**Pro-Israel Senators to Call on Blinken to Take Stronger Action Over ICC War Crimes Probe**

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WASHINGTON - Two leading pro-Israel senators are circulating a letter to their colleagues calling on U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to take a stronger stance against the International Criminal Court's potential probe into Israeli war crimes according to a letter obtained by Haaretz.

Sen. Ben Cardin, a Democrat from Maryland, and Sen. Rob Portman, a Republican from Ohio, write that Blinken should "issue a more forceful condemnation of the Court’s actions," after the court announced earlier this month that it would open legal proceedings against Israel and Hamas on suspicion of committing war crimes in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.

"We also urge you to work with like-minded international partners to steer the ICC away from further actions that could damage the Court’s credibility by giving the appearance of political bias. We ask that you give this matter your full attention and that you continue to defend Israel against discriminatory attacks in all international fora," the letter continues.

The senators, both members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, say that "while we support the ICC’s stated goal of ensuring accountability for the gravest crimes of concern to the international community, we are concerned that the Court’s recent actions regarding the 'Situation in Palestine' have inappropriately infused politics into the judicial process" and that "the ICC does not have legitimate territorial jurisdiction in this case."

They add that "the ICC’s mandate should not supersede Israel’s robust judicial system, including its military justice system" and that "it is not within the authority of the ICC to accept or deny any party’s claims to these disputed territories, nor has the Court ever before formally investigated allegations taking place in disputed territories. This unprecedented action by the ICC’s Pre-Trial Chamber unfairly targets Israel, biases any subsequent investigation or trial, and hinders the path towards regional peace."

Cardin and Portman write that the ruling "creates an exception for the Court to investigate Israel, even while it is unable or unwilling to address some of the most urgent human rights cases in the world today, including those in Iran, Syria, and China."

When asked for their position on the Cardin/Portman letter, the left-wing pro-Israel organization J Street provided their own letter criticizing the senators' position, which they subsequently circulated throughout Senate offices in response.

J Street called the letter an "unnecessary act of political posturing that purports to seek clarity regarding an already crystal-clear position of the Biden administration," adding that it "provides fodder for those who are pushing [the Biden administration] to embrace the Trump administration’s appalling attacks on the ICC, its personnel and the rule of law."

The response from the liberal Zionist group notes that the State Department already rejected the ICC's decision, "yet the letter then treats the administration’s position as somehow unclear or inadequate, stating that: 'We encourage you to issue a more forceful condemnation of the Court’s actions.' The letter even implies in its opening line that the administration has not only failed to oppose the decision, but that it is therefore lacking in its support for Israel."

The organization also cautioned against the Cardin/Portman letter's language that mirrors their May 2020 letter that urged the United States to defend Israel against ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda's defense of the ICC's jurisdiction to investigate potential war crimes. This letter was later used by the Trump administration to justify sanctions placed on ICC officials and their families. J Street writes that "the new letter’s repeated use of this language must – and will – be read as a call to maintain and enforce these unprecedented Trump-era sanctions, which damaged U.S. credibility and the cause of democratic values on the world stage."

J Street also criticized the senators' use of "disputed territories" instead of "occupied territories" to describe the area beyond the Green Line, stating that "this difference in language is incredibly consequential as a matter of law and policy," adding that "senators who support the longstanding bipartisan consensus positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should not sign a letter containing this rightwing linguistic Trojan Horse."

Neither Sen. Cardin nor Sen. Portman responded to Haaretz's request for comment.