

Israeli foreign minister says U.S. will allow visa-free travel for Israelis

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Tel Aviv, September 26 (RHC)-- The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden is set to allow Israeli citizens to travel visa-free to the United States, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen has said, despite concerns about Israel's treatment of Palestinian- and Arab-American travellers.

In a social media post, Cohen said Israel's looming acceptance into the US Visa Waiver Program (VWP) was "great news" for the country. Cohen said that, "as we promised", Israel would enter the program in November.

The United States government has not formally announced Israel will be joining the VWP, but State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday that a decision would be made in the next days. That was echoed by a spokesperson for the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), who told Al Jazeera in an email on Monday afternoon: "We have nothing to announce publicly at this time, but DHS and the State Department will make a final determination in the coming days."

The prospect of Israel's entry into the VWP has faced widespread condemnation from Arab-American civil rights advocates. That's because one of the main elements of the program is what's known as "reciprocity"; countries in the VWP must allow visa-free travel for American citizens in exchange for a similar easing of visa requirements for their own nationals travelling to the United States.

However, scores of U.S. and other foreign nationals of Palestinian and Arab descent are routinely turned away by Israeli authorities, who control all access to the occupied Palestinian territories. In 2019, Israel did not allow US Congresswomen Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib to visit the country and the occupied Palestinian territories, citing "their boycott activities against Israel".

While US officials have pledged that in order to be accepted into the VWP, Israel would have to treat Americans equally – stressing that "blue is blue" in reference to the colour of the US passport – rights advocates have cast doubt on whether Israel would live up to its commitments.

In July, US and Israeli officials signed a memorandum of understanding to facilitate Israel's entry into the programme. That set off a trial period before the Biden administration makes a final determination by the end of the month.

However, even if fully implemented as intended, experts have said Israel's admission into the programme could still possibly violate the US Constitution, which requires equal treatment under the law.

For instance, the memorandum, a copy of which was shared with Al Jazeera, acknowledges Israel's right to deny admission to Americans based on "legitimate security concerns", a caveat that advocates say Israel may easily abuse to target Palestinian rights supporters.

Moreover, it remains unclear whether US citizens in Gaza would be able to leave the besieged territory under the new regulations.

"If confirmed, this decision is horrible," Abed Ayoub, executive director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) advocacy group, told Al Jazeera in a statement on Monday.

"By allowing for the creation and recognition of different classes of US citizens, our government has endorsed and embraced Israeli discrimination and apartheid. With this decision, the US government will be sending a message that not all American passport holders are equal."

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