

Why Australia Supports Israel's Oppression of the Palestinians

BY

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Australia has a record of loyal support for Israeli state racism and human rights abuses that puts even the US to shame. In order to change that record, we need to challenge the political forces that have made Australia Israel's most faithful ally.

I've written about the Israel-Palestine conflict — and Australia's relationship to it — for nearly twenty years. For some of those years, I lived in East Jerusalem. I'm an Australian/German citizen and I have regularly reported from around Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. In that time, my own views have evolved — I was once a liberal, Zionist Jew who believed in a two-state solution. Today, I back a one-state reality where all citizens can live equally under the law.

One of the US State Department cables that WikiLeaks released in 2011 gave a sense of the prevailing attitude toward Palestinians among Israel's rulers. In 2008, Israeli officials told US diplomatic staff that they would “keep Gaza's economy ‘on the brink of collapse’ while avoiding a humanitarian crisis.” Since then, Israel has kept its word, by enforcing an inhumane siege on Gaza, with Egyptian support.

For public consumption, Israeli politicians blatantly lied about the siege, claiming it was simply intended to prevent the ruling Hamas party from rearming. But the real objective was to punish the people of Gaza for daring to vote for Hamas in the 2006 election.

Fanatical Loyalty

It's painful to witness Australia's visceral hatred of Palestinian human rights, as someone who was born here, but the evidence is overwhelming. Most Australians are unaware of how diplomatically isolated their country has become. Australia is almost unique globally in its consistent support for Israel in diplomatic forums like the United Nations.

Consider Israel's announcement that it would annex the West Bank earlier this year. Although Benjamin Netanyahu has postponed this decision for the time being, his government is still annexing land unofficially across the occupied territories. In spite of this, Australia opposed a UN resolution in June — with only the Marshall Islands, a US client state, joining it — condemning annexation, and voted against resolutions recognizing Palestinian self-determination and opposing Israel's illegal settlement enterprise.

This latest move fitted into a long and inglorious history of Australian efforts to shield Israel from international scrutiny over its killing and maiming of Palestinians. Former Liberal prime minister Malcolm Turnbull gave Netanyahu an embarrassingly fawning welcome when he visited Australia in 2017.

The following year, his successor Scott Morrison flirted with supporting the Trump administration's decision to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Australia's biggest state, New South Wales, then signed a water deal with Israel in 2019, hailing the Jewish state as a global leader in water management (while ignoring Israel's consistent theft of water from Palestinians in the West Bank).

Australia's rulers grant Israel special treatment in other ways, too. Australian Jews can fight in the Israeli Defense Forces and face no legal consequences, even though Israel's occupation and settlement of the West Bank is illegal under international law. Israel has a history of recruiting Jewish Australians to work for Mossad, including Ben Zygier, who was subsequently found dead in a maximum security Israeli prison, having been imprisoned by the Israeli authorities in murky circumstances.

When Mossad forged Australian passports, as part of a mission to kill a Hamas operative in Dubai, the Australian government barely responded to this threat to the security of its citizens. In contrast, when false allegations were leveled against Mohammed Halabi, a Palestinian aid worker in Gaza, Australia indefinitely suspended all funding to World Vision projects there.

Birds of a Feather

For the untrained outsider, Australia's fanatically pro-Israel stance may appear strange, especially considering how far it is from the Middle East. But when we remember that Australia and Israel share a similar colonial history, Canberra's diplomatic posture seems less bizarre. Both nations have dispossessed indigenous populations. Like Israel, Australia has never properly addressed the historic crimes it carried out against the land's Indigenous populations.

Australia's loyalty is also the product of a concerted effort on behalf of Israel and pro-Israel lobbyists in Australia. For years, politicians, lobbyists and many media commentators have enjoyed free trips to Israel, reinforcing their commitment to the country's talking points. Former Labor prime minister Julia Gillard visited Israel in 2009 a few months after the devastating attack on Gaza during Operation Cast Lead. Yet she couldn't even bring herself to mention the very word "Gaza."

Gillard is a member of Australia's supposedly more progressive governing party, but proved to be a reliable spokesperson for the most extreme Israeli government positions. According to her foreign minister Bob Carr, this was due to the "extraordinary" influence of pro-Israel pressure groups like the Australia Israel & Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC) had over Gillard's thinking.

Carr reports that Gillard refused to even let him criticize Israeli colonies in the West Bank because it would upset the pro-Israel lobby — particularly the AIJAC, the most extreme and censorious of the bunch. Organizations representing Australia's Jewish community, while not united on every issue, have largely maintained a cohesive message on Israel, something that Australia's disparate Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim communities have not been able to match.

Although the Israel lobby in the United States is the most aggressive and successful advocacy network of its kind, Israel's Australian backers have also been remarkably successful in silencing criticism of Israel's actions against the Palestinians. The Australian Labor Party may now be slowly inching toward a slightly more critical posture, but this comes after decades of almost complete bipartisan support for Israeli positions.

Weaponizing Anti-Racism

Over the last two decades, pro-Palestinian advocacy in Australia has become more visible. Palestine supporters, including groups like Australia Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN), have undertaken stellar work, even organizing pro-Palestinian lobbying trips to Israel and Palestine, to help journalists develop a more critical view of the conflict. Efforts like these have contributed to Palestinian voices breaking through into the public sphere.

This helps explain why public opinion has become more supportive of Palestinian rights. According to polling conducted in 2017, 61 percent of Australians opposed Israeli settlements, while 55 percent backed the non-violent boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement. This mirrors growing support among Democratic voters in the United States for BDS and targeted actions against Israel.

Still, given the racism of the Australian political class, building support for Palestine has been an uphill battle. Despite increasing public backing for BDS, it has rarely gained traction as a matter of public policy, meeting with stiff opposition whenever it does. When Marrickville Council in Sydney pushed to implement BDS in 2011, it was roundly attacked. Since then there have been very few examples of local, state, or federal politicians openly advocating for it.

Perhaps precisely because the call for BDS has failed to gain serious traction, Australia has yet to see the wave of anti-BDS legislation that has inundated the United States and Europe. It's rather surprising that the current Liberal government hasn't tried to formally designate BDS as racist, in view of its general orientation.

Outside the two major parties, Australia's Greens have at times called for an arms embargo on Israel — but for the most part, they want to avoid wading into an issue that the party leadership believes will only bring them political and media pain.

No doubt, many well-intentioned Palestine supporters are scared that if they push for effective measures against Israel — say, the imposition of sanctions — they will run into a propaganda campaign similar to that recently endured by the British Labour politician Jeremy Corbyn. If such a patently decent man can be buried under an avalanche of mostly bogus claims that he and his party permitted antisemitism to thrive, then it may seem as if there is little hope in Australia.

The weaponization of antisemitism continues apace in country after country, focusing on imaginary threats instead of the real and rising threat of anti-Jewish violence and bigotry. For all too many supporters of Israel, bogus charges of antisemitism against that state's critics are just another political weapon to be deployed against perceived enemies.

As Israeli policies become more openly racist and indefensible, the cynicism behind this calculation will only become more evident. Already, there seems to be hardly any Israeli policy that communal groups like the Executive Council of Australian Jewry and the Zionist Federation of Australia won't endorse.

Thankfully, the occasional brave soul will resist. Witness former Australian Labor politician Melissa Parke, who is currently pursuing legal action against Colin Rubenstein, the executive director of AIJAC, for having falsely accused her of antisemitism.

Solidarity With Palestine

I'll be appearing as a witness for Melissa Parke when the case goes to trial in 2021. But it is much more common for journalists and editors to hold their tongues about Israel and Palestine. I've lost count over the years of the number who are willing to self-censor instead of report a fair story, because they fear being bombarded with hate mail and threats.

The publicly owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has produced some quality work on the conflict, but even they have also been cowed by bullying from Zionist groups. But such capitulation only makes things worse. AIJAC are currently pressuring the ABC to adopt the controversial International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism into its editorial policies.

Even Kenneth Stern, the man who first drafted this definition, has warned that it is being used for “suppressing political speech” by “right-wing Jewish groups” in the United States. Meanwhile, hatred of Palestinians is rapidly becoming an “acceptable” form of racism for the twenty-first century.

Australia will never be a global superpower — but it could use its middle-power status with independence and bravery. As Ben Saul, Challis Chair of International Law at the University of Sydney, wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

The Australian government rightly promotes a “rules-based international order”... All of this must mean speaking truth to our friends as to our adversaries — and not being Israel’s unprincipled stooge.

Saul suggested that “Australia should warn Israel that it will impose sanctions if annexation proceeds”; in the absence of such action at state level, Australians may “personally choose to exercise their consumer power to boycott Israeli products.”

Australia currently sells weapons to repressive states across the globe, so its moral standing is already low. And Australian governments are unlikely to take a lead in pressuring Israel to end its occupation of Palestinian territories in the near future.

But this doesn't make it any less urgent that we reenergize the Palestine solidarity movement and challenge the politicians, companies, and lobby groups that have spent decades backing the longest occupation in modern times.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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