

Relocating the Australian Embassy From Tel Aviv To Jerusalem. Scott Morrison's Recognition Policy Stumbles

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Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Jerusalem, deemed a holy city, and seen as trade item, bargaining chip and bartering tool over the centuries. Sought by the major faiths, despoiled at stages by various empires, revived and chalice of poison in international law. Australia's Scott Morrison, charmless in his ignorance, has come to realise the problems of relocating the Australian embassy from Tel Aviv Jerusalem.

International law, feeble as it is, sees the city as contested and for that reason, the subject of resolution only between the relevant parties in dispute. As international law is a creature shunned and derided in Washington (unilateralism is in vogue), the Trump administration has made true a principle accepted by the US congress since 1995: that Israel's capital be officially acknowledged as such. That the US embassy has taken root on land expropriated by Palestinian landholders is fittingly dark.

Thousands of miles away, however, and Australia's backwater, opportunity shop politicians were making a similar play prior to the by-election in the federal seat of Wentworth. That particular bit of political real estate had been vacated by the former, and very much deposed Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull. Suddenly, Jerusalem, or to be more precise, the interests of Jewry, mattered. (A large Jewish vote was potentially at stake in the affluent Sydney electorate.) If Wentworth could be held, the cannibalising Liberal-National Coalition could still claim to have a barely breathing majority. It was not to be.

During the barnyard scuffles over whether the Australian embassy would be moved to Jerusalem, Morrison suggested he was more than open to the idea. Then came loud voices of demurral from Australia's neighbours, most notably Indonesia. There was trade to worry about, not to mention the finalisation of a free trade agreement.

As Senator Simon Birmingham, the minister tasked with the trade portfolio, noted in a [press release](#) at the end of August,

"Australia and Indonesia have successfully concluded negotiations on the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IA-CEPA), deepening our economic and security cooperation with one of our major trading partners." The only thing missing was the inked signature.

The Jerusalem ploy by Morrison risked, if not scuppering the arrangement, then certainly delaying it. Birmingham, showing the subtle awareness of a blunt, rude instrument, saw few problems. (The Birmingham-Morrison double act is inoculated against the more nuanced

signals of diplomacy.) The agreement with Jakarta [remained](#) “on track for finalisation this year.”

Morrison, betraying a similar obliviousness, saw little in the way of trouble.

“The Indonesian trade minister has made it clear on the public record.”

That clarity, based on remarks by Enggartiasno Lukita, was cautious but open-ended – that the agreement would be signed later this year.

This self-interested reading was preferred to the [sharper take](#) by Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, who had made it clear that,

“Indonesia encourages Australia and other nations to continue to support the peace process and not conduct any action that could undermine the peace process and global security.”

The [leak](#) of WhatsApp messages between Marsudi and her Australian counterpart, Senator Marise Payne, put pay to any suggestion that Jakarta was going to be mild mannered about the whole affair. (Money may have no smell, but politics often reeks.) One particular note of sourness on Marsudi’s part had been the timing of Morrison’s Jerusalem change of heart: Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki was visiting Indonesia at the time.

Morrison, finding himself for the first time in the big league at an international meet in Singapore, has had to smooth things over, less with a fine comb than a jagged rake. The reason was simple: Lukita had become [more expressive](#) on Jakarta’s position regarding the embassy move. The deal “can be signed at any time but when you will sign it... depends on Australia’s position [on the embassy],” came the words to Indonesian media in Singapore on Tuesday. Lukita also reminded reporters of Marsudi’s own warning: “if Australia insists on moving its embassy to Jerusalem, the signing will be delayed.”

The [meeting](#) with Indonesian president Joko Widodo on the side of the East Asia Summit saw Morrison’s attempt to split the issue: the trade deal and embassy review could be considered separable. “They were not conflated, they were not raised together in the meeting yesterday”. Further conversations with Widodo and Marsudi had “been warm and very receptive.” Nor did Morrison feel that his position contradicted the two-state policy.

Some of Morrison’s inner circle seem to be cracking on the subject. Signals of reassurance have been relayed. Defence Industry Minister Steve Ciobo decided to reduce the issue of the embassy move to a matter of improbability. In a [conversation](#) between Ciobo and Lukita at a recent defence event held in Indonesia, Ciobo came up with his assessment:

“About the possibility, I cannot say 100 percent we will move, but, I guess, the possibility is less than 5 percent.”

When asked on Ciobo’s mathematically predictive remarks, Morrison [dismissed](#) them as not reflecting the government’s position. “I am not aware of him even having said that.” The preferable method was dealing with the matter through “a Cabinet submission process”, a

review that would be concluded by Christmas. Australia remained “sovereign in determining its foreign policy.” (Marvellous that someone believes that.)

The line on asserting some fictional Australian sovereignty can also be found amongst other government members. The way to Jerusalem is the way to affirm independence. Senator Eric Abetz, chair of the parliamentary foreign affairs, defence and trade committee, has views typical of members who hail from the White Tribe of Asia.

“If Indonesia really wants to dictate Aus [sic] foreign policy on the middle east,” he [tweeted](#), “should we rethink the \$360 million each year we give them in aid? Instead, how about we calmly finalise this FTA which will lift many Indonesians out of poverty and assist Australian farmers and jobs.”

Another meeting, this time with one of the region’s wildest and at times ruthless leaders, was even more colourful than that with Widodo. Morrison, Australia’s main bargain basement politician, received a schooling from Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. The nonagenarian, whose international credits include rebuffing the International Monetary Fund, mocking US presidents and occasional attacks of anti-Semitic rage, warned of violence. Understand the causes of terrorism, he [said](#) sagely. “Adding to the cause of terrorism is not going to be helpful. I pointed that out.” The Australian account of the meeting is similarly bereft of context to those of Indonesian officials: Mahathir surely did not mean Jerusalem and the embassy in his conversation. Or did he?

Morrison’s tangle is knotted and inextricable. He has jettisoned decades of a bipartisan policy. To now not go through with recognition will anger the Israelis and show him to be opportunistic and weak. To also change midstream would suggest that Australian foreign policy is made in Jakarta, a true scoff at any notion that Canberra was sovereign in any meaningful sense. Either way, Morrison is for turning.

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