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Rev. Dr. Mae Elise Cannon,
Executive Director

March 8, 2021

Churches for Middle East Peace
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The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Congratulations on your inauguration to lead the American people in these times of opportunity and challenge. We are writing to you as church leaders who are deeply committed to peace and justice and look forward to working with you and your administration both individually and through Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP), of which our churches and agencies are members, to advance the cause of peace and justice in the Middle East.

Many of us have organizational presence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory or work closely with churches and partners there. Our decades-long concern arises from this direct contact and experience. Our coalition of 30 church communions and organizations has long provided information and contacts to assist the peacemaking, international religious freedom, and human rights activities of both Democratic and Republican administrations. We stand ready to help arrange a meeting with Jerusalem's Patriarchs and Heads of Churches as well as other Palestinian Christian leaders, if you or Secretary Blinken travel to the Middle East.

Promoting decisive change for peace and justice in the Middle East will take concerted effort, diligence, and commitment, but must be started right away. We stand ready to support you in any way that we can and will pray for your efforts.

We thank you for making good on your commitment to end U.S. support for the war in Yemen by ending military support for offensive operations in the Saudi and UAE-led war in Yemen and halting the sale and delivery of arms to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. We are also pleased that you have lifted the designation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and made a commitment to working to end the humanitarian crisis. We urge that you take steps to restore and expand humanitarian aid to all parts of Yemen, work with Congress to legislate a permanent end to arms sales and military support to the Saudi/UAE coalition's war on Yemen, pressure Saudi Arabia to end the blockade on Yemen and work to secure passage of a new UNSCR that calls for a nationwide ceasefire in Yemen and urges the international community to stop all military support to all the warring parties. **We also urge you to reenter the multilateral nuclear agreement with Iran, the JCPOA, on a compliance-for-compliance basis.** The United States can use that agreement to seek regional peace and nuclear disarmament -- necessary foundations for dealing with other dangers vis-à-vis Iran and its neighbors.

The decade-long war in **Syria** has been devastating to its people and has threatened the presence of Syria's Christian community. The plight of more than 11 million Syrian internally displaced persons and refugees in the region demands urgent attention. The Syrian refugees' inability to return or to resettle elsewhere is a destabilizing factor in Lebanon and continues to drain resources and tolerance in Syria's other neighbors.

We urge you to make the United States part of the solution by reversing President Trump's ban on outside financial transactions with Syria and by encouraging aid that would help the refugees return or resettle and begin to contribute to the massive task of rebuilding Syria for all its communities. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold, we ask you to halt the crippling sanctions that prevent needed humanitarian aid from reaching those who need it.

We are committed, as individuals and as leaders of church communions and organizations, to the achievement of a just peace in **Israel/Palestine** that respects and defends the human rights and security of all who live in that land we call Holy.

In the West Bank, home demolitions, including the destruction of whole villages and infrastructure, have been increasing dramatically since September. Israeli occupation policy has shifted on land registration, using current rules to allow for quicker confiscation of Palestinian land. Due process protecting against land seizures has been reduced. The Israeli election season is exacerbating these moves, which appear to be preparing Area C of the West Bank for the annexation that Israel agreed to suspend in exchange for normalizing relations with Arab countries. Israel is beginning to ease some restrictions from its third lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic while the West Bank is seeing cases rise. While Israel has made great strides in vaccinating its citizens, including Israelis in settlements, Palestinians have been left to watch with very limited access to the vaccine. Prime Minister Netanyahu has just begun a major new round of settlement construction, and the continuing Israeli blockade of Gaza denies Palestinians there of their dignity and basic human rights.

Together, these trends are producing great tension that is already turning to violence. Settler attacks on Palestinian homes, villages, motorists, and crops have spiked since August 2020, and there have been incidents of Israeli citizens attacked by individual Palestinians. In December, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) increased its deployments to the West Bank.

To mitigate the possibility of further violence and to cultivate conditions for a future negotiated peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians based on international law and conventions and the principles of justice and rights, we urge your administration to take these important tangible first steps:

Publicly reiterate that Israeli settlements are illegitimate, and that the United States opposes settlement activity.

Rebuild diplomatic ties with the Palestinian Authority, including working toward the re-opening of the PLO Diplomatic office in Washington, DC as well as reopening the Consulate General in East Jerusalem.

Restart humanitarian assistance programs to the Palestinian people, and resume funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).

We were pleased to hear Acting US Representative to the UN Richard Mills affirm the intention of the Biden Administration to resume humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people and to make steps toward repairing the U.S. relationship with Palestinian leadership. Particularly during the ongoing pandemic, when refugees are among the most vulnerable, funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) must be reinstated immediately. It is imperative you move as swiftly as possible to implement these changes.

These are a few of the pressing issues we wish to raise with the Administration, even as we have long-standing engagement with several other countries and partners in the region. We seek to encourage a US foreign policy in the region that addresses these and other issues in a fair, just, and consistent way. As faith leaders it is our duty to speak up on behalf of those who suffer injustice. We believe peace and justice in the world is also the duty of the United States and of all nations. We pray for your success in these times of opportunity and challenge for our country.

Sincerely,

Joyce Ajlouny

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