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United States Senate

APPROPRIATIONS
BANKING, HOUSING, AND
URBAN AFFAIRS
BUDGET
FOREIGN RELATIONS

July 1, 2024

The Honorable Antony Blinken
United States Secretary of State
The State Department
2201 C Street Northwest Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

As you know, protecting and supporting U.S. citizens abroad is one of the foremost responsibilities of the U.S. Department of State. Since the beginning of 2024, two American citizens, Tawfic Abdel Jabbar and Mohammad Ahmad Alkhdour, both teenagers, have been killed in the West Bank. A third U.S. citizen, journalist Dylan Collins, was injured when a group of fellow journalists came under Israeli fire in Lebanon on October 13, 2023. I write to ask that you provide information related to actions the Department has taken to ensure credible and transparent investigations into each of these incidents and to pursue appropriate accountability for those responsible. In addition, for the reasons stated below, I ask for information regarding the Netanyahu government's compliance with the terms of the Visa Waiver Program.

Thank you for your March 26, 2024 response to my letter related to the killing of U.S. citizen Tawfic Abdel Jabbar in the West Bank. State Department staff from the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs briefed my staff on the deaths of U.S. citizens in the West Bank on two occasions and I joined a third briefing from Diplomatic Security. I applaud the efforts the team at Embassy Jerusalem has made to support U.S. citizens dealing with the killing of family members. However, the three briefings revealed a very troubling issue: no office at State appears to be actively monitoring and following up on the status of any Israeli investigations into the killings of Tawfic Abdel Jabbar and Mohammad Ahmad Alkhdour, and none of these offices viewed such ongoing engagement as part of their official responsibilities.

My February 23, 2024 letter explicitly asked for a briefing related to what steps the Department was taking to ensure that a thorough investigation was being conducted into the killing of Tawfic Abel Jabbar. When Consular and Near Eastern Affairs officials briefed my staff, they informed them that neither bureau has a role in the investigation of this matter nor in acting as the liaison with the Israeli government regarding their investigation. My staff asked which office does play that role and were directed to Diplomatic Security. During their briefing with me, Diplomatic Security told me that

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Consular is in fact the lead office responsible for tracking investigations into U.S. citizens killed abroad. When I pushed the Diplomatic Security briefers for any information on the investigations, they suggested I contact the Israeli Embassy in Washington. It is extremely distressing to learn that nobody in the U.S. government believes it is their responsibility to ensure that the Government of Israel is conducting a credible and transparent investigation into the killing of an American citizen. If this is not the case, please let me know who has this ongoing responsibility.

Sadly, Tawfic Abdel Jabbar was not the only U.S. citizen killed in the West Bank so far this year. On February 10, 2024, Mohammad Ahmad Alkhdour was shot twice in the head near the town of Biddu in the West Bank. Mohammed, like Tawfic, was just 17 years old. According to press reporting, “US Embassy officials visited the home and the scene of the shooting Thursday, taking pictures of the car Alkhdour was driving and the scene around it.”^[1] As in the case of Tawfic, I would like to know who, if anyone, is in charge of tracking the progress of any investigation into the killing of Mohammad Ahmad Alkhdour, and request a briefing with such person or office. You will find a signed privacy act waiver attached to this letter.

In addition to the cases of these two U.S. citizens killed in the West Bank, I would like to know if the U.S. government is conducting an investigation into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) attack on a group of journalists in Alma Al-Shaab, Lebanon, that injured an American citizen. On October 13, 2023, tank fire struck a group of international journalists, killing a Reuters videographer, Issam Abdallah, and wounding six others.^[2] One of the six journalists wounded was U.S. citizen Dylan Collins, whom I have met with. Amnesty International, which conducted an in-depth investigation into the incident and the munitions used in the attack, stated that the tank round used in the incident was Israeli-made.^[3] Amnesty further noted that the United States provides Israel very similar munitions, including the tank rounds provided in an emergency sale to Israel in December 2023.^[4] Reuters also conducted its own investigation into the attack and concluded that “the evidence we now have, and have published today, shows that an Israeli tank crew killed our colleague Issam Abdallah.”^[5] In response to an inquiry from Reuters after their investigation, an IDF spokesman said “We don’t target journalists” and provided no further comment. I would like to know what actions the United States Government has taken to investigate this attack, which killed a journalist, and injured six others, including an American.

Finally, I have heard numerous reports that the Netanyahu government has not allowed some Palestinian Americans to enter and exit Israel via Ben Gurion Airport as required by the terms of the Visa Waiver Program. On May 1, 2024, Hafeth Abdel Jabbar, Tawfic’s father, informed my staff that he and members of his family, all of whom are U.S. citizens, were banned from entering Israel. The Government of Israel imposed these travel restrictions months after Tawfic’s killing. While I understand that, following outreach by Embassy Jerusalem, the Israeli Government reversed this travel ban on Hafeth and his wife, it remains in place for Tawfic’s 22-year old brother Amir. This raises questions about the Government of Israel’s commitment to reciprocity as required by the Visa Waiver Program. And this is not the first such report I have received. As you know, I raised concerns about the need to ensure equal treatment of all U.S. citizens – regardless of ethnicity, national origin, and religion – when

¹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-sends-investigators-to-west-bank-following-killings-of-two-palestinian-americans/>

^[3] <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/lebanon-deadly-attack-by-israeli-authorities-on-journalists-must-be-investigated-as-a-war-crime/>

^[4] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/12/30/us-weapons-sale-israel-blinken/>

^[5] <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/ISRAEL-LEBANON/JOURNALIST/akveabxrzvr/>

the Administration was considering Israel's candidacy for the Visa Waiver Program. Incidents like these raise doubts about how faithfully the Netanyahu government is adhering to the requirements of the Visa Waiver Program. I would like to request a briefing on the Government of Israel's compliance with the Visa Waiver Program, particularly regarding the principle of reciprocity.

I look forward to your written response to the questions and concerns raised in this letter and please have your office coordinate with my staff to set up the requested briefings.

Sincerely,
Chris Van Hollen

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Van Hollen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Chris" being the most prominent part.

CC: Ambassador Jacob Lew