

# **Siraj Center for Holy Land Studies**

## **Safety and Security Guidelines and Protocols**

### **2022 Manual**

In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a record-setting 4.5 million tourists and pilgrims came to the Holy Land, making it one of the most visited regions per capita in the world. As of early 2022, groups and individuals are resuming their travel. Each year, countless universities, colleges, educational institutions, study programs and centers of research and higher learning bring organized tour programs to the region to better understand its people, places, cultures and current events.

Founded in 2005, Siraj Center has nearly 15 years of experience and an impeccable safety record for educational tour programs. We understand that safety and security concerns are a factor taken into special consideration by both individuals and organizations as they determine whether or not participants will come to the region for an educational travel program. The following are our protocols for safety and security for all programs.

#### **Siraj Staff Accompaniment**

Siraj Center's full-time, part-time and contracted guides and logistical coordinators are with our programs from the designated pick-up or meeting point until the designated drop off or departure point. At no time during any program are participants without direct 24 hour access to a Siraj Center representative. All representatives speak fluent English and Arabic. With advance notice, other linguistic specialists can be brought in, as needed, for an additional fee.

#### **Communications**

All Siraj staff accompanying programs are equipped with mobile phones that have near-complete coverage, with the exception of a few valleys and, in some cases, parts of the Old City of Jerusalem where thick stone walls and structures inhibit communication. 4G has not yet arrived in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, but 3G is available in most locations. Most of the hotels and guest houses we utilize have private wifi services, and in any event, cellular reception or a fixed landline. In short, there are very few times that Siraj staff cannot guarantee either telecommunications and/or wireless communications.

#### **First Aid and Protection from the Elements**

All hiking and cycling Siraj programs are equipped with a First Aid kit from Siraj, and a First Aid kit will be made available upon request for other programs. Special care is given to ensure

drinking water is in constant supply, and thorough discussion is given to proper clothing and footwear for the terrain of each daily program. If an individual requires a certain medication or does not have the appropriate clothing or footwear, Siraj staff will take the program participant to local retailers to procure the needed items at the program participant's expense.

### **Accessibility to Medical and Emergency Services**

Pharmacies, polyclinics (independent physician-run clinics) and hospitals can be found across all regions of the Holy Land. Siraj staff are aware of the availability and hours of operation of each needed center and can also locate specialists if needed. With advance notice, Siraj staff can also determine specialist physicians and locations to procure particular types of prescription medications.

All law enforcement-related incidents regarding foreign visitors to the Holy Land are handled either by the Israeli national police force or the Tourism Police of the Palestinian National Authority. In both cases, Siraj center staff can assist with contact with the affiliated law enforcement entity and follow-up reporting as needed.

### **Logistical Transportation Vehicles**

All vehicles used for transport are licensed either for all regions of the Holy Land or are exclusively limited to regions in which they will be used for any tour program. All vehicles are insured and meet safety standards.

### **Hotels, Guest Houses, and Encampments**

All sites used for overnight stays are personally inspected by Siraj staff to meet basic safety and security standards for our international program participants. Specific concerns regarding guest houses and encampments can be discussed in advance, but we affirm that all sites chosen for overnight stays can be considered safe, secure locations for all program participants.

### **Restaurants, Hospitality Meals, and Domestic Cooking Experiences**

All locations in which food is served are checked by Siraj staff for their sanitary conditions. Specific dietary concerns need to be conveyed to Siraj representatives in advance of each program.

### **Security Escorts, Mobile GPS Devices, Emergency Mobile Phones, and Contact Cards**

As needed and on request, Siraj Center can provide additional staff for group accompaniment beyond our standard single representative. Fees for additional staff apply; staff will never have the option of being equipped with firearms or any non-lethal protective weaponry or implements.

In certain cases, mobile GPS devices to track vehicles of program participants can also be rented for an additional charge.

With advance notice, a basic mobile phone, charged and with pre-programmed contact information of Siraj Center staff and guides (but without wifi and app capabilities) can be rented or purchased for each program participant. Laminated contact cards written in English and Arabic for program participants can also be produced upon request.

### **Assessing Security Concerns by Region**

Political and inter-ethnic violence, while not infrequent in the Holy Land, is on the whole highly localized and tends to be extremely brief in nature.

As of January 2022, the only region accessible with an Israeli-issued visa that Siraj does not take programs to is the Gaza Strip. During flare-ups of cross-border incidents between Gaza Palestinian and Israeli forces, Siraj programs do not visit the “seam area” within Israel around the Gaza Strip, which is within range of rocket fire.

On more rare occasions, the Golan Heights and Upper Galilee region come under security warnings, as do particular areas of urban areas of certain West Bank cities. When such security notices for specific regions are issued, programs are simply re-arranged to meet the situation, with every effort to reschedule visits when the security situation improves.

It should be noted that Siraj Center tours do not include planned participation in political demonstrations of any kind, nor do we advise tour organizers to include requests for such tours in their programs.

### **Flash Flooding Concerns for Hiking and Cycling Programs**

During the rainy season from October to April, flash flooding on hiking and cycling trails is always a possibility, and precautions are taken to ensure that at no point will program participants be forced to contend with a possible flash flood. Forecasts are checked daily, and the terrains that are susceptible to flash flooding are known to the trained guides and program coordinators. If flash flooding is a concern, programs are reconfigured to avoid risk areas, and alternate activities are selected within the means at the disposal of Siraj Center. When and where possible, skipped components of a particular program can be revisited, time permitting.

### **On-Site Incident Assessment**

When a security-related incident does occur while a program is in session, or immediately before a program is about to begin, the following security protocols are in place:

Siraj Staff reviews the program itinerary and determines what security concerns need to be taken into consideration by region and date of the program's excursion into the region. Considerations of threat level, the chance of continuing conflict, and its impact on the tour are taken into consideration.

Siraj Staff then assign the threat level with a specific grade:

- **No Threat Level.** A minor isolated incident; possibly misreported as having political or sectarian undertones. (Ex: a fighting or violent incident between individuals picked up by social media at a particular site, a largely peaceful demonstration misreported by the media, a national strike, etc). No action needed.
- **Minimal/Low Threat Level.** An incident or incidents which do not result in major disruptions and/or violence but have the potential to continue. (Examples: a single violent act committed by one individual as a political act, family clan feuds in a village, political demonstrations held over a series of days, clashes between security forces and refugee camp youth, etc.) Program leaders are advised of the situation and are informed that staff will have a heightened level of awareness, and will monitor news for developments in a specific region.
- **Medium Threat Level.** An incident or set of incidents resulting in localized unrest, multiple injuries, deaths and/or damage to property. (Examples: multi-day violent demonstrations, a string of violent incidents, repeated incursions by Israeli forces into communities and the sealing off of particular neighborhoods and communities, etc.) Program leaders are advised that a specific program component or components may be revised and the itinerary adjusted to reflect said threat. Safe spaces are identified as needed – usually hotels, guest houses and churches – and additional staff may be brought in to act as accompanying tour hosts at the expense of Siraj Center.
- **High Threat Level.** Significant and sustained outbreaks of violence that directly impact the ability of a program to function as planned. (Examples: sustained cross-border conflict, severe multi-day region-wide clashes in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, etc.) Program leaders are advised of the needed redrafting of programs, are encouraged to speak to program participants and institutional representatives to explain the situation and to provide as-needed information. Siraj Center will provide both accompaniment and logistical support as needed.
- **Absolute Highest Threat Level.** This designation is only declared during a complete region-wide conventional or non-conventional conflict, resulting in limitation or cessation of international air travel to and from Tel Aviv. Since the founding of Siraj Center, such a situation has never occurred.

## **Pre-Program Briefings and Online Question & Answer Conference Calls**

All Siraj programs include a pre-program orientation talk about safety and security, ranging from basic health and safety concerns to considerations of documentation of conflict-related aspects of their program. The orientation includes discussion on what individuals should do if they are separated from the program group or lost, and how they can contact Siraj Center. Contact information is provided in the group orientation packets.

Program organizers are also encouraged to organize pre-departure online Question & Answer conference calls for program participants, faculty, parents, and staff via an online app such as Skype or Zoom. This complimentary service can be organized on request with advance notice.

## **Safety and Security Contact**

For further questions and concerns, please contact Siraj Center Director Michel Awad at [michel@sirajcenter.org](mailto:michel@sirajcenter.org).

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