

Keynote Statement
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“And Still We Rise: Transforming US Policy Toward a Just Middle East”
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1. Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends, I am honored to join you at this year’s Churches for Middle East Peace Summit, grateful for the opportunity to gather with all of you to listen to and learn from the many inspirational and hardworking women leaders, activists and peacemakers here today. In these difficult days, this is the kind of motivation and vision that must be amplified and multiplied as we, collectively and individually, seek to make a difference in this long and painful journey for a just peace.
2. I am proud to be here as both a diplomatic representative of the Palestinian people at the United Nations and as a Palestinian-American, whose life’s work has centered on the pursuit of justice and peace and who has never stopped hoping for this country – the country of my birth and the country that gave my family a home so many years ago – to live up to its founding principles and noble ideals, including when it comes to Palestine and not excluding it as the exception to every rule.
3. Since 1992, when I began my work with the Palestine Mission to the UN in New York, I have advocated for the just cause of the Palestinian people, striving for respect of their inalienable human rights and the promotion of a peaceful solution that would bring an end to the Israeli occupation and enable the Palestinian and Israeli peoples to live in mutual peace and security, with due regard for their respective national aspirations and inherent human dignity. Contrary to popular misperceptions fostered by Israeli and US narratives, this advocacy has neither been biased, nor one-sided; it has been within the strict framework of international law, calling for realization by Palestinians of the same rights and freedoms to which all humans on this earth are entitled.
4. Years ago, I would ask audiences: *“Can you imagine life under a foreign occupation for 25 years? What is it like to be a woman or man, a child, who has known nothing but the*

oppression of military occupation all their lives? How painful and traumatic is a life of forced displacement and exile? What impact does this have on a people, their society, their norms and behaviors, their outlook on the world and their place in it? What does it do to the society of the oppressor, what illnesses does it breed and with what consequences?"

5. I could never have imagined that I would be saying the same things more than 25 years later, as we observe this year 51 years since the start of the Israeli occupation in 1967 and 70 years of an ongoing *Nakba* by which the Palestinian people have been dispossessed and uprooted, from their ancestral lands, denied their right return, and endured untold hardship across generations. And, I am finding it ever more difficult to properly convey the misery of this plight, which worsens by the day. What you saw in the clips preceding me are just a glimpse of the anguish lived by Palestinians every single day.

6. 11 million Palestinians, including 6 million refugees, continue to be denied their national aspirations and basic human rights. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, their existence is marked by total control by the occupying Power – by the Israeli Government, its military forces and settler population – over every aspect of life, infringing on every right, impoverishing and marginalizing them, isolating and devastating their communities and society, and inflicting pervasive violence, fear and terror. This occupation is illegal, in every sense of the word, subsisting only by way of constant subjugation and violation of rights, whereby no place is safe, not the sanctity of one's home, not schools, not holy sites, and certainly not at the hundreds of military checkpoints imposed to control every movement and humiliate young and old, an endless system of abuse scarring and, in many ways, destroying a people's past, present and future.

7. The persistence of this injustice and the conflict's mutation has made us all worse for wear and remains a stain on the world's conscience. It has undermined the post-World War II vision of a world where international law and human rights are universally applied and respected. The fact is that Israel, an occupying Power, has been allowed to trample the law and violate the rights of an entire nation of people for decades and with near total impunity. This has in turn undermined the international system's viability, allowing a toxic double

standard to thrive in global relations, where one people – based on religious edicts and ongoing attempts to rectify grave historical wrongs against them – is privileged at the expense of the rights and existence of another people.

8. The US role in fostering this detrimental double-standard is unquestionable. Back when I began, I was daunted by the task of confronting and correcting the controversial, biased lens through which the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is viewed in the US. A quarter of a century later, I can honestly say that this task hasn't become easier as perversion of the conflict and the plight of our people continues, and at an extraordinary level with this new administration.
9. But, in the course of my work, I have also realized, that, presentation of the facts, sharing of stories of ordinary people enduring extraordinary suffering, and insistence that the matter be viewed through a human rights lens, leads not only to a better understanding of the truth about the Palestinian experience, but to sympathy and support. Of course, that requires overcoming the diversions of a religiously-charged discourse – of Jew vs. Muslim, accusations of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia – and insistence on addressing the core issues. It also requires overcoming the “terrorism” framing of the conflict, typified by the kinds of arguments regularly heard on Capitol Hill and in any presidential election campaign, implying that Israel's security is prime above all else and must be ensured by, and at the expense of, the Palestinians, who while victims of this injustice, are routinely cast – even the children – as villains and terrorists that must be silenced and defeated. Violence and terror are undeniably elements of the conflict, but this is not about terrorism, and we must reject the equating this cause with it and use of this argument to deny Palestinians their basic humanity.
10. This is a human rights issue, a political, territorial, legal issue. In every encounter, we must insist – rightly and logically so – that the issues be considered based on the law, human rights and the core UN Charter principles of self-determination of peoples, equality of all nations, and the prohibition of the acquisition of territory by force. Perhaps this sounds naïve in a City where real politic is the daily currency, but I cannot imagine, and know there cannot be, a just end to this conflict otherwise. Seen through a legal, rights lens, the Palestine question is self-evident and among the foremost peace and justice issues of our time. And, it is widely

recognized that a peaceful solution would not only benefit both the Palestinian and Israeli peoples, but could contribute to stabilizing the wider region, opening a new chapter in the Middle East, with positive impact on global peace and stability. This makes transforming US Middle East policy even more vital and urgent.

11. Ladies and Gentlemen, although my work is focused at the UN, the outsized role played by the US in the conflict, and its self-appointment as Israel's chief defender and protector at the UN – regardless of international law and its own principles and interests – has, by default, made the US central to our work. Take, for example, President Trump's declaration on Jerusalem last December and the ramifications of this unlawful decision on the ground and for peace efforts; or recent encounters at the UN, whether at the Security Council or General Assembly, where just last week the vote on a resolution aimed at ensuring protection for the Palestinian people – in the aftermath of Israel's killing of more than 130 Palestinians, including 16 children, and injury and maiming of over 13,600 people, mainly in the blockaded Gaza Strip – was suddenly and irrationally turned into a hostile confrontation by the US due to the administration's insistence to pit itself not only against us, but against the majority of the international community and international law, in its constant attempts to shield Israel from censure and accountability.
12. But, by saying that the US has become central to our work, I don't mean that our work focuses on the US. It is not about the US and is certainly not personal, as US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley keeps implying, but rather about life and death for a people, about their rights, including to freedom, about their national survival, or not. And, our UN resolutions are neither anti-Israeli, nor anti-US, as recently claimed by this administration. On the contrary, they are responsible pieces of legislation that are firmly rooted in the law and that are pro-human rights, pro-peace, pro-justice, and are supported by the overwhelming majority of countries around the world.
13. While historically active in the search for peace, US detachment of its Middle East policies from those laws and values and its pro-Israeli bias – wherein it has absolved Israel of its

wrongs and allowed it to claim victimization, even as it openly brutalizes the Palestinian people – have aggravated and prolonged the conflict, rather than contributed to its resolution.

14. In this way, the US has made itself a central player and not one of peacemaker, despite all the years of marketing itself as such, no less as sole peacemaker, disregarding the rest of the world's concerns and interests in a just solution. This dilemma has never been more stark than in the Trump era and in the aftermath of the unlawful transfer of the US embassy to the Jerusalem, which have inflamed tensions and sensitivities and diminished, rather than enhanced, the prospects for a peaceful two-State solution, already severely-damaged, if not nullified, by decades of Israeli violations and entrenchment of the occupation.
15. The reality is that, despite immense humanitarian funding over the years, especially as the largest donor to UNRWA, a role now seemingly abdicated by this Presidency, and despite decades of engagement in the peace process, US actions have hampered, at best, and obstructed, at worst, efforts to find solutions to recurrent crises and to address the conflict's root causes. It has worked at cross-purposes with the rest of the international community, which has long insisted that the solution be based on the law, knowing that no solution will be sustainable or just otherwise. Thus, the US appearance as isolated at the UN; a situation of its own doing and not any cynical effort on our part, which also continues to be absurdly implied by Ambassador Haley.
16. It is a situation in which a people's pursuit of freedom and liberty, rights so cherished and sacrosanct here in the US, has been disfigured and dismissed in favor of hawkish security pretexts and illogical rhetoric lauding Israel, a proven human rights violator, the world's longest-standing occupying Power and the creator of one racist, discriminating law after another, as the so-called "only democracy in the Middle East", as America's "stalwart ally", and as a State with which relations are "iron-clad" and where "no daylight" exists in policy and practice. Against the backdrop of the realities on the ground, this has cast the US into a very awkward, hypocritical position vis-à-vis the rest of the world as it makes excuse after excuse to justify, defend and exempt Israel's unlawful behavior, including and especially by use of its veto power at the UN Security Council.

17. Added to this is loose rhetoric of “shared values” between the US and Israel. What kind of shared values are exactly being referred to when Israel is forcibly oppressing and besieging another people, colonizing, blockading, terrorizing and displacing them from their land, every single day? These pronouncements have to be questioned; it is time to stop accepting such rhetoric as fact. It is time to ask: What does being a “stalwart ally” mean, when such an alliance means directly enabling, including with weaponry, human rights violations and crimes, in a manner evoking complicity and liability?
18. We must also question the repeated reference to “Judeo-Christian” values in US political discourse as regards this conflict. Such references imply that the “other”, the Palestinians, do not share or abide by those values, blatantly ignoring the fact that Palestinians are comprised of both Muslims and Christians and dismissing the fact that the Palestinian Christian community represents the oldest Christian tradition in the world. Yet this kind of rhetoric remains a mainstay of Washington lingo as government officials continue pandering to the Israeli lobby and its Christian Zionist supporters, injecting a negative religious dimension into the discourse, rather than giving space for religion as a positive force for social good.
19. If the issue is to be in any way examined or addressed through a religious lens, be it Christian, Islamic or Jewish, it cannot be politicized in a manner that exploits religious beliefs and disregards the tenets of tolerance, peace, and equality among all humans at the heart of those faith. It must instead seize upon the potential and responsibility of religion to shape moral and humane decision-making. Unfortunately, the exact opposite has happened in this country, as the Israeli lobby and its union with American evangelicals continue to negatively influence US policy on the issue.
20. Led most aggressively over the years by AIPAC, this lobbying thrives on perverted perceptions whereby every Palestinian and every expression of resistance to the Israeli occupation, even non-violent protest, is branded a threat to Israel, if not outright terrorism, and the issue is divorced from international law, as well as fundamental concepts of justice and freedom central to American values. Congress has near-unanimously adopted the lobby’s pro-Israel stance and distorted narrative, directly affecting executive decision-making. US

mainstream media has also been significantly impacted, tainting the entire debate in this country and further affecting public opinion. Instead of informed constituents influencing their representatives, it is the other way around, skewing the discussion unfairly against the Palestinian people and fueling a vicious cycle that has been difficult to break.

21. Take, for example, efforts to foster a fair examination of the Palestinian issue in Congress.

After all these years, little progress has been made, with the exception of brave attempts by a few representatives who insist that the US stand on principle, like Betty McCollum, who has rightly been honored by Churches for Middle East Peace for her work to protect Palestinian children. But, they are only a handful, and the norm in DC is instead one where anti-Palestinian resolutions are routinely churned out, to the lobby's satisfaction, with little regard for the truth about the rights violations the Palestinian people are suffering under Israel's occupation, with the ostensible, blanket support of the US and its citizenry.

22. Change is happening, though, as Americans, and particularly the younger generation, are becoming better informed of the realities of Palestine-Israel. Access to information and more impactful outreach, including through enhanced coordination with other justice movements, have sparked new conversations among concerned citizenry, who we urge to stand up and insist to their representatives: Not in our names.

23. But it is a slow change and many worry that it may not be in time to overcome the speed and destructive effect of developments on the ground, which is on the brink of collapse – whether in Gaza, where the humanitarian situation is disastrous, or in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, where Israel's illegal settlement campaign has totally undermined the contiguity of the Palestinian land, all but destroying the two-State solution on the 1967 borders – or be in time to overcome the hostile measures by both the Israeli and US governments that are imposing a fait accompli on the Palestinians and dashing the chances for peace.

24. Ladies and Gentlemen, that is why, while we work with the entirety of the international community towards the attainment of a just peace, we are very much aware that making this a reality requires a major transformation in US policy. Serious efforts are needed to shift

towards a human rights-based, justice-driven policy, to replace policies that have been driven by biased, polarized, political interests loyal to the Israeli government and have been so costly, not just to Palestinians, but also to Israelis, the region and US national interests, and have precluded the goal of a just, stable and peaceful Middle East.

25. Unfortunately, despite all of the political, humanitarian, economic and human capital invested – particularly since the signing of the Oslo accords 25 years ago here on the White House lawn – the US has failed, at every pivotal juncture, to leverage its power and investment for the sake of peace. This has been the case even in moments when the Israeli government has bluntly mocked and contradicted US efforts, as we witnessed recently during the tenures of President Obama and Secretary Kerry. Beholden to the powerful lobby, lawmakers have instead chosen, to varying degrees, to coddle and enable Israel, emboldening its impunity and aiding its crimes, whether directly or indirectly. At the UN, this remains the primary reason for the Security Council’s continued paralysis on our issue as the US veto prevents the Council from acting to address emergent and cyclical crises and playing its rightful role in the advancement of a peaceful solution.

26. Overcoming this depressing history requires remedying the US factor in the conflict, with an aim of more constructively, rapidly and positively effecting change. Action is needed by all those who seek peace and justice, and faith-based organizations, churches, and most certainly women and youth have a pivotal role to play in this regard with action that can ethically and humanely influence decision-making. Countering false narratives and demanding such change of course requires persuasive and consistent advocacy. This, in turn, requires courage and resilience, considering the aggressive backlash typically unleashed against those who dare speak truth to power. It is not easy, but is morally imperative.

27. I would liken the resilience required for this to that which has been exhibited over the years by the Palestinian people. They have remained patient and steadfast in the face of enormous odds, painful crises, and fierce attempts to negate their presence, history, culture and identity. That resilience – under occupation, in exile in the refugee camps and in the activism and dedication of our Diaspora – remains a source of inspiration for our ongoing efforts in pursuit

of peace, and I hope it can be equally inspirational for your advocacy and efforts to be agents of change and to give hope to those most in need of it, especially our youth, who have never known a day of peace, who see no horizon and whose despair is drowning their convictions that peace is possible and a better future awaits them, a despair that is intensifying against the backdrop of the heavy-handed, insensitive approach of this administration.

28. While it is hard at times not to question the meaning of our efforts in the face of deepening injustice and demoralizing setbacks, I still believe, as I sense and hope all here do, that our combined efforts will eventually bring peace and that better future. And, I am certain this is what keeps us going, motivating so many to continue fighting the good fight, and I am proud to see so many women at the forefront.
29. I urge you to join us in seeking that change that will make US policies more just and will salvage the chances for peace. We must insist that this country divest from oppression, cruelty and injustice and, instead, invest in humanity, dignity and rights for all. We must insist that the religious dimension of this conflict be one that upholds our shared values and visions for a just world, where all people can live in freedom, equality, stability, peace and prosperity, and that rejects using religion as fuel for conflict, as a sword to harm and denigrate others, to justify their persecution, and to deny them those rights and blessings.
30. Despite the extremely negative climate and immense challenges, we cannot give up on raising awareness and influencing decision-makers. Collectively, we must try to shift entrenched narratives and open hearts and minds for tangible action towards a more just, peaceful Middle East and thereby a more just, peaceful world, including a more just and peaceful United States. The alternative would be to surrender to this grave injustice and to forsake our aspirations for peace and justice. This is an alternative we cannot accept.
31. In closing, I want to reiterate how moved, inspired and reassured I am by the commitment to peace exhibited here in just the course of one day, as we each seek to make our contribution as truth-tellers and peacemakers. This not only makes me more grateful for the solidarity that continues to be extended to the Palestinian people, but reinforces my hope that change may be nearer than we think. Thank you.