Israel’s Illegal Occupation of the Golan Heights Remains an Obstacle to Peace

During the period of the last Labor government in Australia, the general policy of that government, which was in power for six years from 2008 to 2014, was to abstain on votes in the United Nations critical of Israel. When the Liberal government has been in power, as it has continuously since 2014, the vote is almost invariably against any motion critical of the actions of the Israeli government.

The reasons for this voting pattern are never explained. The Australian mainstream media maintains almost complete silence on this voting pattern. There is no reason to believe that the government’s attitude, as represented in the voting pattern, is in fact supported by the population as a whole. One suspects that the reason for the print media silence on the topic is that the general population do not in fact support the actions of the Israeli government that are regularly condemned by the United Nations General Assembly.

One of those topics regularly condemned by the General Assembly is the continued occupation of the Golan Heights by Israel. In 1968 Syria and Israel fought a brief war, in the course of which Israel captured the Syrian territory of the Golan Heights.

It is a fundamental principle of international law that no country may retain the land of another country captured in the course of a war. Yet that is precisely what the Israeli government has done. It has not only retained the Syrian territory, it has consistently ignored successive United Nations resolutions that the land must be vacated and
returned to its rightful owners, in this case the state of Syria.

It is not merely occupation of the seized land that Israel does. It has over the years consistently built thousands of homes that are occupied by Israeli settlers. That building of residences on the occupied land continues to the present day with the new Israeli government of Naftali Bennett recently announcing a further program of building domestic properties.

The principal reason for Israel ignoring the United Nations vote is that it has the support of the United States which consistently votes against all resolutions critical of Israeli conduct, including the continued illegal occupation of Syrian territory. It is one of the features of this voting that also Australia continuously votes in support of Israeli defiance. It is one of literally a handful of countries to do so.

A year ago, on 2 December 2020, there were five resolutions before the United Nations General Assembly on the topic of Israel’s continued defiance of international law. One of those resolutions, A/75/L.34 called for the “peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine.” The vote was 145 in favour and seven against, although one must wonder at the mentality of those who would vote against such a harmlessly worded resolution. The seven “No” votes followed a very similar pattern. They were Australia, Canada, Israel, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru and the United States.

These seven countries are part of a tiny minority that regularly vote against United Nations General Assembly resolutions critical of Israel. Three of the seven are inconsequential islands and depend on either the United States or Australia for their continued existence. Of the remaining four, they are the United States, Israel, and Australia and Canada, the latter two who in the United Nations act as affectively colonies of the United States.

This tiny group regularly vote together on resolutions critical of Israel’s conduct. What is of special interest to the Australian reader however, is that this voting pattern is consistently ignored by the mainstream media. They are all uniformly silent about the vote of the country whose opinions they purportedly represent.

The conclusion one is drawn to about the silence is that the media are ashamed of Australia’s pattern of support for Israel. It is not as if Australia is not infrequently loud in support of international law, or perhaps more accurately the American inspired notion of the “rules based international order”. This convenient fiction hides a multitude of sins, regularly put out to justify the latest United States violation of actual international law.

Although the Labor Party had a slightly more honourable position when in power, by abstaining on these votes condemning Israel’s blatant ignoring of international law, it is still a long way short of actually condemning the conduct, which is what a “No” vote would symbolise. If Labor wins the next election, as expected, there is unlikely to be any change in this pattern.

That party’s foreign affairs spokesperson, Penny Wong, has been conspicuously silent on Labor’s attitude to the continued unlawful conduct of Israel. On 1st of December the United Nations General Assembly adopted a further resolution on the topic, in one of its strongest ever statements. It declared as “null and void” the continued imposition of Israeli jurisdiction over the occupied territory.

In the resolution, adopted last Wednesday, and entitled “The Syrian Golan,” the vote recorded 94 votes in favour and 8 against, with 69 abstentions. The membership of the eight voters against the resolution was slightly changed from a similarly tiny group of a year before. On this occasion the eight “No” votes came from Australia, Canada, Israel, the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The resolution reaffirmed that settlement construction and other Israeli activities constituted a change in the demographic structure of the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. The resolution called on Israel to resume peace talks and withdraw from the occupied Syrian Golan Heights in accordance with the border lines that existed on 4 June 1967.

The Israeli decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration on the occupied Syrian Golan Heights was null and void, the resolution declared. Introducing the resolution, Egyptian representative Osama Mahmoud said that

“The international community must take a decisive position towards respect of international law and international resolutions, most important of which are the United Nations resolutions that reaffirm the inadmissibility of annexation of territories by force and the rejection of any unilateral measures or demographic changes in territories under occupation”, he said.
Speaking to the resolution, the Syrian representative Bassam Sabbagh noted that the General Assembly had called on Israel many times to end its occupation, and that Israel’s refusal to do so, protected by the United States and others to respect the Security Council resolution has led to an “unacceptable paralysis” of the United Nations.

The Israelis are undoubtedly emboldened in their illegal activities by the United States. In 2019, former United States president Donald Trump signed a decree recognising Israeli “sovereignty” over Golan. The decree was widely condemned and has not received any international support.

It is difficult to see a resolution of this issue. Israel is clearly determined to continue its illegal occupation of the Golan Heights. As long as it retains the support of the United States there is unlikely to be any change in that position. It represents a very sad day for international law.

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