March 22, 2024

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden,

We write to express our profound concerns regarding increased settler violence against Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, including forced displacement of people and villages and destruction of property, and to strongly urge your administration to increase your efforts to halt state-sanctioned demolitions of Palestinian homes.

We appreciate your recent executive action to address settler violence and for your reversal of the Pompeo doctrine, acknowledging that Israel’s plans to advance construction on thousands of settlement homes in the West Bank are inconsistent with international law. Your administration's commitment to restoring the US stance on the illegality of West Bank settlements is a crucial step toward preserving the facts on the ground and fostering a sustainable path to peace. We are also grateful for your ongoing efforts to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, secure the release of Israeli and international hostages still held by Hamas including American citizens, and to achieve a ceasefire, permanent end to the war, and a two-state solution.

To that end we are deeply troubled by Prime Minister Netanyahu’s recent comments rejecting a two-state solution, saying that he “will not compromise on full Israeli security control over all the territory west of Jordan – and this is contrary to a Palestinian state.” Unfortunately, the actions of his government reflect this position. While the eyes of the international community are focused on Gaza, we have seen unchecked settler violence, ballooning East Jerusalem and West Bank settlement growth, and the acceleration of demolitions of Palestinian homes throughout East Jerusalem.

Your reversal of the Pompeo Doctrine is an important step to addressing the issue of West Bank settlement construction. The return to the longstanding US position on West Bank settlements as inconsistent to international law is a pivotal benchmark as efforts to undermine the two-state solution persist. The combination of accelerating home demolitions in Palestinian communities along with construction of settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank not only entrenches the occupation but also poses a significant threat to the viability of a contiguous Palestinian state with a capital in East Jerusalem, jeopardizing the prospects for a secure and democratic Israel.

We are also grateful for your recent executive order to implement new measures to address extremist settler violence, which reached record levels in 2023. We share your concerns that “the high levels of extremist settler violence, forced displacement of people and villages, and property destruction – has reached intolerable levels and constitutes a serious threat to the peace, security, and stability of the West Bank and Gaza, Israel, and the broader Middle East region.” Settler violence has a significant impact on

1 https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-782999
Palestinians throughout the West Bank. At least sixteen villages were uprooted due to this violence in 2023 alone.³

Unfortunately, Palestinian communities in East Jerusalem and Area C remain under threat not only from acts of violence and intimidation by Israeli settlers but also from displacement by demolitions that are currently being carried out at an accelerated pace by the Israeli government.

Recent demolitions in the East Jerusalem part of Al-Walaja, a Palestinian agricultural village that lies less than a mile south of residential West Jerusalem and northwest of Bethlehem, underscore the pressing need for the United States to address this facet of creeping annexation. As we expressed in our March 2022 letter to Secretary Blinken, this area of Al-Walaja has been under threat of large-scale demolition for years due to the residents' inability to obtain building permits. Since 1967 when Israel occupied and annexed the northern part of the village, the state has abdicated its responsibility to prepare a zoning plan, which would allow for the issuance of building permits and the regularization of residential development.

Despite Al-Walaja’s residents ongoing efforts to work with the state to establish a zoning plan, which would legalize the existing homes and provide for future residential development, homes are being demolished while the state continues to delay the process, exemplifying the harsh reality faced by communities in East Jerusalem. In the first half of February alone, 10 homes were demolished in Al-Walaja and we are deeply concerned that more demolitions are imminent.

The assertion that these demolitions merely target "illegal" construction is deceptive and unacceptable. Such “illegal” construction and looming demolition threat is a direct result of the Israeli government’s systematic neglect to approve residential zoning plans for Palestinians and its selective enforcement against building violations. In 2023, 144 homes were demolished in East Jerusalem, while there has been a 70% monthly increase in demolitions since the start of the war in Gaza. Many hundreds of homes remain under threat of demolition, leaving entire East Jerusalem communities - such as Al-Bustan, Al-Walaja, and others - at risk of being uprooted.

As your administration has taken crucial steps to deter settler violence and address the illegality of settlements, we respectfully emphasize the urgency of also addressing the issue of state-sanctioned demolitions of Palestinian homes. We urge you to take meaningful action to halt these processes of displacement and their erosion of prospects for peace and a two-state solution.

Sincerely,

Mark Pocan
Member of Congress

Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

³https://www.btselem.org/settler_violence/20231019_forcible_transfer_of_isolated_communities_and_families_in_area_c_under_the_cover_of_gaza_fighting