

# Australia votes with the US against UN condemnation of Israel's wall

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In another demonstration of the Howard government's unwavering support for the Bush administration, Australia joined the US in voting against a UN General Assembly resolution on July 20 that called on Israel to dismantle its so-called security barrier. The vote underscores Canberra's determination to align itself with Washington, irrespective of its impact on relations with other nations, or its standing in bodies such as the UN.

The only countries to join Australia, the US and Israel in opposing the resolution, were three tiny Pacific island states—the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau—all of which are completely dependent upon American financial aid. Voting in favour of the resolution were 150 states, including countries that are staunch supporters of the Zionist state, such as Britain and other European Union member states.

The UN resolution called on Israel to comply with a ruling previously issued by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which found that the wall violates international law. The UN also appealed to all member states to acknowledge their obligations under the ICJ ruling. These include the duty “not to recognise the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall in the occupied Palestinian territory, including in and around East Jerusalem”.

Prime Minister John Howard attempted to present his government's vote as a principled stand against terrorism. “We believe Israel has a right to protect herself against suicide bombing attacks. We may have been in the minority, but we are right, Israel does have a right to protect herself,” he declared.

In reality, the Sharon government's “security barrier” is designed not to protect the Israeli people, but rather to further advance his government's goal of annexing East Jerusalem and large sections of the West Bank, as part of a “Greater Israel”. Along with the regime of daily repression directed against the Palestinian people, the wall

will only inflame further opposition and attacks inside Israel by Palestinian militants.

Construction of the 720-kilometre barrier has already seen Palestinian homes and land destroyed, with the route intruding several kilometres inside many parts of the West Bank. The wall has divided communities and families, and has intensified the constant hardships and indignities already endured by ordinary Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.

The UN's support for the ICJ ruling against the wall is an attempt to defuse the outrage felt, particularly in the Middle East, toward the Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people. The non-binding resolution was a very timid document, which equated Israeli state terrorism with the resistance of the Palestinians. It included a demand that the Palestinians “undertake visible efforts on the ground to arrest, disrupt and restrain individuals and groups conducting and planning violent attacks”.

Howard's open defence of the US-backed Israeli regime's criminal policies is based on the calculation that Australia requires US support to pursue its own imperialist interests. It was the same motivation behind Canberra's unequivocal endorsement of the Bush administration's “war on terrorism”, its commitment of Australian troops to the illegal invasion of Iraq and its trenchant defence of the ongoing US occupation and plunder of that country.

In their latest political foray on behalf of Washington, Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer have denounced the Spanish and Filipino governments as terrorist appeasers for their concessions to the anti-war sentiments of their people. In return for these political services, Howard hopes to ensure US support for Australia's own neo-colonial interventions in the Pacific, notably in East Timor, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.

Howard's break with the previous foreign policy is

underscored by Australia's voting record on UN resolutions concerning Israel. Until recently, Canberra either supported or abstained from UN General Assembly resolutions critical of Israel's human rights policies. As Australia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, John Crighton, put it in 1997: "Generally speaking, Australia is reluctant to be out on a limb. When you consider the implications of a particular policy action, a factor is always 'what company are we in', and secondly 'how isolated are we'."

Now Canberra is quite prepared to go out on a limb, so long as Washington is out there as well. In March, Australia and the US were the only two nations that voted against a resolution in the 51-member UN Commission on Human Rights to condemn Israel's political murder of wheelchair-bound Hamas leader, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin.

Following Washington, the Howard's government's stance is increasingly contemptuous of international law, the UN and bodies such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In justifying Canberra's opposition to the UN resolution, Downer declared: "The International Court of Justice doesn't have standing in this issue. All it can do is give an advisory opinion, and I think [that] by going to the International Court of Justice and getting advisory opinions on very contentious international political issues, it undermines the standing of the International Court of Justice."

Downer's concern for the ICJ's integrity is nothing but rank hypocrisy. His real motivation is to denigrate the court's authority, particularly at a time when the East Timorese government has threatened to have the ICJ adjudicate on its maritime border dispute with Australia. East Timor has refused to ratify an agreement on the lucrative Greater Sunrise oil and gas field in the sea between the two countries.

Under the proposed agreement, which maintains the border that Australia negotiated with the Indonesian Suharto dictatorship, East Timor will receive just 20 percent of the revenues from the Greater Sunrise royalties. If the maritime border between the two countries were set in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, East Timor's share would be 80 percent.

In rejecting in advance any ICJ ruling on the issue, Downer explicitly linked Canberra's stance to its no vote on the UN resolution on Israel. "We don't need third parties [in the dispute]," Downer said on July 21. "The other thing is—and I told you this in a question earlier about the International Court of Justice and the security

barrier between the Israelis and the Palestinians—I don't want to see the International Court of Justice politicised. And it worries me that people are trying to politicise the International Court of Justice. It's a court... Where countries don't accept its jurisdiction, those matters have to be negotiated in other ways."

The muted concern expressed in the Australian media and among opposition parties to Canberra's no vote on the UN resolution reflects fears in ruling circles about the dangers associated with Howard's complete subservience to the Bush administration. If Washington's reckless militarism and unilateralism creates a disaster, in Iraq in particular, it threatens to engulf Canberra as well.

In line with concerns that Australia should pursue a more cautious multilateral approach, Labor's foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd declared on ABC Radio: "A more appropriate course of action would have been for Australia to have abstained on this particular resolution."

Democrats Senator Natasha Stott Despoja said the vote was unfortunate: "I think there'll be a lot of countries that view Australia's position with concern, if not contempt." Greens Senator Kerry Nettle described the decision as embarrassing: "It does nothing for our standing in the international community."

A brief editorial entitled "A puzzling vote on Israel" in the *Sydney Morning Herald* sounded a similar note: "Canberra's decision to stand so decisively with the US—Israel's key ally and military and economic sponsor—can only enhance the impression that Australian foreign policy is increasingly shaped in Washington."

Needless to say, no one in these circles voiced any principled opposition to the criminal and provocative policies of the Israeli regime.



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