Middle East policy gap is a chasm

Paul Duffill

Weekend reports cited sensitive government documents that revealed senior officials were left scrambling to contain blowback from Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s October announcement that he was considering moving Australia’s embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. In advance of that announcement, Australian embassies were put on notice to boost security and upgrade travel warnings, emails obtained by the ABC show. After Morrison went public, missions in Indonesia and Malaysia shut down amid protests.

Now, as the 2019 election approaches, a range of voices have speculated (as have Morrison and Labor foreign affairs spokeswoman Penny Wong) about how the election will be impacted by arguably the most contentious foreign policy issue: Australia’s support for Israel, Palestine, and Middle East peace.

Presumably hoping to hose down the fallout, Morrison convened a review of his proposal and was an honorary research fellow at Sydney University. He was awarded the Isaac Roet Prize for research on peace-building in Israel-Palestine.

For that we have over 60 years of research in international conflict resolution which demonstrates that an imbalance of power and associated human rights abuses are a critical block to achieving peace through negotiations. Israel is carrying out illegal occupation and seizures of Palestinian families’ land in the West Bank – including in Palestinian East Jerusalem, which Israel captured in 1967 – to build Jewish-only settlements illegal under international law. Indeed, in 1992, around the beginning of the Oslo peace process, outgoing Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir remarked that had he remained in office he would have dragged out peace negotiations with Palestinians to buy time to dramatically increase Israeli settlements. Israel’s illegal settlements have more than doubled in size since the beginning of the “peace process”.

It is important to acknowledge rocket and knife attacks and other violence by Palestinians. At the same time, Israeli forces are committing serious violence against civilians, including Palestinian women and children. Israel maintains over 65 laws that discriminate against Palestinians. Israel also enforces (with some Egyptian support) a blockade and no-go zones in Gaza and has repeatedly used lethal force against unarmed protesters there. The UN reports Gaza is in a downward spiral of “development” trending towards “unlivable” conditions. Israel clearly enjoys a significant power advantage, and this is where Australian foreign policy comes in. Morrison’s recognition of West Jerusalem as Israel’s capital also

Palestinians’ right to a state or a capital in the Palestinian East Jerusalem, only acknowledging their “aspirations” for such. This double standard reflects a long-term pattern for Australia – particularly the Coalition. So it is striking that Labor has unanimously pledged to join 137 other nations and recognise Palestine as a state, once in government. This is an important step to reduce the hazardous power imbalance. All countries – including Australia – are required under international law to not support Israel’s illegal occupation.

Recognition of Palestine does not lock the parties into pursuing only the elusive “two-state solution” should it prove untenable and better solutions arise from genuine negotiations between the parties.

Paul Duffill lectures at Rikkyo University and was an honorary research fellow at Sydney University. He was awarded the Isaac Roet Prize for research on peace-building in Israel-Palestine.