

Australian government continues its love affair with Israel

by Sonja Karkar

Women for Palestine
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Well, so much for our new government taking an even-handed position on Israel/Palestine. Before our politicians even warmed their seats in the new parliamentary sittings, the Australian Prime Minister announced that he will lead a parliamentary motion to honour Israel on 12 March acknowledging *Yom Ha'atzmaut*, Israel's Independence Day. The Opposition Leader will second the motion. Then, celebrations will take place at a reception in the Mural Hall of Parliament House.

If Palestinians and their supporters had any hopes of a sympathetic hearing from the new Rudd government on the multiple human rights abuses being perpetrated by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, those hopes are now well and truly dashed.

This year marks 60 years of Palestinian dispossession and displacement and a savage, relentless occupation that is smothering the lifeblood of the Palestinians while Israel celebrates its ill-gotten gains. Palestinians are starving in Gaza. Palestinians are being sold out in the West Bank. Palestinians are dying. Their very existence is under threat. It is as simple and as awful as that.

Every Australian ought to be asking why our Prime Minister and the parliament feel so humiliatingly obligated to Israel that they must go to these lengths to show their friendship with a foreign country that consistently violates international law, United Nations resolutions and human rights conventions? If supporting the Palestinian cause is too much to ask, then refusing to single Israel out for any kind of recognition would at least be sensitive to the Palestinians living here. The Palestinians were never asked if they would agree to the foreign imperial division of their country. Most had their family homes and lands taken from them by Zionist forces ruthlessly pushing for a Greater Israel not intended

by the 1947 United Nations Partition of Palestine. All suffer indescribable pain knowing that many of their people live a hellish existence under Israel's occupation. It is on the human wreckage of Palestinian lives that Israel celebrates its independence, honoured so gratuitously by our government.

Such demonstrations of affection are not new. Our former Prime Minister John Howard had already fostered this extraordinary bond when he declared Australia as Israel's closest friend. Many of his ministers followed suit and none was more accommodating than former Foreign Minister Alexander Downer when he said that he wore Israel as "a badge of honour" even as Israel's war planes decimated the Lebanese landscape in 2006.

True to form, Israel has rewarded its friends with facile honours. John Howard received two in one year. He was awarded the Jerusalem Prize from the World Zionist Organisation and he had a forest named after him in the Negev by the Jewish National Fund, which specialises in acquiring property for "the purpose of settling Jews on such lands." These lands are the subject of legal proceedings brought by the now displaced indigenous Bedouins of the Negev who are being "moved out" for the exclusive benefit of Jews worldwide who want to live in Israel. Although these Bedouins live in what is now called Israel, 45 of their villages are not recognised by the Israeli government and have never received even the most basic amenities.

This latest expression of friendship falls hard on the heels of the new Prime Minister's moving apology to our own indigenous people and raises many questions about the sincerity of that momentous gesture. The similarity between the grievous losses suffered by both peoples - the Aborigines and the Palestinians - is not fanciful. Both peoples have been the hapless victims of the great white colonial enterprise and in both cases, it would have succeeded brilliantly, if these people would have just disappeared. But it is not so easy to kill off people and their dreams.

There are some 11 million Palestinians worldwide whose collective memory is seared with the narrative of their people who fled in terror during Israel's 1948 purge of Palestine. About two-thirds of the Palestinian population never saw their homes again. Many still have the keys to their front doors, the deeds to their properties and lands, the photos of happier moments, and the endless familiar memories of smells and sounds unfaded by time. Around 7.2 million refugees are languishing today in refugee camps waiting to return home and to receive compensation for the calculated decimation of their society - one that had successfully developed culturally and economically over centuries, despite four hundred years under Ottoman rule.

Palestine was not a land without people as Israel's mythmakers have tried to promote, particularly through the emotive Hollywood film "Exodus". Palestine was, in fact, populated by successful citizen merchants and officials who added an economically vibrant dimension to the essentially peasant population who were actively engaged in working the land. Not only did Palestinians own land, but even where there was no legal title, the land was considered as belonging to the Palestinians through their history of land use and uninterrupted possession.

The surest sign of Israel's real intentions, is its blatant disregard of international law. Israeli tanks and soldiers are bombarding Gaza while tightening its siege on this tiny sliver of land with a population almost at bursting point. In the West Bank, Israel is increasing - not decreasing as it promised to do in the most recent peace negotiations - the number of checkpoints that totally suffocate the ordinary daily movement of another burgeoning population. And, it is ignoring every request to stop its illegal West Bank settlement project that is literally turning thousands of Palestinians on to the streets - homeless and stateless and forced to rely on the world's pitiful humanitarian aid that can never bring them economic or political independence.

Every human rights organisation reporting on the situation has documented Israel's violations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and they provide enough evidence to challenge the appropriateness of aligning ourselves with Israel. The words "apartheid" and "ethnic cleansing" have already begun to enter mainstream consciousness after being given voice by former US President Jimmy Carter and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. And in churches, universities, social justice groups and other pockets of society, the consciences of people are finally being stirred.

To counter this, Israel is employing new public relations strategies to secure its legitimacy in the global community. In Australia, Israel has established a chapter of the Peres Center for Peace which is endeavouring to cast Israel in the role of peacemaker - a role which it has refused to honour at the negotiating table.

The Center - named after one of the more notorious Zionist architects of Palestinian ethnic cleansing, Shimon Peres - has already persuaded the Australian Football League (AFL) to include a friendly team of Israelis and Palestinians in their 18-team line up for this year's AFL International Cup. It has bedazzled the AFL administrators with the idea of people crossing all boundaries "for the simple love of the game" - a notion that would never be entertained by a government at war with an enemy state and one that has been rejected when political pressure through sports' boycotts is deemed necessary to stop countries behaving oppressively. Nowhere else was this so effective than in South Africa's anti-Apartheid struggle.

Regrettably, our leaders will continue to pursue their self-serving policies until ordinary, decent people force them to accept that our common humanity is worth more than the lucrative deals that bring such enormous profits to the multinational corporations, and from which many governments benefit. Just as people brought down the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the people can bring down the ethnically divisive Zionist regime in Israel as well. This is why the word “apartheid” so rattles Israel’s supporters.

But, we have a long way to go, especially when governments insist on continuing their love affairs with Israel. In the meantime, al-Nakba - the Palestinian catastrophe of dispossession and displacement - is being accelerated. An imprisoned, destitute Gaza is being bombed right now. This crime against humanity is what needs to be acknowledged in our Parliament and not a motion honouring Israel. The Australian “fair go” that our Prime Minister so fondly embraces, has never sounded so hollow or sunk so low.

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