

POLITICS

As Orthodox Union and other Jewish groups condemn settler rampage, many avoid mentioning Benjamin Netanyahu

BY RON KAMPEAS FEBRUARY 27, 2023



View of cars burned by Jewish settlers during riots last night in Hawara, in the West Bank, near Nablus, Feb. 27, 2023. (Nasser Ishtayeh/Flash90)

WASHINGTON (JTA) — As American Jewish organizations responded to Sunday’s settler riot in the West Bank, most began with statements of condemnation.

One began with a question: “How can such a thing happen?”

“How could it come to this, that Jewish young men should ransack and burn homes and cars?” continued the statement from Rabbi Moshe Hauer, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, who added that “we cannot understand or accept this.”

He concluded with a note of desperation: “What happened yesterday must never, ever happen again.”

Hauer’s anguish was all the more notable because it came from a group whose constituency, American Orthodox Jews, has historically sympathized with the movement to create Jewish settlements in the West Bank. And Hauer’s statement did something else that many other groups did not: It appeared to question the leadership of Israel’s prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

“Attacking a village does not deserve to be called ‘taking the law into your own hands,’” Hauer’s statement said. “This is not the law; this is undisciplined and random fury. Actions like these demonstrate the critical need for clear and strong leadership.”

While Hauer didn’t mention Netanyahu by name (and didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment) the implication was clear: On Sunday, in response to the riot in the town of Huwara, Netanyahu said, “I ask – even when the blood is boiling – not to take the law into one’s hands.”

The Orthodox Union has for years criticized U.S. pressure on Israel to accept a two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians or to share Jerusalem. In 2007 it stood out among Jewish groups leading criticism of the then Israeli government for contemplating a Palestinian role in Jerusalem.

Beyond the O.U, Jewish groups decried the actions of the settlers but mostly avoided mentioning the Israeli government or its leader. Instead, some looked to Israel’s president, Isaac Herzog, whose role is largely ceremonial but who has sought to broker compromise amid the current contentious government. He had issued a “forceful condemnation” of the rioting on Sunday, saying that security forces, not civilians “committing violence against innocents,” should respond to terrorism.

Affirming and quoting the Israeli prime minister was once a reflex for legacy groups when commenting on crises in Israel. But times have changed. Israel’s government includes far-right parties and ministers

who are themselves settlers and have long advocated harsher measures in response to Palestinian terror.

One official, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, was once convicted of incitement to violence. And some coalition members have sympathized with the rioters in the wake of the rampage. Against that backdrop, Netanyahu did not feature in many American Jewish organizations' statements. Others condemned the prime minister for his links to the far right or what they saw as his government's tepid response.

“Though some Israeli leaders, including the prime minister, called for restraint, the government failed to prevent or quickly curtail this unacceptable violence,” Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said in an emailed statement. “Those responsible must be held accountable and safety and security for Jews and Palestinians alike must prevail.”

The Anti-Defamation League and American Jewish Committee both cited Herzog's statement, and declared, respectively, their “outrage” and condemnation of “this violence in the strongest terms.”

The AJC declined further comment, and the ADL, asked to elaborate on its statement, condemned lawmakers who incite violence, while avoiding mentioning the fact that they are members of Israel's governing coalition.

“There is also no excuse for the incitement to violence we heard from a few political leaders, including some Israeli Knesset Members,” a spokesman said in an email. “We join Israeli President Herzog's call for a de-escalation of violence, and urge Israeli law enforcement to ensure that those involved in the Huwara violence are held accountable.”

Asked for a statement, William Daroff, the CEO of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, did not mention the government or Netanyahu. “I condemn without reservation the riots and violence in Hawara,” he said in an interview. “There is no excuse for lawless vigilantism.”

In a statement later, Daroff suggested that if Israeli politicians fail to condemn the settler violence, there could be consequences for the relationship with Jews overseas.

“These criminal acts of violence and vandalism harm Jewish sovereignty and Israel’s relationship with the global Jewish diaspora,” he said. “We urge Knesset members to speak out against these attacks while pursuing a peaceful resolution.”

The Jewish organizations approached for this story did not reply when asked what they planned to do if Netanyahu fails to take action. A number of regional Jewish organizations and rabbis have previously called for boycotts of far-right coalition members if and when they tour the United States.

Israeli authorities arrested a number of the rioters, and then let them go. No plans for prosecution have been reported yet.

The Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly stood out for extending its condolences to both Jewish and Arab victims of violence on Sunday — an equivalence that is extremely rare in Jewish groups’ statements. The group’s message, written in English and Hebrew, mentions both the family of the two Israelis who were shot while driving through Huwara, and the family of the Palestinian who reportedly was shot dead while pleading with settlers to leave his village alone.

“We are in pain and join the condolences to the families of those killed, among them the Yaniv family and the Al-Aqtash family and wish a speedy and full recovery to all who were injured,” the group said, referring to the Israeli and Palestinian victims, respectively. “We expect our government, the IDF, and the police, to act to prevent harm to people and to property, and to try any person who has chosen to harm another person.”

Americans for Peace Now and J Street both called on the Biden administration to use its leverage to get Netanyahu to take action.

“Netanyahu’s extremist coalition is demonstrating that it will not be stopped by polite protestations or vague agreements,” J Street said. “Only by setting clear redlines and tangible consequences can the US hope to deter this government.”

Americans for Peace Now similarly called on Biden to “hold the government of Israel accountable for both its unrestrained settlement activity and its enabling of settler violence,” while the liberal rabbinic human rights group T’ruah said the Israeli government “has fueled the incitement that led to this attack.”

The Israel Policy Forum, a group that backs a two-state outcome, decried the lack of accountability for the rioters for the attacks on the Hawara residents. “Their only crimes were being Palestinians living in proximity to a spot where a different Palestinian committed a terrorist attack, and the settlers who rampaged through their homes and streets unimpeded, without any real consequences, represent the daily injustice that Palestinians face as non-citizens on their land with no recourse to any responsible higher authority,” it said in a statement.

Some organizations praised Netanyahu’s government for speaking out against the riot. The Jewish Federations of North America commended “the Government of Israel for speaking out quickly to lower tensions.” And the American Israel Public Affairs Committee appeared to tie the settlers’ vigilantism to Palestinian terrorism.

“As Israel’s Prime Minister and President clearly indicated, vigilante action cannot be tolerated,” its spokesman said. “Terrorism will not decline as long as the Palestinian leadership continues incitement, rewards terrorism with payments to terrorists and their families, and encourages the public celebration of Israeli fatalities.”

At least one organizational leader echoed the sentiments of Israeli officials who sympathized with the rioters. Morton Klein, CEO of the Zionist Organization of America, said in an interview that he condemned the rioters, but also understood what drove them.

“I don’t believe that civilians should be taking the law into their own hands,” he said. “I oppose civilians taking on their own hands, that’s

for sure, but you know, after constant murder of people, you know, people lose control.”

Klein said Israel needed to “put enormous pressure in every way you can” on Palestinians in order to quell violence in the West Bank. Asked whether Israel also deserved pressure to bring the settler rioters to justice, Klein said that was not a concern of his.

“Arabs care more about Arabs than they do about non-Arabs and Jews care more about Jews than they do about non-Jews,” said Klein, who met in person with Ben-Gvir last week in Israel. “It’s a natural human trait.”