

8 September 2016

Our reference: MIN/100688/2016

Rt Hon George Howarth MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

King Charles Street
London SW1A 2AH

Dear George,

Thank you for your email of 18 August to the Foreign Secretary, on behalf of a number of your constituents, about Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs). I am replying as Minister responsible for our relations with the Middle East.

Your constituents raise concerns over the village of Susiya in the OPTs, and the village of Umm al-Hiran which is located within Israel.

The UK position on demolitions in the OPTs, including the threatened demolition in Susiya, is clear: such demolitions cause unnecessary suffering to ordinary Palestinians; are harmful to the peace process; and are, in all but the most exceptional of cases, contrary to international humanitarian law. As your constituents may be aware, the Fourth Geneva Convention is clear that the destruction of any real or personal property in Occupied Territory is not justified unless it is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations. The Fourth Geneva Convention also makes clear that individual or mass forcible transfer of protected persons from occupied territory is prohibited.

We are concerned that there has been a large increase in demolitions since the start of 2016, compared with the monthly average in 2015. We are also concerned at the increase in the demolition of structures funded partly or fully by international donors. Our Embassy in Tel Aviv has repeatedly raised our opposition to demolitions with the Israeli authorities, including our specific concerns about Susiya, and urged them to provide a legal route for Palestinian construction.

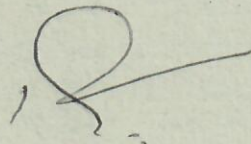
On 28 July, I issued a statement condemning the announcement of new Israeli settlement units and noting the alarming increase in demolitions of Palestinian houses throughout 2016. On 18 August, officials from the British Consulate General in Jerusalem, along with an official from our Embassy in Tel Aviv visited Susiya to again highlight our serious concern and show our continuing support for the village.

The UK Government supports Bedouin communities and Palestinians facing demolition or eviction in Area C of the West Bank through our funding to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) legal aid programme. This helps residents challenge decisions in the Israeli legal system. I am pleased to report that 97% of cases provided with legal representation through NRC have resulted in suspension of demolitions and evictions, allowing Palestinians to remain in their homes.

I can assure you that the UK Government is a strong supporter of international justice and is committed to upholding the Geneva Conventions. It is our longstanding position that Israel has legal obligations as an Occupying Power with respect to the OPTs under applicable international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention. We have a regular dialogue with the Government of Israel with regard to the implementation of those obligations and raise our serious concerns regarding such issues of international humanitarian law in the OPTs.

Your constituents also refer to proposals to demolish the Bedouin village of Umm al-Hiran within Israel. We have been encouraging the Israeli authorities and Bedouin communities to find a satisfactory solution to this issue, respecting the equality of all of Israel's citizens in a way which avoids forced relocations.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'T. Ellwood', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

TOBIAS ELLWOOD MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State