

open letter from former Australian diplomats to Prime Minister Scott Morrison

The Hon Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister

We are a group of former Australian diplomats who have served our country around the world. We write because of our real concern about the course the US Trump administration appears to be taking in relation to Israel and its conflict with the Palestinian people.

For decades since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Australia has sought to play a supportive role in the international community's efforts to steer Israel and the Palestinians towards a just and enduring peaceful settlement. We have rightly supported the rights of all states in the region, including Israel, to live in peace and security; and embraced the rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination.

The Oslo peace process, begun in 1993, made early encouraging progress towards a settlement and established the foundations for agreement between the two sides. The process was largely guided by the United States through the expert contributions of many notable capable State Department officials and others. Key issues which were always going to be difficult to resolve – but none of which is inherently insoluble - were the status of Jerusalem, the Palestinians' right of return, and Israeli settlements.

What was lacking – and is now obvious to us all – is that Israel simply has not been prepared to entertain the notion of the existence of a viable independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. Nor has it shown any interest in accepting that Jerusalem would become the shared capital of two countries. Despite the good intentions of many, the United States has not been prepared to induce Israel towards the compromises necessary to secure an outcome in accordance with these principles.

President Trump has from the beginning shown himself to be a partisan player, heavily committed to Israel's continuing occupation the West Bank and all of Jerusalem. His decision to move the US Embassy to Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem has understandably been interpreted as a deeply hostile act by not only the Palestinians, but across the Islamic and Arab world. More recently Mr Trump's decision to recognise Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights is a threat to the international rules-based order, including the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force. It also reflects a failure to understand the strategic significance of that area for Syria's defence of its capital into the future, and an unhelpful level of indifference to Arab sensitivities towards Israel's occupation of Arab land. It adds a further complication to efforts to build a more stable Middle East, a goal that is clearly in the interests of all parties, including Australia.

The Trump administration has indicated that it has been working with Israel on a proposal that begins with an economic plan before unveiling a political plan. While we would welcome any move to relieve Palestinian economic distress - particularly in Gaza where conditions for the local population are, thanks to Israel's blockade, indescribably harsh - we must not lose sight of the fact that the conflict is in essence a political one grounded in Israel's occupation and systematic denial of Palestinian human rights. Any proposal developed by the US administration needs to include the engagement of the Palestinians. So far we have noted the propensity of the Trump administration to operate only in concert with Israel. There is also an apparent intent to diminish the role of the United Nations in the region. This is no way to achieve either peace or Israel's long term security and prosperity.

Under President Trump, the United States appears to have decided to turn away from its longstanding goal of achieving a two-state solution, an approach that Australia and the great majority of the international community have supported for the past 25 years. Australia has no wish to see Israel occupying a position very much on the wrong side of history. Our interests are linked to the emergence of a stable, peaceful Middle East. But there is a substantial risk that without the exercise of US political, moral and other authority, it will be impossible to sustain a process leading to a two state solution that arrives at the creation of a viable sovereign Palestinian state alongside Israel. The consequences of such a situation for Israel, and the values which have long underpinned our relations with that country, are deeply disturbing.

Under such circumstances it is important that Australia, which has good relations with both Israel and the United States, and which has national interests in nurturing our sometimes fragile relations with the Arab countries and the wider Muslim global community, remains firm in our support for a solution that provides acceptable outcomes for both parties to the conflict.

For our own reputation and in recognition of our national interests, Australia should not support a United States initiative which excludes the Palestinians and blatantly excuses Israel from an eventual requirement to make the compromises necessary for peace.

Yours sincerely

Grant Battersby, First Secretary, Israel 1983 -1985

Dr Anthony Billingsley, former Australian diplomat

Dr Bob Bowker, Ambassador to Jordan 1989-92, and Egypt 2005-2008

Dr Ken Chan AM, former Australian diplomat and Administrator of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands 1983-85.

John Fennessy, Ambassador to Lebanon 1999-2002

Dr Janet Gardiner Ambassador to Syria 1998-1999, Ambassador to Portugal 2000-2004

Bruce Haigh, Deputy Head of Mission in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, the Yemen, Pakistan and Afghanistan, 1982-88

James Ingram AO, FAIIA, Australian Ambassador to the Philippines 1970-73; High Commissioner to Canada 1973-74; Executive Director, UN World Food Programme 1982-92.

Christopher Lamb, Australian Ambassador to Myanmar 1986-89 and to Yugoslavia, Macedonia and Romania 1997-2000

Don McFeat, former DFAT officer

John Menadue AO, Ambassador to Japan 1976-1980

Robert Newton, Ambassador to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Sudan 2002 - 2005

Professor Richard Rigby, Ambassador to Israel 2000-2001

Peter Rodgers, Ambassador to Israel 1994-97

John Tilemann, Ambassador to Jordan 2001-5

Robert Tyson, Ambassador to Saudi Arabia 2001-05, Russia 2005-08, Iraq 2008-11, Kuwait 2011-15

Michael Wood, Australian Consul General in Chicago 2015-2018

Peter Zoller, former Australian diplomat