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**European Union Heads of Mission visit communities facing the threat of
demolition and displacement in the Southern Hebron Hills**

A group of European Union Heads of Mission in Jerusalem and Ramallah visited today communities facing the threat of demolition and displacement in the Southern Hebron Hills. The objective of this field trip was to gain a first-hand impression of developments in the area, to demonstrate concern at the humanitarian impact of any house demolitions and forced transfer of population, and to express the EU's commitment to a sustainable future for the Palestinian communities in Area C. During the visit, the group met with Prime Minister Dr. Salam Fayyad at Mufaqara village who briefed them about the PA efforts and work to support the people of this area.

The group started its visit at Jinba community where it met representatives from several communities in Area C and were briefed on recent developments in the Southern Hebron Hills, including the proceedings in the Israeli High Court with regard to communities situated in the designated "Firing Zone 918". The intention by the Israeli Ministry of Defence to prohibit permanent residence in the firing zone and thus to evacuate 8 communities (al-Majaz, a-Tabban, a- Sfay, al-Fakhit, al-Halaweh, al-Mirkez, Jinba, and al-Kharuba, all of which have been in existence from before the Firing Zone was declared) would – if upheld by the High Court of Justice – entail the forced transfer of up to 1800 people, contrary to Israel's obligations as the Occupying Power.

The designation of the area as a live firing zone would thus reduce further the opportunities for Palestinian communities to live and work in Area C and reduce further any potential of economic and social development for the Palestinians in this area of the occupied Palestinian territory. Later on, the group met Prime Minister Dr. Salam Fayyad, at Mufaqarah village. The group reaffirmed to the Prime Minister the strong commitment of the EU for the well being of the Palestinian people in Area C, and particularly those communities under the threat of demolition in the South Hebron Hills.

In the Council Conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process of 14 May 2012, the EU recalled the applicability of international humanitarian law in the occupied Palestinian territory, including the applicability of the fourth Geneva Convention relative to the protection of civilians. The EU calls upon Israel to meet its obligations regarding the living conditions of the Palestinian population in Area C, by a policy shift entailing accelerated approval of Palestinian master plans, halting forced transfer of population and demolition of Palestinian housing and infrastructure, simplifying administrative procedures to obtain building permits, ensuring access to water and addressing humanitarian needs. Social and economic developments in Area C are of critical importance for the viability of the future Palestinian state since Area C is its main land reserve.

The EU and its Member States will continue to provide financial assistance for Palestinian development in Area C and expects such investment to be protected for future use. The EU will continue to engage with the Government of Israel to work out improved mechanisms for the implementation of the donor funded projects for the benefit of the Palestinian population in Area C.

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