

March 12, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Hegseth:

We write to express alarm regarding reports of civilian casualties arising from Operation Epic Fury in Iran and urgently request detailed information about the steps the U.S. is taking to prevent and respond to civilian harm. We are particularly disturbed by reports of what appears to be the deadliest attack on civilians thus far: a girls' elementary school, where at least 175 civilians, many of them children, were reported [killed](#) and 100 children and staff [wounded](#). The New York Times recently [reported](#) that the U.S. preliminary investigation found that the United States is responsible for this strike due to outdated targeting data. With reportedly over 1,000 total civilian [deaths](#) already and a lack of clarity about the anticipated scale and duration of operations, we demand clear answers on how the Department plans to investigate these reports and prevent the risk of further civilian harm.

Longstanding U.S. military policy and the law of armed conflict, also known as international humanitarian law, apply during wartime and protect civilians and military service members alike. Under the law of armed conflict, the U.S. must distinguish between civilians and combatants, ensure proportionality, and take all feasible precautions to protect civilians. The Department of Defense has in recent years improved the way it prevents, mitigates, and responds to civilian harm, including through its Department of Defense Instruction on Civilian Mitigation and Response (DOD-I 30001.7) and the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence that provides direct support to warfighters.

We are therefore deeply concerned by reports of U.S. and Israeli strikes in Iran that have resulted in significant and growing civilian harm. The U.S. and Israel have reportedly struck or impacted numerous civilian sites—including [schools](#), [hospitals](#), [gymnasiums](#), [public gathering spaces](#), and a [UNESCO heritage site](#). In addition to civilian casualties, these strikes have disrupted civilian life and damaged infrastructure. The U.S. military must refrain from using explosive weapons in densely populated, civilian areas in line with its commitments under the [Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas](#). Civilians and civilian infrastructure may under no circumstances be the object of attack and must at all times be respected and protected by all parties.

Reported civilian harm by the U.S. and Israel during Operation Epic Fury is particularly alarming yet unsurprising given the recent strain on our civilian protection institutions. For example, we understand that budget reductions at the Department have deprived military commands—including at U.S. Central Command—of essential resources needed to meaningfully address civilian casualties. In February 2025, you fired [top military lawyers](#) responsible for ensuring compliance with the laws of war, including those designed to protect civilians in conflict. And on March 2, 2026, you [asserted](#) that there would be “No stupid rules of

engagement.” President Trump has likewise [declared](#) that “I don’t need international law.” This attitude is not only lawless but counterproductive. General Joseph Votel, former Commander of U.S. Central Command, recently stated “If you cause so many civilian casualties and you cause so much civilian harm here, it can actually undermine the mission that the military has been sent in to do [...] the benefit to be gained by supporting these [Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response (CHMR)] positions, I think it outweighs the movement of resources to other places.” Now is not the time to admonish the principles of civilian protection and undermine the important work the Department has undertaken in recent years to advance CHMR policy and practice.

To that end, we seek detailed information regarding civilian protection during Operation Epic Fury and steps the military is taking to mitigate and respond to civilian harm. We also urge your Department to make public the findings of the ongoing investigation with respect to the strikes on the Shajareh Tayyebbeh school.

Specifically, we request written responses to the following questions:

1. Did the United States Armed Forces carry out the strikes on the Shajareh Tayyebbeh school? If so, what was the target and why was the decision taken to execute the strikes? What was the assessed civilian harm risk of the strikes, and what steps were considered or taken to prevent civilian harm?
2. What is the U.S. military’s assessment of civilian casualties from the airstrikes on the Shajareh Tayyebbeh school? In light of the scale of reported deaths of children in Minab, will the Department investigate the airstrikes on the Shajareh Tayyebbeh school as a possible war crime?
3. What is the role of artificial intelligence, if any, in selecting targets, assessing intelligence, and making legal determinations during Operation Epic Fury? If artificial intelligence is used, is it subject to human review and at what point? Was artificial intelligence, including the use of Maven Smart System, used to identify the Shajareh Tayyebbeh school as a target? If so, did a human verify the accuracy of this target?
4. How are congressionally mandated civilian harm mitigation and response (CHMR) policies and institutions, including DoD-I 3000.17 and the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence, being resourced, implemented, and operationalized during Operation Epic Fury?
5. What steps is the Department taking to prevent and mitigate civilian harm in its planning and targeting during Operation Epic Fury? What precautions is the U.S. taking to avoid and minimize civilian harm?
6. Please describe the Department’s process for target selection and review in Operation Epic Fury. Has the Department employed red-teaming and used civilian environment teams to mitigate civilian harm in this operation? If so, how do you assess the success of these actions? How many personnel are responsible for civilian harm mitigation and response in Operation Epic Fury?
7. What steps does the U.S. plan to take to respond to civilian harm reports from Operation Epic Fury, including development of lessons learned and post-harm responses to civilians?

8. Will the Department commit to surging CHMR capabilities to protect civilians in the context of Operation Epic Fury? Please indicate your plan for doing so, and any resources required from Congress.
9. Has the Department established accessible channels for civilians to report alleged civilian harm in Operation Epic fury? Are those channels available in Persian, Kurdish, and other major Iranian languages?
10. How is the Department working with Israeli authorities to harmonize civilian harm practices and policies between U.S. and Israeli forces?

We request a response no later than March 20, 2026. Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



Sara Jacobs
Member of Congress



Yassamin Ansari
Member of Congress



Jason Crow
Member of Congress



Adam Smith
Member of Congress



Jim Himes
Member of Congress



Gregory W. Meeks
Ranking Member
House Committee on Foreign
Affairs



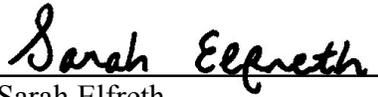
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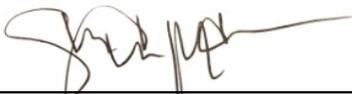
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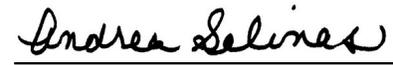
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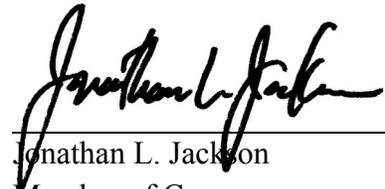
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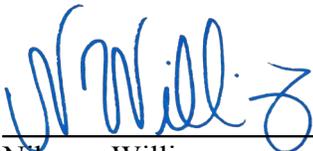
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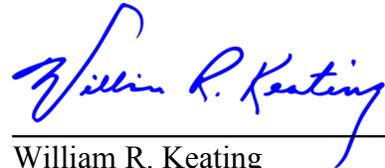
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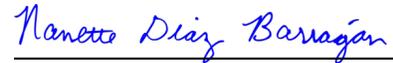
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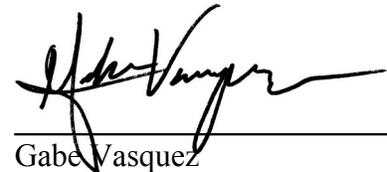
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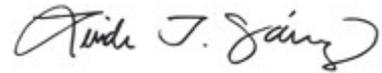
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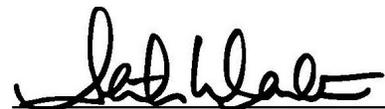
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Sahas Subramanyam

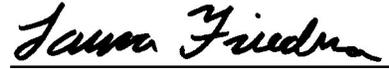
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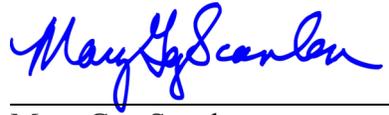
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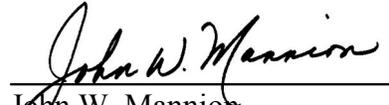
Grace Meng
Member of Congress



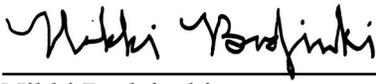
Mary Gay Scanlon
Member of Congress



Marilyn Strickland
Member of Congress



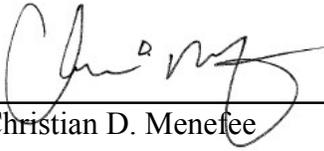
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Member of Congress



Al Green
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Christian D. Menefee
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Lateefah Simon
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Seth Magaziner
Member of Congress



Maxwell Alejandro Frost
Member of Congress

CC: Admiral Brad Cooper, Commander
U.S. Central Command