

Congressional Accompaniment Program - Q&A

Answers provided by Darrell Yeany, Presbyterian campus minister and active in Friends of Sabeel

Q:

A friend writes that realizing her own reservations about going to Israel/Palestine, she has concerns for the safety of congresspersons and their staffers. How do you address questions/concerns about safety?

A:

As you know, Americans are treated very hospitably in both Israel and Palestine by the vast majority of the population. The Sabeel staff, our host and tour guides, are in close touch with the situation and take precautions not to schedule visits in any location where there might be danger. Consequently we did not go to Gaza on either of our previous visits. In all of our eight trips to Israel/Palestine we have encountered a dangerous situation only once and that was when we had to duck stones thrown by Israeli settlers in Hebron. The US Consulate in Jerusalem has told us that if we request it, they will accompany our visits into the west bank. We have not felt the need to request such accompaniment in past trips. Security & safety concern has not been a factor in spite of the news stories that suggest a false picture of the risks in "holy land" travel. Thousands of tourists will be in the area while we are there, which further enhances the security situation.

Q:

Are there safety waivers that participants need to sign?

A:

Yes, CAP does not "guarantee" safety or freedom from discomfort as, of course, no one can. CAP cannot be held legally responsible for normal stress or accidents etc. The waiver is a normal part of international travel.

Q:

I note that the brochure suggests seeking participation from Congresspersons or their foreign policy aides. I recall that you preferred aides because it was easier for them to move about in Israel/Palestine than it is for members of Congress. Can you share your views about this? Can you, also, discuss how you get into Israel--what you say to security officials when entering, etc. Are participants able to be open about their intentions to travel to the West Bank, Gaza?

A:

This is true. Congress members themselves seem to be more security conscious than their aides and the US Consulate seems to value their safety above that of their aides. Consequently it is sometimes easier to travel with less reluctant participants. However, we do not believe the status of the participants alters the security factor in any substantial way.

We have flown into the Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv and have had no entry problems of any kind. We normally present our group as tourists destined for J, which is our hotel base. That information seems to satisfy Israeli entry security. We normally do not, nor are we requested to disclose our itinerary, in part because it is rarely finalized until we arrive. US citizens, however, are not prevented from entering the West Bank or Gaza except under emergency conditions set by Israel, so travel information should not be a deterrent.

Q:

Can you remind me about the number of congressional staff that attended in 2005 & 2006? My memory is that it is only one or two.

A:

You are again correct. In 2005, Congressman Jim Leach's foreign policy aide and her Jewish companion accompanied us and most happily so. In 2006, Congressman Lacy Clay's foreign policy aide cancelled at the last minute due to the war in Lebanon. In fact, that conflict did not affect our itinerary in any way, nor did it endanger us in any way.

Q:

My understanding is that you have promises from Senators Harkin and Grassley to send aides. Is that still the case? Can you share any other congressional interest that you have at this time?

A:

Yes, both had made tentative commitments to go on the 2006 cap tour but were unable to do so when the Senate voted to extend its legislative session into the week of the tour. We hope one or both of them will be with us this spring. Also, we are in touch with our newly elected congressman, Dave Loebasck, about going on the CAP tour and fully expect him or his aide to be with us. Other supporters in the 1st and 3rd Congressional Districts in Iowa are working on their congress members as well.

Q:

I note that Sabeel staff (a Christian group in Jerusalem) conducted the tours. Can you address the appropriateness of the tour for those of different faiths and the sensitivity of the tour to participation by a religiously diverse group?

A:

We have had both Jewish and Muslim aides and companions on our two previous CAP tours. Religious observance is voluntary during free time. We may discuss religious implications of our experiences and observe some silent meditation time. We do visit several religious sites that include all three major religions in the area.