Netanyahu receives effusive official welcome in Australia

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu left Australia yesterday after what he called a "wonderful" five-day visit. There was certainly an extraordinary welcome by the Turnbull government and the political and media establishment for Netanyahu—the first sitting Israeli prime minister to make the trip in the 70 years since the Zionist state was established in Palestine.

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and the financial elite feted Netanyahu, an extreme right-wing politician long personally associated with brutal military operations and repression against the Palestinian population. Netanyahu's government is accelerating illegal Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank of Palestine.

Fearing public opposition to his visit, Netanyahu arrived with a 500-strong security contingent. Wherever he went in Sydney, traffic was blocked for his cavalcade and hundreds of police were deployed. Despite this, several hundred protesters marched through the city last Thursday, carrying banners and placards, such as "Netanyahu is a war criminal," "Apartheid: Wrong in South Africa, Wrong in Palestine" and "Netanyahu a terrorist: Go home."

But in ruling circles Netanyahu was treated as a hero. Turnbull who, like Netanyahu heads an unstable and crisis-riddled government, held seven dinners with him. The Israeli prime minister conducted a succession of meetings with government and Labor Party leaders, including a session with the Liberal-National government's national security committee (NSC).

No less than six billionaires, and coteries of business and government leaders, past and present, gave Netanyahu a standing ovation at a gala occasion in Turnbull's electorate in eastern Sydney, one of the city's wealthiest areas. "Netanyahu doesn't get that sort of applause at home," Herb Keinon, a *Jerusalem Post* reporter told a Fairfax Media journalist. One billionaire was a noticeable absentee—casino mogul James Packer, who has been named prominently in corruption investigations swirling around Netanyahu.

Netanyahu received a ringing endorsement from the Australian government, one of the few in the world that opposed last December's token UN Security Council resolution criticising Israel's settlement expansion as prejudicial to any possible peace deal with the Palestinian Authority.

On the day Netanyahu arrived, Turnbull published an opinion piece in Rupert Murdoch's *Australian*, accusing the UN of a prejudiced attack against Israel. "My government will not support one-sided resolutions criticising Israel of the kind recently adopted by the UN Security Council," Turnbull wrote.

Netanyahu claimed not to know of Turnbull's piece in advance, but voiced his pleasure with it. "Australia's been courageously willing to puncture UN hypocrisy, more than once," he said.

Emboldened by Donald Trump's pledge to be "the most pro-Israel president in history," Netanyahu defied the UN resolution and gave the go-ahead for the construction of 3,500 new homes in West Bank and East Jerusalem settlements. Over the past 50 years, about 600,000 Israeli settlers have moved into the occupied territories, where about 2.9 million Palestinians live.

Turnbull's identification with Netanyahu not only underscores the Australian government's complicity in the dispossession of the Palestinians and support for all the past crimes of the Zionist state. It also signals support for future crimes being prepared by the Israeli ruling class and its US backers, including a military confrontation with Iran.

Netanyahu arrived in Australia fresh from visits to

Britain, the US and Singapore, which are among the few other countries so closely aligned to Israel. His tour is part of an international diplomatic offensive to take advantage of Trump's election.

According to Israeli media reports, in the NSC meeting Netanyahu urged the Australian government to reverse its support for the 2015 Iran nuclear deal championed by former US President Barack Obama. Under that agreement, Iran accepted severe limits on its nuclear programs and facilities in exchange for a step-by-step lifting of crippling US-led economic sanctions.

With Trump denouncing the agreement and using threatening rhetoric about Iran, Netanyahu is seeking to line up US allies to likewise repudiate the agreement and so-called normalisation process, which the Obama administration declared in 2015 was the only alternative to a war against Iran.

Netanyahu, in his meetings with Australian leaders, continued to agitate against the 2015 deal. In an interview with the *Australian's* foreign editor Greg Sheridan, he claimed that the Sunni extremists of Al Qaeda and Islamic State could be replaced by Shi'ite groups manipulated by Iran, who would threaten Australia as well as the Middle East. Netanyahu told Sheridan the US was considering "as we speak" a range of new sanctions against Iran. Such punitive measures would inexorably set a course for conflict with the Iranian regime.

Netanyahu is also promoting what Trump has called a "much bigger deal" for the Middle East. Trump's remark, made at a joint media conference with Netanyahu in Washington earlier this month, suggests plans to bring Arab Sunni regimes such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, into a new sectarian scheme, in partnership with Israel, to restructure the Middle East at the expense of their regional rival, Iran.

As with the entire "war on terror" conducted since 2001, US military interventions across the Middle East are seeking to establish unchallenged US hegemony over the resource-rich and strategically-vital region, working closely with the Israeli and Arab regimes—from Egypt to the Gulf—that the US underwrites militarily and financially.

Significantly, Netanyahu framed his visit to Australia in the context of 100 years of wars, from World War I onward, in which Australian forces have been dispatched to the Middle East, saying "we would not be here" except for these "courageous" operations. Such appeals to past military sacrifices invariably signal preparations for new wars.

Turnbull reciprocated by describing the presence of Australian military personnel along Israel's borders today as evidence of a "tangible and resolute" commitment to Israeli security. During the visit, agreements were made to increase the relatively small $1 billion annual trade flows between the two countries, but the overriding focus was on intensifying military links, particularly in intelligence and cyber warfare.

In Trump's White House press conference with Netanyahu, the US president backed away from the 25-year charade by US governments of pursuing a "two-state solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Turnbull said Australia's position on that policy had not changed, but he indicated a readiness to fall into line with a shift, saying "you cannot expect any Israeli government to put itself in a position where its security is at risk."

Likewise, after a cordial meeting with Netanyahu, Labor Party leader Bill Shorten issued a statement formally opposing Jewish settlement expansion and upholding the "two-state solution" but emphasising Labor's decades-long support for the Zionist state "with safe and secure borders."

In reality, the disintegration of the so-called two-state solution has revealed the fraud of the claim that peace and security for the Palestinian masses and an end to their oppression by the Zionist state could be obtained through deals between the US and other imperialist powers and the bourgeois Arab regimes.

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