Australian government expels Israeli diplomat over forged passports

Robert Morgan
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The Australian government's announcement last week that it was expelling an Israeli diplomat over forged Australian passports used in the Dubai assassination operation last January was a cynical charade. During the four months that have passed since the murder of Hamas member Mahmoud al Mabhouh by Israeli agents, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delayed taking any action at all. Now he has imposed a token sanction, expelling a single and unnamed member of the Israeli diplomatic contingent in Canberra.

One week later the Labor government has reiterated its unconditional backing for Israel's unlawful and murderous activities by refusing to openly condemn the Israeli commando attack on the humanitarian aid convoy organised to break the blockade of Gaza. After expressing his concern for the loss of life, Rudd called for Israel to conduct its own inquiry into the incident—in line with the Obama administration's moves to head off any international investigation.

The government's reaction confirms that it will take no further action over the Dubai incident and there will be no criminal investigation. Announcing the expulsion, Foreign Minister Stephen Smith emphasised: "The government takes this step much more in sorrow than anger or retaliation... Australia remains a firm friend of Israel." Speaking on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7:30 Report" on May 24, Smith said that the Australian and Israeli governments should now "put this behind us". He explained that the government would "absolutely not" change its policy stance toward Israel, and the incident would not "disturb the fundamental basis of (the government's) approach to the Middle East".

Mabhouh's assassination was in flagrant breach of international law. Over two dozen men and women were organised into a highly professional hit team that carried out the extrajudicial liquidation of an alleged enemy of the state of Israel. The group used forged passports in the names of British, Irish, French, German and Australian citizens.

The assassination has been universally attributed to Mossad, the Israeli intelligence organisation. Despite Israel's maintenance of a "policy of ambiguity"—under which it neither confirms nor denies responsibility for such actions—in March this year the former British Labour government tacitly acknowledged Israel's responsibility, expelling an Israeli diplomat over 12 forged British passports. The Rudd government has now followed suit.

Foreign Minister Smith declared that the Israeli forgery was a "clear affront" to the security of Australia's passport system and its national sovereignty, and the Israeli moves were "not the actions of a friend". He later said that there would be "something of a cooling off period so far as relevant agencies were concerned", referring to Australian and Israeli intelligence.

These statements were merely for public consumption. There is no doubt that behind the scenes the Rudd government has reassured the Israeli government and Mossad officials that it will be business as usual. The *Australian*'s Mark Dodd last week cited an unnamed Australian security analyst noting that "the major source of Australia's intelligence is through the ABCA [America, Britain, Canada, Australia] countries and anything of critical interest to both countries [Israel and Australia] will be passed on regardless of this affair".

The Rudd government has refused to comment on how the forged Australian passports were used. Smith declared that the government has "assiduously avoided making any reference to the assassination per se". His justification—that there was an ongoing investigation in the United Arab Emirates into the murder—was nothing but a convenient pretext. There would be no such reticence on the part of the Labor government had such an incident been orchestrated by, for example, the Iranian government.

The Israeli government is notorious for its record of assassination of political opponents around the world. In the last decade it has waged a systematic assassination campaign against the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank and Gaza. Mabhouh's murder is the latest episode in this campaign, and will not be the last. Both the Labor and Liberal parties will nevertheless maintain their full support for the Zionist regime.

Labor has backed the Israeli government's agenda in the Middle East ever since the state's founding in 1948. Kevin Rudd is the latest in a long line of party leaders with close ideological—as well as personal and sometimes financial—ties with Israel and the Israel lobby in Australia. Before assuming the leadership, Rudd was the

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party's foreign affairs spokesman and emphasised his support for Israel. He authored a December 2004 op-ed piece published in the Fairfax press, "Labor has always supported Israel", insisting that the country was "a vibrant, democratic state" and boasting that Labor's platform explicitly condemned Palestinian suicide bombers, unlike the national platforms of the Liberal and National parties.

In October 2007, in the lead up to the last Australian federal elections, Rudd signalled Labor's support for Washington and Tel Aviv's provocative threats against Iran. He declared that Tehran posed "not only an existential threat toward Israel, but also the broader Middle East, Europe and the world", announcing that he would initiate legal proceedings in international courts against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for inciting genocide by allegedly calling for Israel to be wiped off the map. There was no genuine legal basis to Rudd's proposal, which was intended to again signal Labor's wholehearted support for the Israeli government.

In January 2009, the Rudd government backed Israel's criminal attack on Gaza, propagating the lie that Israeli actions were a "defensive" response to Palestinian "aggression". Israel's offensive against a largely unarmed and defenceless population killed about 1,400 people, the majority of them civilians, including 400 women and children, injured at least 5,000 people, and destroyed 21,000 homes.

Last November, the Rudd government voted with Israel, the US, and just 13 other countries against a UN General Assembly resolution that endorsed the Goldstone Report which found that Israel had committed war crimes during the offensive.

The Rudd government's refusal to condemn the criminal execution of Mabhouh, and its effective cover up of Mossad's use of forged Australian passports in the operation, is entirely consistent with Labor's record.

The Liberal-National opposition coalition opposed the government's decision to take any action at all against Israel, labelling the expulsion of the diplomatic official as an "overreaction" and a political stunt aimed at securing support from Arab nations for Australia's efforts to win a temporary seat on the UN Security Council.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Secretary Dennis Richardson yesterday rejected this position, insisting that Canberra could not endorse Israel's forging of Australian passports. He told a senate estimates committee that Israel had misused a passport in 2004, which led to a 2006 agreement between "an Australian agency and an Israeli agency about how things would be conducted". He continued: "Against that background earlier this year, Israel again misused Australian passports in the most flagrant and blatant of ways. We are entitled to have our own national interest, and unfortunately in this case a firm friend, a very good friend, did not abide by the principles of friendship."

Richardson's testimony followed a furore over opposition foreign affairs spokeswoman Julie Bishop's interview with Fairfax Media, in which she revealed that Australian intelligence agencies forged passports for their own operations. This admission was met with an angry response from the government. Smith demanded that Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott disavow his colleague's comments, and denounced Bishop as "not fit to occupy a position of trust" because she had placed Australia's "national security" at risk.

The government's outrage stood in marked contrast to its muted response to the crime itself, the Israeli passport forgery in the assassination operation. Bishop's remarks merely let slip the open secret that Australian intelligence agencies, like their US counterparts, have as little respect for international law as do their Israeli counterparts. The only difference is that the Israeli government tends to be more blatantly contemptuous of legal and diplomatic norms; according to press reports, Australian intelligence typically utilises bogus passports created through the establishment of fictitious Australian identities rather than forging the passports of foreign nationals.

There are no principled differences between the Australian and Israeli governments on the question of international extrajudicial killings against alleged terrorists. Canberra accepts the legitimacy of such murder operations as part of the "war on terror", and is, in fact, directly culpable, with Australian SAS troops in Afghanistan regularly involved in assassinating senior resistance fighters.

The author recommends:

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[26 March 2010]

The Dubai assassination and the "war on terror"
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