

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 16, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest
Washington, D.C., 20500

Dear President Biden,

During this trying time, we thank you for your steadfast support of Israel following Hamas' horrific massacre, torture, and kidnapping of civilians on October 7; your dedication to working towards the safe release of the hostages; and your commitment to peace and security for all people in the region. We write to you as members of Congress who were in Israel on October 7th, as members who steadfastly support the special U.S.-Israel relationship, and as members who support a just future for both Israelis and Palestinians. We strongly believe that Israel has the right and responsibility to defend itself against Hamas, whose acts of terror endanger Israelis, Palestinians, and other communities in the region. We also agree that combat operations must be conducted according to the laws of armed conflict and that we must continue to do everything possible to protect innocent civilians in Gaza and facilitate an increased flow of desperately needed humanitarian assistance. We believe these goals are mutually affirming to the mission of ultimately defeating Hamas and achieving a sustainable peace in the region.

As your administration tirelessly works to prevent the expansion of this conflict, we write to specifically highlight the threat that violence in the West Bank – especially vigilante violence by Israeli settlers – poses to those efforts, Israel's near-term security, Palestinian human rights, and long-term regional peace. We thank you for your strong remarks condemning settler violence and for speaking directly with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu about the “need to hold extremist settlers accountable for violent acts.”¹ It was valuable that following your conversation, Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly stated on Saturday his condemnation of this violence and that his government “will act against it,” but we are concerned that his remarks did not accurately recognize its source nor scale.² We believe Israel must do more to stop any further settler violence and urge you to continue to stress to the Israeli government the need to proactively prevent these attacks and ensure accountability for any crimes committed in the West Bank.

Since October 7th, we have seen the exacerbation and dramatic proliferation of settler violence against Palestinian civilians in the West Bank. The per-day average of publicly documented incidents of settler violence has risen 133%, and includes killings, physical assaults, destruction

¹ The White House. (2023, November 6). *Readout of President Biden's Call with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/11/06/readout-of-president-bidens-call-with-prime-minister-netanyahu-of-israel-8/>

² Solomon, S., Malsin, J. (2023, November 8). *Netanyahu says Israel will act to stop Jewish violence against Palestinians in the West Bank*. The Wall Street Journal. <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/israel-hamas-war-gaza-strip-2023-11-08/card/netanyahu-says-israel-will-act-to-stop-jewish-violence-against-palestinians-in-west-bank-H3zQRlp6KS0KMx6Mzke>

of property, forced evictions, unlawful detentions, death threats, and large-scale intimidation.³ Further, in nearly half of the documented attacks, settlers have been accompanied or been actively supported by IDF reservists in uniform.^{4 5} It is critical that the IDF swiftly act to stop such unacceptable actions by reservists and that the Israeli government hold all those who perpetrate criminal acts to account. Failure to do so risks the lives of Palestinians and Israelis and endangers broader security concerns.

We further worry that extreme members of the Israeli governing coalition may be inflaming tensions and inciting violence in the West Bank, including by reportedly distributing rifles to civilians, including to settlers, without appropriate vetting and approvals.⁶ Senior Israeli law enforcement were quoted expressing similar concerns that Israel could “end up paying a heavy price” for this unchecked distribution of weapons, and that the rifles could fall into “the wrong hands and untrained individuals.”⁷ As the U.S. works to support Israel’s defense, we urge your administration to seek adequate assurances from the Israeli government that any rifles provided by the United States will not end up in the hands of civilians in the West Bank.

Stability in the West Bank is critical to short- and long-term Israeli and Palestinian security and the prevention of expanding the current Israel-Hamas conflict. As the IDF responds to the threat of Hamas in Gaza, manages the escalation with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and faces additional threats coming from the Houthis in Yemen and other terror and militant groups across the wider Middle East, Israel cannot afford instability in the West Bank. The proliferation of settler violence puts innocent lives at risk, fuels incitement and retaliatory action, and threatens to exacerbate tensions to a point that, without increased action to prevent these attacks, could lead to the escalation of another front.

We strongly believe that a two-state solution remains the only genuine option to achieve a just, secure, and prosperous future for both Israelis and Palestinians. However, settler violence against Palestinian civilians destroys the very seeds of trust and cooperation needed to make progress toward a two-state outcome and an enduring peace in the region. For example, settler violence presents a significant challenge to the viability of the Palestinian Authority (PA), a critical partner for West Bank security, the future of Gaza, and regional peace efforts. Though the PA needs to implement necessary governance reforms, such as ending its martyr and prisoner payment system and addressing corruption, it needs essential resources to reinforce legitimacy. Countries around the Middle East that seek greater regional integration and normalization with Israel want to see a pathway to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a functioning, stable,

³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2023, November 1). *The other mass displacement: settlers advance on West Bank herders*. <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/other-mass-displacement-while-eyes-are-gaza-settlers-advance-west-bank-herders>

⁴ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2023, November 8). *Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel* | Flash Update #33. <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-33>

⁵ Pacchiani, G. (2023, November 1). *IDF soldiers film themselves abusing, humiliating West Bank Palestinians*. The Times of Israel. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-soldiers-film-themselves-abusing-humiliating-west-bank-palestinians/>

⁶ Sharon, J. (2023, October 10). *Ben Gvir says 10,000 assault rifles purchased for civilian security teams*. The Times of Israel. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ben-gvir-says-10000-assault-rifles-purchased-for-civilian-security-teams/>

⁷ Breiner, J. (2023, November 10). *Israel’s top cop warns Ben-Gvir’s mass distribution of weapons could put them in the wrong hands*. Haaretz. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-10/ty-article/.premium/israels-top-cop-warns-ben-gvirs-mass-weapons-distribution-could-put-them-in-wrong-hands/0000018b-b85c-dea2-a9bf-f8ded92c0000>

and empowered PA that can deliver for the Palestinian people. Settler violence, the undermining of PA viability, and instability in the West Bank endangers innocent lives, drains critical resources, and takes away focus from addressing the urgent crisis in Gaza and, ultimately, from achieving lasting peace across the region.

This is a time of great anguish and pain for so many in the region, and those affected by this conflict around the world. Like you, we have heard directly from the loved ones of those abducted and killed on October 7th and from those who have lost loved ones in Gaza. While the way forward is not an easy one, we share your resolute determination to chart a pathway to enduring peace in the region. As your Administration engages with the Israeli government during this crisis, we urge you to continue prioritizing stability in the West Bank and ending settler violence. We are ready to work with you in order to achieve these goals.

Sincerely,



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Dan Goldman
Member of Congress

CC: The Honorable Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State