

21 September 2023

The President  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20500  
**Via electronic delivery**

**Re: Concerns of Indian Transnational Repression in the United States**

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing to you on behalf of many Sikhs in the United States who are deeply concerned for their personal safety by both the rising tide of transnational repression<sup>1</sup> and Hindu nationalist hate ideology originating from the government of India.

As you are aware, this week, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau confirmed that “Canadian security agencies have been actively pursuing credible allegations of a potential link” between the Indian state and the arbitrary extra-judicial killing of Sikh Canadian Hardeep Singh Nijjar in British Columbia last June.<sup>2</sup> Prime Minister Trudeau’s national security advisor previously named India as a “top source of foreign interference in Canada,”<sup>3</sup> and these concerns were publicly raised by Prime Minister Trudeau at the G20 Summit in New Delhi earlier this month.<sup>4</sup> In response to Prime Minister Trudeau’s statement on India this week, New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jagmeet Singh, who is also a Sikh Canadian, has received death threats on online platforms for calling on Canada to include India in a foreign interference inquiry.<sup>5</sup>

However, concerns of transnational repression, and specifically the targeting of Sikhs, extend beyond Canada and well before these recent events. The Department of Homeland Security’s most recent threat assessment for 2024 has identified the threat of transnational interference as a risk to our own national security.<sup>6</sup> The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has also found that Jagtar “Jaggi” Singh Johal, a British Sikh man, remains

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<sup>1</sup> To be clear, “transnational repression” refers to the act or practice of governments reaching across borders to silence dissent among diasporas and exiles, including through assassinations, illegal deportations, abductions, digital threats, Interpol abuse, family intimidation, and other tactics.

<sup>2</sup> “India expels Canadian diplomat in tit-for-tat move as spat over assassinated Sikh activist deepens.” CNN, Sep. 19, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/18/americas/canada-hardeep-singh-nijjar-india-intl/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> “India among top actors for foreign interference in Canada: national security adviser.” CTV News, Jun. 5, 2023, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/india-among-top-actors-for-foreign-interference-in-canada-national-security-adviser-1.6428213#>.

<sup>4</sup> “Trudeau leaves India after aircraft issues delayed departure from rocky G20: Canadian prime minister’s time at G20 summit in New Delhi highlights growing tensions between India and Canada.” *Al Jazeera*, Sep. 12, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/12/trudeau-leaves-india-after-aircraft-issues-delayed-departure-from-rocky-g20>.

<sup>5</sup> See example via Tweet from @HeerJeet on Sep. 19, 2023: <https://twitter.com/HeerJeet/status/1704298624220278924>.

<sup>6</sup> “Homeland Threat Assessment 2024.” *Department of Homeland Security*, Sep. 13, 2023, [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-09/23\\_0913\\_ia\\_23-333-ia\\_u\\_homeland-threat-assessment-2024\\_508C\\_V6\\_13Sep23.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-09/23_0913_ia_23-333-ia_u_homeland-threat-assessment-2024_508C_V6_13Sep23.pdf)



“detained for his religious belief and for documenting religious freedom violations.”<sup>7</sup> And in May 2022, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention declared Johal’s detention arbitrary and called for his immediate release.<sup>8</sup> The Sikh Coalition<sup>9</sup> has also received reports from individuals in the United States receiving threatening messages after attending peaceful protests critical of the Indian government. We are also aware of instances of Indian government agents stopping individuals arbitrarily and with false charges to elicit information about Sikh communities in the United States. And finally, we have been notified of situations in which individuals in the United States who have expressed criticism of the Indian government have had their family members in India face harassment at the hands of Indian authorities.

In light of the growing body of evidence and credible reports of transnational repression propagated by the government of India, we appreciate that the White House issued a statement expressing concern about Prime Minister Trudeau’s announcement and requesting that the Indian government cooperate with Canada’s ongoing investigation. We also agree with the National Security Council’s (NSC) recent statement that “targeting dissidents in other countries is absolutely unacceptable and we will keep taking steps to push back on this practice.”<sup>10</sup> **However, we urge you to take further action to assure Sikhs, Muslims, and other Indian diaspora religious minorities in the United States are safe from similar acts by foreign actors.** Any steps you take to achieve this goal would also send an unequivocal message that violations of human rights, rule of law, and sovereignty will not be tolerated by the United States.

By way of example, the same communities at risk of harm by Indian transnational repression are also raising the alarm—and rightfully so—about the rising tide of hateful Hindu nationalist ideology here in the United States. This ideology, commonly referred to as Hindutva, is marked by “portraying religious minorities as less than patriotic; rationalizing or ignoring mob violence; attacking scholars, journalists, intellectuals, and others who dare to speak out in support of pluralism; imposing one’s dietary values upon others; and last but not the least, falsely claiming to speak and act on behalf of all Hindus.”<sup>11</sup> At a USCIRF hearing on September 20, 2023, on “Advancing Religious Freedom within the U.S. - India Bilateral Relationship,” Commissioner David Curry characterized India’s system of religious interference as one of the most sophisticated in the world.<sup>12</sup> For Sikhs in India, this has meant systemic oppression such as restrictions on religious practices, economic marginalization, and suppression of political dissent—including extra-judicial punishment, violence,<sup>13</sup> and a decade of enforced “disappearances.” This

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<sup>7</sup> “Jagtar Singh Johal,” *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*,

<https://www.uscifr.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/jagtar-singh-johal>.

<sup>8</sup> “UN group: No legal basis for Jagtar Singh Johal’s detention in India.” *BBC News*, May 8, 2022,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-61371846>.

<sup>9</sup> By way of background, the Sikh Coalition is the largest Sikh American civil rights organization in the United States. We were founded in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, in response to a torrent of hate crimes against Sikhs throughout the United States. Our mission since then has been to work towards a world where Sikhs and other religious minorities in America can freely practice their faith without bias and discrimination.

<sup>10</sup> “Biden Is Caught Between Allies as Canada Accuses India of Assassination”. *New York Times*, Sep. 20, 2023,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/20/us/politics/biden-canada-india.html>.

<sup>11</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions.” *Hindus for Human Rights*, Nov. 18, 2022,

<https://www.hindusforhumanrights.org/en/faq#HINDU>.

<sup>12</sup> “Advancing Religious Freedom within the U.S. - India Bilateral Relationship.” USCIRF, Sep. 20, 2023,

<https://www.uscifr.gov/events/hearings/advancing-religious-freedom-within-us-india-bilateral-relationship-1>

<sup>13</sup> “Protecting the Killers: A Policy of Impunity in Punjab, India.” *Human Rights Watch*, 2007,

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/10/17/protecting-killers/policy-impunity-punjab-india>; “Dead Silence: the legacy of



authoritarianism, discrimination and prejudice has also led to tragedy on the scale of genocidal violence<sup>14</sup> and consistent incendiary rhetoric<sup>15</sup> about Sikhs (and other marginalized groups in India). Based on these trends and our community's historical experience, we remain gravely concerned that Hindu nationalists will continue to demagogue Sikhs as "extremists" or "terrorists" due to political views they may or may not hold.

Many civil rights organizations, including the Sikh Coalition, remain deeply concerned about the authoritarian turn underway in India, and how the exportation of the Hindu nationalist ideology driving that in turn impacts individuals and communities in the United States.<sup>16</sup> This has included targeting of Sikhs in Connecticut,<sup>17</sup> Muslims in New Jersey,<sup>18</sup> journalists who ask questions about India's human rights record,<sup>19</sup> and state legislators in California who have spoken out about caste discrimination in the United States.<sup>20</sup> Left unmitigated, our national security and pluralistic society remain vulnerable to a threat that has demonstrated substantial growth in other nations, including Canada. Moreover, Hindu nationalists and white supremacists are also worryingly becoming increasingly further aligned to advance their respective agendas of prejudice in establishing racially pure societies.<sup>21</sup> Supporters of Hindu nationalism have embraced the Aryan race mythology as well as fascism, while White Supremacists have admired Hindu nationalists promoting Islamophobia and the ideals of a caste system.<sup>22</sup> Such cross-pollination of extremist ideologies to inspire bigoted acts of hatred has become a growing threat around the world.<sup>23</sup> While we applaud the White House's National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism's commitment to

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human rights abuses in Punjab." *Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights*, May 1, 1994,

<https://www.hrw.org/reports/India0594.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> "Remembering 1984." *The Sikh Coalition*, Jun. 1, 2023, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/blog/2023/remembering-1984-4>.

<sup>15</sup> "Watch Rajiv Gandhi make his infamous 'big tree falls' speech justifying the 1984 anti-Sikh riots," *Scroll.in*, Nov. 20, 2015, <https://scroll.in/video/1558/watch-rajiv-gandhi-make-his-infamous-big-tree-falls-speech-justifying-the-1984-anti-sikh-riots>.

<sup>16</sup> "What's fueling the rise in Hindu nationalism in the U.S." *NBC News*, Jun. 27, 2023,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/modis-popularity-grows-india-hindu-nationalism-rising-us-rcna90680>.

<sup>17</sup> "Norwich Sikh independence celebration is criticized by Indian residents." *The Connecticut Day*, Jun. 26, 2022,

<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20220626/norwich-sikh-independence-celebration-is-criticized-by-indian-residents/>.

<sup>18</sup> "Billboard Truck Displays Hateful, Anti-Islamic Messages Targeting NJ Mosques." *NBC New York*, Dec. 2, 2022,

<https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/billboard-truck-displays-hateful-anti-islamic-messages-targeting-nj-mosques/3980506/>;

"Disruption at Edison's India Day Parade rattles Muslim participants." *New Jersey.com*, Aug. 16, 2023, <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/2023/08/16/disruption-at-edisons-india-day-parade-rattles-muslim-marchersfront-headline/70596258007/>.

<sup>19</sup> "White House blasts harassment of reporter who asked India's Modi about human rights." *NBC News*, June 26, 2023

<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/white-house-blasts-harassment-reporter-asked-modi-human-rights-record-rcna91251>

<sup>20</sup> "Lawmaker Faces Violent Threats for Trying to Make California the First State to Ban Caste Discrimination." *TIME*, Mar. 29, 2023, <https://time.com/6267016/aisha-wahab-interview-caste-discrimination/>

<sup>21</sup> "Hindu Supremacists in a White World." *Oxford Academic*, Jun. 23, 2023,

<https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/90/4/805/7205783>.

<sup>22</sup> "Why white supremacists and Hindu nationalists are so alike." *Al Jazeera*, Dec. 13, 2018,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/12/13/why-white-supremacists-and-hindu-nationalists-are-so-alike>

<sup>23</sup> "New Zealand attacks offer the latest evidence of a web of supremacist extremism." *The Washington Post*, Mar. 15, 2019,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/new-zealand-suspect-inspired-by-far-right-french-intellectual-who-feared-nonwhite-immigration/2019/03/15/8c39fba4-6201-4a8d-99c6-aa42db53d6d3\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/new-zealand-suspect-inspired-by-far-right-french-intellectual-who-feared-nonwhite-immigration/2019/03/15/8c39fba4-6201-4a8d-99c6-aa42db53d6d3_story.html);

and "Racism In America Should Not Take Center Stage in the Global Fight Against White Supremacy." *TIME*, Jul. 20, 2021,

<https://time.com/6082168/white-privilege/>.



combating the foreign support and transnational links that help fuel antisemitism in the United States, we must apply similar approaches to combating Hindu nationalism in the United States.<sup>24</sup>

**We urge the Administration to take swift action to promote community safety from Indian transnational repression and rising Hindu nationalist threats in the United States. This should include the NSC, in partnership with the Department of Homeland Security, meeting with Indian diaspora communities, journalists, and human rights advocates critical of India to discuss the U.S. government’s protective steps. Additionally, we believe that the United States must also hold its allies accountable: we recommend multilateral diplomatic discussions with the government of India to emphasize the importance of respecting sovereignty, democracy, freedom of speech, and the human and civil rights of religious minorities and peaceful dissidents, including Sikhs. And finally, if Canada’s allegations against India are proven true, the White House must publicly condemn not only India’s arbitrary extrajudicial killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, but also the dangerous propaganda narratives that attempt to falsely portray entire religious minority communities, and particularly the Sikh community, as violent extremists.**

The United States has a responsibility to ensure the safety and security of Sikhs in the United States by addressing the growing body of evidence around transnational repression by the government of India, mitigating the rising tide of Hindu nationalism in the United States, and condemning propaganda narratives that attempt to falsely portray religious minority communities as violent extremists. By working alongside our allies and centering the experiences of affected communities, you can take tangible steps to ensure that these issues do not rise to the level of severity that they appear to have reached in Canada.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter; we look forward to seeing your administration take action, and are available to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

*Harman Singh*

Harman Singh  
Policy & Education Director  
The Sikh Coalition

Cc: Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas, Department of Homeland Security  
Secretary Antony Blinken, Department of State  
Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor

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<sup>24</sup> “The U.S. National Strategy To Counter Antisemitism.” *The White House*, May 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/U.S.-National-Strategy-to-Counter-Antisemitism.pdf>

