

Of Tourists And Terrorists; U.S. Visa Policy Irks Israelis

July 22, 2003

Thomas Frank

Newsweek (New York)

Washington - The government's effort to prevent terrorists from entering the United States is prompting an unlikely protest from a staunch ally - Israel.

The dispute, which Israeli officials will raise with the Bush administration today, centers on a new policy requiring U.S. consulates to interview many more foreigners before letting them visit the United States.

Millions of travelers now must go to U.S. consulates weeks or months before their trip to seek a visa previously available by mail. The policy, implemented over recent months, becomes official Aug. 1.

Israel might find the policy tolerable if it were applied evenly. But it is not. Nationals from 27 countries face no interviews or background checks for visits up to 90 days because the United States exempts them from all visa requirements. Longer-term visitors need a visa, and everyone faces a quick review at a U.S. port of entry.

The visa-waiver countries include the United States' strongest allies and trading partners such as Britain, Germany and France - but not Israel, which exceeds the annual allotment of rejected visas.

As increased scrutiny of U.S.-bound Israelis delays travel, Israeli Ambassador Danny Ayalon is lobbying to have Israel waived from visa requirements. Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom has discussed the issue with Secretary of State Colin Powell and is expected to raise it with Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge today in Washington.

But their efforts collide with the post-Sept. 11 caution on admitting visitors and a recognition that

about 1 million of the 6 million Israelis are Arabs, who are likely to draw more scrutiny. Israeli Jews also draw scrutiny from increasingly watchful U.S. consular officers if they were born in countries such as Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Iran - facts noted on Israeli passports.

"Nobody wants to be the visa officer who lets a terrorist into the country," said a congressional aide close to the issue, recalling the outcry after revelations that all the Sept. 11 hijackers had been given visas by U.S. consulates. "It's a complicated issue. We're working with the State Department and trying to deal with it. But it's going to be difficult."

The State Department waives visas only for stable, friendly countries whose citizens are considered unlikely to cause harm or to overstay short-term visas and become illegal immigrants. A waiver is granted when less than 3 percent of a country's annual visa applicants are rejected. Israel exceeds that rate.

For Israel, requiring visas of its roughly 300,000 annual visitors to the United States is anomalous to its own fight against terrorism and its close ties to the United States. "Does anyone really think an Israeli national is going to be involved in terrorist attacks?" said Mark Regev, an Israeli Embassy spokesman. "We think a common-sense approach to Israelis is called for."

Some in Congress are echoing that view. "Many Israelis have felt it to be insulting," said Rep. Jan **Schakowsky**, a Democrat whose suburban Chicago district includes many Jews.

Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) said at a hearing July 10 that requiring visas of Israelis was "discrimination against Israel." Waxman said an Israeli woman who had been visiting the United States regularly over the last 20 years recently faced such a long delay in getting a visa for her latest visit that "she missed the birth of a grandchild."

Business, academic and travel organizations, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, say the additional interviews will hurt the economy by keeping visitors away. They want a postponement of the new interview policy and a substantial increase in the number of consular officers. Sixty percent of the 28 million visitors to the United States last year required visas including nationals of key trading partners South Korea and India.

Meanwhile, Poland is trying to become a visa-waiver country. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), calling the country a "loyal ally," will ask Congress to waive visas for Poland. The measure is likely to fail, but will launch a long-term campaign.

But Janice Jacobs, the State Department official in charge of visa services, acknowledged that consular offices with large numbers of visa applicants "will have a tougher time coming into compliance with the [interview] policy."