



United States Department of State

*Washington, D.C. 20520*

APR 17 2014

Dear Ms. Lowey:

Thank you for your letter regarding visas for young Israelis. Secretary Kerry shares your concerns about the increase in visa refusals over the last five years and has directed the Department to take a range of immediate actions to ensure that, consistent with U.S. immigration law, we make every effort to maximize the number of young Israelis able to travel to the United States. The Secretary has directed us to address these matters quickly and comprehensively.

We reviewed data on refusal rates for tourist visas for Israelis from the age of 21 to 26 and found that visa rejection rates have doubled from 16% in 2009 to 32% in 2013. We know that despite a two-thirds approval rate, this increase has led to a perception by some that young Israelis are unwelcome to travel to the United States. Clearly, that is not the case. Israel is one of our closest friends and allies, and we welcome interchange between Israelis and Americans in every manner, including travel by Israelis to the United States. The Department can and will do more to encourage and assist qualified Israelis to visit the United States.

In our initial review, we have learned that there had been increased rates of overstays and illegal employment, particularly for young Israeli visa holders, and that these trends had been observed over a number of years. While we are at the early stages of our review, we have learned that adjustments intended to help spot and prevent visa abuse have led to the increase in the visa refusal rate for young Israelis age 21 – 26. As you know, the law requires our Consular Officers to exercise their judgment and taking into account recent data and past experiences, and fine-tuning for local norms and customs, to maximize legitimate travel by ensuring that qualified travelers receive visas while minimizing visa abuse and fraud. It is not uncommon for adjustments to be made over time as the facts on the ground change.

The Honorable  
Nita Lowey,  
House of Representatives.

The Secretary has directed the Department to examine how we can improve the visa process to ensure that all qualified Israelis, particularly young Israelis, are able to travel to the U.S. To do this, we are taking the following actions:

First, the Secretary is directing relevant offices in Washington and overseas to review policies and procedures on visa adjudication and review, with a focus on applicants age 21 -- 26. The Secretary's senior staff will also participate. The purpose of this review is:

- To ensure there are no extraneous issues impacting decisions by consular officers at Post with respect to the granting of visas to otherwise qualified applicants;
- To ensure that legitimate concerns regarding overstays and illegal employment by some do not result in otherwise qualified applicants being denied under 214(b) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA);
- To ensure that our visa adjudication procedures are consistent with our stated policy to facilitate travel by qualified young Israelis to the United States, unless specifically prohibited by law.

Second, we fully recognize that our visa laws do provide some flexibility. As you know, the presumption of immigrant intent part of the law, with the burden of proof on the applicant to demonstrate otherwise. That said, our consulates and consular sections do adjust their policies and procedures to adapt to the culture and patterns of the country in which they are working. Together with relevant offices in Washington, Embassy Tel Aviv is evaluating whether our policies and procedures match with the facts and customs on the ground in Israel and will make any adjustments where necessary.

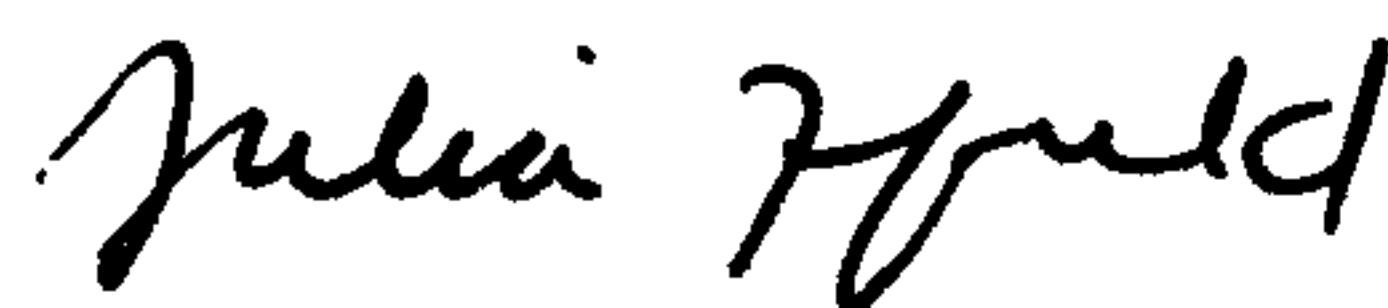
Third, we will expand outreach and assistance to Israelis applying for visas through education of the Israeli public on how to successfully navigate the visa process, with full transparency of the standards applied. We agree that, particularly for young people, this can be a costly and sometimes high-pressure process. We believe that full information will benefit both the applicants and our consular officers who are adjudicating applications, so that fewer surprises occur on the day of the interview.

Fourth, the Department will develop recommendations for creating alternative programs to enable more young Israelis to participate in cultural exchanges in the United States. Because many of these young Israelis are not yet enrolled in higher education programs, they are ineligible for certain short-term cultural exchange programs that have an employment component that Israeli and other students participate in under the J visa. There have been examples of cultural exchange programs designed for specific countries, [most recently for Ireland and Australia,] that include a work component. Such a program could be tailored for young Israelis. We look forward to working with Congress on the design and implementation of such a program with you. In addition, we will increase publicity for young Israelis about existing short-term cultural exchange programs with an employment component that are not limited to those enrolled in higher education, such as the camp counselor and au pair programs.

Finally, and perhaps in the long term most importantly, the Department, together with the Department of Homeland Security, is creating a joint U.S.-Israeli working group to help Israel move toward eligibility for the Visa Waiver Program, including through reduction of the overall refusal rate. This is a goal of both the United States and Israel, and it would make travel easier for citizens of both countries.

The Secretary wants these matters addressed with some urgency, and these steps will be regularly reviewed by his senior staff. We appreciate your leadership on this matter and the constructive suggestions of your staff in developing these proposals. We plan to report back to you in July on our progress in implementing these proposals and in the months that follow, and will stay in close contact with you as we address this issue.

Sincerely,



Julia Frifield  
Assistant Secretary  
Legislative Affairs