Speech by the Hon Alexander Downer, MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs,
Annual Assembly of the State Zionist Council of Victoria,
Melbourne, 5 December 2000

Australia and the Middle East Peace Process

Introduction – Middle East tragedy

Thank you, Philip [Chester, President of the State Zionist Council of Victoria]; [names of other VIPs]; ladies and gentlemen. Let me say how pleased I was to be able take up Philip’s invitation to speak here tonight regarding Australia and the outlook for the Middle East peace process.

For Australia, the developments in the Middle East over the past year have produced both hope and deep frustration. I know I am not alone in voicing these frustrations.

The Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and the second Camp David Summit raised our hopes. But during these last two months, cycles of provocation, violence and retribution have gravely damaged them.

We are deeply concerned at the loss of life, injury and the damage to mutual confidence between Israel and the Palestinians that has occurred. We have urged both sides to halt the cycle of violence by exercising strong leadership and even stronger restraint.

We believe that unbalanced criticism and the singling out of Israel only for blame in the current context are deeply unhelpful.

The current situation is all the more troubling because it follows a moment of real hope. While only the participants in July’s second Camp David Summit know exactly what was on the table, it is clear that the offers made by Prime Minister Barak went further than those of any other recent Israeli government.

Remarkable progress was made, and continued to be made after Camp David, in narrowing differences on deeply sensitive issues, which until then had been considered too difficult to address.

The current violence broke out right at the moment when the media was abuzz with hints that both sides were on the verge of a constructive outcome to even the most difficult issue of the peace process – the status of Jerusalem – through accepting some form of shared control.

Though unable to bridge all the gaps between them, the new flexibility that was shown strengthened our belief that, with courage and commitment, ways would be found to settle historic grievances on the basis of security, individual dignity and mutual respect.

As Prime Minister Howard said recently here in Melbourne, Mr Barak’s offers at Camp David should have been accepted. It is tragic in the extreme that they were not.

I understand the grief and uncertainty that now prevails between Israel and the Palestinians. We appreciate the
frustration that is felt among many countries, especially within the Jewish community at what has happened. But recriminations sow only bitterness, and do not restore the mutual confidence upon which an effective peace process must be built.

All of us must continue in our different ways – through diplomacy and otherwise – to encourage moves towards peace.

**Australia’s role**

As you know, ladies and gentlemen, our Government will always remain fundamentally committed to the territorial integrity of Israel, and its right to live in peace behind secure and defined boundaries. At the same time we also recognise the legitimate right and aspiration of the Palestinian people to a homeland and a better future for their children.

Australia has long taken the view that the issues so tragically dividing the Israeli and Palestinian people must ultimately be resolved through direct negotiation based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, the Oslo Accords, and the principle of land for peace.

We are committed to playing a positive and constructive part in support of peace in the Middle East. We work both in public and behind the scenes to that end, including through the use of direct bilateral channels and in multilateral forums such as the United Nations.

We have sought to make our role a practical and effective one.

Australia has made tangible commitments to the peace process through targeted development assistance. Our development assistance program this year is worth roughly $6.5 million. In addition, we are to provide $1.5 million dollars as emergency assistance for those affected by the current violence.

In September 2000 Australia opened the Australian representative office in Ramallah. The office will substantially facilitate Australia’s dealings with the Palestinian authority in the West Bank and Gaza. It will enable Australia to promote other objectives more effectively, including support for democracy and good governance.

**The way forward**

So far as the present tragic situation is concerned, allow me to emphasise that both sides share responsibility for ending the current violence, and for rebuilding the mutual confidence on which any resumption of negotiations has to be based.

Unilateral steps are not the answer to the present situation. Neither is the use of violence.

There is no real alternative - for either side - to achieving a negotiated settlement. Failing that, further violence, misery and human degradation may destroy that path for generations to come.

The prospect of a unilateral declaration of independence has been raised from time to time. But the percentage of territory that the Palestinians would gain in a UDI would be far less than might be offered in negotiations. A host of other problems would plague a self-declared state.

Chairman Arafat and the Palestinian National Council have now postponed dealing with the issue twice in recent months – and, after the most recent deadline passed on November 15, have refused to set any new date to discuss the issue. We hope that the idea of a unilateral declaration of independence has now lost its currency, at least for the time being.

As you know, the Israeli Government also spent quite a lot of time in the run-up to 15 November looking at a way to enact what was described as “unilateral separation” from the Palestinians. The topic has aroused debate inside Israel, as well as a distinctly negative reaction from the international community, including the United States. Australia shares those concerns.

No matter how much some people might wish it, it is impossible to seal off Palestinians and Israelis from each other, and yet to build a secure future for both parties.

No matter how deep the trenches nor how high the wire, only a comprehensive political settlement can provide the peace, security and stability that both sides yearn for.


Whatever happens in war or diplomacy, whatever territory is won or lost, whatever accommodations or compromises are finally made, the future guarantees that Arabs and Jews will remain close neighbours in a weary land, entangled in each other’s fears. They will not escape one another. They will not find peace in treaties, or in victories. They will
find peace, if at all, by looking into each other’s eyes.

**Emergency Special Session**

Most of you will be aware that Australia abstained on the Resolution of the Tenth Resumed Emergency Special Session (ESS) of the UN General Assembly on 20 October that was critical of Israel. That stance has generated quite a lot of interest, including among a wide range of community groups in Australia.

Let me preface my remarks about the ESS by noting that Australia’s record of support for the United Nations is exemplary. Many Australians have served with UN agencies in the region such as UNTSO, UNIFIL and UNRWA. Those agencies have contributed to stability, not only as peacekeepers, but also through providing education and health facilities among Palestinian refugees.

Australia accepts that UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 are central planks upon which a comprehensive solution to the Israeli-Arab dispute must be based.

At the political level, however, all too often the temptation to vent frustrations in a UN context overrides more considered strategies to benefit those directly involved on the ground.

There are issues of international law associated with the use of the ESS mechanism, which I won’t go into here. Those issues have meant that Australia has opposed the use of the mechanism to deal with the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

Our decision to abstain this year was informed by this history, but it was also based on the resolution’s substance. Like the resolutions emerging from the past five previous sessions of the ESS, the text was unbalanced enough to warrant an abstention, but not so unbalanced overall as to justify a vote against. Another 45 countries took the same view.

The text was unbalanced because it did not acknowledge the need for the Palestinian leadership to act in a determined way to stop the violence. Nor did it reflect adequately the loss of life and injury among Israelis, as well as among Palestinians.

We made an explanation of vote at the time, putting our view that direct negotiations between the parties themselves provide the best prospect for putting a final end to the cycle of violence, and returning to a process that can deliver a comprehensive agreement. We urged that the commitments made at Sharm El Sheikh be implemented as soon as possible.

We have continued to emphasise those views to Israelis and Palestinians alike.

We will uphold the principles of international law upon which dealings between the parties should be conducted.

We will continue to condemn the use of politically-motivated violence, by any party.

We strongly support the call of the international committee of the Red Cross for both sides to respect, and to ensure respect, for international humanitarian law and its principles.

All those involved must respect civilians. All sides must ensure the free movement of ambulances, medical teams and medical supplies into and within the West Bank and Gaza.

Terrorist acts, reprisals against the civilian population and attacks directed against the civilian population on either side must be absolutely and unconditionally prohibited.

Despite the gloomy shadow cast by recent events in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank, it is important to remember that not all news from the region is bad.

The Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May was a piece of good news. The Lebanese Government still faces considerable challenges in the south of the country, but the scene has been set for it progressively to restore control over its territory.

In Syria, it is too soon to tell how the new President will respond to the pressures upon him, both internal and external. But we wish him well, and continue to urge both Israel and Syria to proceed to resolve their own outstanding differences.

**Iranian Jews**

Phillip indicated in his invitation to speak that you would be interested in hearing about our Government’s concerted efforts on the trial of the Iranian Jews imprisoned on espionage charges in Iran.
Over the last 18 months Australia has made 27 different representations to the Iranian Government, expressing our concern over the arrest and trial of 13 Iranian Jews and two Iranian Muslims on charges of espionage. Our Embassy in Teheran has been more deeply engaged in monitoring the trial than that of any other nation.

I myself have made 13 separate representations on the issue, including directly to Iranian President Khatami, Foreign Minister Kharazi, the head of the Expediency Council, Mr Rafsanjani, and with several other Iranian Ministers and parliamentarians during my visit to Teheran in July.

In particular, I explained that the conduct of the trials had damaged international perceptions of Iran, and urged the Iranian government to show sensitivity during the appeals process.

I also urged that the prisoners should be treated humanely, and that the conditions of their imprisonment should take account of their religious needs.

I understand that the prisoners are now receiving regular family visits, and have access to kosher food and religious literature.

Iran’s announcement on 21 September that the appeals process had resulted in some reduction of sentences for the 10 Jews was not the result that many of us had hoped for, but it was a step in the right direction.

Like many others here tonight, I am disappointed that prison sentences remain in place. I have urged the Iranian authorities to extend clemency to all of the prisoners, both Jewish and Muslim, remaining in prison.

I understand that all ten of the convicted Jews have now sought leave to seek the annulment of their convictions in the Supreme Court. You can be assured that Australia will be watching the progress of the applications very closely.

**Conclusion**

Prime Minister Howard visited the Middle East in April 2000. That visit re-affirmed the importance our Government accords to Australia’s relationship with Israel – as do the other visits this year undertaken by Mr Vaile, Mr Kemp, and Senator Alston.

In discussions with both Prime Minister Barak and Chairman Arafat, Mr Howard urged both sides to persevere through the challenges presented by the negotiating process.

The history of the Middle East peace process has shown us that what can not be achieved in battle can be accomplished around the negotiating table.

No side can expect to achieve its ideal objectives, and the way back to the negotiating table will be tough. Australia does not play a major role in the peace process, but we have a long and proud history of constructive support for peace that makes equitable provision for both sides.

Notwithstanding the tragic events of recent weeks, Australia is committed to playing a positive and constructive role in support of peace in the region.

We are grateful for the consistent support given by the Australian Jewish community to those efforts.

Australia will remain a strong, reliable ally and friend of Israel.

We all have to be prepared to stay the course, despite the challenges we now face.

But with courage, leadership, and flexibility, the goal of a just, comprehensive and lasting peace remains within reach.