

US groups laud Israel's entry into the Visa Waiver Program, say it heralds deeper ties

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The Israelis are coming

Left-leaning groups raise concerns about Israel's commitment to 'reciprocity,' which has been a sticking point in the process



Jack Guez/AFP via Getty Images

Passengers check an information board at Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv on Dec. 17, 2017.

By
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Israeli citizens looking to visit the U.S. for family weddings and bar mitzvahs, for vacations or for short-term programs would first have to face a lengthy and costly visa process, if they were lucky enough to get an appointment to apply, which in the post-COVID-19 era was no small feat — and still face the possibility of rejection.

But no more. On Wednesday, Israel became the 41st country to enter the coveted U.S. Visa Waiver Program, joining nations like the United Kingdom, Japan and Germany. By the end of November, Israelis will be able to travel to the U.S. for fewer than three months without a visa.

Dozens of American Jewish groups and leaders congratulated Israel on its entry into the program and said the move would benefit both countries, though some organizations and politicians also expressed concern about the implementation, saying Israel is discriminating against different groups of Americans traveling to the country.

The leaders of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations — the umbrella group's chair [Harriet Schleifer](#) and its CEO, William Daroff — commended the decision in a statement on Wednesday, calling the move, which they said will “bring tangible benefits to both American and Israeli citizens,” a “long overdue” step.

“The relatives of Jewish Americans in Israel,” they added, “will no longer be forced to go through a lengthy, expensive, and cumbersome process to visit their families. Additionally, Israel's entry into the Visa Waiver Program reduces barriers to commerce between American and Israeli entrepreneurs, enhancing American firms' competitiveness in key sectors such as AI and Semiconductors.”

Elana Broitman, the outgoing senior vice president of public affairs at the Jewish Federations of North America, told *eJewishPhilanthropy* the move “means a lot for federations and the community [including] camps and synagogues,” which bring Israelis to American Jewish communities to teach and participate in short-term programs. (Israelis participating in longer-term and paid programs, like those serving as Jewish Agency emissaries, will still require a visa.)

“The designation of Israel into the Visa Waiver Program is an important recognition of our shared security interests and the close cooperation between our two countries,” Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas, who made the announcement with Secretary of State Tony Blinken, said in a statement.

Blinken added, “This important achievement will enhance freedom of movement for U.S. citizens, including those living in the Palestinian Territories or traveling to and from them.”

Israel has sought to join the program for more than a decade. While it met two of the key criteria, the final roadblock was Israel's practice of regularly barring Arab and Palestinian Americans from entering the country — and the West Bank — through Ben Gurion Airport, which violated reciprocity requirements. (Israel maintained that this was necessary as a security precaution, and Israeli security services have raised concerns about the implications of ending the practice.)

The push for the visa waiver emerged following meetings between then-Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and President Joe Biden in 2021. From there, the two countries worked to remove Israel's barriers to entry through legislation and protocol changes.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday expressed appreciation “to U.S. President Joe Biden for his support of the initiative, which will further strengthen ties between the two peoples.”

Daniel Elbaum, head of The Jewish Agency for Israel North America, told eJP that his organization “applauds the decision which we believe will strengthen ties between Israelis and Americans,” while also praising former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides, who, Elbaum said, “worked tirelessly to make this happen.”

Hadassah National President Rhoda Smolow and CEO Naomi Adler said the removal of the visa barrier would “make it easier for doctors at [Israel's] Hadassah Medical Organization to collaborate with US colleagues to advance shared goals, share best practices face-to-face and advance critical medical research.”

The Orthodox Union applauded the announcement as well, calling it a reflection of the “unique bond” between the U.S. and Israel.

Rabbi Moshe Hauer, the group's executive vice president, said in a statement, “Israel and America have an enduring relationship built on their shared democratic values and continue to grow their cooperation in military, diplomatic, technological, and economic matters. The admission of Israel into the Visa Waiver Program reaffirms that unique bond while delivering a meaningful, practical benefit, enabling greater connection between the citizens of both countries.”

Herbert Block, executive director of the American Zionist Movement (AZM), said he was hopeful that Israel's inclusion “will facilitate many professional, business, medical, academic, and cultural exchanges while also enhancing personal connections and family ties between Americans and Israelis.”

In a post on X, the Israel Policy Forum said that the program “is predicated on the principle of full reciprocity,” referring to Israel's requirement to allow the entry of all Americans, including those of Palestinian and Arab descent.

“We are glad Israel has achieved this standard and look forward to it being maintained long after the announcement of this decision has passed,” IPF said.

J Street, a progressive Israel advocacy group frequently critical of Netanyahu and his government, said in a statement that while it was “pleased that travel between the two countries will now be easier for most of each other’s citizens,” it has concerns about the implementation of the program, saying that “the Visa Waiver Program’s requirements are being bent and adjusted to accommodate Israel in a way that they have not been for other countries.”

J Street called on the U.S. to “monitor and enforce the obligations that Israel is undertaking with the utmost seriousness.”

The decision was also met with criticism from a handful of Democratic U.S. lawmakers. Sens. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Brian Schatz (D-HI), Jeff Merkley (D-OR) and Peter Welch (D-VT) issued a statement on Wednesday saying that the Biden administration’s announcement is in violation of the central principle of the Visa Waiver Program, noting reciprocity between Israel and the U.S. in how they treat each other’s citizens.

“Adherence to this important American tenet of reciprocity and equal treatment of all US citizens is critical to the integrity of the Visa Waiver Program, and we are deeply concerned with the Administration’s decision to move forward in violation of that principle,” the senators said.