

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 19, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth  
Secretary of Defense  
U.S. Department of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Hegseth,

We write regarding our concerns about the Department of Defense's (DoD) degradation of civilian harm prevention programs and its impact on the Department's ability to prevent, mitigate, and investigate harm to civilians. Over the course of President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu's war in Iran, attacks on civilian infrastructure and communities have led to more than 1,700 confirmed civilian deaths.<sup>1</sup> Alarming reports of attacks on more than 20 schools and a dozen health care facilities further illustrate the war's risks to civilians.<sup>2</sup>

Troubling allegations of civilian harm incidents in which the U.S. was or may have been responsible for civilian harm in this war include:

- A missile strike on a girls' elementary school in Minab, Iran that killed 175 children and teachers – likely the deadliest child casualty event by American forces since 1991.<sup>3</sup>
- A ballistic missile attack on an elementary school and sports hall in Lamerd, Iran that killed at least 21 people.<sup>4</sup>
- An airstrike on a major highway bridge used for commerce and travel that did not “provide any military advantage” to the US.<sup>5</sup> Reports indicate that the attack killed eight people and injured more than a hundred others.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> New York Times, “Iran’s Schools and Hospitals in Ruins, Times Analysis Shows,” Leanne Abraham, Aurelien Breeden, and Bora Erden et. al., April 9, 2026,

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2026/04/09/world/middleeast/us-israel-strikes-iran-structures-damage.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*; World Health Organization, “WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing,” March 18, 2026, <https://www.who.int/news-room/speeches/item/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing---18-march-2026>.

<sup>3</sup> New York Times, “U.S. at Fault in Strike on School in Iran, Preliminary Inquiry Says,” Julian E. Barnes, Eric Schmitt, Tyler Pager, et. al., March 11, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/11/us/politics/iran-school-missile-strike.html>; Human Rights Watch, “The Bombing Of Iraqi Cities: Middle East Watch Condemns Bombing Without Warning of Air Raid Shelter In Baghdad's Al Ameriyya District on February 13,” March 6, 1991, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1991/IRAQ291.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> New York Times, “New U.S. Missile Hit Iranian Sports Hall and School, Analysis Shows,” Christiaan Triebert and John Ismay, March 29, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/29/world/middleeast/us-precision-strike-missile-iran-lamerd.html>.

<sup>5</sup> New York Times, “Trump Hails Strike on Iranian Bridge, Warning ‘More to Follow’,” Euan Ward, Edward Wong, Parin Behrooz et. al., April 2, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/02/world/middleeast/trump-iran-bridge-strike.html>.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

- The use of scatterable antitank landmines that have landed indiscriminately in residential Iranian villages and reportedly killed a civilian.<sup>7</sup> Landmines are indiscriminate weapons that can harm civilians for decades after use.

We are concerned that these were all preventable tragedies. The high human toll of this war reflects the administration's broader disregard for the strategic, legal, and moral imperative to minimize civilian harm. Prior to the war, you reportedly overruled top military leaders and made deep cuts to DoD's mitigation and response (CHMR) programs, fired personnel at DoD's Civilian Protection Center of Excellence (CPCoE) and slashed CHMR staff at the U.S. combatant commands "by more than 90 percent."<sup>8</sup> This included eliminating the entire civilian harm office at Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), removing civilian harm specialists from target development strike teams, and reducing the team of 10 at U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) to only one full time staff.<sup>9</sup>

This is a concerning pattern and raises questions about whether the administration is upholding international law and the laws of war. The President has repeatedly threatened civilian infrastructure and called for mass annihilation of civilians, writing that "[a] whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again," drawing bipartisan condemnation that the U.S. would threaten to take actions that experts agree would be war crimes.<sup>10</sup>

We are also concerned that your leadership is further harming the credibility of our armed forces, exacerbating threats to civilians and U.S. servicemembers alike. In the first week of the war, you said it would be fought with "no stupid rules of engagement."<sup>11</sup> You have repeatedly derided "tepid legality."<sup>12</sup> You declared that there would be "no quarter, no mercy for our enemies."<sup>13</sup> International law and the DoD Law of War Manual explicitly forbid declaring that "no quarter will be given" or threatening to conduct hostilities on that basis.<sup>14</sup> These statements not only

<sup>7</sup> New York Times, "U.S. Antitank Mines Discovered in Neighborhood in Iran," John Ismay and Aric Toler, March 27, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/27/us/antitank-mines-iran.html>; Bellingcat, "Evidence Points to US Scattering Mines over Iranian Village," Trevor Ball, March 26, 2026,

<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2026/03/26/us-iran-mines-israel-village-missile-munitions-weapons-war-conflict/>.  
<sup>8</sup> Politico, "Hegseth ignored military officials when he slashed offices that limit risk to civilians," Jack Detsch and Paul McLeary, March 13, 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/03/13/military-leaders-warned-hegseth-not-to-gut-offices-that-limit-risk-to-civilians-00827722>.

<sup>9</sup> *Id*; The Economist, "How America and Israel built vast military targeting machines," March 11, 2026, <https://www.economist.com/international/2026/03/11/how-america-and-israel-built-vast-military-targeting-machines>.

<sup>10</sup> Post on Truth Social by U.S. President Donald Trump, April 7, 2026, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/116363336033995961>; Washington Post, "Trump threats against civilian targets put military in legal, moral quandary," Adam Taylor and Ellen Nakashima, April 7, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2026/04/07/trump-iran-bombing-civilization-war-crime/>.

<sup>11</sup> Military.com, "Hegseth's 'Stupid Rules of Engagement' Line and What ROE Actually Do," Haley Fuller, March 6, 2026, <https://www.military.com/feature/2026/03/05/hegseths-stupid-rules-of-engagement-line-and-what-roe-actually-do.html>.

<sup>12</sup> New York Times Magazine, "Every Pentagon Has Its Buzzword. For Hegseth's, It's 'Lethality,'" Nitsuh Abebe, March 26, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/26/magazine/lethality-us-military-pete-hegseth.html>.

<sup>13</sup> CNN, "Word of the Week: Denying the enemy 'quarter' may sound like tough talk, but it would be a war crime," Harmeet Kaur, March 18, 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/2026/03/18/us/word-of-week-no-quarter-hegseth-ccc>.

<sup>14</sup> International Humanitarian Law Databases, "Rule 46. Orders or Threats that No Quarter Will Be Given.," U.S. Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Law of War Manual," July 2023, pp. 210-211, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jul/31/2003271432/-1/-1/0/DOD-LAW-OF-WAR-MANUAL-JUNE-2015-UPDATED-JULY%202023.PDF>.

harm civilians and undermine established standards, but also endanger U.S. servicemembers with greater risk of reciprocation and erode good order and discipline.

The reduction of civilian harm is essential for the U.S. military's operational effectiveness and central to U.S. interests. As General Joseph Votel, the former commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) has noted, failing to prevent civilian harm "can actually undermine the mission that the military has been sent in to do."<sup>15</sup> DoD's Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan (CHMR-AP) affirmed that efforts to mitigate civilian harm are "critical to achieving long-term success on the battlefield."<sup>16</sup> CHMR and CPCoE civilian harm specialists support operational commanders, map out civilian presence in combat theatres, analyze operational risks, and provide expertise on the discriminate use of force to be consistent with U.S. and international law.<sup>17</sup> These efforts conserve resources by focusing military planning, operations, and munitions towards high-value, strategic targets and avoid the negative moral and strategic costs of killing civilians.

Senior DoD officials in the Trump administration agree that mitigating civilian harm is a vital national security imperative. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby wrote to members of Congress that, "I believe it is in the U.S. national interest, as well as morally right, to seek to reduce civilian harm to the degree possible."<sup>18</sup> During his confirmation, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dan Caine said that combatant commanders who incorporated CHMR personnel into planning "see positive impacts from the program."<sup>19</sup>

Your attempts to gut DoD's civilian harm institutions contradicts more than a decade of bipartisan consensus and DoD-led reforms, initiated during the first Trump administration, to systematically prevent, and address civilian harm in DoD operations.<sup>20</sup> This included unifying a civilian harm reporting process that was fragmented across the military services and developing a set of standard assessment procedures to analyze instances of civilian harm caused by U.S. forces.<sup>21</sup> Congress codified these reforms into law on a bipartisan basis, authorized research that

<sup>15</sup> NPR, "Pentagon closing offices focused on reducing civilian casualties," Leila Fadel, March 11, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/11/nx-s1-5320226/pentagon-closing-offices-focused-on-reducing-civilian-casualties>.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan", August 25, 2022, p. 1, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Aug/25/2003064740/-1/-1/1/CIVILIAN-HARM-MITIGATION-AND-RESPONSE-ACTION-PLAN.PDF>.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*; U.S. Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Law of War Manual," July 2023, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jul/31/2003271432/-1/-1/0/DOD-LAW-OF-WAR-MANUAL-JUNE-2015-UPDATED-JULY%202023.PDF>.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, "Advance Policy Questions for Elbridge Colby Nominee for Appointment to be Under Secretary of Defense for Policy," p. 11, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/colby\\_apq\\_responses2.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/colby_apq_responses2.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, "Advance Policy Questions for Lieutenant General John Daniel Caine (USAF), Retired, Nominee for Appointment to Grade of General and to the position of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," p. 10, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/caine\\_apq\\_responses.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/caine_apq_responses.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Breaking Defense, "Esper Presses Hard For New Civilian Casualty Policy," Paul McLeary, September 24, 2019, <https://breakingdefense.com/2019/09/esper-presses-hard-for-new-civilian-casualty-policy/>; Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Civilian Casualty (CIVACS) Review," April 17, 2018, <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Civilian%20Casualty%20Review%20Report%20Redacted.pdf>; U.S. Government Accountability Office, "CIVILIAN HARM DOD Should Take Actions to Enhance Its Plan for Mitigation and Response Efforts," March, 2024, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/870/867076.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> New York Times, "Austin Orders U.S. Military to Step Up Efforts to Prevent Civilian Harm," Eric Schmitt, Charlie Savage, and Azmat Khan, January 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/us/politics/us-airstrikes->

evaluated gaps in DoD’s civilian harm procedures,<sup>22</sup> required DoD to submit reports on civilian casualties resulting from US military operations,<sup>23</sup> and formalized the creation of the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence (CPCoE) to institutionalize DoD processes to mitigate civilian harm.<sup>24</sup>

Organizations representing thousands of former service members called on DoD to protect the civilian harm program.<sup>25</sup> Top military officials, including admirals, generals, and members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff all pushed back against the dismantlement of civilian harm offices.<sup>26</sup> Yet the administration opted to pursue these cuts that are contrary to U.S. law.<sup>27</sup>

The importance of protecting civilian life to the greatest extent possible is central to effective military operations and differentiates the United States from our adversaries. We call on the administration to immediately end the war in Iran, fully restore Congressionally authorized programs and staffing to mitigate civilian harm, and provide complete responses to the attached questions no later than May 4, 2026:

## Questions

1. What steps and precautions is DoD taking to prevent, mitigate, and respond to civilian harm from U.S. and partner actions in the war in Iran?
2. How many personnel are dedicated to preventing and responding to civilian harm within each of the eleven combatant commands? Please provide a breakdown of CHMR personnel, including the number of personnel in place as of January 20, 2025, and the number in place now, at: AFRICOM, CYBERCOM, CENTCOM, EUCOM, INDOPACOM, NORTHCOM, SOCOM, SOUTHCOM, SPACECOM, and STRATCOM..
3. Reports indicate that CENTCOM’s civilian harm team was cut from a group of 10 full-time staff to only one in 2025, but that the team was subsequently restaffed to assist with the war in Iran.<sup>28</sup> How many CHMR staff are currently employed at CENTCOM (please indicate full-time staff and those with collateral duties, as well as civilian, active duty, or contractor)?

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[rand-report.html](#).

<sup>22</sup> RAND, “U.S. Department of Defense Civilian Casualty Policies and Procedures,” Michael J. McNerney, Gabrielle Tarini, Karen M. Sudkamp et. al., January 27, 2022, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA418-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA418-1.html).

<sup>23</sup> National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, Public Law 117-81, Sec. 1048.

<sup>24</sup> James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, Public Law 117-263, Sec. 1082.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, About Face: Veterans Against the War, The Chamberlain Network et. al. to Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, June 24, 2025, <https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Veterans-Letter-Maintaining-CHMR-at-DOD.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Politico, “Hegseth ignored military officials when he slashed offices that limit risk to civilians,” Jack Detsch and Paul Mcleary, March 13, 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/03/13/military-leaders-warned-hegseth-not-to-cut-offices-that-limit-risk-to-civilians-00827722>.

<sup>27</sup> James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, Public Law 117-263, Sec. 1082.

<sup>28</sup> ProPublica, “The U.S. Built a Blueprint to Avoid Civilian War Casualties. Trump Officials Scrapped It.,” Hannah Allam, March 10, 2026, <https://www.propublica.org/article/trump-defense-department-iran-hegseth-civilian-casualties>.

- a. Of these, how many are temporarily employed to assist CENTCOM operations with the war in Iran?
  - b. What are the roles and responsibilities of these staff?
  - c. On what date were additional CHMR specialists brought on to assist with the CENTCOM mission?
  - d. To what extent were the number of CHMR specialists within “strike cells” at CENTCOM reduced prior to the war in Iran?
  - e. Were CHMR specialists and personnel from the CPCoE involved in planning prior to the launch of the war in Iran? To what extent are CPCoE staff currently supporting CENTCOM?
  - f. What recommendations, if any, were provided to CENTCOM officials by CHMR specialists?
    - i. To what extent were these recommendations adopted by CENTCOM over the course of the campaign in Iran?
4. Multiple senior career military leaders opposed efforts to degrade the CHMR programming, including through cuts to staff at the CPCoE and U.S. combatant commands.<sup>29</sup>
- a. Please provide any and all correspondence, memorandum, meeting transcripts, regarding the decision to slash CHMR programs within DoD.
  - b. Please provide a copy of the June 2025 memorandum from then CENTCOM Commanding General Kurilla opposing the cuts to CHMR.
  - c. How many CHMR personnel were reassigned? Please disaggregate CHMR personnel reassignment by command and full time employee versus contractor status.
  - d. How many former CHMR personnel were terminated? Please disaggregate CHMR personnel termination by command and full time employee versus contractor status.
  - e. How many staff at the CPCoE took voluntary buyouts?
5. What is DoD’s assessment of how civilian harm caused by U.S. forces and its allies and partners contribute to:
- a. Recruitment efforts by non-state armed groups and foreign states?
  - b. Anti-American sentiment?
  - c. Risks to U.S. citizens residing in the Middle East and other conflict areas?
  - d. Intelligence gathering capabilities?
6. By DoD’s estimates, how many civilians have been killed over the course of the war since February 28, 2026?
- a. What share of those civilians killed were from U.S. operations?
7. By DoD’s estimates, how many civilians have been injured over the course of the war since February 28, 2026?

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<sup>29</sup> Politico, “Hegseth ignored military officials when he slashed offices that limit risk to civilians,” Jack Detsch and Paul Mcleary, March 13, 2026, <https://www.politico.com/news/2026/03/13/military-leaders-warned-hegseth-not-to-gut-offices-that-limit-risk-to-civilians-00827722>.

- a. What share of those civilians injured were from US operations?
8. By DoD's estimates, how many people have been displaced over the course of the war since February 28, 2026?
9. Have US forces used cluster bombs to disperse mines, including BLU-91 antitank mines and BLU-92 antipersonnel mines, in the war in Iran?
  - a. If so, have cluster bombs been equipped with wind-corrected munitions dispenser tail kits to minimize the potential of hitting civilian infrastructure and targets?
  - b. What is DoD's assessment of the civilian harm risk associated with the use of cluster bombs to distribute BLU-91 and BLU-92 mines?
10. How many civilian harm reports has DoD received since February 28, 2026?
  - a. How many of these reports have gone through an initial review?
  - b. How many of these reports have had a civilian harm assessment initiated, and what is the current status of these assessments?
  - c. How many AR 15-6 investigations into civilian harm has DoD opened since the start of the war in Iran?
11. What is the status of the of DoD's investigation into the airstrike on Minab, Iran?
  - a. How was this target identified? Was artificial intelligence used at any point in the target development process to identify, prioritize, or recommend this target?
  - b. What is the timeframe for a final report?
  - c. Will the final investigation be shared with Congress and the U.S. public, with only narrow redactions to protect the privacy of individuals or national security?
12. Has DoD opened an investigation into the February 28, 2026 ballistic missile attack on an elementary school and sports hall in Lamerd, Iran?<sup>30</sup>
  - a. How was this target identified? Was artificial intelligence used at any point in the target development process to identify, prioritize, or recommend this target?
  - b. Were collateral damage estimations conducted prior to this strike? Was civilian harm foreseen? What steps did DoD take, if any, to minimize civilian harm as a result of this strike?

Sincerely,



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Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator

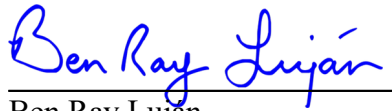


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Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator

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<sup>30</sup> New York Times, "New U.S. Missile Hit Iranian Sports Hall and School, Analysis Shows", Christiaan Triebert and John Ismay, March 29, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/29/world/middleeast/us-precision-strike-missile-iran-lamerd.html>.




Ben Ray Lujan  
United States Senator



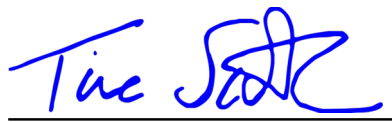
Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator



Mazie K. Hirono  
United States Senator



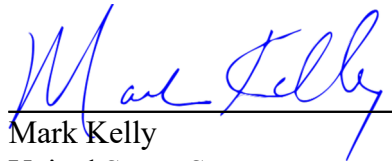
Peter Welch  
United States Senator



Tina Smith  
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator



Mark Kelly  
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand  
United States Senator



Raphael Warnock  
United States Senator