



Middle East Studies Association

Task Force on Civil and Human Rights

The Middle East Studies Association of North America and its Task Force on Civil and Human Rights offered a series of Know Your Rights webinars in Spring 2025 addressing members' concerns about changing immigration policies and enforcement actions under the Trump administration. We received a wide range of questions that were addressed during these webinars. We have developed these materials in the hope that they might provide useful resources addressing frequently asked questions (FAQs) regarding travel as our members begin to make travel plans for the MESA Annual Meeting on November 22-25, 2025, in Washington, DC.

MESA is aware that members may have concerns about security at the meeting due to the federalization of Washington, DC, as well as the recent increase in political violence, especially related to immigration, in the U.S. MESA is working closely with the conference venue to ensure, to the greatest extent possible, attendees' safety. We will be implementing measures such as badge checks, and also providing information for panel chairs to assist them in moderating their sessions.

MESA cannot and does not provide legal advice or resources and nothing in this memorandum should be construed as legal advice. The basic information in this memo, drawn from trustworthy public sources, is, instead, designed to be a starting point for better understanding your rights during travel, to assess risks, and to take precautions as needed.

FAQs on Travel-Related Issues for Students and Scholars

As a preliminary matter, it is worth noting that there are important distinctions between international and domestic travel that are addressed in the materials below. In general, domestic travel entails fewer risks of exposure to searches and surveillance than travel across borders.

In what follows, we turn to questions concerning the kinds of issues that might arise in the course of travel, including search and detention by government officials at the border, at airports and at public transit hubs. As a general matter, basic advice in all contexts would be:

- Do not consent to a search unless you believe you are legally required to do so (only non-citizens entering at a border on a nonimmigrant visa are under a requirement to submit to a warrantless search of digital devices).
- Ask, "Am I free to go?" to clarify if you are being detained.
- Invoke your rights politely and clearly. For example, you might say: "I do not consent to a search and wish to remain silent."
- Use device encryption and strong passwords on your electronic devices; if crossing borders, consider traveling with devices that contain limited data about your research, your networks, and your social media profiles.
- Turn devices off before travel (which may further limit access to data without a passcode).
- For more, see [MESA's Advocacy Resource Center](#) under "Digital Security."

We offer greater context for this general advice and address more specific frequently asked questions below:

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1.

What do I need to know about domestic travel inside the United States?

Both citizens and noncitizens are required to show their identification documents if asked to do so by a federal officer while driving, at an airport, or at a border. If you are not a U.S. citizen, you must carry your immigration documents (your green card or, if you are on a nonimmigrant visa, your passport, I-20 form and I-94 arrival/departure record) at all times under federal law.

2.

Am I subject to searches of my electronic or digital devices when traveling domestically?

The Transportation Security Agency and other law enforcement agencies operate in all airports. For domestic travel, their search authorities are typically related to aviation security. In addition, at airports, train stations, and other public transit hubs, TSA-led teams may conduct random security screenings, but they do not have general authority to search the contents of your digital devices in connection with such screenings.

In general, the usual constitutional protections for searches apply in domestic travel-based encounters with law enforcement (that is, requirement of a warrant to search the contents of digital devices). Be aware, however, that if you consent to a search, you will have waived those protections.

3.

What counts as a border?

All land and sea entry points are borders. Federal agencies also view many airports, train stations, and bus terminals as borders if they are within 100 miles of a border. In general, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) have jurisdiction at international borders, and not in the interior of the country, but they may be able to conduct certain activities within the 100-mile border zone. CBP asserts the authority to conduct searches of electronic devices without a warrant at the border. Within the 100-mile border zones, CBP has extended authority to stop and question people, including at domestic public transit hubs (like train or bus stations), but they do not have a right to search devices without a warrant unless they have probable cause (that is, a reasonable basis to believe a crime has been committed or that evidence of a crime is present) or you give consent to a search.

4.

What can I be forced to reveal or turn over about research materials or interviews with foreign citizens when entering the U.S.?

U.S. officials have broad authority to conduct searches at the border and at ports of entry to the U.S. under federal law. There are fewer constitutional protections against such searches. Researchers crossing the border with sensitive data (such as interview data containing private information about foreign citizens) should plan ahead. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) can search and even seize electronic devices without a warrant when you enter the U.S. While you are entitled to refuse to unlock your devices or decrypt files if you are a citizen or LPR, they may confiscate your device or detain you for hours at the airport. If you are traveling on a nonimmigrant visa, you may be denied entry for refusing to unlock your device.

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Please see the remainder of the FAQs for further suggestions on how best to protect sensitive research data.

5. Are foreign language materials less likely to be subject to review?

Having materials in foreign languages does not make it more or less likely that immigration officials will be interested in reviewing your data. The growing ability of AI models to quickly translate large volumes of data means that language is no longer a barrier to their review.

6. What should I say in an encounter with officials at the border if I am unwilling to unlock my device to protect work-related materials?

If CBP asks about your work, or the reason you consider data sensitive and are unwilling to unlock your device or decrypt your materials, provide general answers. Be careful not to offer more details than you wish to disclose. For instance, you might say “I am a researcher and have a professional obligation to protect the privacy of those who participated in my research activities.” Always be polite, but be firm and concise in your responses.

Your college/university may have a protocol for protecting data crossing borders. A letter or document from your university administration *might* be useful to confirm that you are a legitimate researcher handling sensitive data. Such letters should be on university letterhead, signed by a senior administrator, and cite professional ethics and confidentiality obligations relating to research (especially research involving human subjects). You may then invoke the letter, by saying: “My device contains confidential research interviews and my university ethics policy requires me to protect its confidentiality. Please see this letter provided by my employer.” However, such a letter will not legally prevent a border search or seizure.

You might consider consulting a lawyer before traveling and carrying their number with you. If CBP detains you for questioning or seizes your devices, you should ask to contact your lawyer.

7. What do U.S. citizens need to know when entering the U.S.?

At this time, there is no distinction among types of U.S. citizenship: Naturalized and native-born citizens are entitled to the same rights of entry and constitutional protections at the border. If you are a U.S. citizen, present your U.S. passport. Agents must let you enter the country. This applies to all U.S. citizens.

You may be asked questions about your identity and travel, including the purpose of your trip. You should answer these questions calmly, concisely and honestly. If you are asked questions about other people, your political or religious views, your work, or other matters unrelated to your travel, you may exercise your right to remain silent by saying “I am not comfortable answering that question.” However, refusal to answer such questions may lead to secondary inspection, longer inspection time, and possibly hours of detention at the port of entry.

You may be asked to hand over your digital devices (phone, laptop, etc.) for a digital search. If an agent instructs you to unlock devices, provide passwords, or disclose social media information, there

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is no “right” answer. Remain calm and respectful, and be truthful if providing information. If you cooperate, agents may scrutinize and copy your information. If you refuse, agents may seize your devices. If they keep your devices, ask for a receipt.

If you are told that you are going to be held for additional questioning, you can ask to contact a lawyer. If you have reason to be concerned that you might be subjected to secondary questioning due to the countries you have traveled to, or for any other reason, you should consult a lawyer before traveling and have their number with you to contact should you face uncomfortable questioning at the border.

You should document any delays or searches and report them to civil rights groups.

8.

If I am a dual citizen, and am asked to reveal my non-US citizenship, what should I do?

Dual citizens (people holding both U.S. and another citizenship) should always enter and exit the U.S. on their U.S. passport. You cannot be denied entry to the U.S. but federal officers can ask you about your other citizenship(s) to confirm your identity, travel history and possible customs issues. If asked whether you hold another citizenship, you should answer that question truthfully. Remain calm and keep answers concise and minimal – you are not required to explain why you have dual citizenship or what you did abroad, except to confirm basic travel itineraries. If you are pressed to answer questions you are uncomfortable with you can say: “I am a U.S. citizen and I have answered your questions to establish my identity and citizenship. Am I free to go?”

9.

What is the risk for U.S. citizens entering the U.S. with a passport that does not match sex assigned at birth?

U.S. citizens cannot be denied entry to the country based on a gender marker “mismatch.” If you are a U.S. citizen with a valid passport that does not match the sex or gender marker assigned at birth, you have an absolute right to enter the country.

You may, however, face questions or additional screening if the immigration officer decides that your appearance does not “match” your passport. You do not have to answer intrusive medical or personal questions unrelated to confirming your identity. If you are asked rude or intrusive questions that go beyond establishing your admissibility to the U.S. as a citizen, you can calmly answer by saying “I am a U.S. citizen. This is my valid passport.” You may also ask to speak with a supervisor if an immigration officer behaves disrespectfully.

Carrying a recent photo may help limit the likelihood of additional questioning. Unfortunately, however, you should be prepared for extra time to cross the border as immigration officers may insist on an extra check to confirm your identity. For additional information, see this resource:

[Immigration Equality](#).

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10.

What do lawful permanent residents (green card holders) need to know when entering the U.S.?

If you are a lawful permanent resident of the U.S., present your green card as well as your passport. You should avoid spending more than six months outside the U.S.

Permanent residents must be permitted reentry, unless charged with a crime, or if one of the following six exceptions is applicable: abandoned/relinquished status; been abroad for 6 months or more; engaged in illegal activity while abroad; departed the U.S. with a pending removal/deportation case; committed some legal offenses; or tried to reenter without inspection (i.e., not at a formal border crossing).

Permanent residents have the same rights as U.S. citizens regarding questioning at the border, however, border officers may schedule a “deferred inspection” with a permanent resident in order to ask questions that go beyond status and recent travel. Whether at the border/airport or in a “deferred inspection” meeting, you may be asked questions about your identity, your travel, the purpose of your trip, and your continued status as a permanent resident. You are required to answer these questions and should do so calmly and honestly, asserting your lawful permanent resident status.

If you are asked questions about other people, your political or religious views, or matters unrelated to your travel, you may exercise your right to remain silent by saying “I am not comfortable answering that question.” You may also invoke your right to request legal counsel.

You may be asked to hand over your digital devices (phone, laptop, etc.) for a digital search. If an agent instructs you to unlock devices, provide passwords, or disclose social media information, there is no “right” answer. Remain calm and respectful, and be truthful if providing information. If you cooperate, agents may scrutinize and copy your information. If you refuse, agents may seize your devices. If they keep your devices, ask for a receipt.

You should document any delays or searches and report them to civil rights groups.

11.

What do foreign visitors (visa holders / visa applicants) need to know when entering the U.S.?

You should carry your visa documents, proof of your purpose in the U.S., proof of funds, your employer or school, and present these when asked.

You may have a long interview or a secondary screening. You should answer questions minimally and truthfully. For instance, if asked about your religion or politics, you might answer: “I am [religion].” Never lie in responding to a question, because this can be grounds for a lifetime bar on entering the U.S. You should also avoid refusing to answer questions and instead provide minimal and concise answers.

Unlike U.S. citizens, noncitizen travelers on nonimmigrant visa categories (e.g., F-1, J-1, M-1, H-1) do not have a constitutional right to enter the U.S. CBP officers have broad authority to ask questions to determine admissibility — including questions about religion, political beliefs and affiliations — if they believe it is relevant to whether you are inadmissible on security grounds or likely to violate your visa conditions. Courts have found that noncitizens *at the border* do not have full First Amendment protections and refusing questions may lead to a finding that you have not demonstrated admissibility. In short, refusing to answer questions may result in a denial of entry.

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You may be asked to hand over your digital devices for a search. If an agent instructs you to unlock devices, provide passwords, or disclose social media information, remain calm and respectful. If you cooperate, agents may scrutinize and copy your sensitive data. If you refuse, agents may seize your devices. In either case, they may deny you entry or revoke your visa. They also may escalate the encounter, including by detaining you further.

If you are denied entry, seek legal counsel and reapply for a visa from abroad.

12.

In what scenarios would a noncitizen traveler be detained if they are denied entry?

Noncitizen travelers do not have an automatic right to enter the U.S. even with a valid visa. Admission is always at the discretion of the CBP officer at the port of entry. If you are denied entry, you may be allowed to withdraw your application for admission voluntarily and take the next available flight home at your own expense without a formal removal order. This is the most common outcome for routine denials based on visa issues or missing documentation.

If the CBP officer finds you inadmissible for suspected fraud, misrepresentation, or suspicions of criminal conduct, then you may be detained in a short-term immigration detention facility near the airport/border while you are issued a formal removal order. If the officer's suspicions are more serious (terrorism or national security grounds), the person may be transferred to an ICE detention center while further investigation takes place about the allegations.

13.

What is the current travel ban?

On June 4, 2025, President Trump issued a “Full Suspension of Entry for Nationals of Countries of Identified Concern” applying to citizens of Afghanistan, Myanmar (Burma), Chad, Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Haiti, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen, plus a “Partial Suspension of Entry for Nationals of Countries of Identified Concern” for Burundi, Cuba, Laos, Sierra Leone, Togo, Turkmenistan, and Venezuela. On August 18, 2025, the State Department instructed all embassies and consulates to suspend all new non-immigrant visas for Palestinian Authority passport holders (having announced on X the suspension of all visitor visas for those traveling from Gaza two days earlier). Media reports indicate that there is now effectively a broad suspensions (or visa “ban”) for almost all Palestinians holding PA passports. Non-U.S. citizens are advised to consider their travel in light of these travel bans and subsequent developments.

14.

What do I need to know about leaving the U.S.?

Immigration officers have broader authority to question people and conduct searches at international exit points at borders and airports, which includes searches of your person, your belongings (e.g. luggage), and your digital devices. These authorities are the same as at borders or ports of entry when entering. We are all accustomed to regular security screening at airports when departing, which in the US is handled by the TSA. While CBP is more focused on arrivals than departures, they still have some authority at departure points as well.

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Exit searches must be for a legitimate purpose, such as to check for export control violations, to stop drugs or weapons from crossing the border, or to investigate national security concerns. However, as is the case upon entry, full constitutional protections do not apply at the border or at ports of exit. Officers do not require a warrant and do not have to meet standards of probable cause to engage in questioning, conduct searches, or seek to search electronic devices.

It is rare to face full device searches or questioning when leaving the U.S., but when traveling to countries in the Middle East (and other destinations deemed sensitive by the U.S.) it is possible that a traveler may be flagged. In such cases, all the same advice applies as at entry (see the information above). Unless the officer believes that there is a need for further investigation on a criminal or national security basis, you will not be refused departure from the country.

15.

What should I do with my digital devices before traveling to the U.S.?

Carry as little data as possible. Consider deleting data from your regular devices, shifting data to the cloud, using temporary devices (loaner laptops, etc.), and leaving devices at home if possible. Even data that has been deleted or removed from a device may be accessible with software available to the government. Make sure your data is backed up to a server that is not connected to the devices you are carrying, in case a device is taken.

Do not use fingerprint or facial locks. Create separate, long, unpredictable passwords (ideally 15 characters long). There are various apps that can help. [Full-disk encryption](#) is a basic first step (with different options for Mac and Windows users), while additional encryption tools (such as VeraCrypt) might provide even stronger protection. Do not store your passwords for encryption on the same device that holds the encrypted sensitive data. Keep them in a separate secure manager that you can access later (ideally on a device you are not carrying with you across the border).

Shut down devices before arriving at the border, to block high-tech attacks and impede unconsented access. Log out of apps and browsers (and delete saved login credentials) to prevent agents from accessing cached cloud content.

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16.1

What additional resources can I consult for travel-related concerns?

Travel with paper printouts of relevant legal resources and the phone number of an immigration attorney you have consulted, or the general phone number for legal services organizations that you may contact, from a landline, if needed.

MESA has produced additional resources you might wish to consult, especially [our FAQs on Visa-Related Issues for Non-Citizens, including Green Card Holders](#). We have also collected resources that we consider useful to our members at the [MESA Advocacy Resource Center](#), which include the following:

The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) has valuable additional resources concerning digital safety, which are collected [here](#). Their [pocket guide](#) is designed to be printed and carried on your person as a quick reference resource.

The ACLU has produced two documents that provide more detailed answers to legal questions, offer a list of legal resources and can be printed before travel:

[Enforcement at the Airport](#)

[Traveler's Bill of Rights](#).

CUNY CLEAR has produced a useful [Know Your Rights While Traveling](#) document.