

March 25, 2020

Dear President Trump, Secretary Mnuchin and Secretary Pompeo:

We write to you out of deep concern for the people of the Middle East, and indeed the whole world, including our own country, during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Christian denominations and agencies with long-standing relationships in the Middle East, we are hearing directly from our partners that daily life for people was already tenuous for many in places such as Iran, Syria, and Gaza and these realities have only become more difficult as a result of COVID-19. **We urge you to lift sanctions that negatively impact civilian populations and other restrictions that impair governments' abilities to respond to the health crisis. This includes financial sanctions that impact the ability of countries to import much-needed medical supplies and equipment.**

- **Iran:** COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on Iran. Long preceding the current crisis, sanctions have caused a shortage of medicines, medical supplies and equipment in Iran.<sup>1</sup> We recognize that some steps have already been taken, including allowing humanitarian trade with the Central Bank of Iran. But U.S. sanctions are so sweeping that they impact Iran's entire economy, have made banks unwilling to carry out humanitarian transactions, and make it difficult for other countries to carry out transactions without triggering secondary sanctions. **The U.S. should lift sanctions on Iran that are impairing a response to this crisis and should allow the International Monetary Fund to grant Iran's request for a loan.**<sup>2</sup>
- **Syria:** The potential impact of the virus in Syria is staggering. An estimated 11 million Syrians are already in need of humanitarian assistance, with 6.2 million displaced from their homes.<sup>3</sup> Many lack adequate shelter and sanitation. Syria's health care sector has been seriously weakened as a result of military attacks in the ongoing war and the imposition of sweeping sanctions make it difficult to purchase medicines and medical supplies. **Rather than moving forward with implementing additional sanctions, the U.S. should lift sanctions that prohibit the import and purchase of badly-needed medicines and medical supplies and assure banks that such transactions will not trigger a reprisal.**
- **Gaza:** The strict Israeli blockade of Gaza, imposed with U.S. support, has already made conditions "unlivable" for the residents of Gaza, apart from COVID-19. The UN and other international agencies have repeatedly called attention to shortages of key medicines and medical supplies, with up to 50% of basic medical supplies unavailable at any time.<sup>4</sup> Population density, broken water and sanitation systems, and an under-resourced medical system leave Gaza vulnerable to an uncontrolled COVID-19 outbreak that could also negatively impact Israel. Israel regularly denies permits to patients seeking medical care that is available only outside Gaza and when permission is granted, Israel often denies permits for accompanying family members, especially for parents of children. **The U.S. should end its support for the blockade of Gaza and**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/29/iran-sanctions-threatening-health#>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-iran-imf/iran-says-it-has-asked-imf-for-5-billion-emergency-funding-to-fight-coronavirus-idUSKBN20Z17B>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/03.04.20\\_-\\_USG\\_Syria\\_Complex\\_Emergency\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_5.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/03.04.20_-_USG_Syria_Complex_Emergency_Fact_Sheet_5.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf\\_files/WHA72/A72\\_33-en.pdf](http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA72/A72_33-en.pdf)

**immediately press Israel to ensure that medical supplies and technology are provided to Gaza, that patients needing treatment outside of Gaza are given the permits necessary for extended periods of treatment, and that family members, especially parents accompanying children, are also granted permits to travel.**

As people of faith, our concern is for the most vulnerable in our country and around the world. At this precarious moment, we call on the U.S. government to extend compassion and help to those who are in need—goodwill gestures that will show the people of the Middle East that their well-being is important to us. Such actions are also in keeping with the international humanitarian principles of addressing human suffering and protecting life and health, regardless of political differences.

We pray for wisdom for you in these difficult times.

Sincerely,

American Friends Service Committee

Church of the Brethren, Office of Peacebuilding and Policy

Church World Service

The Episcopal Church

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Friends Committee on National Legislation

Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA

Pax Christi USA

Presbyterian Church (USA)

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society