

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 29, 2024

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

Thank you for your administration's tireless efforts to secure the release of the hostages held in Gaza, bring a comprehensive negotiated end to the shattering violence between Israel and Hamas, and surge humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians. We mourn the shocking and brutal murder by Hamas of the six hostages whose bodies were recently recovered, including American citizen Hersh Goldberg-Polin,¹ and thank you for your determination to work around the clock to secure a deal for a negotiated ceasefire and the release of the remaining hostages.

We appreciate that your administration, while necessarily focused on Gaza, has also remained engaged in trying to address the situation in the West Bank, which has worsened substantially since October 7. We write to express our deep concern about the rise in settler violence, settlement expansion, and measures adopted to weaken the Palestinian Authority and otherwise destabilize the West Bank. Violent settlers, fueled by the inflammatory rhetoric and incitement to violence by members of the Israeli cabinet, including Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, and empowered by extremist organizations like Regavim and Amana, have carried out over 1,270 recorded attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank, averaging more than three violent attacks per day.² The attackers have destroyed homes, stolen livestock, wounded over 200 Palestinian civilians and killed 11.³

We welcomed your Executive Order addressing actors on all sides undermining peace, security, and stability in the West Bank and appreciate that your administration has used it to impose sanctions on a Palestinian militant group, organizations implicated in violent extremist activity and instigators from the settler movement and settlement outposts from which violent attacks are launched. As Senators Ben Cardin, Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jack Reed, Chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Mark Warner, Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, urged in a May 2024 letter,⁴ we also believe that the administration should continue to increase efforts to ensure all actors complicit in this violence

¹ The New York Times, "Killing of Israeli-American Hostage Prompts Outpouring of Grief Across U.S.," Isabelle Taft and Soumya Karlamangla, September 1, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/01/us/hersh-goldberg-polin-death-mourning-us.html>.

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Today's top news: Occupied Palestinian Territory, Sudan, Ukraine," August 21, 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/news/todays-top-news-occupied-palestinian-territory-sudan-ukraine-2>.

³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Humanitarian Situation Update #198 | West Bank [EN/AR/HE]," July 31, 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/humanitarian-situation-update-198-west-bank-enarhe>.

are subject to U.S. sanctions equally. With radical officials in the Netanyahu government continuing to enable settler violence and enact annexationist policies, it is clear that further sanctions are urgently needed. The key individuals and entities that are destabilizing the West Bank – thereby also threatening the security of Israel and the broader region, and U.S. national security as well – should be directly held accountable. The message that such actions are unacceptable from leaders, including within the Israeli government, must be heard.

In this moment of instability and uncertainty, Finance Minister Smotrich has seized the opportunity to take steps to advance illegal and dangerous annexation of the West Bank. He has weaponized his authority in order to approve thousands of new settler homes in the West Bank, secure Israel's largest seizure of land in the West Bank in three decades, and enable settlement construction that even violates Israeli law.⁵ He has authorized an increase in demolitions of Palestinian homes, leading to the displacement of more than 2,000 Palestinians, over 1,000 of whom are children.⁶ As a key leader of the settler movement he has also used toxic and inciting rhetoric in public and private, shielded instigators in the West Bank from accountability, called for a Palestinian town to be “wiped out,” and repeatedly voiced his public support for annexing the West Bank.⁷

Finance Minister Smotrich's policies have significantly compromised the overall health and stability of the West Bank economy. He has denied tens of thousands of work permits to Palestinian civilians since October 7, preventing workers from returning to their jobs for almost a year in defiance of the Shin Bet's recommendations. Additionally, he withheld tax revenue from the Palestinian Authority for months, relenting on the same day that an agreement was reached to convert outposts, illegal under Israeli law, into recognized settlements. Major General Yehuda Fuchs, former head of Israel's Central Command in the West Bank recently stated that his Command “depends on the existence of a functioning and strong Palestinian Authority, with effective security mechanisms that maintain law and order. Proactively undermining the security reality on this front endangers the security of the State of Israel.”⁸

National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir has also played a prominent role in inciting violence against Palestinian civilians, encouraging the construction of illegal outposts, and preventing enforcement against violent settlers. Earlier this month over 100 violent settlers attacked the West Bank village of Jit, burning homes and killing a Palestinian man. The perpetrators who

⁴ Letter from Sens. Cardin, Reed, and Warner to Secretaries Blinken and Yellen, May 15, 2024, https://foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/cardin_reed_warner_letter_to_blinken_and_yellen_on_west_bank.pdf.

⁵ Politico, “Israel turbocharges West Bank settlement expansion,” July 3, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/07/03/israel-turbocharges-west-bank-settlement-expansion-00166584>; The New York Times, “The Unpunished: How Extremists Took Over Israel,” Ronen Bergman and Mark Mazzetti, May 16, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/16/magazine/israel-west-bank-settler-violence-impunity.html>.

⁶ The Guardian, “Israel destroys 11 homes in West Bank village amid spiralling violence,” Bethan McKernan and Quique Kierszenbaum, June 28, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/28/israel-destroys-11-homes-in-west-bank-village-amid-spiralling-violence>.

⁷ The Times of Israel, “Israel should ‘wipe out’ Palestinian town of Huwara, says senior minister Smotrich,” Michael Bachner, March 1, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-should-wipe-out-palestinian-town-of-huwara-says-senior-minister-smotrich/>.

⁸ The Times of Israel, “Outgoing IDF West Bank commander slams settler leaders for failing to rein in violence,” Emanuel Fabian, July 8, 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/outgoing-idf-west-bank-commander-slams-settler-leaders-for-failing-to-rein-in-violence/.

attacked Jit reportedly identified themselves as “Ben-Gvir’s gang...here to kill you, here to kill Arabs.”⁹ Ben-Gvir also distributes rifles at political events, prompting serious concern by U.S. officials that U.S.-manufactured weapons could be used in settler attacks against Palestinians by his civilian “security squads.” According to Israel’s Police Chief, Ben-Gvir used his authority as minister to prevent police from protecting humanitarian convoys bound for Gaza, allowing settlers to attack and halt aid. Instead of using the Israeli police force to mitigate violence, Ben-Gvir has taken steps to weaponize the force, refusing to prosecute the destruction of property and extremist attacks in the West Bank. Like Smotrich, Ben-Gvir uses dangerous rhetoric publicly at a precarious moment, including calling on Israel to annex the West Bank and encouraging police officers to shoot any “terrorist” even if they do not pose a threat.

Given their critical roles in driving policies that promote settler violence, weaken the Palestinian Authority, facilitate de facto and de jure annexation, and destabilize the West Bank, we urge you to sanction Finance Minister Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir pursuant to Executive Order 14115. Government leaders instigating violence must be subject to U.S. sanctions; those in leadership responsible for the lawlessness must be held to account.

We also urge you to apply sanctions to any other entities and officials that meet the criteria specified in that Executive Order, including key entities that destabilize the West Bank by promoting settler violence and dispossession of Palestinian communities and through other means. One such entity is Amana, which has long played a key role in establishing the majority of West Bank settlements and provides loans and building infrastructure for new outposts that are illegal under Israeli law, including agricultural farms that facilitate settler violence against Palestinian communities. Another is Regavim, which was co-founded by Smotrich. Regavim’s mission is to obstruct Palestinian construction in the West Bank, causing displacement and exacerbating tensions. Regavim also played a crucial role in organizing Tzav 9, which has already been sanctioned for its role in impeding the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Israel is the United States’ closest and most enduring democratic ally in the Middle East, and we remain completely committed to ensuring its long-term security, including by supporting a negotiated two-state solution. Settler violence in the West Bank, incentivized by external organizations and even by extremist officials in the Netanyahu government, threatens the long-term strategic security of Israel and the region.

Thank you for your continuing leadership and attention to this matter in this difficult and critical moment.

Sincerely,

⁹ CNN, “Residents of West Bank town say deadly settler attack was ‘most vicious’ yet,” Nadeen Ebrahim, et al., August 17, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/17/middleeast/west-bank-settler-attack-jit-israel-intl/index.html>.



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Member of Congress



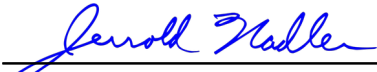
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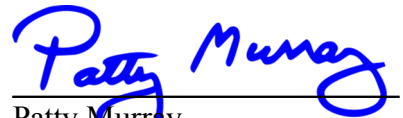
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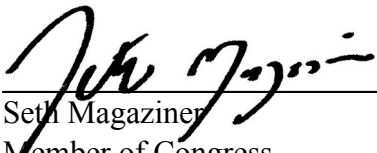
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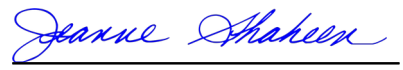
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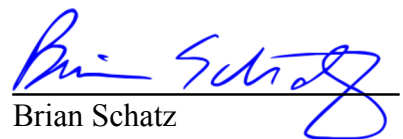
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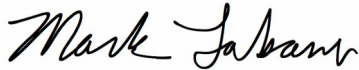
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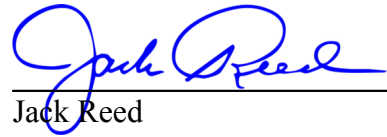
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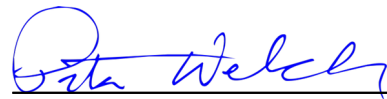
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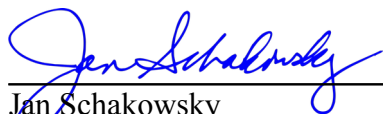
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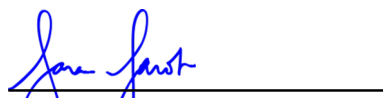
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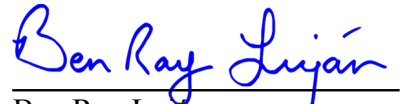
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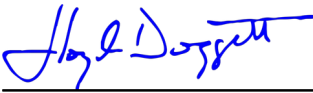
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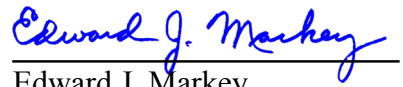
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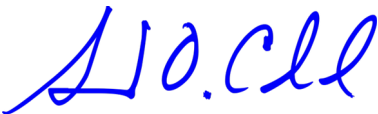
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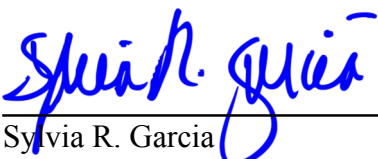
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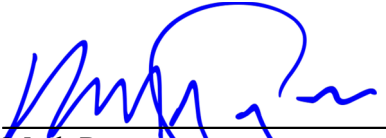
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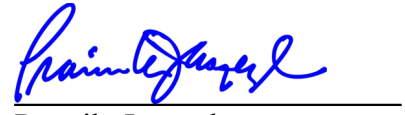
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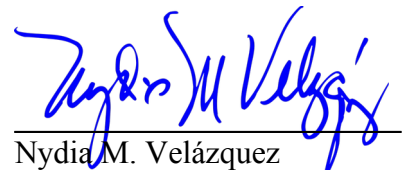
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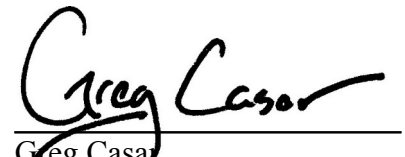
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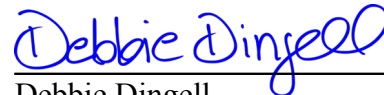
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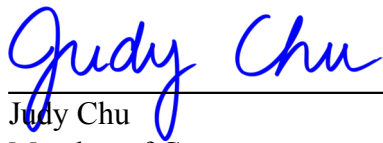
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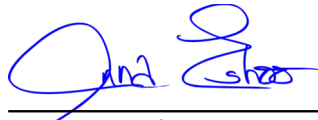
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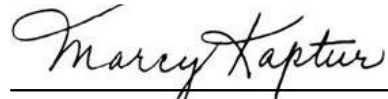
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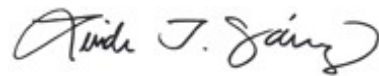
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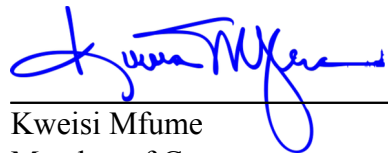
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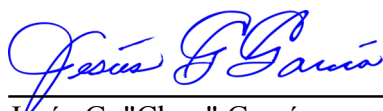
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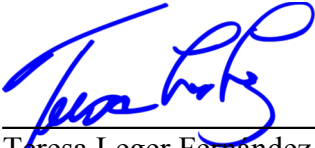
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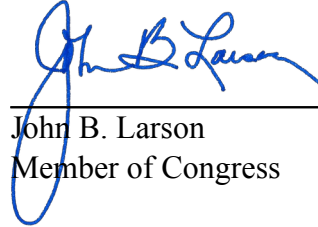
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