

*Fourth Andrew Vincent Memorial Lecture*

**“AUSTRALIA AND THE ‘NEW MIDDLE EAST’”**

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It is a great privilege to be asked to give this address tonight, honouring the memory of Andrew Vincent. I had the pleasure of knowing Andrew over many years and always admired his passion for the region and his understanding of its dynamics.

Like Andrew, my experience of the Middle East came partly through my work in the ‘public service’. I want to start out tonight briefly sketching that experience as a means of structuring some comments on how Australia’s rather idiosyncratic involvement in the Middle East might relate to the new phenomenon of the ‘Arab Spring’.

My life strangely circumnavigated the Middle East for many decades without any pattern. I admired Andrew’s more structured approach. He studied Arabic at Sydney University. After a posting to Beirut, he took himself off to that wonderful institution, the American University in Beirut, to earn his masters before doing a second Masters and a Doctorate in Pennsylvania.

Unfortunately, I never committed myself either to an academic pursuit of the issues or to Arabic. I cannot claim to be an ‘Arabist’ — though I would be proud of that label if I had earned it — since I have only a smattering of the language. It is sad that it has almost become a term of abuse in some quarters in Australia in recent years.

Admittedly I did Middle Eastern archaeology for a while at Sydney University but my main discipline was history.

My continuing interest has been in the ancient history of the Middle East and I have just completed a doctorate at this university — a rather strange progression since I have already published two books on the history and archaeology of Syria before joining the academic treadmill.

My main exposure to the Middle East, like Andrew Vincent’s, came as a result of the lottery of overseas postings — in my case in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Andrew’s work related to Australia’s migration program; mine to the gamut of our relations with the area at the political and economic level. In between assignments to other areas, I was sent by the hazards of the service to Cairo in 1974 (as Political Counsellor), Damascus and Beirut (as Ambassador with dual responsibilities) in 1984 and Tel Aviv in 2001 (as Ambassador).

I was also head of the Branch in the Department in Canberra that covered the Middle East, Africa and South Asia from 1988 to 1991. My Mid-East experience was not constant but it did give me an opportunity to take soundings of Australia's responses to the region over thirty or so years.

I should also note in passing that as a 'generalist' officer (we had no Middle East specialists in the 1960s) the other common thread in this career was that I managed to be assigned to three of the nastier civil war situations of the late twentieth century — the Nigerian Civil War in 1967–69; the war that led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971; and the Lebanon Civil War at the darkest phase of its 15 year course.

Let me add, though, that my experience with South Africa was another random thread. I was involved with our policy on southern Africa in several phases including as Ambassador at the time of South Africa's transition to the Mandela Government. For once, a foreign assignment had an inspiring ending, encouraging my foolish optimism that even the most intractable conflicts can be systematically ended and that situations embedded in institutionalized humiliation cannot survive.

#### *Seeing things from both sides*

If there is any consistent message in this eclectic career it is that you can never afford in assessing developments in international relations to see events from one side only. Even if your personal viewpoint inclines you to one perspective, you have to seek out and assess the views of the other side.

That is often either dangerous or unwelcome but in my view it is an essential part of the job. It's not always understood in Canberra where, for example, politicians would prefer to line up automatically on one side in a dispute if that's what the votes or the party funding depend on.

It's often personally difficult to cross the line of confrontation. I've had to call on some nasty characters responsible for documented massacres or manipulative clerics who have stoked up civil war animosities to new levels of savagery.

But I have also met some individuals like Nelson Mandela who could ride above entrenched animosities and identify the inspiring messages.

Mandela's authority became a benchmark for leadership that has sadly now disappeared from the political landscape.

#### *Lessons of the Middle East*

The 'Middle East situation' is, of course, the biggest challenge to dispassionate description. Some would say it's impossible given the animosities stored up over 60 years. Few therefore are inclined to see the situation from the perspective of both sides. Since the Oslo Accords in the

1990s briefly introduced a new dynamic into the region, a few foolhardy diplomats have covered both. I took up a proposal to become one of them in 2000.

I have long believed that the biggest threat to Israel's viability was a decision it stumbled into itself. This was the error of keeping the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan territories overrun in its rapid victory in the 1967 war.

That decision to remain in occupation of the remaining parts of 1948 Palestine didn't have to happen; was not explicitly one of Israel's war aims; and was vigorously debated within the Israeli Government at the time. Nowadays Israel's apologists would have us believe that it was a natural and defensible outcome. From that logic flows an increasingly tortuous attempt to argue against the reality of the framework of international law that the territories were merely 'contested', implying that Israel is some sort of reluctant but benevolent guardian.

The challenge for Israel, however, after 1967 became one of defending a move that defied the international post-war system for the orderly settlement of disputes. Whereas one could argue about how much Israel should have grabbed in the scramble for historic Palestine back in 1948, this time the world couldn't just tacitly accept total annexation.

### *The challenge of Palestine*

Decades down the track, this decision imperils the demographic balance and puts Israel now on the threshold of trying to maintain a 'democratic' ranking while half the population under its control (a whisker short of a majority with 5.5 out of 11.5 million) do not have the full rights of citizens. But friends of Israel like Australia do that country no good service by failing to remind Israel of its miscalculation.

Moreover, the continued occupation of the territories and the rise of the 'settler' movement that underpins it has the potential to destabilise Israel's own society. The growing power of the movement is lapping at the political balance within Israel, threatening its system of national education and pushing Israel towards a gender-based theocracy.

### *Denying 'Palestine'*

In handling the Middle East issue, much of my professional life was necessarily spent devising ways in which we could dance around the bleeding obvious: that the Palestinians taken in 1967 under Israeli control didn't actually want to stay that way.

Through the seventies and eighties, this meant that Australian officials couldn't use the proper noun 'Palestine' because it might pre-empt an outcome. (That presumed, I suppose, that they might choose to stay with Israel or become Jordanians.) 'Palestinian' could be used in the adjectival

format only if qualified to indicate that they had made no decision on their national aspirations. From the mid-seventies, the Australian Government was still so timid in the face of ‘lobby’ pressure that Australian mid-ranking diplomats could talk to Palestinian representatives in Arab capitals but Ambassadors could not call on them ‘officially’ (though in my time in Cairo, a creative Ambassador seemed able to engineer a remarkable number of happenstance meetings at receptions and dinners).

By the 1980s, Australia was still not among the majority of ‘Western’ group counterparts in acknowledging that the outcome should be the ‘homeland’ spoken about in resolutions — resolutions in fact that Australia had supported as long ago as 1948.

This was intended, of course, to avoid offending Israel which argued that the territories seized in 1967 — being ‘contested’, not occupied — had to be seen as part of the whole complex of problems unresolved since 1948.

Domestically, Israel has been remarkably successful in making the geographic reality of occupation vanish in the eyes of its Jewish citizens. Jewish Israelis only can drive on their ‘settler roads’, weaving in and out of their implanted town sprinkled from one side of the West Bank to the other without any need to confront the reality of the Arab presence on the West Bank.

However, the policy of wearing down other countries’ resistance to this exercise in seamless geography has been much less successful.

This brings a dichotomy between domestic ‘virtual reality’ in Israel and the framework of international relations based on international law protecting a Palestinian identity. This dichotomy makes it all the more difficult for a future Israeli government to contemplate persuading its Jewish citizens of the need to adjust their perspective.

Unfortunately, by tacitly encouraging Israel in this policy — i. e. effectively by saying nothing — countries like Australia are preventing Israel from seeing the impossibility that all their illusions can co-exist. Can a ‘democratic’ state in which more than a majority do not enjoy equal rights; a ‘Jewish state’ in which only a small percentage practice the religion prescribing the state’s character, really be credible?

### **Questioning the ‘Leon Uris’ narrative**

When I went to Israel in 2001, I didn’t know the country directly except through a couple of short visits.

I knew the broad outlines of its history since 1948 but through my formative years at school and university the prevailing narrative had been ‘plucky little Israel’ standing up to the gigantic menace of the Arab world,

reflecting tension going back ‘from time immemorial’. Let’s call it the ‘Leon Uris’ narrative.

My experiences in the Arab world had shown that there were other perspectives and that there were indeed many centuries when Jews and Arabs had rubbed along without wiping each other out.

But some of that ‘Leon Uris’ narrative remains embedded in the background even today since it is so relentlessly insisted on by politicians. It’s also, of course, repeated as ever *ad nauseum* by the media narrative which is largely in the hands of people who know little about the Middle East beyond what was pumped into them on sponsored ‘familiarisation’ visits.

*Finding the Middle East continuum.*

My first direct experience of the region had been in Cairo in the period immediately following the 1973 war. The Egyptian campaign initially crossing the Suez Canal into Israeli-held Sinai had partly reversed the slough of depression which had settled on Arab countries after the 1967 defeat.

In this and my next posting in the region in the mid-eighties gradually opened my eyes to what made the region tick. It was a slow process.

I have to confess that the importance of the historical narrative in shaping present attitudes dawned on me slowly. I found that there was a rich tradition in Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo etc whose dimensions were little appreciated in remote Australia.

Just take the level of architecture, who really understood that at the time of the Crusades, the architectural legacy on the Islamic side more than matched the fantasies we all have of Crusader castles? It flowed not just through the Islamic citadels but their mosques, madrasas and even public hospitals (then virtually unknown in the west).

Arabs see the story of the region as a continuum. The ‘Leon Uris’ perspective sees it as an Old Testament narrative, interrupted for millennia, which began again after World War Two.

Arabs, however, even if they couldn’t tell you down to the day the dates of Mamluk or Hyksos rule, selectively know that their present society is the sum of a long process — one with many ups and down but with a continuous narrative running through it.

This seems to contrast with the sort of popular perception we have in a place like Australia where the world is re-set to default on a certain date or era (e. g. the invention of the Apple computer) and the rest you can forget about.

Most Australians of my generation were thus easy prey for the ‘Leon Uris’ storyline that the creation of Israel in 1948 was not only a good thing but

largely re-set Middle East history; the preceding periods were just a haze of misery, confusion and obscurity (into which, incidentally) the Australian army had briefly marched in 1917 and again in 1941.

But the sense of a long continuum in Arab minds, I discovered, meant that events hundreds of years back had the same resonance today as they might have at the time. If we (especially in Australia) find it difficult to see how the 13<sup>th</sup> century plays into the present, many Arabs don't.

## **Australia and the Middle East since Suez**

### **Oscillation between enthusiasm and languor, 1950s–1980s**

Australia's official approach to the affairs of the Middle East has long suffered from these problems of a short attention span. Typical is the erratic pattern of representation, opening and closing of embassies. As a practising official, I often had the feeling that the Department would prefer if the Middle East would just go away. It was impossibly 'complex' (a much over-used word), consumed resources in endless argumentation and was marginal to our economic interests. Even after the Gulf began to take off in the 1980s, the Department was reluctant to open new posts to reflect our growing commercial and consular activities.

#### *Australian policy tradition — from an illusion of 'balance' to uncritical support*

One of the disadvantages of a short-term approach is that Governments often lose sight of the importance of the UN framework in establishing Australia's policy responses. The Labor Party in 1948 had been strongly in favour of early recognition of Israel but the Department's despatches at the time underlined that we also understood that an Arab state would be set up alongside. (And they didn't, by the way, mean Jordan.) When that was preempted by Israel's push well into the land notionally assigned to the Arabs of Palestine and by Jordan's takeover of the West Bank, the issue went into abeyance.

By the 1990s, the fallout from the first Gulf War propelled new initiatives to tackle the Arab-Israel confrontation and the Oslo Process set new parameters. It became possible for our Government to talk about a future for an independent Palestine.

### **Today: the two-state mantra — policy vs posturing**

A large part of the problem in Australia's approach is that it seeks to convey different pictures to the adversarial parties. That's why Australia rarely, if ever, comments on the disastrous 'occupation' policy in the West Bank or even join with the United States in condemning it as an obstacle to peace.

Yet it is officially our policy not to recognise Israel's occupation as a *fait accompli* since it is against all the norms of international behaviour set down since the last century.

Since the 1990s, we've acknowledged the need for a Palestinian state. The 'two state' solution has become the new mantra. Under the Oslo accords, it is officially too, of course, the notional outcome agreed to by Israel.

What Australia seems reluctant to accept, however, is that you can only have a 'two state' policy if you treat the two as independent and equally viable partners. But Australia always seemed to be acknowledging the Palestinian side on sufferance. Israel's interests must always be paramount — even when they contradict a two state outcome.

Two examples —

- When Prime Minister Howard made the significant gesture towards the Palestinians in 2000 by calling on Yasser Arafat, he only felt it was safe to do so accompanied by senior representatives of the pro-Israel lobby.
- When Prime Minister Gillard put out an extraordinary 'thought bubble' two weeks ago on the question of the forthcoming vote on the admission of Palestine to the UN, she basically did the spruiking for Israel, preferring a process of defining the Palestinian state by direct bargaining between Israel and Palestine.

This goes against the long tradition of ALP policy which pre-Rudd endorsed the relevant UN resolutions (including two vital Security Council texts) which must be consistent with any outcome. Her comment assumed that the Palestinians will just get the leftovers from what would be a totally asymmetrical negotiation between the country with the world's fifth biggest military machine and the entity which Israel has occupied and pulverised for 45 years.

### **The mind game — public opinion**

*Palestinian cause is a lot stronger.*

Palestinians have come through an epic struggle for identity that really deserves another Leon Uris blockbuster. It is now very difficult to get the world to accept that Palestine should be quietly snuffed out or transferred elsewhere. 40 years ago it was broken, fragmented and demoralised; today it has a government structure under Prime Minister Salam Fayyad that has made considerable strides in tackling the nation's problems.

Moreover, it is my impression that a growing proportion of the population of countries like Australia don't really see why this can't be solved. Palestine is beginning to look like a nation in waiting.

And let's not forget that the picture of what's happening in the region is no longer set by the traditional media. New sources provide a more nuanced picture. Articulate Arabs and Palestinians appear on panel discussions even on the ABC. Every night at 10.00 PM in Sydney you can get the al-Jazeera News on TV Sydney, free to air. Blogs and websites give in-depth coverage. The Leon Uris narrative is wearing thin and the trend in opinion polls (such as they are) shows a steady drift towards accepting an independent Palestine.

### **The 'Arab Spring'**

Moreover, it's not just in Palestine that democracy is surfacing. Three years ago, Obama went to Cairo University and gave a speech that sought to encourage a new blossoming of democracy in the Middle East. Since then there have been regimes overturned in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and serious uprisings in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain.

- Was this the Neo-Cons' birth of democracy in the Middle East for which the invasion of Iraq paved the way?
- Has the US backed away from the new President's idealistic rhetoric?
- Or has it chosen a third path — a selective endorsement of democracy, playing favourites and giving first priority to providing Israel the leeway to re-fashion the environment as it wishes? In other words, business as usual.

Obama's speech at the UN on 21 September signals a humiliating reversion to the third option. The 'Arab Spring' proved to be a phenomenon too home-grown and too disparate to fit any American schema.

### **Egypt and North Africa**

The course of events in North Africa are well known from the media. In the three countries, people had had enough of nepotism and the manipulation of the political and security system to favour narrowly defined interest groups.

What is less clear is whether we really have an outcome, at least in the case of Egypt. In itself, the pictures of Mubarak on trial in his sick-bed in a courtroom cage is a powerful image signalling that an era has passed and that yesterday's gods are truly mortal.

What is less clear is what has replaced the old images. The army in Egypt clearly calls the shots now but it is unclear whether they have a vision of a path towards full democracy or are simply going through the motions before installing a regime that would best suit their interests.

Clearly, the events of Tahrir Square have injected a new reality into the Egyptian political equation. It is significant that the one pillar of the



Sadat/Mubarak era that has been emphatically questioned is the close relationship with Israel on security and economic issues.

Under American tutelage, the Mubarak era saw an increasing inter-dependence between the Egyptian and Israeli military and intelligence communities — enabling, for example, the Israel stranglehold around Gaza to be held in place.

While the Peace Treaty between the two countries remains, what has long been a ‘cold peace’ will probably go now to the deep freeze. This reflects the pressure coming from the new democratic forces rejecting a deal which had effectively given the Israelis a means of neutralising Egypt’s role in any future confrontations with the Palestinians.

As we are seeing in Cairo this week, we have populism to date, not democracy. Every interest group is out on the streets highlighting their case, a situation which is ripe for exploitation by religious fanatics.

More depressing for Israel, though, is that the apparent freezing of the treaty’s provisions is exactly the opposite of what the Neo-Cons had in mind, given their central assumption that democratisation would unleash the deep desire of most Arabs to live in harmony with an economically dynamic, progressive and ‘democratic’ Israel.

The United States seems powerless to influence this course of events that it partly sought to stimulate. It is powerless, in particular, because when it comes down to it its influence is seen to be ineffective in taming the ambitions of its main protégée.

## **Syria’s melt-down**

*What is the Syrian ‘revolution’ about?*

In the early days, outsiders were not sure what President Bashar al-Assad stood for. Some were still inclined to take him at his word, up to a point, and to see him as pushing reform against obstructionism from a resistant party and security apparatus.

But increasingly it became apparent that if the President had favoured reform it was only at the level of tokenism or of measures which would not amount to a full liberalisation of society. Though many local interest groups wanted him to go a lot further towards economic reform, Bashar apparently wanted only those reforms sufficient to accommodate interest groups linked to the Presidential palace, especially in banking and telecommunications.

From those early days in Deraa back in March, it quickly became apparent that he was attempting a two track policy in response to demonstrations, neither of which seemed to be effective. Each track cancelled the credibility of the other.

The regime oscillated between increasingly feeble attempts at conciliation and massive crackdowns — the latter messily exerted with poor discipline, thus unleashing brutal and unnecessary force.

Many of the elements given a free rein (especially the part-time party thugs or *shabbiye*, youths or ex-servicemen hired for the day) simply added to the chaos.

This initial confrontation ignited a wider range of groups beyond the original mix of local sheikhs, clerics and disaffected farmers in Deraa. In turn other tensions surfaced, some running along the sectarian fault-line between the majority Sunni community and the Alawi, the Shi`ite heterodox group from the coastal mountains who for some decades have controlled the armed forces and security services.

Too many layers are involved to describe the confrontation neatly — peasant revolt; crackdown on interest groups; genuine youthful urge for freedom; settling of scores in a society long suppressed by a ruthless leadership; ‘Salafist’ groups fostered outside the country but which had suddenly sprung up inside (according to the regime); liberal exiles vs in-country dissidents; and finally internal sectarian tensions.

Because the regime has unwisely shut itself off from the international media, it is not always easy to sift truth from fiction and much uncorroborated material gets to air. It is thus impossible to say to what extent underlying sectarian tensions have contributed to the unrest but as the uprising attempts to maintain its momentum into its seventh month, such tensions still seem to be marginal.

Resistance for much of the past six months has been leaderless and lacked until recently a core set of demands.

The new movement showed the effectiveness of Facebook etc in spreading the word, signalling that there were many who felt alike that the regime had lost all legitimacy; but it was incapable of articulating those demands beyond a few slogans.

The situation has often developed into a free-for-all, though there are some themes which have emerged.

### *Syrian Themes*

My abiding impression of these events is the extraordinary courage and persistence of ordinary Syrians. Day after day, they go out onto the streets knowing that there is a good chance that a percentage of them will die. This shows a determination way beyond what we would define as political commitment; and they have been doing it for seven months.

The regime's response has been woeful — not just for the level of cruelty and sheer disdain for human life but for its inability to do anything but make the situation worse.

It is hard to believe that they can hold out against the extraordinary level of international criticism — not only from the West and from human rights groups but from their Arab partners, Turkey and the UN Security Council (though the latter fell short of Chapter VII action last week).

To show how detached the government is from reality, they fall back on the argument (borrowed from Ghaddafi's spin-masters) that they face a significant armed insurrection fostered by outside interests.

While not all Facebook coverage can be relied on is also farcical to claim that everything that has happened can be dismissed as the work of externally-sponsored armed gangs.

Some confrontations, notable the one at Jisr al-Shugur in June, at Hama in August and at Rastan near Homs in late September, have clearly involved armed elements who took on the police and intelligence agencies but across the six months, this phenomenon has been a small part of a complex picture and not a consistent element in the mix.

However, the picture seems to be changing. Incidents of an apparent armed uprising may be rising and suggest an ominous capacity for events to run out of control. This may suit the regime's purpose in justifying its crack-down but it also has the potential to increase the scale of bloodshed and the profligate use of force on both sides in situations where civilian deaths may rise well beyond the 2000 or so recorded so far by the UN.

Unlike Cairo, the army is an unlikely key to a solution. The Syrian army earns little respect and it has shown that as a force for restoring order and stability, they would be better left in their barracks.

### *Role of Outsiders*

In my view, it would be unwise for outsiders to get involved in this one beyond the range of sanctions measures recently adopted by the EU and like-minded countries. Outside intervention would raise even more tensions. Remember Colin Powell and the sign in the china shop: 'you break it; you own it'. Civil wars have their own dynamics; if outsiders create additional dynamics, there is too much they simply cannot control.

Libya was different. Let's not forget that however draconian the regime, the ostensible model of the secular-based Syrian state was not all bad. Lose that and another Middle East state may face greater exposure to the forces of sectarian division.

The international community has to keep giving Syria a way back while increasing the tension on the economic screws. A return to the pre-March

2011 default position is impossible. Bashar has lost the mantle he claimed as a force for reform and renewal in Syria. Unless he can be persuaded to arrange a controlled transition to a new political framework for Syria, one which will ensure the protection of all of Syria's diverse mix of faiths and ethnic elements, Syria will be consigning itself to a new role as a hermit kingdom in the heart of the Middle East, an outcome no one needs.

### **Israel and the 'Arab Spring' — losing the lynch-pin**

It would be wrong for Israel to assume that amidst all this confusion the Arab world has again discredited itself in the eyes of the world and that Israel stand ever higher as a 'bastion of stability and democratic values' in a troubled region.

I noted earlier that a diminishing percentage of the Australian population believe the old mantras — plucky little Israel up against the implacable hostility of the Arab and Islamic world; the supposed struggle since 'time immemorial' re-rehearsed numerous times over the past 60 years.

*Loss of Egypt is a blow; Turkey perhaps more so*

Israel, however, may still believe its own propaganda: that the Arab world deep down wants an accommodation and can be persuaded that its own best interest lies in accepting Israel's terms. Israel is clearly able to apply sufficient force to repel any threat but the doctrine that upscaling violence will convince the Arab world to respect its position is an illusion.

Israel faces now a very difficult environment, not the 'new Middle East' it might have hoped for under the Neo-Con scenario.

As mentioned earlier, for 40 years, the Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel provided Israel with a bulwark which enabled it to isolate the impact of other threats including the most volatile situation on its borders, Gaza. The accords remain but with few signs of life.

The loss of Turkey is equally ominous for Israel. Israel has lost its partner, the Turkish military, through its rash and over-the-top responses. Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party are now free to modify relations with Israel more in line with popular Turkish sentiment

Egypt and Turkey were two of the lifelines Israel had enjoyed to the immediate Islamic world. In both cases, 'the new democracy' has not worked to Israel's advantage largely due to the severity of Israeli actions in the past against Palestinian opponents. The technique of massively overplaying 'existential' threats is wearing thin.

## Australia's Response

### Dealing with Netanyahu

Australia has rightly welcomed the 'Arab Spring'. It has at least had the effect of turning the Government's attention to a region which was badly neglected under the Howard and Rudd Governments.

Under Howard, relations with the Arab world were a sub-set of the major issues of Israel and Iraq. The Howard Government fell in with the American vision of the region as the theatre for playing out the lessons of 9/11 including an inclination to see pre-existing regional issues as local manifestations of the 'war on terror'.

Where commercial opportunities were identified, relations were upgraded (in the Gulf and, ironically, Libya) but few countries were ever visited and some posts were even closed (Algiers, Damascus) or staff down-sized to less than nominal levels.

Sadly, this process continued with the Rudd Government. DFAT was further gutted and Foreign Minister Smith paid not a single bilateral visit to an Arab country except as a stopping-off point on the way to Baghdad or Afghanistan or to attend multi-lateral meetings.

It almost seemed as though Governments had become afraid to be seen getting too close to Arab countries — or it had identified that there were 'no votes in it'.

Meanwhile, of course, the Israelis could do no wrong. Whatever Israel's response to provocation or assaults from across their borders was excused as 'Israel's right to defend itself'.

Even the election of an Israeli Government under Netanyahu — manifestly opposed to any repairing of its relations with the Palestinians or the Arab world (and with a Foreign Minister who has made little attempt to disguise his contempt for a people he would rather transfer across the Jordan) — the 'love-in' continued. Visits, congratulatory messages (matched by no other mature democracies in their relations with Israel), 'leadership forums', subsidised tours (often gleefully shared by the Australian media) all flowed unimpeded by Israel's broader defiance of the international community.

Israel became '*sui generis*'. Different rules applied, shared by no other country in their relations with Australia. Even a rare attempt by Australia to assert its own national interests (eg on such a clear infringement of the relationship as Israel's use of living Australian citizens' passports to outfit an assassination hit squad) — something that to his credit Rudd flagged initially with unusual vigour — were later buried when a new ALP leadership conveniently emerged under Gillard.

## Interplay between policy and politics in Australian responses

This pattern of uncritical ‘love-ins’, of course, presents awkward issues for practitioners of Australian policy. Beneath the surface of all this adulation, the fundamentals of Australian policy remain.

Australia does believe in the respect for the international norms, particularly those that govern the rules of war and the protection of civilians in occupied territories. We do believe that there should be a Palestine as a viable outcome for Palestinian national aspirations, not one shackled to Israel as second-class citizens. This is simply a continuation of the decisions we took in 1948 to support the UN plan which envisaged *an appropriate Arab Government substantially covering that portion of Palestine assigned to them by the United Nations Assembly decision.*

It took a long while to get there but we do now talk of a ‘Palestine’ as a viable separate state with an international profile.

We do not accept the annexation of East Jerusalem nor the incorporation of the Syrian Golan into Israel.

But we do not say so! Nor do Ministers use the word ‘occupation’, an expression even largely shunned by the ABC.

### *Media*

One of the reasons why acknowledging our own policy is considered a dangerous move for Australian Ministers is the media. I never criticize lobby groups for doing their job. It’s their right to advance their cause as long as they use legitimate means and their voice is not taken as the only valid viewpoint. But the decline in the level of public life in Australia has led to a stifling of the arguments and an unwillingness to move beyond slogans and mantras.

When there is a pronouncement that reflects fundamental policy, the media response usually simply adopts the pro-Israel lobby’s arguments that any slightly sceptical remarks about Israeli actions are dangerous deviation.

Let’s take as an example the roasting that Kevin Rudd got in the *Australian Financial Review* in December 2010 for his reminding an Israeli audience that Australia disapproved of Israel’s not opening its facilities to UN nuclear inspectors. The *AFR* wrote up the remarks as indicating that Rudd was out of control and in defiance of his newly-installed Prime Minister.

The fact was that this has always been Australian policy. I can recall pointing it out in direct terms to Israeli MFA interlocutors in 2003, reading out carefully phrased ‘talking points’ provided by DFAT. Israel’s refusal to join the NPT and thus open its facilities to inspection are a big negative in international attempts to get the Iranians to fulfil their duties under the NPT.

### *Recent modification of language*

Recent modifications in Australia's language, signal perhaps a tentative return to more traditional principles. In recent months, Foreign Minister Rudd has made some sensible iterations of Australian policy. In Bahrain on 2 December last year, he endorsed the view of King Abdullah that there was a limited timeline for the achievement of a two state solution and he has since reminded the Israelis publicly that they need to respond.

In Jerusalem on 13 December 2010, Rudd reminded an Israeli audience that among the scenarios it needed to consider was the Arab League peace initiative of 2000 — an Arab offer which successive Israeli Government have chosen to ignore as an 'inconvenient truth' since it effectively accepts a return to the 1967 lines. Given that it also offers full relations between the Arab League members and Israel, it is the definitive answer to the Israeli line (constantly trumpeted in Australian media commentaries) that the Arab world is not prepared to co-exist with Israel.

In Athens on 2 February this year, Kevin Rudd spoke of the broad architecture of a comprehensive settlement for '*an independent and secure Israeli state and an independent and secure Palestinian state*'.

Moreover, he singled out elements of an agreement which would be uncomfortable for the Israelis: *These elements include the 1967 borders, with mutually agreed land swaps; the question of the right of return; the question of Jerusalem and the holy sites; as well as necessary security guarantees.*

More recently, the Foreign Minister issued a press release (1 October) on Israeli settlement building. His statement simply recorded the Australian Government's 'disappointment' at Israel's announcement that it would build approximately 1,100 new housing units in East Jerusalem and carefully avoided any use of the term 'occupation'. It was a start but a timid one.

### *Uncomfortable choices for Israel*

It is, in short, rare to hear an Australian politician offering specifics on the uncomfortable choices that Israel faces. Note too that not one of these pronouncements, to my knowledge, was picked up or commented on in the mainstream press.

So the debate is muffled with media commentators rarely choosing to identify the trends.

The fact is, there are two universes on this issue — the real and the virtual.

There's the little duck pond of Australian politics with its spiteful infighting, corrupted values, a 'commentariat' of miniscule proportions interviewing each other *ad nauseum*, and massive reliance on favours and funding tied to interest groups — in short, deficient

leadership shackled to the shunning of public mood and encouraged by a tendency to dumb issues down; ...

... and there's the real world.

### **'Missing an opportunity' (Gareth Evans)**

Gareth Evans's remarkable opinion piece syndicated last month underlines this lack of public debate. I worked under Evans on his efforts to nudge South Africa towards a peaceful resolution of its massively embedded problems. He knew how international pressure could help mould internal forces.

Evans was always aware that ideals have to be married to the realisable. In his recent syndicated opinion piece (reported in the *SMH* on 23 September) he reflects the views of former Israeli Prime Minister Rabin in this terms:

*Rabin knew that the only way to ensure a democratic Jewish state with viable, secure borders was to accept a Palestinian state alongside it, equally secure and viable. They would share Jerusalem as a capital, and find a mutually acceptable solution to the enormously sensitive issue of the return of Palestinian refugees. ... it is overwhelmingly in Israel's own interest to defuse this issue by accepting, once and for all, that Palestinian statehood is an indispensable requirement of its own long-term peace and security. Indeed, Israel should treat the UN vote as an opportunity for a new start to negotiations, rather than an excuse for renewed confrontation.* (Gareth Evans, Project Syndicate 23 Sept 2011)

Evans took this lesson further and urged that Australia should put itself on the right side of history by joining a vote in favour of Palestine's admission to the UN. Given that Rudd reportedly prefers an abstention and the Prime Minister's 'thought bubble' in *The Australian* of 21 September (noted earlier) puts her in the rejectionist camp, this is a sad reflection of how far from real principle Australian Labor Party politics have strayed.

Indeed Gillard seems determined to use this issue as a 'wedge' against Rudd, thus driving Australia's position even further into line with an isolated Israel. In that extraordinary intervention in the foreign policy process, mentioned above, Gillard argues: '*no UN resolution will change present realities on the ground. That is why we believe direct negotiation is the only true path to peace*'.

This, of course, is pure Israel-speak. Spelt out it means the following: We don't want the UN in on this; we want Israel to sort it out with a beaten, humbled, neutered and demoralized rump entity; Israel to keep the Jordan Valley, all of Jerusalem and its environs, the 'settlement blocks' and the chunks of territory already annexed by the West Bank wall and sundry other bits and pieces that the IDF would like to keep. This leaves only 40 percent of pre-1967 Palestine for the Palestinians — in other words, back to a Palestine enjoying virtually no attributes of a viable state.



Gillard's article plays mind games with Rudd just as he appears to be attempting to nudge policy back towards the more traditional elements that at least resembled an attempt at balance and a viable outcome, not just a stitched-up deal that would attract no international support.

### **The apartheid parallel and a 'one state' solution**

#### *South Africa and Israel*

As mentioned, I was involved on the sidelines of South Africa's struggle to shrug off apartheid in the 1980s and 1990s. It was certainly the professional highlight of my conflict-ridden career to see Nelson Mandela cast his vote as a tiny primary school at Inanda in Natal where the founding President of the ANC, John Dube, was buried. With Mandela's great capacity for symbolism which triumphed over sectarian and clan rivalries, he had chosen a humble Zulu village in the backblocks of Natal to cast his vote after months of sectarian Zulu-Xhosa strife. The 80 year-long narrative of the apartheid struggle had triumphed.

I am, however, very wary of any attempt to bring the lessons of one conflict as a framework for another. Sure, Israel imposes a policy of separation that resembles apartheid in erecting physical and geographical barriers but it is a very different model.

I see two problems with the BDS movement's attempts to adopt campaign techniques earlier used against South Africa. First, I think that to approach the issues at the municipal level distorts the real functions of this level of government which has no mandate on foreign relations.

But more importantly, I am not sure that the community is necessarily ready for it. Some sympathisers may feel uneasy at such tactics. Even if they also feel that Israel gets away with the excessive use of force and the repression of Arab populations under its control they can't necessarily see the connection between the symbolic target and the occupation of Palestine. In other words, more 'context' is needed.

The risk too, to judge only by the item on *Radio National Breakfast* this morning, is to make sure that such action is in no way seen as an anti-Jewish campaign. This is clearly in the mind of the BDS organisers, but is the public yet ready to absorb the distinction in the wake of the mischievous confusion sown by conservative opponents? To judge by the stir this issue has caused, however, you would think that Israel is such a fragile entity that it could be buffeted by a few people standing with placards outside a chocolate shop!

There are arguments that this particular Israel-owned enterprise does more than pay its taxes to the Israeli state but goes out of its way to boost the

morale of the IDF's Golani Brigade, responsible for some of the worst excesses, for example, in the 2001 attack on Jenin.

People have a right to make their own peaceful protests within the law on whatever issues they chose (and not to be vilified by politicians out-bidding each other to pose as friends of a fragile Israel) but I'm not sure that supplying free chocolates to selected IDF soldiers is the best target for wrath. The connection is a bit too abstruse and it is a question, too, of conserving energies which could be better and more convincingly deployed elsewhere. There are plenty of other enterprises (not just Israeli) which are much more central to the pursuit of an aggressive policy against Palestinians.

### *One State solution?*

Israel, like any country, has to earn and maintain its standing in the eyes of others. It is possibly doing more to undermine its own credibility than its most effective critics could manage.

I suspect the reason why the South African parallel is so attractive to many of Israel's opponents in the BDS movement is that it flows into the solution adopted in South Africa, a single nation for all communities with no discrimination based on creed, origins, gender etc.

Having followed every step of South Africa's debates and negotiations on this question, I would love the same template to apply in historic Palestine; but I just think it can't happen.

I've discovered over the past few years that many academics have this strange ritual of finding a global theory to apply to an issue and then hunting around for facts to fit into it. The belief that Palestine is a continuation of the struggle against colonialism is totally deficient as an intellectual handle on the situation in the Middle East. Yes, it is about OCCUPATION but not for the reasons that the French took over Cote d'Ivoire or the British Malaya. The roots of this exercise in settlement is totally different from the economic or security motivation behind taking political control of large parts of the world's land mass in the last two centuries.

I may be a forlorn adherent of the international system, but I believe that above all it would be foolish for the Palestinians to fall in with an idealised solution that would mean abandoning the framework for the international community's support over decades for Palestinian statehood.

When one community in a single state has a massive security apparatus at its disposal and is driven by a 'Promised Land' ideology, there is an asymmetry in the proposed system that is simply unworkable.

Left entirely on its own, Israel is likely to introduce even greater restrictions on where Palestinians can live, work, travel, build or get an education than they do today inside pre-1967 Israel.

Moreover, Israel would be tempted (as some right-wing politicians are already vigorously flagging) to counter the reality of an Arab majority within its borders by more measures to impose a 'Jewish' identity as a requirement for full participation as citizens.

The call for a 'Jewish state' — not simply a state where Judaism is the established or official religion but one where every characteristic of the body politic reflects a religious identity (undefined) — would be an ominous new requirement, totally inconsistent with the sort of a 'one state' solution some seek.

### **Understanding the Middle East — future of Middle East studies at Macquarie**

Australia has been militarily involved in the region at least four times in the last 100 years.

But has it ever really tried to develop the same in-depth understanding of its cultures as we do, say, of the Classical world? There is no educational institution in Australia that looks at, say, Islamic archaeology. One of the foremost authorities on the issue, an Australian graduate, had to go to Copenhagen to find a job.

Several universities do bits of the picture (often spread across dispersed Departments) and the most concerted effort is at Sydney University which teaches Arabic with increasing success and does courses on the historical dimensions; and at the ANU, the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, which likewise has a range of language and area studies courses.

Macquarie has built its program around modern politics and has clearly sought to run its program with minimal resources. Modern politics is a riskier area but it needs to balance with a deeper understanding of the dominant Arab culture of the region.

Rather than pick favourites among potential claimants for a dominant role among Australian universities in this field, it seems to me to be more logical to accept two things:

- that there needs to be a full range of study and research programs in Australia which convey the complexities and richness of Arab and Islamic culture
- that resources should not be so constrained that an individual university program stands little chance of conveying at least part of a coherent picture.

*Australians are still appallingly ignorant of Arab culture.*

There are few places in Australia where you can get the sort of perspective which in France or the United States would be available in numerous colleges and universities and across many disciplines — literature, art, archaeology, history, sociology, politics.

Macquarie's Centre for Middle East and North African Studies draws on the expertise of several academics around the Faculty but it appears to have no core expertise in issues central to the main threads of Arab and Islamic civilization.

We shouldn't get mired in the debate on Israel vs Palestine. We should be exploring the continuum to see why Arab are so passionate about their history and their language.

That would require a centre somewhere in Australia capable of offering the wide perspective of Arab culture, based on a flourishing language program. Doing things in little packages, borrowing staff from other busy disciplines, can only have a marginal impact. It is time for our educational institutions to recognise the challenge.

That, I am sure, would be the best way to honour Andrew Vincent's memory.

11 October 2011