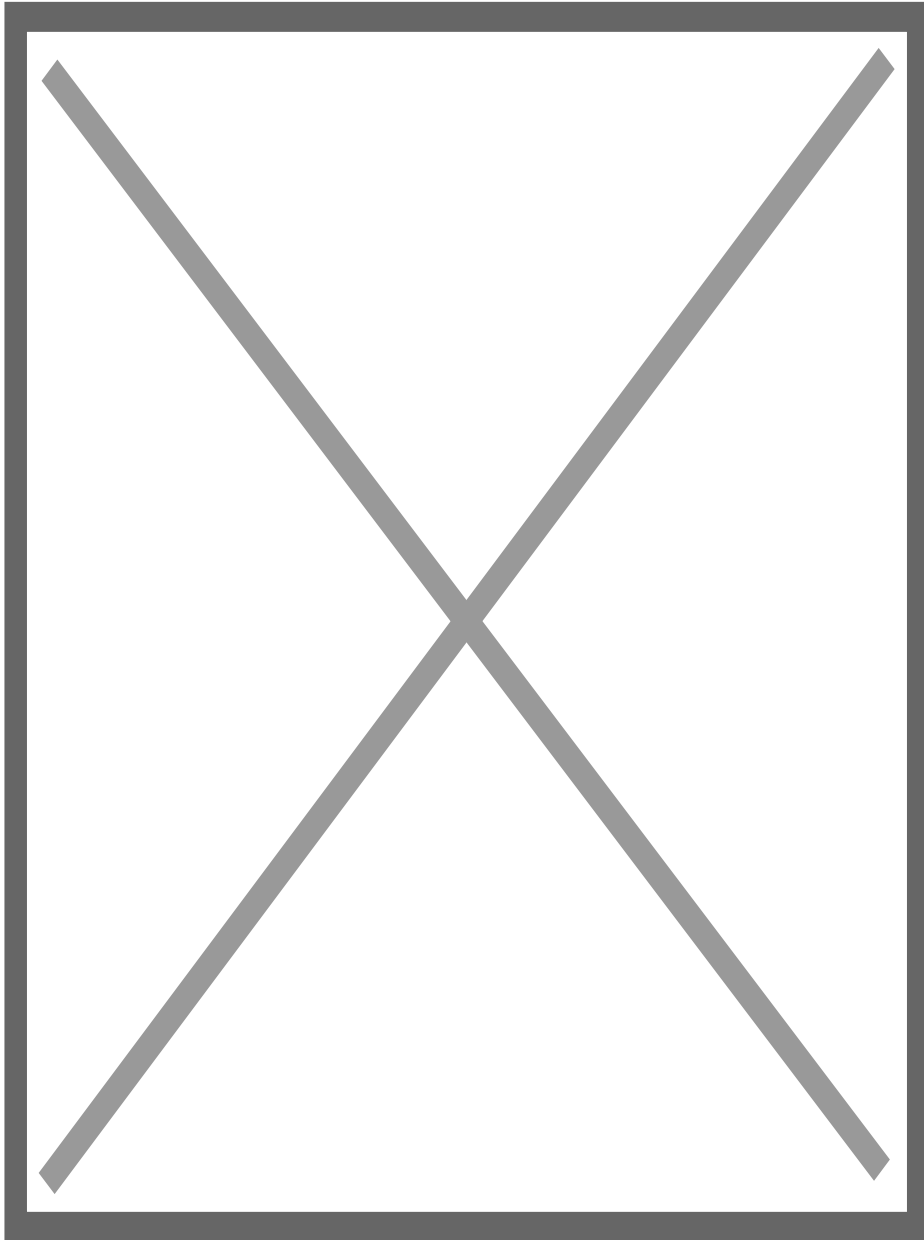


US citizens denied entry to Israel for trip to learn about Palestinian Christians

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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Seven of the 13 members of the delegation to Israel gathered for a photo prior to crossing the border and being denied entry. (Photo courtesy of Edward Phillips)

A group of 13 United States citizens who traveled to Israel to take part in a weeklong trip with a Christian organization dedicated to Palestinian liberation theology were denied entry at the border last week.

The interfaith group, led by retired Emory University theology professor L. Edward Phillips and his wife, Sara Webb Phillips, an ordained United Methodist minister, were set to tour Jerusalem and West Bank sites with the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, a 40-year-old nonprofit organization registered in Israel.

They traveled from the US to Jordan and had planned to enter Israel via the Sheikh Hussein Crossing when they were interrogated by Israeli border agents. Nine were initially granted visas and allowed into Israel, while four were denied. Then in a turnabout, Israeli border authorities boarded a bus where the nine were waiting and seized and cancelled their visas.

“I always wanted to be first at something,” said L. Edward Phillips, 71, who taught historical theology and worship at Emory’s Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, speaking by phone from Jordan. “Now I’m the first person to lead a Christian delegation into the West Bank to be categorically denied entry.”

Israel’s Border Control Administration, part of the Ministry of Interior, did not respond to emailed requests for comment.

Sabeel’s director, Omar Haramy, said that although Israel has denied entry to a handful of individuals over the years, it has never denied an entire delegation.

“This is something you don’t expect in a country that labels itself as a liberal democracy,” Haramy said. “This is how you’d expect somebody going into Iran or Iraq or North Korea. You don’t expect a group of interfaith people, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, with a clean record, many of them professors, graduates of top-notch universities, to get treated like this.”

Sabeel, which has welcomed thousands of visitors to Israel and the West Bank over the years, is appealing the denial of two in the group. Jonathan Kuttab, a lawyer and the executive director of Friends of Sabeel North America, an affiliate organization, said Israel does not allow groups to appeal.

Two reasons were cited for each of the denials: public safety and immigration considerations, specifically that some members of the group might overstay their visas, Kuttab said.

Kuttab also protested the Israeli decision to the U.S. Embassy and Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee. The State Department did not respond immediately to request for comment.

In the past couple years, the Israeli government has arrested and [swiftly deported](#) dozens of international activists, including US Jews who traveled to Israel as volunteers with nonprofits to help Palestinians in the West Bank.

Both Muslims and Christians in the West Bank have suffered escalating violence at the hands of Israeli settlers and/or the Israeli army. A United Nations [report](#) from late July estimated 2,000 such attacks will occur by the end of 2026—an all-time high.

Israel has not routinely denied access for tourists on short stays.

But that may be changing.

Sara Webb Phillips, among the last four delegation members denied visas, said she was hectoring and intimidated by border agents, accused of being an activist and asked to write down every organization she is a part of. She listed the Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, and the Atlanta Community Food Bank. Sabeel is not a membership organization.

“They were bullying me, and finally (the border agent) says, ‘We know about your work. We know you are with Sabeel,’ and she said, ‘You know they’re a terrorist organization,’ and I said, ‘No. They’re an organization that’s working peacefully for Palestinian rights,’” Phillips said.

Friends of Sabeel North America, or FOSNA, has called for an investigation into the incident and posted a [petition](#) to its website.

The eight-day trip was supposed to include stops in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron, and meetings with Palestinian Christians in those cities, many of whom have endured Israel’s brutal occupation. The itinerary also included a trip to Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust museum.

L. Edward Phillips said the purpose of the trip, like several others he has participated in over the years, was to learn about Palestinian Christians’ lives and to tell others about what they saw.

“This is a come see what’s happening, learn about the situation, and go back and tell the stories trip,” he said. “We tell the stories of the people we’ve encountered, the histories of the places we’ve seen, the strength of the people locally that are putting up with amazing odds and the tradition of ‘sumud,’ or perseverance.” —Religion News Service