

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Your Upcoming Trip to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Dear Mr. President,

On behalf of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), we write to you ahead of your upcoming trip to the Middle East, and in particular your visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. There have been a number of concerning reports regarding both your planned meetings and the issues that you intend on raising. ADC would like to take this opportunity to demand that the humanity of Palestinians be centered in all aspects of your trip.

The human rights of Palestinians living in Israel, the Occupied Territories, and around the world have for too long been willfully ignored in favor of “good relations” with the State of Israel. Mr. President, you can take concrete steps to change this narrative. This can begin by acceding to the following requests:

Meeting with Benjamin Netanyahu will only serve to raise the profile of hard line extremists in Israel, there is no reality in which such a meeting with a non-head of state or member of governmental leadership will result in positive progress towards the recognition of Palestinian human rights.

Benjamin Netanyahu has a long, entrenched history of believing both in the supremacy of Jewish Israelis and in the lack of Palestinian humanity, as evidenced by racist comments and embrace of the use of violence against innocent Palestinians. He is not a member of the current leadership of Israel, and may use your presence to bolster his future political aspirations. By meeting with him, you would be giving life to hard line extremists in Israel. Legitimizing these believers in outright violence against Palestinians would not only be spitting in the face of human rights advocates around the world, but would also demonstrate to millions of Americans that good relations with a foreign official who is not even nominally in charge of any aspect of government is more important than human rights.

*Inclusion in the United States’s Visa Waiver Program is not a matter of negotiation, and cannot happen without full and transparently implemented reciprocity for **all** Americans regardless of their political views, ethnic or religious background.*

The cornerstone of the Visa Waiver Program is reciprocity, a participating state cannot treat Americans differently due to religious or ethnic background. Currently, American citizens who hold Palestinian identity cards are not able to fly into Israel. Instead, they are required to travel to Jordan and cross the Allenby Bridge; a process that can take hours should every aspect go correct. Equally concerning is the arbitrariness that is applied to any Arab American seeking to visit Israel and the Occupied Palestinian

Territories. Arab Americans who only hold American passports face extended periods of interrogation when arriving in Tel Aviv, and their entry into the country is determined by how the particular border control agent feels that particular day. There is no world in which these types of restrictions and requirements comport with the reciprocity necessary for inclusion in the Visa Waiver Program. This reciprocity must be fully implemented before a final decision is made. As many Arab Americans are aware, written rules for travel to Israel are often entirely different from the Israeli border control practices. Written changes without the corresponding changes in practice will result in nothing actually changing for Arab Americans, and specifically Palestinian Americans.

Additionally, it is absolutely imperative that you make clear to the Israeli Government that participation in the Visa Waiver Program is not a matter of negotiating an agreement. Rather, it is a matter of meeting the requirements outlined by law. Any less, and the legitimacy of the entire program will be questioned.

There must be an independent and international investigation into the murder of Shireen Abu Akleh, and the United States has an obligation to demand that Israel fully cooperate with such an investigation.

On May 11, 2022, Palestinian-American Al-Jazeera Journalist Shireen Abu Akleh was murdered by an Israeli sniper in the city of Jenin. Abu Akleh's murder has been confirmed to have come from the Israeli convoy that morning by investigations from the New York Times, Washington Post, CNN and others - and yet the United States government has not forcefully and definitively condemned her killing. It has been over forty days, and it seems that the administration has lost momentum in investigating. Instead of pressing for justice in the murder of one of its citizens, it appears that your administration is hoping that people will forget and move on.

The United States has an obligation to Ms. Abu Akleh, who was American, to find out what happened to her. If this happened in any other country, the US would have at a minimum called for an independent investigation. It is not lost on ADC that Israel has been excused in similar past incidents, such as the murder of Palestinian-American Omar Assad in February 2022, and the brutal beating of fifteen-year-old Palestinian-American Tarik Abukhdeir in 2015. Your visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories is a perfect opportunity to prioritize the safety of Americans by pressing for a full, independent, and international investigation of Ms. Abu Akleh's murder.

The continued eviction of Palestinians, the related demolition of Palestinian homes, and the release of a Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) ordinance severely limiting travel to and from the Occupied Palestinian Territories are an affront to humanity and must be called out.

Israel severely controls every aspect of Palestinian life, both within the borders of the State of Israel and the Occupied Territories, as most recently documented by Amnesty International in their report "Crime of Apartheid: The Government of Israel's System of Oppression Against Palestinians"¹. The most recent examples of this oppression can be seen in the continued eviction of Palestinians, the demolition of Palestinian homes and villages, including the repeated destruction of the Arab Bedouin village of Al-Araqeeb in the southern Negev region, and the COGAT ordinance outlining horrific restrictions on travel to the Occupied West Bank, inhumane invasions of privacy of any Palestinian American looking to

¹ <https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Full-Report.pdf>

travel there, and despicable separation of families highlighted by the inability for spousal visas to be extended for longer than 27 months. As President you have committed to foreign policy that is “centered on the defense of democracy and the protection of human rights”². Should you not press for an immediate cessation of evictions and home demolitions, and for the rescission of the COGAT ordinance, you would be abdicating this supposed central tenet of your foreign policy.

We at ADC appreciate the complexities of every international trip the President makes. However, centering human rights in U.S. foreign policy means that the above issues and requests be among your top priorities during your upcoming visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. ADC stands ready to assist your team in ensuring the humanity of Palestinians is at the forefront of this trip. Thank you for your consideration of this letter. Should you or your team have further questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to my team.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'S. Khalaf', written over a horizontal line.

Samer Khalaf

CC:

The Honorable Antony Blinken, Secretary of State
The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas, Secretary of Homeland Security
The Honorable Merrick Garland, Attorney General of the United States

² <https://www.state.gov/putting-human-rights-at-the-center-of-u-s-foreign-policy/>