

Antagonizing Palestinians, Australia's Linguistic Blunder Snowballs

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Reacting to antagonized Palestinian snowballing protests to her government's decision on June 5 to reverse a 47-year old bipartisan consensus on describing eastern Jerusalem as "occupied," Foreign Minister Julie Bishop on June 13 denied any "change in the Australian government's position."

On June 5, Australian Attorney-General George Brandis in a statement said: "The description of East Jerusalem as 'Occupied East Jerusalem' is a term freighted with pejorative implications, which is neither appropriate nor useful."

The new Australian terminology provoked Jordan, the third largest importer of Australian sheep in the Middle East, to summon Australia's charge d'affaires, John Feakes, to convey its "concern" because "The Australian government's decision violates international law and resolutions that consider east Jerusalem as an integral part of all Palestinian territories occupied in 1967."

Similarly, the Australian Representative in Ramallah, Tom Wilson, was summoned by the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to convey "deep concern" because Brandis' remarks "contradict all international resolutions." They requested "official clarification."

Bishop's "no change" statement came in response. It was followed on June 14 by Prime Minister Tony Abbott who said, while on a trip to North America, that his government had made only a "terminological clarification."

Australia still "strongly" supports the "two-state solution" and "there has been no change in policy - absolutely no change in policy," Abbot said, but at the same time confirmed that, "We absolutely refuse to refer to occupied East Jerusalem."

Abbot two days earlier stated that the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) are in "truth ... disputed territories."

Canberra is showing no signs of backing down. Australian ambassador to Israel, Dave Sharma, on June 11 said Brandis' reasoning could lead his government to similar official linguistic change on the West Bank.

"I think we just call the West Bank, 'the West Bank,' as a geographical entity without adding any adjectives to it, whether 'occupied' [the Palestinian position] or 'disputed' [the Israeli position]. We'll just call it what it is, which is 'the West Bank,'" he told the Tablet. However,

this is not official yet, he said.

“There has been no change in the Australian government’s position on the legal status of the Palestinian Territories , including East Jerusalem,” Bishop “clarified” in her statement. She was not convincing. The credibility of Bishop’s and Abbot’s denial of “change” could hardly be plausible.

It is a “radical change in the Australian position on Palestine ,” Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki said. The head of the Palestinian delegation to Canberra , Izzat Abdulhadi, said Australia ’s new stance is “very provocative.”

On June 12, Arab and Islamic ambassadors from 18 countries, including Saudi Arabia , Egypt and Indonesia , protested to Australia ’s Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra .

Jerusalem is the permanent headquarters of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The organization was founded in response to the burning of Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam’s third holiest site, by the Australian arsonist Michael Dennis Rohan in 1969.

The Australian on June 10 reported from Jerusalem that the 57-member OIC will hold a joint emergency meeting this month with the 22-member Arab League to decide their response to Australia ’s “terminology” declaration.

Secretary General of the Arab League, Nabil al-Arabi sent Bishop a “letter of protest” requesting “official clarification,” his deputy Ahmad bin Hilli said last Monday.

Palestinians are on record to invoke the multi-billion annual Australian agricultural exports to the member states in the discussions. Australian Deputy Prime Minister Warren Truss told reporters last Friday that “we will work very hard with them ... to maintain the trade,” but so far his government has shown no signs to that effect.

Bishop’s and Abbot’s “no change” statements tried to imply that their country’s policy has not changed and that if there was a change it is a linguistic one only.

Either case the change in “terminology” serves neither Australian nor Palestinian interests. Coming ahead of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s upcoming visit to Australia this summer, to be the first ever sitting Israeli premier to visit Canberra , it serves only as a free of charge welcoming present.

However, coming on the 47th anniversary of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territory in eastern Jerusalem, West Bank and Gaza Strip and in 2014, which the United Nations proclaimed an International Year of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, the Australian “change of language” was “absolutely disgraceful and shocking,” according to the member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Hanan Ashrawi.

“Such inflammatory and irresponsible statements ... are not only in blatant violation of international law and global consensus, but are also lethal in any pursuit of peace and toxic to any attempt at enacting a global rule of law,” Ashrawi was quoted as saying by the Times of Israel on June 6.

In fact, describing the Palestinian territories, eastern Jerusalem inclusive, as “occupied” is not only a Palestinian position.

The Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem has not been recognized by the international community and all 193 countries of the UN, including the U.S. , refuse to have their embassies in Jerusalem because it would imply their recognition of the city as Israel 's capital.

Published by The Guardian on this June 11, Ben Saul wrote: "Calling east Jerusalem 'occupied' simply recognizes the near-universal legal status quo, namely that it is not sovereign Israeli territory."

"Declaring that east Jerusalem will not be described as 'occupied' implies that Australia rejects the application of international humanitarian law ... The term "occupation" is therefore not pejorative or judgmental." Saul said, adding that " Australia 's new view ... corrodes the international rule of law and violates Australia 's international law obligations" in accordance with the Geneva conventions to which both Australia and Israel are signatories.

The UN Security Council Resolution 478 on August 20, 1980 censured "in the strongest terms the enactment by Israel of the 'basic law' on Jerusalem," affirmed "that the enactment of the 'basic law' by Israel constitutes a violation of international law" and determined

"that all legislative and administrative measures and actions taken by Israel, the occupying Power, which have altered or purport to alter the character and status of the Holy City of Jerusalem, and in particular the recent 'basic law' on Jerusalem, are null and void and must be rescinded forthwith."

Ninety UNSC resolutions, let alone 40 others vetoed by the U.S. , rule accordingly. Now Australia is the only other nation that joins and supports Israel in its violation of all these resolutions. Aside from Israel , it is also the only nation to change its language on the Palestinian Occupied Territories .

Australian linguistics in context

The Palestinian people are not known for their short memory. They view the Australian government's "terminological clarification" in the context of the country's recent pro-Israel changes of policy as well as in Australia 's historical anti-Palestinian policies.

Last month, Ambassador Sharma met in East Jerusalem with the Israeli Minister of Housing Uri Ariel, who is in charge of the illegal construction of the colonial settlements in the OPT.

In January this year, while on an official visit to Israel, Foreign Minister Bishop told the Times of Israel that she isn't convinced that Israeli construction of illegal settlements in OPT is a violation of international law, and called international boycotts of these settlements "anti-Semitic" and "Hypocritical beyond belief."

Last November, Australia failed to join 158 nations who supported a UN General Assembly resolution calling for an end to Israeli settlements or to join 160 countries which supported another resolution calling on Israel to "comply scrupulously" with the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

In November 2012, Australia abstained from supporting the UNGA recognition of Palestine

as a “non-member observer state” by a vote of 138 to 9, rendering PM Abbot’s latest “clarification” that Australia still “strongly” supports the “two-state solution” a hollow statement.

Quoted by Emeritus Professor Peter Boyce AO, *President of the Australia Institute of International Affairs in Tasmania*, a 2010 study found that 78% of Australians were opposed to Israel’s settlements policy and only 22% thought Jerusalem should be recognized as Israel’s capital. More recently, at the time of the 2012 General Assembly vote on Palestinian non-member observer State status, 51% of Australians thought their country should vote “Yes” and only 15% “No.”

“Australia has had an important role in the establishment of the Israeli state” and it “stood alone among western governments in its uncritical alignment with Israel,” Professor Boyce wrote.

Certainly Boyce had history in mind. Australia in its capacity as the Chairman of the [UN General Assembly](#)’s Ad Hoc Committee on Palestine helped to push through the [UN Partition Plan](#) on November 29, 1947. It was the first UN member state to vote in favor of Israeli statehood and the first to grant Israel de-jure recognition when the U.S. recognized it de-facto only. Israel was also the first Middle East country with which Australia established diplomatic relations in 1949.

Australia had defended all Israeli wars on Palestine , Egypt , Jordan , Lebanon and Syria as “in self defense,” especially the 1967 war in which it occupied more Palestinian territories and the lands of four Arab countries.

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