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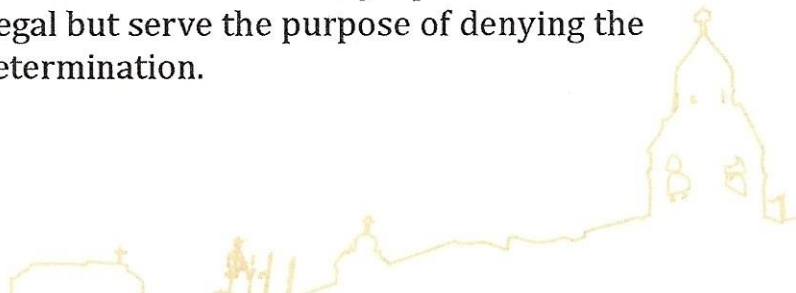
Date: November 21<sup>th</sup>, 2020

### **Open Letter from the Mayor of Bethlehem to the International Community on the Construction of a new Israeli Settlement**

Last Sunday the Israeli Government advanced the construction of over 1200 units in an area north of Bethlehem referred to as the illegal settlement of "Giv'at Hamatos". Its construction comes as a continuation of a process by the Israeli occupation, which began as soon as 1967 when the occupying power dissolved the legitimate Arab East Jerusalem Municipality and unilaterally expanded the municipal boundaries of the illegitimate Israeli Jerusalem Municipality that also included 22,000 dunums of land belonging to Bethlehem, as well as Beit Jala and Beit Sahour.

The illegal settlement of Giv'at Hamatos aims to link the illegal settlements of Gilo ("Al Slayeb", built in 1973 mainly over lands of Beit Jala) and Har Homa ("Jabal Abu Ghneim", built in 1996 on lands of Beit Sahour), creating a solid barrier of settlements that will perpetuate the separation of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, both in Palestinian territory occupied by Israel in 1967. This represents a major blow to our cities as they represent the main areas for our natural growth. It will also encircle Beit Safafa and change the landscape around the historic Mar Elias Monastery, the first stop of the Christmas Eve procession that takes place every year from the Old City of Jerusalem. Such continued colonial-settlement expansion does not only separate the geography between the holy cities, it also contributes to the sabotage of our Palestinian practices and traditions, whether religious or cultural, inherited from our ancestors.

All Israeli settlements are illegal under international law. This has been reaffirmed in several UN resolutions, including UNSC Resolution 2334 of 2016. The International Court of Justice made clear on its Advisory Opinion of 2004 that those settlements are not just illegal but serve the purpose of denying the inalienable Palestinian right to self-determination.



STATE OF PALESTINE

Bethlehem Municipality



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It also set clear responsibilities for all peace-loving countries, *inter alia*, the obligation of non-recognition and non-assistance. Yet, 16 years later very little of this has been implemented. In fact, foreign companies continue to contribute to the development and consolidation of Israeli settlements and their related infrastructure, including those settlements which separate Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

In addition to dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic and the severe economic crisis arising out of the tourism cancellations, during 2020 we have had to deal with settlement expansion and related infrastructure all over our district, including in Al Makhrouf/Battir valley (a designated World Heritage Site) and Cremisan. A few weeks ago over 900 units were approved for the illegal colonial-settlement of Har Gilo located on Bethlehem's highest hill.

When Israel began the construction of Har Homa settlement back in 1996 we also heard statements of "concern" and "condemnations" yet lack of action is what has allowed Israel almost 25 years later to have over 24,000 settlers in this place. Everyone who claims to care about world peace and security, a rules-based world order, the implementation of the long overdue inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and particularly about the present and future of the oldest Christian community worldwide, has the legal, moral and political responsibility to take action in order to hold Israel accountable.

Thus and during this holy season of Christmas when the hearts and the sights of all believers are directed towards Bethlehem, the town of the Nativity, we call upon all peace-loving nations, the upcoming Biden Administration, the European Union and particularly those countries that hold special status with regards to the Status Quo of the Holy Sites, as well as the Holy See, to take immediate action to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine, including by urgently stopping the construction of the illegal colonial-settlement of "Giv'at Hamatos". Bethlehem needs no more suffocation and closure. It deserves to be restored to its former glory as an open city for peace.

Adv. Anton Salman  
Mayor of Bethlehem

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21. 11. 2020

