

December 11, 2020

Dear President Elect Biden,

Congratulations on your election to be the next President of the United States. We look forward to working with your administration over the next four years as we all endeavor to realize greater justice and reconciliation in the United States and the world.

We write to you as Christian churches and organizations at a time when Christians from across the globe prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the prince of peace. While attention is turned toward the “little town of Bethlehem,” the Christian community in Israel/Palestine continues to suffer as a result of the ongoing occupation. As Palestinian Christians continue to emigrate, we face the real prospect that the survival of the indigenous Christian presence in the Holy Land may soon be in danger. By ensuring the U.S. government stands firmly in support of peace and justice for all in the region, your administration can help ensure the Christian community, along with all in the Holy Land, can flourish.

Many of us have a presence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory or work closely with Palestinian and Israeli partners and organizations and our concern arises from this direct experience with those most impacted by the ongoing occupation and conflict. Over the last four years U.S. policy has moved in directions that have alienated the U.S. from many of its international partners and supported the deepening of Israel’s occupation while undermining long term efforts to realize a just and lasting peace. If the U.S. remains committed to realizing peace with justice in Israel and Palestine there is a need for an immediate change in policy and approach when your administration enters office.

But walking back policy changes made by the Trump administration will not be enough. It has been nearly 30 years since the Oslo Accords were signed and changes on the ground mean that simply returning to peacemaking models of the past will not work. Moving forward we hope that your administration will invest in new approaches that build towards a future where human rights violations are ended and there is equality between Palestinians and Israelis.

To that end we ask that your administration works to:

- 1. Ensure that all parties are respected and included in negotiations towards a just and lasting peace based on international law.**

This means reengaging with the Palestinian Authority and allowing for a reopening of Palestinian representative offices in the United States as well as the US Consulate in East Jerusalem and ensure unimpeded access to consular services for Palestinians. Without respectful and direct engagement with Palestinians no meaningful change can occur.

Moving forward, and in addition to engagement with the Palestinian Authority, the U.S. – with the full and equal participation of the other members of the Middle East Quartet (the United Nations, the European Union, and Russia) - should pursue a policy that encourages Palestinian political reconciliation and that allows space for the inclusion of Palestinian political parties and factions that have heretofore been excluded or marginalized from political space and negotiations, parties that must be brought along if peace is to be achieved. As has been the case when other conflicts have been ended, groups that can be spoilers and with significant influence must be engaged and brought to the table if there is to be peace.

2. Restate the US position that settlements are illegal under international law and take action to ensure that any further Israeli settlement construction and growth results in political consequences.

In 2019 the Trump administration declared that it no longer considered Israeli settlements in the West Bank illegal and violations of international law. We ask that your administration reiterate a commitment to international law by making it clear that U.S. policy does not recognize illegal Israeli settlements. We also ask that your administration make it clear that settlement construction and growth are not accepted by the United States by imposing consequences on the Israeli government for future settlement activities it authorizes or undertakes.

3. Resume funding to the Palestinian Authority, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, and other UN and humanitarian actors working in the West Bank and Gaza

The Trump administration cut all funding to the Palestinian Authority, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and to other U.N. and humanitarian actors operating in the West Bank and Gaza. This money was used to fund education, health, medical, and other basic services for Palestinians. In recent weeks UNRWA, one of the largest health care providers in Gaza, has run out of funding at a moment when COVID-19 is spreading rapidly there. This blatant politicization of aid must be ended by your administration. Immediate action to restore vital and life-saving assistance is needed. This resumption of funding for UNRWA should be accompanied by a clear affirmation of the status of more than 5 million registered Palestinian refugees, and the unacceptability of the denial of their rights under UN resolution 194. Outside of UNRWA, we urge your administration to work with Congressional leaders to ensure funds appropriated for humanitarian programs in the West Bank and Gaza be obligated.

4. Ensure accountability

Israel remains the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid, receiving approximately \$3.8 billion in military aid each year. This funding helps the government of Israel maintain the occupation of the Palestinian territories, making the U.S. complicit in Israel's detention of Palestinian children in military prisons, violent repression of peaceful protestors, and demolitions of Palestinian homes and communities. It also supports Israel's own arms manufacturing and export trade, which is at its highest in the country's history and is among the world's highest arms exporter.

We ask that your administration respond to the concerns raised in legislation like H.R. 2407 and in Dear Colleague letters sent over the last year to Sec. of State Pompeo that call for accountability for Israeli human rights abuses and action to ensure that no U.S. funding to Israel is used to further the occupation or to support human rights abuses perpetrated against Palestinians. We also ask that such massive military aid (to Israel and other countries in the region as well) be reevaluated in a Middle East that does not need to be more heavily militarized.

Finally, we urge an end to the visa bans, family entry bans, and asset freezes imposed by the US on select officials of the International Criminal Court as well as the threat of similar actions against others who participate in investigations that target Israel, the U.S. or other groups. Similarly, we urge a reversal of the policies of the last few years which have seen prominent Palestinian human rights activists like Hanan Ashrawi, denied visas to the U.S. Actions like these carried out against human rights defenders

and those investigating violations of international law undermine key international human rights accountability mechanisms that the U.S. should support.

- 5. Reiterate the U.S. position that territory controlled by Israel as a result of the 1967 war, including East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, are occupied territories subject to international law and are not recognized parts of Israel.**

Since World War II the prohibition of the acquisition of territory through use of force has been a central tenant of international law. Annexation of occupied territory by an occupying power is a blatant violation of international law and the U.S. has traditionally stood together with the rest of the international community in supporting this principle. However, under the Trump Administration the U.S. government recognized Israel's annexation of the occupied Syrian Golan Heights and occupied East Jerusalem. The Trump Administration also stated its support for Israeli annexation, outside of a negotiated agreement, of significant portions of the West Bank. It is imperative that your administration walk back these positions and return to support for international law, and hold Israel accountable for violations of these principles. Further, we urge you to ensure that products made in Israeli settlements and industrial zones in the occupied territories cannot be labeled, "Made in Israel."

- 6. Make clear that criticism of Israel, including support for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions actions, is protected and legitimate speech.**

Over the last four years there has been a coordinated effort to prohibit speech critical of Israel and to make it illegal to support boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) actions. Over 200 laws have been introduced in 40 states and at the federal level with the goal of prohibiting support for BDS and anti-BDS laws have passed in 30 states. These laws are ostensibly, though wrongly, based on the premise that supporting BDS is somehow anti-Semitic. We abhor anti-Semitism, but nevertheless we support the constitutionally guaranteed freedom to speak and act in ways that may lead to fair and just outcomes. As Churches and faith-based organizations, we do not have a consistent position or a consensus on BDS, but many of us have supported boycotts and divestment at various times in our history and in the present including campaigns designed to protect civil rights, end Apartheid in South Africa, protect farm workers, improve prison conditions, end environmental pollution, and oppose Israeli settlement construction. We ask that your administration make it clear that Americans' rights to engage in speech and actions critical of the government of Israel are constitutionally protected.

Conclusion

The challenges before your administration are significant and bringing change in Israel and Palestine will not be easy. However, the costs to Palestinians and Israelis of failing to act are much more significant and demand commitment to change by the U.S.

As Christian churches and organizations in the United States, we strongly urge you to pursue engagement in honest, credible, and serious efforts with Palestinians, Israelis, regional parties, and the international community, to seek a just and lasting peace. We are available and would be eager to meet with you or any of your staff to discuss these points further, and to share our own experiences and those of our partners in Israel and Palestine.

And we pray that we may soon join you in celebrating a region where all are at peace and enjoy their rights and liberties without regard to race, ethnicity, or creed.

Alliance of Baptists
American Friends Service Committee
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Christian Reformed Church in North America, Office of Social Justice
Church of the Brethren, Office of Peacebuilding and Policy
Church World Service
Churches for Middle East Peace
The Episcopal Church
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA
Presbyterian Church (USA)
Reformed Church in America
United Church of Christ
The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society