

# Australian shift on East Jerusalem provokes diplomatic furore

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The Australian government has provoked an international diplomatic row by shifting its position on the status of East Jerusalem. In a formal statement to a Senate committee on June 5, Attorney General George Brandis declared, after consultation with Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, that the government would no longer describe East Jerusalem as “occupied,” since the term was “freighted with pejorative implications, which is neither appropriate nor useful.”

The statement was an exercise in damage control following a protracted exchange the previous night during which Brandis had stonewalled questions from Labor and Greens senators over the illegality of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories. Brandis had refused to say whether the government regarded the settlements as legal or not, questioned the use of the term “occupied,” and launched into a red-baiting attack on Greens Senator Lee Rhiannon, a former member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia.

The problem was that Brandis had openly blurted out a shift in government policy that has been underway since the Liberal-National Coalition won last September’s election. For decades, successive Labor and Coalition governments have formally adhered to a long list of UN resolutions that have called for the withdrawal of the Israeli military forces that seized control over East Jerusalem and other territories in the 1967 Israeli-Arab war. With the exception of Israel itself, virtually every country in the world has accepted that, under international law, these territories remain “occupied.” And under the Geneva conventions, the Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories are illegal, as is Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem.

International law and the observation of legal formalities have not stopped the US and its allies, including Australia, from stanchly defending, and arming, the Zionist state of Israel and justifying its decades-long

crimes against the Palestinian people. Moreover, the Arab ruling elites that back the UN resolutions have repeatedly betrayed the Palestinian people. They tacitly support US proposals for negotiations on a “two-state solution” that would consolidate an Israeli state alongside a dependent, subordinate Palestinian state, which would continue the oppression of the Palestinian people.

Nevertheless, the Australian government’s shift in terminology amounts to an implicit endorsement of Israeli claims to portions of the occupied territories, its annexation of East Jerusalem and acceptance of the legitimacy of Israeli settlements. Bishop had already signalled the changes soon after the Coalition took office. While still officially supporting the “two-state solution,” the government made absolutely clear that it was siding with Israel, without publicly announcing any change.

\* Last November, the government reversed Canberra’s previous position on four resolutions in the UN General Assembly on Palestinian issues. Australia was one of a handful of countries that voted against two resolutions—one expressing grave concern over illegal Israeli practices and measures in occupied Palestine, the other demanding Israel cease construction of the wall that effectively incorporates Palestinian land into Israel. Australian representatives abstained on two others, including one calling for a cessation of Israeli settlements.

\* In January, while visiting Israel, Bishop gave an interview to the *Times of Israel* in which she openly questioned whether Israeli settlements in occupied Palestine were illegal. “I would like to see which international law has declared [them] illegal,” she said. In fact, the settlements are a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention that bars the transfer of populations from any occupying power to occupied territory.

\* In May, Australian ambassador to Israel, David Sharma, met with the Israeli building and construction minister Uri Ariel at a government complex in East

Jerusalem. Not only did the visit involve tacit acceptance of Israel's annexation, but Ariel is notorious for advocating the annexation of the entire West Bank.

By bringing the government's policy shift into focus, Brandis's comments provoked a storm of opposition. Arab governments in the Middle East, including the Palestinian Authority, summoned their Australian ambassadors for an explanation. Palestinian foreign minister Riyad al-Maliki condemned the shift as a "radical change in Australia's position on Palestine." On June 12, diplomatic envoys of 20 countries took their protest to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, threatening a UN motion of condemnation and possible trade sanctions on Australian agricultural products.

The Coalition government stood by Brandis's remarks. Speaking on June 14 in the US, Prime Minister Tony Abbott declared that the government had only made a "terminological clarification," and insisted there had been "absolutely no change in policy." At the same time, he declared: "We absolutely refuse to refer to occupied East Jerusalem."

The stance of the Abbott government may well point to a broader reconsideration taking place in ruling circles in the US and internationally. Australian governments—Coalition and Labor alike—take their cue directly from Washington, and are used to functioning as point men for the US on especially sensitive issues, including the Middle East. In 2011, for instance, Labor's foreign minister Kevin Rudd played a key role in rounding up Arab support for the US-NATO air war on Libya.

During this month's trip, Abbott met with Obama in Washington, signing a series of military agreements that will further integrate Australia into US preparations in the Indo-Pacific for war against China. Amid the seizure of Mosul and other Iraqi towns by Sunni extremist militias, the situation in the broader Middle East was undoubtedly discussed. Abbott responded by immediately offering Australian support for a US intervention in Iraq.

With the US-backed puppet government in Baghdad crumbling, Syria embroiled in civil war and the rising danger of conflict throughout the region, the Obama administration is increasingly reliant on Israel as the bedrock of a Middle Eastern foreign policy in crisis. While not willing to alienate Arab countries from which it is seeking support, Washington has undoubtedly given the nod to Canberra to proceed with its "terminological" shift.

In Washington, Abbott went one step further than

Brandis by telling the media that "the truth is that they are disputed territories"—a term used only by Israel to refer to East Jerusalem and other occupied Palestinian areas. After the prime minister met with US Democratic Party leaders, including influential House minority leader Nancy Pelosi, SBS News noted that the Democrats "welcomed a change of language on East Jerusalem."

Back home, Abbott faced divisions in his government's own ranks as members of the rural-based National Party and farmers' organisations began to voice concerns about the potential loss of Middle Eastern markets. The prospect of losses in Australia's \$2 billion export of live sheep and cattle only grew after the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) last Thursday formally condemned the Australian government over the issue and called on OIC member states around the world to "take necessary measures to respond."

The opposition Labor Party only belatedly reaffirmed its policy last week that the Palestinian territories were "occupied." Both the Coalition and Labor have a long history of support for the Zionist state and of justifying its assault on the democratic rights of the Palestinian people. Indeed in April, speaking to the Zionist Federation of Australia, Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten suggested that not all Israeli settlements were illegal, when he declared that only "some settlement activity in the West Bank is illegal under Israeli law."

For her part, Bishop sought to pacify diplomats from Arab and other countries in a meeting last Thursday. She insisted that there had been no change in Australian government policy on the legal status of the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, and released a letter to the Moroccan ambassador insisting that Australia continued to be "a strong supporter of a just and lasting two-state solution." Privately, Bishop sought to pin blame for the row on Brandis. Publicly, however, the foreign minister has pointedly refused to use the term "occupied," giving the lie to her claims that no policy shift has taken place.



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