



November 10, 2025

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary
U.S. Department of Defense
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Hegseth:

We write with deep concerns regarding your remarks and subsequent memorandum regarding proposed changes to religious accommodations for facial hair in the United States Armed Forces. Our servicemembers put their lives on the line to defend the rights enshrined in our Constitution, and they deserve nothing less than the right to exercise those freedoms.

On September 30 you addressed a convening of high-ranking military officials in Quantico, Virginia and called for a change in uniform and grooming standards with a particular focus on beards. You specifically stated that “the era of rampant and ridiculous shaving profiles is done” and that there would be “no more beards, long hair, [or] superficial individual expression.” A memorandum released afterward ([Grooming Standards for Facial Hair Implementation](#)) specifies that the military should “revert back to pre-2010 standards,” that facial hair waivers for religious accommodations are “generally not authorized,” and “approvals will be limited to non-deployable roles with low risk of chemical attack or firefighting requirement.” The memorandum further states that the Secretaries of the Military Departments have 60 days to provide an implementation plan for this direction.

We are deeply concerned by the scope of the changes that you appear to have proposed. Since 2010—and well before then, throughout U.S. history—thousands of members of our military have shown conclusively that beards do not impede honorable and capable performance. Modern technical innovations in gas masks mitigate the safety risks of maintained beards. This is clear from both the current policies that govern religious accommodations in multiple branches, as well as the fact that Sikhs and others with beards have successfully weathered tear gas chambers with their gas masks sealed. Our allies around the world, including in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Israel, Germany, and elsewhere, have also found ways to ensure that troops deployed with beards stay safe.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that religious accommodations are not a matter of superficial expression. Religious freedom is a fundamental value of our great nation and a constitutional right enshrined in the First Amendment. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) specifically protects it for employees in the public and private sectors so that no one is forced to choose between their careers and their sincerely held beliefs. These protections extend to individuals in our military. As you reference in your memorandum, [DOD Instruction 1300.17](#) established a policy in furtherance of both RFRA and the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment, recognizing that servicemembers have the right to observe the tenets of their religion. Over the past decade and a half, the various branches have navigated individual accommodation requests and implemented policy changes to ensure that each branch respects religious accommodations while also holding servicemembers to high standards of performance and professional appearance. As a result, Sikhs, Jews, Muslims, Christians, Rastafarians, and others now serve in the U.S. Army, U.S. Army National Guard, U.S. Navy, U.S. Air Force, and U.S. Marine Corps with their articles of faith intact, including in combat zones, and in conventional units and Special Forces alike.

To avoid upending this progress, disrupting processes that already work for the branches, infringing on constitutionally protected rights, and depriving the military of current and future religiously observant servicemembers, we urge you to pause the 60-day implementation guidelines for your new policy and further clarify, no later than 30 days upon receipt of this letter:

1. Whether religious accommodations for facial hair for troops with sincerely held religious beliefs granted between 2010 and 2025 will be maintained and respected;
2. Whether religious accommodations for facial hair for troops with sincerely held religious beliefs pending before the September 30 memorandum will be processed in accordance with DOD Instruction 1300.17 and the RFRA; and
3. Whether each service branch—particularly those who have made their policies more efficient and more compliant with both the RFRA and the fundamental American value of religious freedom—will have the latitude to assess its religious accommodations process free of top-down directives.

To remove or severely restrict religious accommodations in the U.S. military is to turn away qualified individuals who would otherwise pursue a career of meaningful service. Doing so will also impact troops who currently have these accommodations: It devalues the contributions of Sikh, Jewish, Muslims, Christians, Rastafarians, and others who volunteered to fight for our nation, and will hamper our overall readiness by leading to the separation of qualified servicemembers. Ultimately, it would be a moral failing if those who voluntarily put their lives on the line for our country are deprived of the very rights they signed up to fight for.

We urge you to honor the contributions of religiously observant servicemembers and defer to the accumulated expertise of the branches as they have navigated this issue over the past 15 years. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Grace Meng
CAPAC Chair



Ted W. Lieu
Member of Congress



Raja Krishnamoorthi
Member of Congress



Yassamin Ansari
Member of Congress



Ro Khanna
Member of Congress



Wesley Bell
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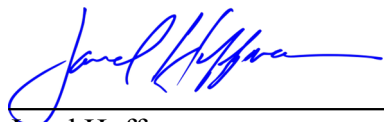
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Member of Congress



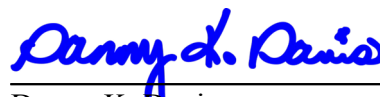
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Member of Congress



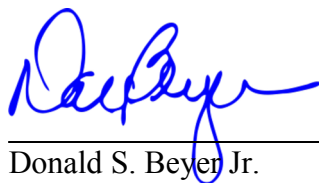
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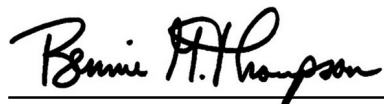
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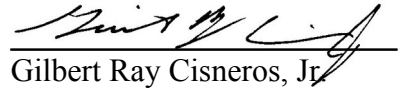
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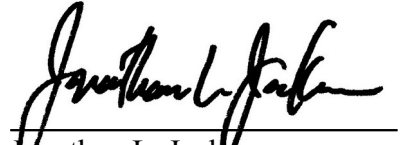
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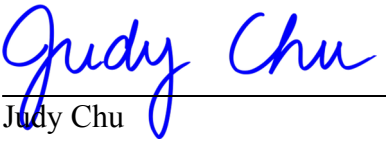
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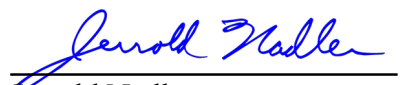
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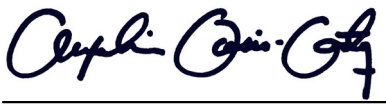
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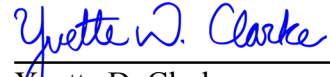
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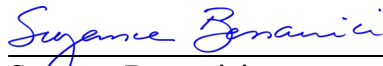
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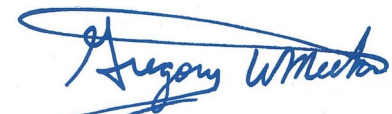
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