

Jamaal Bowman and Bernie Sanders Urge the Biden State Department to Investigate Israeli Use of US Weapons

A letter signed by eight other Democrats is congressional progressives' most forceful response yet to Israel's new far-right government.

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Rep. Jamaal Bowman and Senator Bernie Sanders are leading an effort to urge President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken to investigate whether Israel is using US weapons to commit human rights abuses against Palestinians, in violation of United States law, according to a [letter](#) and e-mail sent to other members of Congress obtained by Jewish Currents.

The letter was written by Bowman, while Sanders is spearheading efforts to garner support from other senators, according to Bowman's office. The letter has so far been signed by eight additional lawmakers: Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Summer Lee, Rashida Tlaib, Cori Bush, Ilhan Omar, Betty McCollum, André Carson, and Ayanna Pressley.

"At this inflection point, we ask your administration to undertake a shift in US policy in recognition of the worsening violence, further annexation of land, and denial of Palestinian rights," the lawmakers wrote. The lawmakers end the letter by calling on the Biden administration to "ensure US taxpayer funds do not support projects in illegal settlements" and to "determine whether US-origin defense articles have been used in violation of existing US laws." The letter criticizes the new Israeli government's "alarming actions" and its cabinet of "far-right, anti-Palestinian individuals and parties," asserting that the Israeli coalition in power is "pushing repressive, anti-democratic policies and escalating violence towards the Palestinian population."

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

[[DATE]]

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Department of State
2201 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear President Biden and Secretary Blinken,

We write to you with deep concern regarding the rapidly escalating violence in the occupied Palestinian West Bank and the alarming actions of the new extreme right-wing Israeli government. We urge immediate action to prevent the further loss of Israeli and Palestinian lives. At this inflection point, we ask your administration to undertake a shift in U.S. policy in recognition of the worsening violence, further annexation of land, and denial of Palestinian rights. Only by protecting democracy, human rights, and self-determination for all Palestinians and Israelis can we achieve a lasting peace.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government includes far-right, anti-Palestinian individuals and parties. Minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir openly encourages and praises violence against Palestinians. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich responded to the recent Israeli settler attacks on the Palestinian town of Huwara in the occupied West Bank by declaring that the whole town should be "wiped out."¹ Their presence in the government has made this the most far-right, illiberal government in Israel's history. True to their records, these figures are pushing repressive, anti-democratic policies and escalating violence towards the Palestinian population.

[Read the full letter here.](#)

The laws mentioned in the Bowman-Sanders letter—the [Arms Export Control Act](#) and the [Foreign Assistance Act](#)—stipulate that US weapons can only be used for purposes of self-defense and cannot be used to commit human rights abuses such as torture, extrajudicial killings, and any other "flagrant denial" of "the right to life." The letter demands that the Biden administration "ensure that all future foreign assistance to Israel, including weapons and equipment, is not used in support of gross violations of human rights," and that the administration respond to the lawmakers with a "detailed plan" on how the US will make sure Israel does not illegally misuse future aid.

The wide-ranging letter expresses concern over the government's [now-delayed](#) plans to gut the power of the Israeli judiciary. The lawmakers say these changes could enable corruption and "open the path" to further annexation of Palestinian territory, which they acknowledge is already occurring. "Despite massive street protests and a general strike, the Israeli government has merely delayed its judicial overhaul for a short time, and none of the agreements reached this week will lessen the systemic violence against Palestinians, including annexation of Palestinian land," the letter states. It also addresses what the lawmakers call "shocking and terrifying violence" in the occupied West Bank, such as the Israeli army incursion into Nablus on February 22nd that [killed](#) 11 Palestinians, the [settler rampage](#) through the town of Huwara on February 26th, and the [killing](#) of an Israeli

American by a Palestinian gunman on February 27th.

The letter is the most forceful response yet by Democratic members of Congress aimed at Israel's new far-right government, and reflects a desire to push the Biden administration to enforce their oft-stated [policy](#) that Israelis and Palestinians deserve "equal measures of freedom" and that Israel should refrain from actions that undermine peace, such as the building of settlements on Palestinian land. Its criticism of the Israeli government's judiciary overhaul and concern over the recent escalation of violence in the West Bank hits similar notes to a [March 8th letter](#) signed by 92 members of Congress—including Rep. Rosa DeLauro, the highest-ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, and Rep. Jim McGovern, the most powerful Democrat on the House Rules Committee—in which the lawmakers urged Biden to "use all diplomatic tools available" to stop Israel's government from damaging the judicial system and undermining the potential for a two-state solution. But Zaha Hassan, a human rights lawyer and a fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said that this earlier letter "invites the traditional response from the administration, because the asks aren't very clear. The framing allows the State Department to do what it's always done, which is issue statements but not take specific action." Unlike the March 8th letter, the Bowman-Sanders letter calls on the Biden administration to investigate whether Israeli actions have violated US laws that govern how US weapons can be used.

"The Biden administration's approach has been to issue statements of concern," said Beth Miller, the political director for Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) Action, the political and advocacy arm of Jewish Voice for Peace. "But not only does that not match the dire reality on the ground in Palestine, it also doesn't align with existing US law that should ensure that the US isn't complicit in human rights abuses against Palestinians."

The new letter comes on the heels of growing Democratic alarm at the new Israeli government, including a call from Democratic Senator [Chris Murphy](#) for the Biden administration to consider conditioning aid to Israel in response to the new government's deepening entrenchment of Israel's military occupation. "We're in a different moment in terms of what is happening on the ground in Israel/Palestine. Some members of congress are recognizing that," said Hadar Susskind, president and CEO of Americans for Peace Now, a "progressive Zionist" anti-occupation group backing the Bowman letter. "Things like calling for potentially conditioning aid—that's not something a lot of members of congress did before. People are understanding that a different situation on the ground requires different responses."

The Bowman-Sanders letter represents a rare instance of members of Congress publicly asking the State Department whether Israel is violating laws governing how US weapons may be used. When members of Congress do send such inquiries to the State Department, they typically do so privately to avoid blowback from Israel advocacy groups, or because they believe a private letter will have more influence, said Brad Parker, senior adviser on policy and advocacy for Defense for Children International-Palestine. Parker said the letter was also unique in its assertion that "illegal de facto and de jure annexation of the occupied West Bank is well underway," as the lawmakers write. "Some of the other letters have been limited to home demolitions or other single issues," said Parker. "This Bowman letter is more about structural or systemic issues like annexation, and specifically recognizes that annexation is happening, rather than [discussing] a perceived threat of annexation, as other letters have."

Over 20 civil society groups are supporting the letter, including Dream Defenders, IfNotNow, Justice Democrats, and the Working Families Party, according to JVP Action. J Street, the most [prominent](#) liberal Zionist group operating in Washington, was not among the public supporters of the letter at the time of publication, even as the letter's demand for an investigation into whether Israel is complying with the Arms Export Control Act echoes some of J Street's positions. The organization has [requested](#) that the Biden administration investigate whether an Israeli home demolition operation in the West Bank used US weapons in violation of that law; at its policy conference in December, J Street president Jeremy Ben Ami called for "oversight and accountability for how our aid to Israel is actually being used." J Street spokesperson Logan Bayroff declined to comment on the letter.

The letter builds on Sanders's long-standing [calls](#) for the US to impose restrictions on military aid to Israel to ensure that such funds aren't used to violate Palestinian human rights. It also underscores Rep. Bowman's willingness to wade into a [politically risky](#) foreign policy issue, becoming one of the most outspoken members of Congress on Israeli human rights violations. Elected in 2020 after running a primary campaign against pro-Israel hawk Eliot Engel, Bowman has had to balance his alliance with the progressive movement with the concerns of his Jewish constituents, some of whom treat the US-Israel relationship as sacrosanct. In September 2021, Bowman voted to send Israel an extra \$1 billion in military aid to fund the [anti-rocket Iron Dome system](#). Then, last year, he [withdrew his support](#) of a bill that backed Israel's normalization agreements with Arab governments.

Hassan said that the letter highlights some Democrats' desire for "action" as Israel's extremist government enacts more "uncontrolled violence mainly visited upon Palestinians." But Hassan was pessimistic that the letter would lead to a shift in policy from the Biden administration. "I don't hold out much hope that the administration is going to respond to a letter by the most progressive members of Congress," she said. "There needs to be a broader group of signers for there to be a sense of urgency and action from the State Department."

James Zogby, the president of the Arab American Institute, echoed Hassan's skepticism. "The letter honestly addresses Israel's behavior and the need to draw a line that, if crossed, brings consequences," he said. "Will the administration do it? They won't. But the letter moves the needle in the right direction."

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