

Unofficial advice for Palestinians wishing to visit the United Kingdom, February 2020

Palestinians wishing to visit the UK for the first time are advised to apply for a visit visa.

Types of visit visa include;

- Business Visit,
- Medical Treatment,
- Family Visit,
- General Visit

If your visit is for the purpose of tourism, then you should apply as a General Visitor.

These visas are valid for six months. It can be used to gain entry for a single trip to the UK, or to enter the UK again for the same purpose during the 6 month period of visa validity. Extended validity visit visas exist, valid for 2 years, 5 years or 10 years. Applications for these will not be successful unless you have previously been issued with a number of 6 month visas, and have travelled and complied with the visa conditions on each occasion.

If your intention is to study in the UK, you need to apply for a study visa.

Please take a look at this website for visit visa guidance on which visa you should apply for; www.gov.uk/browse/visas-immigration/tourist-short-stay-visas.

Application Process

1. Make an appointment with the Visa Application Centre (VAC) nearest to you (in East Jerusalem, Ramallah or Gaza City). There is a booking system for appointments – please book early.
2. Ensure that you submit your application at the VAC 6 – 8 weeks before your planned travel.
3. Complete the visa application form on-line, and pay the fee on-line, using your credit card (not any other method of payment). Print a copy of the completed application form to bring with you to the VAC
4. Bring the forms and receipts with your passport and originals of all supporting documents, including the original of any letter of invitation you may have (faxes and emails can be tampered with, and thus are not accepted by UK Visas and Immigration - UKVI).
5. At the VAC you give your fingerprints, and hand in all the papers with your passport. Your passport and papers go to the UKVI Office at the British Embassy in Amman for consideration. Your passport will be returned to you only after the decision on your visa application. It can take several weeks for a decision to be made. Hence the need to apply early. You can pay extra for the Priority Service, which guarantees earlier

consideration of your application. If you can afford the Priority Service, it is best to use it.

6. It will then be necessary to wait for an answer, 6 – 8 weeks .
7. Return of passport with covering letter and visa, if successful. Possible appeal or replication if unsuccessful.

Criteria for visa approval

On the UKVI website, www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-rules-appendix-v-visitor-rules, there is an explanation of what the Entry Clearance Officer (ECO) will take into account when considering your application.

The ECO at UKVI (Amman) needs to be convinced of three things:

- (a) that you will not be a charge to public funds – ie will not seek benefits or health care on the UK National Health Service during the visit(s); and
- (b) that you are entering for the purpose of visiting the UK only, not for any other reason; and
- (c) that you will leave the UK before the expiry of the visa.

These are key considerations for the ECO. In addition, the ECO will consider whether you have applied for the right kind of visa. There are different application forms for study or work or medical treatment in the UK. It is wrong to apply for a visit visa if the aim of the visit is paid employment, study, or medical treatment.

Your passport

Your passport must have more than six months' validity remaining, so that when the visa is issued the passport is valid for the duration of the six month visit visa.

Supporting documents

The ECO in Amman will not have the opportunity to meet you, or to ask any questions direct. This means that the application form and supporting documents need to be as comprehensive as possible.

Please bear in mind the considerations which the ECO must address before deciding whether to issue the visa. It is important to provide clear written evidence, in English, that you have enough money to maintain yourself in the UK for the duration of the visit(s), and that you will indeed leave the UK before the expiry of the visa.

- (a) The ECO want to see written proof in English that visitors have enough personal funds to cover the cost of the visit and accommodation in the UK, even with a letter of invitation from a group or body in the UK willing to guarantee that it will cover those costs. Expect the ECO to ask to see a recent personal bank statement (in English) from you, with the bank account containing adequate funds. It is important

that the funds in your bank account are not deposited there within four weeks before you application. Large deposits made into your account in the run-up to your application will arouse suspicion.

- (b) Regarding the question of your likely return to Palestine, it is useful for you to spell out in writing your family ties in Palestine. Make it clear that you have every intention of rejoining the family after the visit. In addition, if you are employed, it is useful to attach a letter in English from your employer making it clear that you are going to the UK with the approval of the employer, and that your employment is being held open for you to resume on return to Palestine.
- (c) On returning to Palestine this can be related to (b) but should be stated clearly that visitors will return and the dates they intend to.

The more comprehensive the application and supporting documents are, the stronger the chance of a successful application. Do not produce any false evidence if you feel that you do not have enough. This will lead to investigations into fraud and will lead to a 10 year ban from entry into the UK. If you have been refused a UK visa at any time previously, you need to say so.

Letter of invitation

Often a Palestinian applicant will have received a letter of invitation from a sponsor in the UK – a friend or relative, or an organisation interested in strengthening UK/Palestinian ties. A letter of invitation is very useful – but not sufficient of itself to guarantee that a visa will be granted. The task of the ECO is to assess the intentions and circumstances of the individual applicant, not of the person or organisation in Britain issuing the invitation. The ECO needs to see evidence that applicants will return home at the end of the proposed visit. To assess this, the ECO takes into consideration applicants personal and financial circumstances, including any assets, employment or family dependants as evidence of strong ties to Palestine, and commitment to return there. So applicants need to provide evidence of their personal circumstances, including their financial status, even if they are not financing the visit personally.

The ECO is able to take into account the support (from the United Kingdom) for an applicant's case for visiting Britain. However, the ECO will not accept this as being sufficient. Any assurances or guarantees made from Britain on an applicant's behalf are not legally enforceable, and thus cannot be relied on.

The invitation letter needs to spell out the terms of the invitation; who is doing the inviting, what the purpose of the visit is, and what costs are they guaranteeing to cover. If the invitation states that the sponsor is covering some or all of the costs the sponsor must produce bank statements confirming that they are willing and have adequate funds to do this. The sponsor needs to spell out whether the funds in the bank account will be reserved for you only, or for several applicants at the same time – and if so, how many. The more applicants that are involved, the more funds are needed in the account.

To sum up – a letter of invitation from Britain may be necessary or at least highly desirable – but it is not sufficient on its own. If at all possible, the letter of invitation should be an original – not a fax or email or a photocopy. The letter of invitation can be sent to Palestine by courier, eg DHL, or post, if sufficient time is allowed. Scanned copies of the invitation letter and any other supporting documents from the UK are acceptable to UKVI as long as the scanning is of good quality, but originals are preferred.

The letter of invitation should be attached to the print-out of the application form and taken with all supporting documents to the VAC appointment

While UKVI can only consider the evidence supplied with the application form, and is not open to external influence, there may well be advantage in associating a VIP with the letter of invitation. A Member of Parliament, a Member of the House of Lords, the local Mayor... This is not essential, but can help if there are questions about the application, or if the visa is refused for some reason and you need to reapply. Involving a relevant VIP does no harm.

The British Consulate-General in East Jerusalem

The Consulate-General does not decide who is granted a visa. Decisions on issuing visas are made by British officials from the Home Office (the British Ministry of the Interior) based in the British Embassy in Amman. Nevertheless, if you know a member of staff of the Consulate-General, you can let them know that you are applying to visit the UK, and seek their advice. In some circumstances the Consulate-General can indicate to Amman that you are known to them.

In the event of refusal – reapply

If a visa is refused, usually the swiftest course of action is for you to reapply, paying the visa application fee again, and taking full account of the reasons given in the letter from the ECO which will accompany the returned passport. Those reasons must be addressed and answered fully in the reapplication. The visa application form contains a question “Have you ever been refused a visa to the UK?”. It is essential to answer “Yes” to this question in the reapplication and vital if the rest of the application is to be credible. Answering “No” in these circumstances will lead to a 10 year ban from entry into the UK, as will including any falsehood or similar fraudulent inclusion in the application.

The appeal process

It is possible, in certain circumstances, to appeal against a visa refusal. The circumstances are normally set out in the ECO’s letter. If you decide to appeal, the appeal must be lodged quickly. However, the appeal process can take several months, with no guarantee of success. A fresh application, paying the fee again, is often the best way forward.

Final thought

The British Government and the British people welcome valid visa applicants to visit the United Kingdom. The vast majority of Palestinians apply successfully for a visit visa, because

they understand the rules and submit applications in good time with a lot of supporting documents to accompany them. If, for any reason, your first application is unsuccessful, do not take it personally. The issue is with the application, not with you. Instead, read the ECO's explanation carefully, and make sure that your next application answers all the points in that letter.