

Beyond Beer Sheva: Assessing Australia-Israel Relations

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Australia-Israel Relations: Why Change the Status Quo?

Beyond the shared goal of a rules-based world order, a strengthened Australia-Israel relationship would advance the national interests of both countries. For Israel, enhanced ties would help counter negative trends in Israel's international standing and consolidate an additional political and economic foothold in the Asia-Pacific region. For these reasons alone, an upgraded partnership with a longstanding supporter such as Australia should be a foreign policy priority for Israel.

For Australia, strengthened ties would produce benefits in security and technology. For example, learning from technological advances made by the Israeli hi-tech industry and the Israeli Defense Forces multidisciplinary national "cyber-ecosystem" (which makes up Israel's "cyber defensive envelope"), Australian government, industry, and small business could gain valuable skills in protecting critical infrastructure from the imminent threat of cyber attacks.¹ Moreover, Israel's start-up nation status has helped it promote a global network of ties that could benefit Australia. Australia's Innovation Launch Pad in Tel Aviv, for example, is a first step in building frameworks for cooperation and tangible policy prospects in order to cultivate a thriving joint innovation culture. By the same token, Australia has already been able to benefit from Israeli expertise in arid zone agriculture, and joint research on climate-specific agricultural practices could reinforce their respective strong export industries in light of upcoming climate change-related turbulence.² In addition, Australia is pushing to improve its

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status as an international leader in defense exports. One of the five pillars of Australia's Defense Export Strategy is to foster greater innovation and productivity in the domestic defense industry, and collaborative technology initiatives could help promote this objective.³ Finally, Australian efforts to contain violent extremism by Islamist forces in the Asia-Pacific region could benefit from enhanced cooperation in counter-terrorism, including intelligence sharing with Israel.⁴

From Beer Sheva to Today

The Battle of Beer Sheva on October 31, 1917 was one of Australia's greatest World War I victories and the last significant cavalry charge of war history.⁵ The Australian Light Horse Brigade, composed of the 4th and 12th regiments, launched an attack on the Turkish-held town of Beer Sheva, later to become the major city of southern Israel. The strategic significance of the town, along with its water supply, was critical to the entire Australian operation, and defeat in the battle would have risked enemy capture or life threatening dehydration. The Australians surprised the Turks by advancing through the desert, the one unprotected side of the occupied town. Charging at machine guns and incoming artillery, the brigade captured the water wells and the town as a whole, marking a stunning victory in the campaign that led to Turkish withdrawal from Palestine in the weeks to come.⁶ To this day, the Battle of Beer Sheva remains one of the most memorable milestones in the history of the Australian-Israeli relationship.

Australia was one of the selected members of the United Nations Ad Hoc Committee on the Palestinian Question, which endorsed the recommendation of the UN Special Committee on Palestine to partition the British Mandate into a Jewish state and an Arab state, and it was one of the first member-states to vote for General Assembly Resolution 181, which formally approved that recommendation.⁷ Since then, Australia has generally played a supportive role for Israel, though that support has more often taken the force of token diplomatic gestures rather than tangible action. Attitudes toward Israel have evolved slowly, with significant policy shifts occurring only with changes in government. During the 1982 Lebanon War, the Australian government seemed to adopt a "bandwagoning" approach by taking a neutral stance, urging both sides to avoid escalation and commending the UN and the United States for taking action to "prevent renewed hostilities."⁸ Throughout the prolonged conflict in southern Lebanon, beginning in 1985, the government strongly condemned Israel's

attacks from within Lebanon and did not endorse Israel's presence in South Lebanon.⁹

At the same time, Australia has consistently supported Israel at the UN, illustrated by the Knesset's 1987 expression of gratitude for Australia's rejection of the General Assembly's resolution to equate Zionism with racism. That year, Prime Minister Bob Hawke emphasized his "support [for] the principle of self-determination of the Palestinian people," while adding that "like successive Australian governments, we see moral as well as political imperatives in our commitment to the security of Israel and its right to exist within secure and recognized boundaries."¹⁰ Hawke also highlighted his government's commitment to further coal exports to Israel, a sign of increased industrial and agricultural cooperation meant to strengthen the bilateral economic ties.¹¹ However, the warm rhetoric of the Hawke government was undermined later in 1987 when Trade Minister Ariel Sharon's invitation to visit Australia was retracted due to negative reactions from Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) sympathizers in Australia.¹²

Terrorist attacks carried out in 1990 by Palestinian groups aligned with the PLO were described by government senators as a blow to the peace process that would only harden Israeli attitudes. Senator Robert Ray noted that following these attacks the government would reconsider its support for the PLO, after having approved the request by the Palestine Information Office in Canberra to change its name to the PLO Office.¹³

Over time, the issue of Jewish settlements has posed a growing challenge to Australia-Israel relations. Much like many other international actors, Australia believes that the settlements are destructive to the peace process, reflected in Prime Minister John Howard's remarks during his 2000 visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories.¹⁴ Subsequently, criticism of Israeli policy with respect to settlements and – by extension – to the broader issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became particularly virulent in the ranks of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). In 2016, for example, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop called on Opposition Leader Bill Shorten to prevent a damaging motion by the New South Wales (NSW) Labor Friends of Palestine. The motion was intended to bar parliamentarians, officeholders, and rank-and-file members from accepting sponsored travel invitations to Israel while Benjamin Netanyahu's government "continues settlements, refuses a Palestinian state (and) brutally mistreats Arab residents of the West Bank."¹⁵ At the NSW State Labor Conference in 2017, former Foreign

Minister Bob Carr successfully passed a motion to unconditionally support a Palestinian state, a ground-breaking development in the traditional approach calling for the conflict to be resolved by negotiations and mutual agreement. Former party leaders Bob Hawke and Kevin Rudd also expressed their support for this motion. This movement could significantly sway the Labor party's foreign policy position on the Palestine question in the next elections.¹⁶ These developments echoed the sentiments of former minister Barry Cohen of the Labor Party, who assessed that the party's approach was "rampant with anti-Semitism." This charge that has been denied by various Labor leaders but continues to shape the Australian Jewish community's approach to the Party.¹⁷

Australia's foreign policy approach toward Israel is of particular significance due to the weight carried by the relatively small Jewish population. The Jewish community is one of the oldest diasporas in Australia, and has been described as "the most Zionist Diaspora Jewish community" in the world.¹⁸ Perhaps predictably, this Zionism translates into political affiliation and interaction with Australian political parties. Jewish parliamentarians makes up a total of 2.2 percent of total representatives in the Australian Commonwealth Parliament, although Australia's Jewish community constitutes only about 0.45 percent of the total population.¹⁹ It is Australia's open and democratic society that has played a large factor in encouraging Jewish intervention and participation in the political process. These activities are complemented by participation in the World Jewish Congress and the foundation of the Commonwealth Jewish Council, which is involved in advocacy of community concerns.²⁰

In tandem, the Muslim population in Australia is growing rapidly and now accounts for 2.6 percent of the total population, though with only 1.3 percent representation in Parliament.²¹ Leading Arab businessmen in Australia have adopted an advocacy role for their community amid growing concerns about violent extremism in Australia.²² As Australia battles the threat of terrorism on its shores, Islamophobia is on the rise, with Muslims in Sydney experiencing discrimination at three times the rate of other Australian groups.²³ The Lebanese community in Australia has experienced insensitivity to their concerns, and Minister of Home Affairs Peter Dutton has made discriminatory comments against the Lebanese and South Sudanese communities in Australia.²⁴ Dr Anne Aly, the first female Australian-Muslim Member of Parliament and a counterterrorism expert,

has received death threats throughout her time in Parliament, suggesting the growth of hostility toward the growing Muslim community in Australia.²⁵

The disparity between the Australian Jewish and Muslim communities in political representation and power is important when assessing the history of foreign policy approaches to the Middle East. Still, it raises the question of why, if Jewish representation in politics is high, are the relations between Australia and Israel stagnant, or at the very least, underperforming.

Netanyahu's State Visit to Australia: Diplomatic Rhetoric or Genuine Mutual Commitment?

The most recent developments in the relations between the Israeli and Australian governments came with Prime Minister Netanyahu's unprecedented visit to Australia in early 2017. The visit was accompanied by announcements of collaboration between Israel and Australia, in the form of agreements that could mark a new era of strong bilateral economic and political ties. While visiting Australia, Netanyahu and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull signed a Bilateral Agreement on Technological Innovation and Research and Development, as a framework for science, engineering, and business groups to create jobs and industries of the future, as well as an agreement on air services to expand commercial and people-to-people links.²⁶

Turnbull expressed hope, based on commitments to "share our national experiences and expertise in aviation security and the protection of crowded places," as well as "initiatives that will advance our two countries['] shared interests in national security, counterterrorism, cyber security, innovation, and trade and investment."²⁷ Indeed, meetings focused heavily on innovation and cyber security; Israel excels in these fields, and Australia has a growing interest in developing its own capabilities. Violent extremism was also a joint concern discussed in the meetings, and the two leaders stressed the importance of strengthened cooperation to combat terrorism.²⁸ Not surprisingly, then, the central focus of the collaborations was on security, a concern that is increasingly relevant to all international actors and a field in which Israel has great expertise. Indeed, one of the most significant developments throughout the meeting was an affirmation of the importance of bilateral defense cooperation, which currently is lacking; neither sends officers to study at the other's military staff colleges, and Australia's defense attaché to Israel is based in Turkey. Both countries focused on incorporating

cyber capabilities into military operations, substantiating their commitment to a bilateral cyber dialogue.

The visit, to be sure, did not go without scrutiny. During a joint press conference to mark the beginning of Netanyahu's visit to Australia, Turnbull was questioned about his commitment to a two-state solution, after having expressed openness to a one-state solution following a meeting with President Trump earlier that year. In response, Turnbull reiterated Australia's position on a two-state solution.²⁹ In addition, in a meeting with Netanyahu, Opposition Leader Bill Shorten declared "'clearly and unambiguously' that where settlements and their expansion are a roadblock to peace, that's damaging to the peace process."³⁰ Nevertheless, Netanyahu summarized his fruitful visit by stating that his agreements with Australia reflect "our [Australia and Israel's] commitment to defend our common values of freedom, of democracy, the rule of law, pluralism."³¹

To mark the 100th year anniversary of the Battle of Beer Sheva in October 2017, a delegation of Australian government and opposition members visited Israel, including Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Amidst domestic political turbulence, Turnbull missed nearly half of his planned schedule in Israel, causing his coalition colleagues to argue before the diplomatic community that the delay was "not embarrassing."³² Turnbull's visit marked the first Australian Prime Minister's visit to Israel since 2000,³³ an interesting development but one that was underpinned by Australian military legacy rather than the desire to advance bilateral relations. During his brief visit, Turnbull reiterated that the relationship between Israel and Australia was strong on a governmental and personal level, with Netanyahu labeling Turnbull a "true friend of Israel."³⁴ The friendly remarks made during both visits represent a familiar recourse to diplomatic jargon rather than tangible and measurable action. Both Israeli and Australian officials refer repeatedly to the limited cooperation initiatives between them, such as Australia's Innovation Landing Pad in Tel Aviv, mentioned in every media release and speech delivered by Turnbull during both visits, and the Battle of Beer Sheva, a historical moment that both parties cling to in an attempt to forge links. Thus the relationship between Israel and Australia, despite the momentous visit of Netanyahu to Australia, seems to have been no deeper than Israel's ties with other soft power allies. This is an important fact in analyzing the lukewarm relationship, as it alludes to the lack of new and significant bilateral endeavors.

A Critical Analysis of Australia-Israel Relations

This first visit by a sitting Israeli Prime Minister to Australia met with mixed reviews. Due to Australia's heavy focus on the Asia-Pacific region, the visit was overlooked to some extent, with few analysts delving into the opportunities and challenges posed by a renewed bilateral focus. Significant Australian foreign affairs and strategy think tanks such as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and the Lowy Institute did, however, feature critical analyses of the state of Australia-Israel relations. Analyses of the significance of the relationship included the argument that "there's really no country in the Middle East whose interests are more closely aligned with Australia's than Israel."³⁵ Others, however, viewed the visit as a display of token diplomacy, with little conviction behind it. Israel's relative neglect of Australia did not go unmentioned. It was noted that Australia sits on the periphery of Israel's worldview, an attitude attributed to the sense that Israel doesn't know what it wants from the relationship.³⁶ The relationship underachieves in many ways, with both states failing to recognize the extent to which they can contribute to the other's national interests and relying more on rhetoric than on substance.

Several points of mutual interest that could form the basis of a deeper relationship were highlighted in the analysis of the visit. It was suggested, for example, that Israel's doctrine of self-reliance could be enhanced through exposure to Australia's experience in military coalitions, while heightened intelligence sharing could bolster the approach to counterterrorism in the Asia-Pacific.³⁷

At the same time, Australia's current political climate and the volatility of party approaches to Israel could derail progress made over the past year. A future ALP government might adopt a firm stance on the unconditional recognition of Palestine, with the Liberal National Party's (LNP) traditionally more fervent support of Israel also at risk of waning. To the extent that these risks can be attributed more to failed Israeli diplomacy than to successful Palestinian advocacy, they can be attenuated by more proactive public diplomacy in Australia.³⁸ Shared interests should act as further motivation for Israel to focus heavily on reconciling its relationship with Australia, lest neglect end up costing Israel a key ally.

Looking Ahead

Given the undeniable benefits that both Australia and Israel seek to gain from a strong bilateral relationship, there is a need to inject more content

into the relations. The future of that relationship depends on several critical factors. First, Australian political parties must take heed to act rationally in their foreign policy approaches to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. This means making calculated, evidence-based statements, rather than rushing to respond to current events without assessing the implications of damaging rhetoric. For its part, Israel must make a concerted effort to elevate Australia's status from one of several middle power allies and expand the scope of ties, rather than content itself with rhetorical support in the UN. As Australia's focus shifts more and more toward the Asia-Pacific region, Israel can no longer keep Australia on its periphery and expect its support in return. Unless both parties invest more in tangible initiatives, the potential benefits of closer cooperation will slip away with the passage of time.

Notes

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