

OPEN LETTER ON ISRAEL AND PALESTINE FROM THE ELDERS

Her Excellency Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Commission
Brussels
Belgium

6 October 2026

Juan Manuel Santos (Chair)
Ban Ki-moon, *Elder Emeritus*
Lakhdar Brahimi, *Elder Emeritus*
Gro Harlem Brundtland
Fernando H. Cardoso, *Elder Emeritus*
Helen Clark
Elbegdorj Tsakhia
Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein
Hina Jilani
Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
Ricardo Lagos, *Elder Emeritus*
Graça Machel
Denis Mukwege
Mary Robinson
Muhammad Yunus, *Elder Emeritus*
Ernesto Zedillo

Dear President von der Leyen

Every day, we are moving further away from a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that would enable both peoples to live side by side in peace and mutual security.

Decisive action is needed to alter the current trajectory. We are calling on you to build support for a ban on EU trade with illegal settlements, and for suspension of the core trade provisions of the EU-Israel Association Agreement.

Your recent State of the Union speech underscored the need for strong leadership from the EU on the conflict, the political obstacles that need to be overcome, and the dangers of leaving a vacuum where concerted action should be.

We share your frustration at the continued divisions among member states, but encourage you to use your authority as President of the European Commission to set out a clear way forward that responds to the urgency of the situation and upholds the EU's values.

The Netanyahu government is clear in its intent to annex the entire West Bank, and to erase Palestine physically, economically, culturally and politically. The tender for construction of E1 - which has long been a red line for the EU - is the latest step in pursuit of this goal.

This dangerous path will not make Israelis safer and it is damaging Israel's standing in the region and around the world.

But illegal settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank is not only the work of a few extremist settlers. It is a decades-old state enterprise that has been led by successive Israeli governments, endorsed by the Knesset, and enabled by the Israel Defense Forces. Crucially, it is also facilitated by external actors through trade in goods and services, financial donations and political support.

The EU was founded on human rights and respect for the rule of law. To defend these values, EU trade must be consistent with international law, and with the EU's own policy position on the illegality of settlements. As High Representative Kallas has recently stated, a ban on trade with settlements is the "principled stance" to take.

A number of European Union member states, the United Kingdom and Canada have shown leadership in taking forward national bans on trade with the illegal settlements. We believe that unless the EU responds to this new political momentum and shows consistency in upholding its founding principles, it risks undermining its credibility around the world.

We urge you to table a proposal for a ban on EU trade with settlements ahead of the next Foreign Affairs Council on 12 October. This is a crucial opportunity to build sufficient support for such a ban, as a trade measure under the Common Commercial Policy requiring a Qualified Majority Vote.

There is more that the EU can and must do to uphold human rights. In July, Mary Robinson and Helen Clark visited the West Bank on behalf of The Elders and saw the impact of settler terrorism and forced displacement, often supported by Israeli forces, on Palestinian communities in the West Bank, which we believe amounts to ethnic cleansing. We heard testimony of the atrocious living conditions in Gaza endured by a population on the brink of survival in a tiny sliver of land, with severe restrictions on humanitarian aid, and the risk of being killed due to daily "ceasefire" violations. Israel's legitimate security concerns do not justify such violations. We visited Brussels immediately after the West Bank, where we had the opportunity to engage with EU member states and European Commission officials.

As you proposed last September, the core trade provisions of the EU-Israel Association Agreement should be suspended unilaterally given Israel's systematic breaches of Article 2 on human rights in the West Bank and Gaza. These breaches are ongoing and becoming ever more blatant. Aligning EU trade with international law is needed more than ever.

This moment requires courage and moral conviction. We look forward to the European Union playing a decisive and positive role under your leadership.

Yours sincerely



Juan Manuel Santos, former President of Colombia and Nobel Peace Laureate and Chair of The Elders



Graça Machel, Founder of the Graça Machel Trust, co-founder and Deputy Chair of The Elders



Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway and former Director-General of the WHO



Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand and former UN Development Programme Administrator



Elbegdorj Tsakhia, former President and Prime Minister of Mongolia



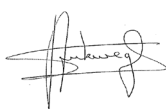
Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights



Hina Jilani, Advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and co-chair of the Taskforce on Justice



Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former President of Liberia and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate



Denis Mukwege, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate



Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights



Ernesto Zedillo, former President of Mexico