

Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Australia angers Israel with U-turn on recognition of West Jerusalem as capital

Previous government's decision undermines efforts to resolve Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Canberra says



Australia maintains its embassy in Tel Aviv despite the Scott Morrison government in 2018 recognising West Jerusalem as Israel's capital © Amir Cohen/Reuters

James Shotter in Jerusalem YESTERDAY

Australia has reversed a four-year-old decision to recognise West Jerusalem as Israel's capital, in a U-turn that sparked an angry response from the Middle Eastern country.

Penny Wong, Australia's foreign minister, said the previous government's decision to [recognise West Jerusalem](#) undermined efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and had put Canberra "out of step with the majority of the international community".

"The Australian government remains committed to a two-state solution in which Israel and a future Palestinian state can coexist in peace and security within internationally recognised borders," she said on Tuesday. "We will not support an approach that undermines this prospect."

Israel's foreign ministry expressed "deep disappointment" at the decision, which it branded as one "resulting from short-sighted political considerations". It added that it would summon the Australian ambassador to express its concerns.

However, Hussein Sheikh, a senior Palestinian official, welcomed the move "and its affirmation that the future of sovereignty over Jerusalem depends on the permanent solution based on international legitimacy".

The status of Jerusalem is one of the most bitterly contested aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with Israel claiming the city as its “eternal and undivided capital” and the Palestinians seeking East Jerusalem, which Israel occupied during the 1967 six day war, as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

Most countries that have diplomatic relations with Israel maintain their embassies in the Mediterranean city of Tel Aviv, reflecting an international consensus that the final status of the holy city, home to sites sacred to Muslims, Jews and Christians, should be determined in peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

In 2017, then-US president Donald Trump broke ranks, recognising Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and [moving the US embassy](#) from Tel Aviv to the holy city. His move reversed decades of US policy and drew condemnation from the Palestinians as well as Washington’s allies in the Middle East and Europe.

The following year, Australia’s then-government, led by Scott Morrison, followed suit and recognised west Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, although the Australian embassy remained in Tel Aviv.

The announcement by Wong, a minister in Anthony Albanese’s centre-left government that ousted Morrison’s conservative administration in elections this May, followed a report by the Guardian newspaper that the [Australian foreign ministry](#) had removed language referring to West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel from its website.

Apart from the US, only a handful of countries, such as Kosovo and Guatemala, have their embassies in Jerusalem. However, UK Prime Minister Liz Truss has raised the prospect of relocating Britain’s embassy.

Despite Truss’s announcement, there so far has been little sign of a formal review of the proposal. The UK already maintains a consulate in East Jerusalem, which functions as a mission to the Palestinians, and also has a lease on a plot of land in the the city close to the Green Line, which served as Israel’s de facto border until the six-day war.

Arab states and foreign policy experts have been lobbying Truss’s government not to go ahead with the review, warning it would tarnish Britain’s reputation in the Middle East and risk stoking regional instability.

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