



Israel Still Most Favored in Mideast; Visa Limits Cost US \$123 Billion

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1. Easing Visa Rules Could Bring in \$123 Billion a Year

Eliminating travel visas for many foreigners could increase the number of tourists in the United States by up to 67 million a year and boost annual tourist spending by more than \$120 billion, a new report asserts.

The U.S. government requires most foreigners to obtain a travel visa if they want to visit America, in order to prevent unauthorized immigrants, terrorists, and other undesirables from entering the country disguised as tourists.

But the process of obtaining a travel visa is onerous, according to the report from three experts published by the Cato Institute.

First, potential visitors must fill out an online application and pay an application fee of \$160 per visa. Then they must submit to two separate interviews, one involving fingerprinting and intrusive questions.

These interviews are usually held at an American embassy or consulate. This requires significant travel for many. In Brazil, for example, there are only four of these locations in a country as large as the continental United States.

Delays in obtaining a visa are commonplace, and the U.S. government recommends not confirming travel plans until receiving a visa. And visas can be denied for any reason.

Over 42 million tourists visited the United States in 2012. Easing visa requirements that discourage many foreigners from visiting could bring in an additional 45 million to 67 million tourists, mainly from Mexico, Brazil, India, and China, adding at least \$90 billion and as much as \$123 billion to the U.S. economy.

The report authors suggest that nations that pose no security threat or limited threat to the United States, and countries whose citizens do not have a history of illegal immigration, should be included in the Visa Waiver Program. This program currently allows citizens of 37 countries to visit without a visa provided they stay less than 90 days.

Another option is reciprocity — the United States would not demand visas for tourists from a country that does not require American citizens to obtain a visa to visit there.

Current visa requirements "impose a substantial cost on the American economy by severely inhibiting tourism in the United States," the authors contend. "Many sectors of the American economy are heavily dependent on tourist spending.

"By making it unnecessarily costly and difficult for foreigners to visit the country, the United States is impeding economic growth that would occur under a more sensible visa policy."

The report's authors are economists Robert A. Lawson of Southern Methodist University, Saurav Roychoudhury of Capital University, and Ryan Murphy of Southern Methodist University.

2. Americans Least Concerned About Aging Population

The global population of people age 65 and older is projected to triple to 1.5 billion by the middle of this century, but attitudes toward aging populations vary greatly around the world, a survey of 21 nations reveals.

Concerns are highest in East Asia. In Japan, 87 percent of those polled by the Pew Research Center said the growing number of older people is a "major problem" in that country.

In South Korea, 79 percent feel that way, as do 67 percent in China, 55 percent in Germany, and 52 percent in Spain.

More than 40 percent see an aging population as a major problem in France, Britain, Russia, and Italy.

In the United States, just 26 percent said they are concerned, the lowest percentage among the developed countries surveyed by Pew.

These attitudes are closely related to the pattern of aging around the world, according to the Pew survey of more than 22,400 people.

In Japan, where concerns are high, 36.5 percent of the population is expected to be age 65 and older by 2050, up from 23 percent in 2010. In South Korea, 34.9 percent will be elderly by mid-century, up from 11.1 percent.

China expects the percentage of the population age 65 and older to soar from 8.3 percent in 2010 to 23.9 percent in 2050.

At the other end of the scale, just 2.7 percent of the population in Nigeria is age 65 and older, and that figure will be only 3.8 percent in 2050.

In the United States, 13 percent of the population was age 65 and older in 2010. That figure is projected to increase to 21.4 percent by mid-century, when the elderly will outnumber children younger than 15.

"American public opinion on aging differs dramatically from the views of the nation's major economic and political partners," Pew observed. "Americans are less likely than most of the global public to view the growing number of older people as a major problem.

"They are more confident than Europeans that they will have an adequate standard of living in their old age. And the U.S. is one of very few countries where a large plurality of the public believes individuals are primarily responsible for their own well-being in old age."

Pew concludes: "To the extent that demography is destiny, the U.S. may be in a position to experience a more robust economic future in comparison with other developed nations."

3. Vietnam Rejects Appeal From Jailed Catholic Lawyer

Authorities in Vietnam have rejected a legal appeal by prominent Catholic lawyer and human rights defender Le Quoc Quan, who began a hunger strike behind bars on Feb. 2.

Le Quoc Quan was jailed after being convicted of "tax evasion," a verdict widely viewed as politically motivated, according to CNS News.

A panel of judges in Hanoi on Tuesday upheld the sentence of 30 months in prison, plus a fine of about \$60,000, rejecting calls for his release from U.S. lawmakers and a coalition of human rights and press freedom advocates.

"The use of tax laws by Vietnamese authorities to imprison government critics for peacefully expressing their political views is disturbing," said State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki. "We call on the government to release prisoners of conscience and allow all Vietnamese to peacefully express their political views."

Le Quoc Quan's detention was condemned last year by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention for violating his right to freedom of expression and his right to a fair trial, the London-based human rights group Article 19 reported.

The group found that Le Quoc Quan had been targeted for his work as a lawyer and blogger and called for his immediate release.

Le Quoc Quan was arrested and imprisoned in December 2012 on "baseless" charges of tax evasion, according to Article 19. He was denied permission to see his lawyer for two months, and requests by family members to visit him were denied. He was convicted 10 months later.

He began his hunger strike after prison officials denied him access to a priest and to a Bible and law books he needed to help prepare his appeal.

The Catholic lawyer was first arrested in 2007 after returning from a National Endowment for Democracy fellowship in the United States, and accused of subversion.

He was released three months later following protests from the United States, but he was disbarred and hospitalized after an attack by unknown assailants that reportedly was never investigated by police.

Le Quoc Quan was arrested again in 2012 after posting an online article critical of Vietnam's constitution, which exalts the Communist Party of Vietnam, CNS disclosed.

Reporters Without Borders asserts that Vietnam has the second largest number of people detained for online activism, after China.

As the Insider Report noted earlier, Open Doors USA's latest report included Vietnam among those nations guilty of "severe persecution" of Christians.

Yet the United States in 2006 granted Vietnam permanent normal trade relations and removed it from a list of "countries of particular concern" for freedom of religion abuses

4. CBO: Debt to Reach 80% of GDP in a Decade

An ominous new report from the Congressional Budget Office paints a bleak picture for America's future, projecting that entitlement spending will send the federal deficit soaring beyond previous estimates.

Federal entitlement spending is projected to rise at an average annual rate of 5.9 percent over the coming decade, increasing spending from \$2.1 trillion this year to \$3.7 trillion in 2024.

The CBO also projects that the federal budget deficit will rise to more than 4 percent of GDP in the latter part of the coming decade. From 2015 to 2024, the cumulative deficit will reach \$7.9 trillion, \$1 trillion higher than previously projected.

That would push debt held by the public to nearly 80 percent of GDP in 2024, "far above the post-war norm for the United States and perilously close to levels from which it is hard to recover," James C. Capretta noted in an article published by the Manhattan Institute's Economic Policies for the 21st Century.

But the actual economic situation could be far worse. The CBO projections assume an average annual growth rate in discretionary spending of only 1.8 percent. This would likely take defense spending as a percentage of GDP down to levels "not seen in the post-war era — at a time when global conflicts and potential threats are clearly on the rise," observed Capretta, a senior fellow at the Ethics & Public Policy Center and a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

Looking further into the future, deficits are projected to rise even more sharply in years beyond the coming decade due to an aging population and healthcare inflation. The CBO expects debt

held by the public to reach 190 percent of GDP by 2038. And that's assuming the nation will not experience another serious economic downturn.

What's more, the CBO projections don't include data on total state debt, which the Insider Report last week disclosed has already topped \$5 trillion.

"At the beginning of the Obama presidency, the administration convened a fiscal responsibility summit during which there was a lot of talk about the need to finally address the ticking time bomb of runaway entitlement spending," Capretta wrote. "Suffice it to say that, in year 6 of the Obama presidency, people are not holding their breath that a breakthrough on entitlements is imminent."

He concluded: "It would be far better to take action now and head off the crisis before it ever happens than to wait for the crisis to hit and then attempt to scale back benefit commitments."

5. U.S. Poll: Israel Still Most Favored Mideast Nation

Despite recent friction between Israel and the United States over Israel's construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, Americans still view Israel as their most favored country in the Middle East, according to a new Gallup poll.

In fact, the 72 percent of poll respondents who say they have a "very favorable" view of Israel is the highest percentage since Gallup began the poll in 2010.

Back then, 67 percent viewed Israel very favorably, as did 66 percent last year.

The Gallup poll also found that 45 percent of Americans view Egypt favorably, up from 40 percent last year but down sharply from 58 percent in 2010.

As for Saudi Arabia, 35 percent view that nation favorably, while just 19 percent view Libya favorably, and 19 percent have a favorable view of the Palestinian Authority, virtually unchanged from 20 percent in 2010 but up from 15 percent last year.

Just 16 percent view Iraq favorably, and only 13 percent have a favorable view of Syria, an all-time low and the lowest percentage of all this year with the exception of Iran's 12 percent.

On Wednesday, the same day the Gallup results were released, Human Rights Watch reported that the Syrian government was using banned cluster bombs on its own citizens during the ongoing civil war.

A witness told the organization that a rocket that fell on the town of Keferzita "released small bomblets when it exploded in the air," the Jerusalem post reported.

Steve Goose, Human Rights Watch's arms division director, declared: "It is appalling that Syrian government forces are still using banned cluster munitions on their people."

