Members of UK's largest Jewish body condemn Israel's offensive in Gaza

Letter underscores concern in Jewish community over Netanyahu government's violence against Palestinians



A pregnant woman is rescued from her home after an Israeli army attack in Gaza © Jehad Alshrafi/AP

Andrew England in London

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Dozens of members of the UK's largest Jewish representative body have launched a stinging attack on Israel's government for resuming its offensive in Gaza and warned that "Israel's soul is being ripped out".

In an open letter, the 36 members of the Board of Deputies of British Jews said they could not "turn a blind eye or remain silent at this renewed loss of life and livelihoods".

They also condemned violence against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, which they said was encouraged by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right administration, while warning: "This extremism also targets Israeli democracy.

“Israel’s soul is being ripped out and we, members of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, fear for the future of the Israel we love and have such close ties to,” the letter said. “Silence is seen as support for policies and actions that run contrary to our Jewish values.”

The letter, published in the Financial Times, is a first public show of opposition to Israel’s 18-month war against Hamas in Gaza from members of the board, and hints at growing fissures among Britain’s Jewish community over how to respond to Netanyahu’s hardline policies.

The signatories to the letter had pushed the board, which has more than 300 elected deputies, to release a statement condemning Netanyahu’s decision to resume Israel’s offensive in Gaza last month. The move shattered a fragile two-month ceasefire deal, under which Hamas had agreed to release hostages.

But after the board was unwilling to publicly criticise the Israeli government, the deputies wrote the open letter, saying: “The inclination to avert our eyes is strong, as what is happening is unbearable, but our Jewish values compel us to stand up and to speak out.”

Harriett Goldenberg, vice-chair of the board’s international division and one of the signatories, told the FT that while “some fear the appearance of disloyalty, we feel it is essential as British Jews to speak up”.

“Otherwise we run the risk of being complicit. In Jewish history, silence is not a good thing,” she said.

Asked about the letter, the board said it was a diverse organisation and “others would no doubt put more emphasis on the fundamental responsibility of Hamas for this ghastly situation”.

“This diversity is not unlike the politics of Israel itself, whose rambunctious democratic culture sees a fierce exchange of views about these excruciating life and death issues,” it said in a statement.

Britain's Jewish community has largely rallied around Israel since the war in Gaza erupted after Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack, during which militants killed 1,200 people and seized 250 hostages, according to Israeli officials.

However, a significant minority have not, and there is growing concern among board members about the fate of the remaining hostages, the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, Israeli assaults on the West Bank, and Netanyahu's revival of contentious judiciary reforms.

Baron Frankal, another signatory, said the signatories "represent a considerably higher number who share these same concerns, but for a variety of reasons, would not be willing to say so publicly".

Netanyahu insists that he is pursuing the war to destroy Hamas and put pressure on the group to release more hostages, while blaming the militant group for refusing to agree to change the terms of the ceasefire deal.

In the letter, the deputies warned the independence of the Israeli judicial system was "again under fierce attack". They also described the Israeli police as "increasingly resembling a militia and repressive laws are being advanced as provocative partisan populism is bitterly dividing Israeli society".

The letter added that "this most extremist of Israeli governments is openly encouraging violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, strangling the Palestinian economy and building more new settlements than ever".

The deputies linked Netanyahu's decision to resume the war in Gaza in part to Itamar Ben-Gvir, the far-right national security minister who resigned when the government signed the US-brokered ceasefire with Hamas in January.

He rejoined the governing coalition shortly after Israel imposed a full siege on Gaza and resumed the offensive, bolstering Netanyahu's hold on power.

Israel's offensive on Gaza has already killed more than 50,000 people, according to Palestinian health officials.

"We are back in a brutal war where the killing of 15 [Gazan] paramedics and their burial in a mass grave is again possible and risks being normal," the letter said, referring to an Israeli attack on emergency workers in Gaza last month.

"We stand against the war . . . We yearn for the day after this conflict when reconciliation can start," it said.

Letter: As British Jews we can no longer stay silent on the war in Gaza

From Harriett Goldenberg, Baron Frankal, Sophie Hasenson, Robert Stone and others



Demonstrators light up smoke flares and hold up signs during an anti-government protest calling for action to secure the release of Israeli hostages held captive since the October 7 attacks by Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip, in central Tel Aviv © Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

Published 6 HOURS AGO

We write as representatives of the British Jewish community, out of love for Israel and deep concern for its future.

The inclination to avert our eyes is strong, as what is happening is unbearable, but our Jewish values compel us to stand up and to speak out.

This is what we see: the last 18 months of heartbreaking war have shown us that the most successful way of bringing the hostages home and creating a lasting peace is through diplomacy. By the end of the first phase of the second ceasefire and hostage release deal, 135 hostages had been released through negotiation, just eight by military action, with at least three tragically killed by the Israel Defense Forces.

America, Qatar and Egypt again stood as guarantors of the release of all remaining hostages in the second phase of this deal, in return for Israel withdrawing from the Gaza Strip. A strong plan for the reconstruction of Gaza was approved and supported by the international community, to be managed by a Palestinian leadership, which would be a viable alternative to Hamas, financed by the Arab League.

At that moment, the Israeli government instead chose to break the ceasefire and return to war in Gaza with the “Itamar offensive”, so-called as it was Itamar Ben-Gvir’s condition for returning to the coalition, thus enabling the Israeli government’s budget to be passed within the tight deadline needed to avoid an election. Since then, no hostages have returned. Hundreds and hundreds more Palestinians have been killed; food, fuel and medical supplies have once again been blocked from entering Gaza; and we are back in a brutal war where the killing of 15 paramedics and their burial in a mass grave is again possible and risks being normal. Such incidents are too painful and shocking to take in, but we know in our hearts we cannot turn a blind eye or remain silent at this renewed loss of life and livelihoods, with hopes dwindling for a peaceful reconciliation and the return of the hostages.

This most extremist of Israeli governments is openly encouraging violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, strangling the Palestinian economy and building more new settlements than ever.

This extremism also targets Israeli democracy, with the independence of the judicial system again under fierce attack, the police increasingly resembling a militia and repressive laws are being advanced as provocative partisan populism is bitterly dividing Israeli society. Israel’s soul is being ripped out and we, members of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, fear for the future of the Israel we love and have such close ties to.

Silence is seen as support for policies and actions that run contrary to our Jewish values. Led by the families of the hostages, hundreds of thousands of Israelis are demonstrating on the streets against the return to war by an Israeli government that has not prioritised the return of the hostages.

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Silence is seen as support for policies and actions that run contrary to our Jewish values. Led by the families of the hostages, hundreds of thousands of Israelis are demonstrating on the streets against the return to war by an Israeli government that has not prioritised the return of the hostages.

We stand with them. We stand against the war. We acknowledge and mourn the loss of Palestinian life. We yearn for the "day after" this conflict when reconciliation can start. As we mark the festival of freedom with so many hostages still in captivity, it is our duty, as Jews, to speak out.

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