

Australia Moves – Sort Of – Its Embassy In Israel

by Hugh Fitzgerald



When Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that Australia would be moving its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, it seemed like a bold step. He was, after all, ignoring threats from two important trading partners, Malaysia and Indonesia, of possible economic consequences should he transfer the embassy. Upon inspection, however, the Australian announcement turns out to have been considerably less than one had reason to hope.

In the first place, the move, Morrison made clear, would be from Tel Aviv to “West Jerusalem.” Jerusalem has been the undivided capital of Israel since 1967 when, in a war of self-defense, Israel took East Jerusalem (and the Old City) from the Jordanians. Israel quickly tore down all barriers between the two parts of the city, seamlessly reuniting them, as any visitor to the city soon realizes. Morrison seems to support

the re-dividing of the city into two parts, East and West Jerusalem, which in the several thousand years of Jerusalem's existence, had happened only once, during Jordanian rule of what it called "East Jerusalem" from 1949 to 1967. In 1967, the Israeli victory allowed West and East Jerusalem to reunite into one undivided city, which it has been now for more than 50 years. The Israelis have vowed to keep it undivided forever. Morrison could have emulated the Trump Administration, when it announced its Embassy move to "Jerusalem" – even though the actual embassy buildings are all located in West Jerusalem.

Second, the actual move of the Australian Embassy will not take place, Morrison said, until there is a final peace settlement between Israelis and "Palestinians." But when will that be? Given the refusal of the "Palestinians" to negotiate without preconditions, and the maximalist positions they have set out, it is difficult to imagine when that final peace settlement could ever be achieved – if, that is, it is left up to the "Palestinians" to agree, rather than being forced to submit to an agreement that has been forged by the Americans and the Saudis, as now seems possible.

Third, it may now be possible for Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, to impose a settlement on the "Palestinians." The "Palestinians" are financially at the end of their rope, with America cutting off its contributions to both the Palestinian Authority and to UNRWA. They need, more than ever, help from fellow Arabs. We have already heard about the outlines of an Israeli- "Palestinian" settlement, as negotiated by Jared Kushner and Mohammad bin Salman. According to all the reports, the "Palestinian" capital in this scenario would be Abu Dis, a modern suburb of Jerusalem that lies south of the Old City, while Israel would retain as its capital an undivided Jerusalem. Would the "Palestinians" ever accept this? They might not have a choice.

Fourth, with Saudi Arabia throwing its full diplomatic and

financial weight behind such an agreement, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Egypt would out of self-interest likely concur. Some are close Gulf allies, such as the Emirates and Bahrain, marching in diplomatic lockstep with Saudi Arabia. These countries are tired of the "Palestinians," want to focus on their own problems, especially the threat from Iran, and they see Israel as an important ally in the struggle against Iran. They are ready to back Saudi Arabia in imposing a settlement, whether Mahmoud Abbas likes it or not. Egypt, too, under El-Sisi, is in the Saudi camp, largely indifferent to the "Palestinians." Egypt relies on the billions it receives from Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. Even Jordan, though it has a large "Palestinian" population, is heavily dependent both on the direct financial aid, now in the billions annually, it receives from Saudi Arabia and the Saudis' closest ally, the Emirates, and from the remittances sent back to Jordan by the 400,000 Jordanians now working in Saudi Arabia. Were the Jordanians to oppose such a Saudi deal that would include making Abu Dis the capital of "Palestine," they would face the loss both of that direct aid, and of remittances, should the Saudis retaliate by kicking out those 400,000 Jordanian workers.

Fourth, Abu Dis was chosen to be the "Palestinian" capital by the Americans and the Saudis as a face-saving gesture for the "Palestinians." They can tell the "Palestinians" that this dusty, unattractive, newly built-up suburb, with bad roads, is actually part of "Jerusalem." And the "Palestinians" in turn, faced with a fait accompli, can put on their bravest face and proclaim that "Abu Dis" has always been part of Jerusalem. Let them. Israel will have its undivided Jerusalem, now supported, or at least not opposed, by a significant number of Arab states, including the two most important ones, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Fifth, it would have been better for Prime Minister Scott Morrison not to have linked the actual move of the Australian

embassy to West Jerusalem to a final peace settlement, or to speak about East Jerusalem as the inevitable capital of a future "Palestine." He surely has heard – hasn't he? – that the Kushner-MBS negotiations include a provision for Abu Dis, not East Jerusalem, to be the future capital of "Palestine." Why not wait to see the results of those negotiations, and do nothing to encourage the "Palestinians" to think they can hold out for East Jerusalem as their capital? If indeed that "Abu Dis" solution can be imposed on the "Palestinians" by their exasperated Arab brothers, that finally takes East Jerusalem, which the Israelis will never give up, off the table.

Sixth, Morrison could have announced that he was moving the Australian Embassy now, rather than making that move dependent on a peace settlement between Israelis and "Palestinians." The embassy move, the Prime Minister could roundly proclaim, simply recognizes several truths: that Jerusalem is the undivided capital of Israel, that Jerusalem is where the Israeli government is located and where, in order to conduct their business, diplomats have to go, now having to shuttle inconveniently to and from Tel Aviv. Jerusalem has been the holiest city in Judaism for thousands of years before the "Palestinian people" were invented. It has been the place where much of Jewish history was made, a place, too, of uninterrupted Jewish settlement under many different rulers – Roman, Persian, Byzantine, Arab, Turkish, British.

Morrison can also announce that he has reconsidered his original announcement, and decided to move the Australian Embassy to Jerusalem without further ado because of "Palestinian" intransigence. He could explain that "given the continuing refusal of the Palestine Authority to engage in negotiations with Israel, it seems wrong to punish the Israelis by linking our Embassy move to a peace settlement that the 'Palestinians' themselves are blocking. Furthermore, there have been several dreadful terrorist attacks recently on Israelis by 'Palestinian' Jihadis. Still worse, these

terrorists have been rewarded by the Palestinian Authority, which continues to give the families of terrorists large sums, in gruesome gratitude for their cowardly attacks. Our best response is to take Israel's side, and to show solidarity with Israeli victims. I think it is fitting and proper that as our answer to these attacks, we move the Embassy of Australia to Jerusalem, where many of us believe it has always, by right, belonged."

First published in