announcement says otherwise. By admitting Israel into the VWP despite its clear disregard for the program requirements of reciprocity and equal treatment, the Biden administration has compromised both the integrity of the VWP and our rights as Americans. This is unacceptable and should raise alarms not just for Palestinian Americans - but for all Americans who believe that our government should prioritize safeguarding our rights as U.S. citizens. We are disappointed, but not defeated. Now is the time for us to hold our government accountable and make it clear that we will not accept anything less than full reciprocity for all Americans, no matter their ethnicity, religion, or politics.”

Stefanie Fox, Executive Director of Jewish Voice for Peace Action, said, "The Biden administration's decision to allow Israel's entry into the Visa Waiver Program is an outrageous endorsement of the Israeli government's systematic discrimination against Palestinian Americans and a reward to the most extremist, racist government in Israel's history. Once again, the U.S. is singling out Israel for special and exceptionalized treatment at the expense of the rights of Palestinian Americans. Jewish Voice for Peace Action calls for the immediate reversal of this decision."

Ahmad Abuznaid, Executive Director of the US Campaign for Palestinian Rights, said, "We learned from the civil rights movement the fallacy of 'separate but equal.' Today we are obligated to reject Israel's inclusion into the Visa Waiver Program because separate is never equal. Palestinian Americans' tax dollars are just as green, our passports are just as blue, and our rights are just as precious as any other American."

Salam Al-Marayati, President of MPAC, said, “Israel is not in compliance with the law as it relates to reciprocal treatment for all U.S. citizens, as evidenced by their continued targeting of Americans of Arab descent through travel bans with the absence of due process, seizure of property, harassment, interrogation, and detention at border crossings upon entry and exit. There remains no indication that any policy changes will be implemented to change this status quo. This decision will serve to embolden the Israeli government in its ongoing efforts to target American Muslims, Arab Americans, and Palestinian Americans and exploit the rules in the name of security. It also further damages our credibility as a country that values human rights and equality on the world stage.”



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Sandra Tamari, Executive Director of Adalah Justice Project, said, "It is shameful that the U.S. continues to grant Israel not only unfettered impunity for violations of international law and human rights abuses, but also rewards it for its discriminatory policies. The U.S. has admitted Israel into the visa waiver program despite Israel's continued discrimination against U.S. citizens who are Palestinian. Israel's discrimination is especially egregious against Palestinian Americans with ties to Gaza, making reunification of families torn apart by Israel's siege and blockade of Gaza near impossible. Apartheid is not only Israeli policy, it is U.S. policy too."

Jehad Abusalim, Executive Director of The Jerusalem Fund for Education and Community Development, said, "Israel's designation in the VWP is an endorsement of the actions and rhetoric of its right-wing government, especially given the ongoing challenges and brutal repression faced by Palestinians. Instead of rewards, it's essential for Israel to be held accountable for its actions and crimes."

Signed,

Adalah Justice Project (AJP)

Americans for Justice in Palestine Action (AJP Action)

American Muslims for Palestine (AMP)

Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)

Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR)

Jewish Voice for Peace Action (JVP Action)

Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC)

The Jerusalem Fund for Education and Community Development

US Campaign for Palestinian Rights (USCPR)