

Aping Washington: Tony Abbott, Israel and Australian Foreign Policy

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[Oceania](#)

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He is one of Australia's truly singular politicians, relentlessly zealous, hewn from the granite of an older fanaticism. Despise him, loathe him, but consider him for one fundamental point: he has escaped the management artists, the curbing focus groups, and the broad political classes in a way unusual for the modern Australian politician.

Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott has gotten, of late, into the business of clairvoyance. At the very least, he is having a punt at the idea of what the United States is going to do next, notably in certain realms of foreign policy. Where they go, he wishes Australia to adoringly follow.

In many ways, he has grounds for being irritatingly smug. Refugee policies globally are hardening, a testament to his mania against the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers by sea; the obsession with radicalisation and the Islamic enemy within is gaining pace in the most tolerant societies. Data retention laws are being passed in other countries in a vain effort to combat supposedly exceptional threats.

Of late, the policy on Israel, notably in how ambassadorial relations are handled, looms large. Even as other countries were repeatedly affirming that Israel's settlements in the occupied territories were illegal, Abbott preferred to fob off such legal scruples. In this, he chimes with US president elect Donald Trump, who has made his stance clear with the appointment of pro-settler supporter David Friedman as US ambassador to Israel.

Abbott's most recent effort, conveyed publicly by a piece in the Australian version of *The Spectator*, have centred on a similar theme, suggesting with religious intensity that Australia relocate its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The pugnacious stance is intended to anticipate the position of the incoming Trump administration while also dismissing the darker cynicism of the outgoing Obama administration. In Friedman's words last month, he hoped to "strengthen the unbreakable bond between [the United States and Israel] and advance the cause of peace within the region, and look forward to doing this from the US embassy in Israel's eternal capital, Jerusalem." [1] Peace, it would seem, through colonial conquest.

The *Spectator* contribution oozes with violent, well fed patriotism – and the sense that others have forgotten Australia's previous roles in Middle Eastern politics, long before Israel became an internationally recognised state. (He should actually hope for amnesia on this score, though the Middle East is replete with elephantine memories of dangerous consequence.) "We often forget the role that Australians have played in this part of the

world long before our FA18s and our military trainers joined today's fight against the death cult in Syria and northern Iraq.”[2]

There is much pseudo-colonial assertiveness, with delight taken in the role played by the Australian Light Horse “that liberated Beersheba, Jerusalem and Damascus from the Ottoman Turks.” This, despite the fact that the Australians were simply doing the bidding of another empire, meddling to such an extent the whirlwind continues to be reaped. Without the vaguest hint of irony, Abbott happily recounts an imperial project while defending Israel's own colonial enterprise and regional muscularity. For him, these are all pursued in the name of a bully boy styled liberation.

In the fashion of the bully, modern Australian foreign policy, argues Abbott, should focus on cutting the \$40 million a year in foreign aid to the Palestinian Authority: such money was far better spent elsewhere than funding “pensions to terrorists and their families.”

While rubbing the Palestinians out of the equation of help, Abbott insisted that Australia “demonstrate its unswerving support for Israel, as the Middle East's only liberal, pluralist democracy” through joining “any move by the Trump administration to move its embassy to Jerusalem.”

The pro-Israeli hardline in Australia's parliament have agreed, though much of that is also based on anticipating Trump's next jaw dropping action. “Given the indications by [Mr] Trump,” suggested the lopsidedly reactionary Tasmanian senator Eric Abetz, “there is a gaining momentum, and so in those circumstances I would invite the executive of our government in Australia to give very serious consideration to following suit if that does develop into a trend.”

There will, of course, be no trend in that direction, but the lust to imitate the strong remains potent, though on this score, Australia's current foreign minister is holding firm. “The Australian government,” according to Julie Bishop, “does not have any plans to move the Australian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.”[3]

Israeli Parliament MP Sharren Haskel of the governing Likud Party was already familiar with Abbott, having met him during a trip in December as part of the Australia-Israel-UK Dialogue. As Haskel noted, the relocation matter came up, close on the heels of Trump's own promise that his administration would move ambassadorial offices to the holy city.

Such discussions were blithely indifferent to the effects such a move would make: “we discussed that there's no real reason why the Australian embassy shouldn't be in Jerusalem as well.”[4] In actual fact, the reasons are manifold, thickened by historical angst, sentiment and terror.

East Jerusalem, comprising the Old City, fell to Israeli forces in the lighting Six-Day War of 1967. For that reason, it has been designated occupied territory. But for Abbott, as it is with Trump, the jarring detail is inconsequential. Israel's neighbours, and most of the members of the United Nations, will think otherwise.

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Notes

[1]

<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/trump-appoints-pro-settlement-adviser-ambassador-israel-1714512453>

[2] <http://spectator.com.au/2016/12/jerusalem-diary/>

[3]

<http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2017/01/02/bishop-rejects-tony-abbotts-criticism-palestinian-aid>

[4]

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-01-03/abbott's-embassy-stance-welcome-news-in-israel/8158098>

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