

The Morrison Government, Another March of Folly? Australia's Jerusalem Problem

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Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Politics can, after a time, become a myopic exercise of expedient measures and desperate hope. Politics, raw and crude, is at its best at points where survival matters. Conversely, it can illustrate human vices in raw fashion, low points of idiocy and the disaster of folly.

The Morrison government in Australia risks succumbing to another march of folly. Having arisen from a decision to summarily execute its leader (politically speaking), Malcolm Turnbull's replacement looks wooden, a hulk of swaying confusion in search of a purpose. No perspective to exploit is beyond Scott Morrison's purview, be it psychologically ruined children on Manus Island or the prospect of disturbing relations with a move of the Australian embassy to Jerusalem.

The latest shot to Morrison's less than tranquil ship has come from the abrupt move to consider Jerusalem as the new seat of Australia's representation, one made simultaneously with a not so considered contemplation of repudiating the Iran nuclear deal. Some figures, cocooned by security and a cultivated sense of obliviousness, felt it sensible. Colin Rubinstein, executive director of the Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council [felt](#) it politically savvy. "Look at his backbench. Look at his ministry. If you took a poll I think you'd find a lot of support."

A cruder rationale lurks behind the decision: an attempt, made at short notice, to shore up the Jewish vote in the federal seat of [Wentworth](#), vacated by Turnbull in the aftermath of the Liberal Party's leadership challenge. The good, irate citizens of that seat are being asked whether to return a Liberal member to Canberra, a point complicated by a competitive field of candidates and dollops of anger.

In this instance, a leaked briefing or bulletin by the Australian domestic intelligence service on the possible disturbance of any such announcement found its way into the public domain. Marked "Secret" and "AUSTEO" (Australian eyes only), it received distribution on October 15, a day before Morrison floated the idea of an embassy relocation.

The [ASIO Bulletin](#) is sombre and reflective, no doubt aware that the Trump administration's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem came with much blood (dozens of Palestinians slaughtered along with 2,400 injured during [protests](#) in May):

"We expect any announcement on the possible relocation of the Australian embassy to Jerusalem, or consideration of voting against Palestinians in the United Nations, may provoke protest, unrest and possibly some violence in Gaza and the West Bank."

The document also noted that,

“possible Australian interests may be the target of protest activity following any announcement.”

Morrison, having been caught off guard (why would you listen to cautious intelligence officials?) [sought](#) a second opinion from ASIO director-general Duncan Lewis to placate critics. “I want to... reassure Australians that ASIO has no evidence at this time of any planned violence in response to the government’s announcement on 16 October and the matter was fully discussed by Cabinet.”

Another (failed) element of Morrison’s Jerusalem botching stems from attempts to minimise the reaction from various Muslim states to the prospects of moving Australian diplomats from Tel Aviv. One state, Australia’s northern neighbour with the largest Muslim populace on the planet, came to mind.

Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi had been rather busy on the WhatsApp program [conveying notes](#) of concern to Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne, a point that was dismissed by the Morrison government as small beer. A spokesman for Senator Payne went so far as to call the exchange part of a “constructive discussion.”

The messages, also leaked, suggested that the term “constructive” had been rather worn. The action would, according to Marsudi, prove a “slap” to “Indonesia’s face”. Irritated at the timing of the announcement (Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki was visiting Jakarta), Payne’s counterpart [wondered](#): “Is it really necessary to do this on Tuesday?”

Payne’s spokesman, briefed to soften the agitation, [explained](#) his boss’s position:

“Minister Payne emphasised that there had been no change to Australia’s commitment to the Middle East peace process and to a durable and resilient two-state solution that allowed Israel and a future Palestinian state to exist side by side, within internationally recognised borders.”

This did little to calm Marsudi, who badgered Australia’s ambassador Gary Quinlan for [two meetings](#) in three days to explain why the contents of her conversation with Payne had made their merry way into the public domain.

The [statement](#) from the Council of Arab Ambassadors in Canberra, signed by Egyptian ambassador Mohamad Khairat as head of the Council, did much to blow off any suggestions that Morrison’s grand idea would not be damaging.

“The two-state solution means nothing without an equitable resolution of these final-status issues. In the absence of functioning peace process, the sensible course of action would be for Australia to recognise the State of Palestine based on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital.”

The waters of diplomacy have been muddied, and Morrison is keen to find convenient scapegoats. The Victorian Labor government has been [accused](#) of leaking the ASIO bulletin to *The Guardian Australia*, though this vaguely libellous accusation ignores the genuine

possibility that staff on Morrison's own side might well have done so. According to an ASIO spokesman, Lewis had spoken to the Australian Federal Police head Andrew Colvin and "formally referred this matter to the AFP for investigation."

This entire tie-up revealed a standard perversion in Australian attitudes to classified information: the disclosure of WhatsApp messages between representatives of a foreign country is frowned upon but less egregious than a sober, relevant document warning government officials about the consequences of an expedient foreign policy decision. The latter informs an otherwise ignorant public about a government making policy on the hop; the former is a disclosure of tittle-tattle and anger, useful in exposing hypocrisy. Both, at this terminus of the Morrison government, reveal a slide into imminent electoral extinction.

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