

On The Other Side Of The Visa Window

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The visa interview can be a stressful experience on both sides of the window. I know that because, as a visa officer at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, Egypt, one of the largest embassies in the world, my primary job is to conduct those interviews and make decisions on non-immigrant visa applications for people who want to study, do business, or simply visit the United States.

In an average week, I serve more than 300 customers, almost all of whom come from Egypt and the Sudan.

And that isn't my only job. I also serve, on a rotating basis, as duty officer for the embassy, which means I am responsible for assisting American citizens in Egypt who are in need of emergency help.

Applicants who understand that consular officers have limited time to make each adjudication will find their visa interview much more manageable. A little pre-interview homework goes a long way. Preparing specific information that pertains to their case—like the purpose of their trip, showing how they will pay for it, and providing proof of significant ties to their own country, will save a lot of time and anxiety. Bringing this material along to the interview is extremely important.

I would also advise applicants to be honest and direct in their answers and not to be afraid to ask the consular officer to repeat questions. I know that my pronunciation in Arabic is not perfect, and that the words don't always come out the way they're supposed to, so I am always willing to try again.

After reviewing the forms submitted by the applicant and conducting the interview, I am required to apply U.S. immigration law to each situation. I must justify all of my decisions according to U.S. law. For most



Photo Courtesy of U.S. Embassy Cairo

non-immigrant visas, I must consider whether the applicant has shown significant ties to a residence outside of the United States, a requirement designed to prevent illegal immigration, which applies to visa applicants all over the world. Applicants should, therefore, give careful thought to how they will meet this requirement prior to their interview.

In most cases, I am able to issue a visa to the applicant.

Sometimes, however, I have to refuse. This is always a difficult decision for me because I understand that people have a strong desire to visit my country.

One of the biggest misconceptions here in Egypt is that, after the 2001 terrorist attacks, consular officers began routinely refusing applications of Muslim men with beards and women with the hijab. This is just not true.

Although the attacks changed some aspects of the visa process, such as requiring personal interviews of all applicants and using finger scans to improve the security of our visas, they could never alter our fundamental pride and belief in keeping the United States open to legitimate travelers.

Like most of my colleagues, I joined the Foreign Service because I enjoy traveling, learning foreign languages, living abroad, and meeting people from different walks of life. My wife and I consider ourselves very lucky to be in Cairo, Egypt, the city of a thousand minarets, a city of great history and cultural importance, and to be working with its impressive people.

We will always look back on our time in Egypt as a special and memorable period in our lives, and I hope that the visas I adjudicate every day will allow Egyptians to visit my country and feel the same. ■