Israel expresses frustration as delegation is barred from UN event in Saudi Arabia

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Saudi Arabia refused to issue visas for an Israeli delegation to a UN event honoring spots picked as the world’s top rural tourist destinations for 2022, Israeli officials confirmed to The Times of Israel on Sunday.

The delegation was representing the Circassian town of Kfar Kama in the Galilee region of northern Israel, which was [selected in December as an international ‘tourist village’](https://www.timesofisrael.com/circassian-town-in-northern-israel-wins-un-recognition-as-global-tourist-village/) by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

The town, whose 3,500 residents are Muslim, was named among [32 villages](https://www.unwto.org/news/best-tourism-villages-of-2022-named-by-unwto) from 22 countries including Morocco, Italy, Jordan, Mexico, Peru and others.

The award ceremony for the winning villages was taking place Sunday and Monday in Al-‘Ula, Saudi Arabia — which had also been on the UN list.

On Sunday, Bloomberg [reported](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-12/israelis-blocked-from-attending-un-event-in-saudi-arabia#xj4y7vzkg) that the delegation never received a visa, indicating that the path to the potential normalization of ties with the kingdom is still long and complicated. Israel and Saudi Arabia do not have official diplomatic relations, though ties have warmed in recent years, with Riyadh allowing Israeli airliners to pass through its airspace, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government openly seeking to reach a normalization agreement with the kingdom.

The report, which cited unnamed people familiar with the matter, said the visas had been refused ‘despite an appeal from the UN for equal treatment for member states and the Saudis spending billions to become a major player in the tourism industry.’

The report said the Foreign Ministry earlier this month urged the UNWTO to ensure the visas are issued, and the UN last week sent a letter pressing Riyadh’s Tourism Ministry on the matter, to no apparent avail. The UNWTO and the Saudi Foreign Ministry have refused to comment.

The visa denial was confirmed later Sunday by the Tourism Ministry and the mayor of Kafr Kama, who didn’t hide their disappointment.

‘There were great expectations ahead of the event, and it is frustrating that we were prevented from taking part in it,’ Mayor Zakaria Napso was quoted as saying by the Walla news site.

The Tourism Ministry lamented that the efforts to facilitate a visa failed, adding: ‘Israel calls on the UNWTO and on UN bodies to preserve the UN’s guidelines, including equal treatment in ensuring the participation of states in the organization’s events.

‘In this case, the UNWTO failed to meet these standards, which is regrettable.’

Kfar Kama, located in the lower Galilee along the route between Mount Tabor and the Sea of Galilee, is one of only two Circassian towns in Israel, and home to an over 150-year-old, Arabic-speaking minority in the Jewish state.

Its residents, along with those from the Circassian town of Rehaniya, north of Safed, are descendants of Circassian tribes from the North Caucasus region, bordering on the Black Sea. They were settled in the Galilee region in the late 1870s by the Ottoman Empire following the mass murder and expulsion of Circassians during the roughly 100-year Russo-Circassian War.

The Tourism Ministry has backed a series of renovations in Kfar Kama over the years to help preserve its heritage and to help draw tourists in greater numbers.

The village is home to a museum of Circassian culture, and local authorities have worked to preserve its original and distinctive architecture throughout. Archaeological digs in the area have [uncovered](https://www.timesofisrael.com/large-6th-century-church-compound-uncovered-near-site-of-jesus-transfiguration/) remains from much earlier Christian settlers, including a 1,300-year-old church.

Tourist attractions in the village include guided tours, a cheese-making workshop, restaurants offering the community’s unique cuisine, and a night-time sound-and-light show for visitors.