



Australia – Israel Eighth Annual

Be'er Sheva Dialogue

Proceedings and Outcomes

21 November 2022

*Prepared by Dr Anthony Bergin,
Australian Strategic Policy Institute*

Background

The Eighth Be'er Sheva Dialogue was held in Canberra on 21 November 2022, organised by ASPI in association with the Australia Israel & Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC). We kindly thank The Pratt Foundation for their sponsorship, as well as support from the Embassy of Israel in Australia.

The Dialogue is the peak independent platform for security exchange between the two nations. It's named after the Battle of Be'er Sheva, the historic triumph at Be'er Sheva led by British, Australian and New Zealand Army Corps troops on 31 October 1917. This year marks the 105th anniversary of the battle.

This Be'er Sheva Dialogue pursued a fresh path to advance security cooperation between Australia and Israel in the face of a worsening strategic outlook. The war in Ukraine, Iran's disruption to Middle East stability, including ongoing efforts to acquire a nuclear weapon, and Chinese belligerence in our region focused the discussion on the importance of urgently realising practical cooperative outcomes.

The Dialogue has advanced ideas to intensify the security relationship between our two countries in the eight years since it was co-founded by ASPI.

Due to increasing instability and growing strategic threats, the Dialogue stressed the need for our countries to work even more closely in a range of areas from defence, (such as establishing military to military talks, Israeli defence production in Australia, war college and military medicine exchanges) to cybersecurity and critical technologies, such as AI and quantum computing.

Several Australian delegates noted that we need to think more about energy security, supply chain resilience and developing sovereign manufacturing, which are areas Israel has expertise. Several participants stressed that Israel is an exemplar of a country with a strong, whole-of-nation strategic culture around national security and defence, and that Australia and other countries could learn from this.

Pre-Dialogue Dinner

The pre-Dialogue Dinner address was presented by Distinguished ASPI Fellow, former Defence Minister, Ambassador to the US and Governor of Western Australia, Kim Beazley AC. He was introduced by Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles.

Mr Beazley pointed out that “every Australian with a fascination for Australian foreign policy and national security must read Daniel Mandel’s *HV Evatt and the Establishment of Israel*. It tells in many ways a foundational story for the Be’er Sheva Dialogue. As we pursued developing our international story there at its heart is the record of Evatt’s brilliant diplomatic manoeuvring at the UN of fundamental importance in the creation of Israel.”

Mr Beazley pointed out that, “Now we face a new era where we confront the possibility of an existential crisis. We now have much to discuss. Our strategic geography could not be more different. However Israeli lessons in self-reliant inventiveness and production, establishing strategic systems, laser like focus on combined operations, missile defences, cyber, artificial intelligence, all create an intellectual environment we could well emulate”.

Mr Beazley suggested that this is “a useful background for the milieu we will enter when the Defence Strategic Review reports. Much of the vital material will be classified. Probably more than was the case with the Dobb report.”

Mr Beazley concluded by observing that, “we need to use what is public to create a political environment where the much-needed resources are delivered. The Israeli public is exemplary in that regard”.

Opening Address

The Dialogue was opened by the Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, Richard Marles. The Shadow Defence Minister Andrew Hastie also gave opening remarks. Attorney General Mark Dreyfus attended the Dialogue dinner, as did the Ambassadors from Israel and the UAE. Other Members of Parliament, including the deputy chair of the Parliamentary Friends of Israel Senator David Fawcett, also attended the dinner.



The Israeli delegation was led by Ambassador Mark Regev, head of the Abba Eban Institute and former Prime Ministerial advisor and international spokesperson from 2007-2016. The delegation included Major General Eyal Zamir, the former deputy chief of staff of Israel's Defence Force (and now Director General of Israel's Ministry of Defence); Brigadier General Yossi Kuperwasser who led the research and assessment division of Israeli military intelligence; Ehud Yaari, Middle East commentator for Israel's Channel 12 television; Zohar Palti, former head of the policy and political-military bureau at Israel's Ministry of Defence. Dr Anna Borshchevskaya, senior fellow at The Washington Institute and an expert on great

power competition and Russian policy in the Middle East, also came to Australia for the Dialogue.

Australian speakers and moderators were drawn principally from ASPI and included Justin Bassi, ASPI's Executive Director, Katja Theodorakis, Head of Counterterrorism Program, Dr Anthony Bergin, Senior Fellow, Dr John Coyne, Senior Analyst, Dr Malcolm Davis, Senior Analyst, Bec Shrimpton, Director-The Sydney Dialogue, Dr Marcus Hellyer, Senior Analyst, Dr Jake Wallis, Head of Information Operations and Disinformation Program, Kim Beazley, Distinguished Fellow and Gai Brodtmann, ASPI Council Member.

Other moderators included Sarah Pavillard, CEO, ADROITA and Dr Mike Kelly, President, Palantir Technologies Australia. Other participants included representatives from AIJAC, led by Executive Director Dr Colin Rubenstein, the Israeli embassy, including Defence Attaché Safi Amasha, the Australian Defence Organisation and Elbit Systems.

Session One

Partnership between powerful autocracies: China, Russia and Iran: Do we now have a common challenge?

As laid out during the Dialogue, there's growing cooperation between three powerful autocracies: China, Russia and Iran, with the latter's continued use of non-state actor proxies such as Hezbollah and Hamas and the supply of drones to Russia. Along with North Korea, the meeting discussed how this "rectangle of rogues" gave rise to common challenges and the need for practical cooperation between our two states and partners. Israeli participants discussed their country's changing relationship with China that's long sought access to Israel's innovation sector. While Israel had earlier focused on seizing economic opportunities, the country was now taking concerns about China seriously and viewing relations more through a national security prism. Israel has, for example, largely excluded Chinese companies from multiple infrastructure projects and is concerned about China's investment in tech.

One participant argued that China, Russia and Iran are learning from their respective playbooks and tweaking their coercive tools. It was suggested that we are in a “warm war”: the rules based international order is under threat as China and Russia in particular not only breach existing international rules but try to change the rules and set new precedents. It was noted that there are significant cybersecurity challenges and information warfare being faced by Australia from Russian and Chinese actors. Both the Middle East region and the Indo-Pacific region were presented with opportunities and risks from technological advancement. China, Russia and Iran all seek to control their citizens domestically through technology while increasing their influence internationally, including through disinformation and societal disruption. It was agreed that technology was a dominant feature of the geostrategic competition, and that Australia and Israel should increase discussion on the implications of technological advancement across both the military and civil sectors.

Session Two

Counterterrorism in a geopolitically contested and distracted world

On counterterrorism, an Australian participant noted that the public discussion here had shifted towards right wing terrorism right while there was still a threat from Salafi jihadism. It was also noted that the traditional terms of right wing and left wing were becoming less relevant as threats were increasingly based on specific issue grievances and less political ideology (for example the Covid lockdown protests saw members of all political persuasions, and none come together). One delegate argued that small and resilient nations need to ensure against a siloed approach to counterterrorism and look at how we can integrate agencies and capabilities better to counter evolving threats.

It was suggested that Israel's approach to counterterrorism often varies from that of Australia as Israel must maintain a focus on the threats at and within its borders in a way Australia hasn't faced. In addition to threats posed by terrorism and extremism, mainly from ungoverned spaces in the Middle East and with higher risks to Australian abroad than within Australia, the intelligence and security priorities have shifted to other threats in our immediate region, notably heightened geostrategic competition and challenges to the prevailing rules based international order.



Australia, one participant argued, maintains a definite view of terrorism as a clear threat, but one that is predominantly contained. The latest threat assessment by ASIO had judged espionage and foreign interference as higher threats to Australia than terrorism. By contrast, in Israel, the threat of terrorism and violent extremism is much more palpable.

One Australian delegate observed democracies experience a “democratic paradox” when it comes to counterterrorism: we’re made vulnerable to certain threats by virtue of our own openness but also give ourselves the best opportunity to be resilient and overcome such threats by our inclusion and transparency. There must be a balance

between protecting civilians against terrorism and the acts of violent extremists, while also ensuring liberal values and principles are upheld.

It was noted that state-sponsored terrorism has changed existing understandings of the nature and form of terrorist threats, as has the potential for nuclear terrorism. There was some discussion on how each country manages terrorists in prison and it was noted that Australia has a unique system for dealing with post-detention terrorists, including the issuing of continued detention orders if a convicted terrorist is deemed to pose an unacceptable risk at the end of their sentence.

An Israeli delegate suggested that lone-wolf terrorism remains a massive strategic problem and stressed the need for enhanced cooperation of intelligence, to develop special weapons, techniques, and systems and the need to monitor populations when balancing democratic rights and preventing harm. Global partnerships remained as important as ever. Israel had shared information with Australia and both countries worked well with other nations and agencies. For Australia, it remained the case that the threat from terrorism was higher for Australians travelling in Southeast Asia than at home which meant it was vital for agencies like the AFP to work intimately with regional partners such as the Indonesian national police.

Session Three

The implications of Putin's war in Ukraine

Delegates commented that Australia and Israel had different histories and relationships with Russia. Israeli delegates noted they had reached practical understanding with Russia to enable Israel's military continued freedom of action against Iranian and other targets in Syria. Some Western countries continued to pressure Israel to provide Ukraine with air defence systems against missiles and kamikaze drone attacks. While Israel has currently refrained from providing such assistance, instead opting for the provision of humanitarian aid through the supply of high-grade medical technology, it was made clear that as a member of free liberal nations Israel isn't neutral when it comes to superpower rivalry. Israel supported

Ukraine's sovereignty but there were practical considerations that needed to be managed.

One participant argued that the war in Ukraine is far from over and that while it's easy to be euphoric when looking at battlefield outcomes, there is much left to do. It was suggested that only a decisive Russian military defeat could resolve this conflict. Another Israeli participant argued that it would not be possible to totally defeat Russia militarily so only a diplomatic solution would be possible, meaning both sides must at some point be willing to make sacrifices on their position.

From Russia's perspective, they have greater resources and still have commitment by virtue of their "messianic mission" in Ukraine. One participant noted that it's challenging to eradicate an idea: Putin's idea that Ukraine is not a real country and deserves to be eliminated. It was noted that Russia still controls a fifth of Ukrainian territory (up from 7% at the beginning of the war).

Western nations and institutions had shown remarkable resilience and unity but, in terms of actual military assistance, a significant proportion was coming from the United States and other countries, particularly across the European Union, would



need to step up over the long term to outlast Russia. Complementing Ukrainian military resistance and vital to both the immediate response to Russia's invasion and the long-term support for the effort against Russia, was the Ukrainian effectiveness in winning the information/narrative war.

The importance of the private sector was also discussed. An Australian participant argued that we must acutely consider the role of the private sector in providing operationally and strategically useful technologies onto the battlefield. The non-government sector's direct involvement in the war had been a new and surprising element and as a result there was a lack of government structure to both manage and track this private sector engagement in the war. There was a discussion on the "responsibility to protect" doctrine and the implications of Russia's illegal invasion upon this shared understanding among western states. One participant noted that when things start going badly on the military front, "our opponents will go to human security targets, and destabilise areas such as energy, healthcare and food security". This raised questions for several delegates regarding how these lessons can inform our understanding of future conflicts.

Session Four

Accelerating capability into the hands of our militaries: The need for change and the need for speed

From a military perspective, the Dialogue noted how modern conflicts highlighted the need for emerging technology and how Israel had been driven by urgency and the need to propel advanced capabilities into the hands of its military. It was pointed out that over the last 10 years, Israel had been the world's 8th largest defence exporter (ahead of Australia) despite being the 28th largest economy. Israel had only been the 18th largest arms importer despite its very precarious strategic circumstances, while Australia was the 5th largest importer.

Australian delegates suggested that Russia's war on Ukraine and the judgment that conflict around the world, including in the Indo-Pacific, was no longer a mere hypothetical but credible, we could no longer afford a "slow food movement"

approach to the enhancement of weapon systems required for high-end warfighting. We could learn from Israel's experience in how they acquire cutting edge capabilities. One suggestion was that Israel and Australia establish a counter-drone task force.

An Australian participant also promoted the idea of greater dialogue and cooperation in space. Reservations were expressed regarding the location of Israel's main space launching site at Palmachim so it was suggested one avenue for discussion could be the potential for Israel to launch satellites from Australia as part of a broader cooperation in space that could include small satellite development by both states, namely for space-based intelligence gathering. It was recommended that a 1.5 Track dialogue focused on space cooperation be undertaken between Australia and Israel as one step in this process.



A number of Australian delegates argued Australia needed all the help it could get to improve capabilities and it should look to Israel. One Israeli participant suggested that: "There are some things you can't rush: Israel's missile defence system is critical to the country's security, but it took time to become reality".

With the Australian debate about defence capabilities, including through the current Defence Strategic Review that has a focus on the military requirements across the next decade, it was suggested that Australia needed to “consider whether [we] are okay having a capability gap in the intermediate period or need to buy capability from overseas”. This focused the discussion on the meaning of sovereignty and to what extent capabilities needed to be localised versus making the most of trusted and reliable partners. Workforce constraints was another key issue. An Israeli participant suggested the most important lesson from the Be’er Sheva battle that’s true today is that the human factors are the decisive ones: “we need to invest in our people”.

Session Five

Political warfare, hybrid threats and the grey zone

Participants discussed Russia’s application of hybrid warfare and information warfare techniques in Ukraine and how they’d proven less effective than expected. Israel and Australia, it was suggested, could share insights, including with other partners, on how to carry out and mitigate successful information operations.

All participants agreed that a combination of soft and hard power (or diplomatic and defence) was needed for countries to both protect their own national security and have international influence. One Israeli participant argued that diplomatic soft power is irrelevant without military hard power, contending that hearts and minds are only useful if you continue to survive. Israel was acutely aware of its own challenges associated with reputation and narrative but that a “soft” approach ultimately risked sacrificing hard power advantages and defence capabilities and security outweighed diplomatic niceties. While Israel’s unique circumstances were accepted, it was suggested that governments ultimately had the obligation of being better at strategically messaging the need for military capabilities and that investment in strategic diplomacy didn’t have to be at the expense of defence but rather should be complementary and supportive.

An Australian participant noted China’s expertise in the use of technology to achieve strategic and malicious purposes. From cyber intrusions to online disinformation campaigns, Beijing saw technology as a tool to coerce at a threshold below war. The

benefits and limitations of public attributions of information campaigns linked to the state was discussed. Attributions could be a first or initial step but without longer term enforcement mechanisms they are unlikely to act as a deterrent. It was noted that Australia's intelligence agencies are firmly focused on countering foreign interference, with ASIO having publicly assessed espionage and foreign interference as the nation's top security threat. The Chinese government was adept at not only undertaking information warfare operations but messaging that any counter-response to their actions should be viewed through a race lens. Western countries subject to such hybrid threats needed to be conscious that diaspora groups were a target of the Chinese Communist Party, including to coerce and foment social disharmony. Policies that countered such hybrid warfare needed to separate communities from governments and regimes.

The mistake of silence was discussed. The Russian war on Ukraine had highlighted how important it was to counter disinformation, lies and propaganda with information. It was suggested that the intelligence released before the Ukraine conflict undercut Putin's legitimacy and was able to bring along western publics from the start. One delegate noted that Russia's invasion was unique from a US perspective in that it was the first-time intelligence was shared in an attempt to deter a war. While ultimately the public information campaign did not deter Putin, it may have delayed the invasion for weeks, created more challenges for Putin who was used to and expecting an information vacuum and ensured global awareness of the lack of justification for the invasion. Putin had been on the back foot ever since.

Closing remarks

Closing remarks were given by Ambassador Mark Regev, Colin Rubenstein and Justin Bassi. A recurring message during the Dialogue was that Israel's experience with respect to sovereign development of defence and security capabilities and enhancement of weapon systems could be a valuable one for Australia to learn.

This was summed up by the Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles in opening the Dialogue:

Australia looks to Israel as an example of a nation which has been a leader in defence strategic thinking—be it in regard to its defence industry capabilities (and the innovation system, economy and workforce built around that) or in regard to its deep cultural relationship with science and technology. As we look forward, we need to think about how we can continue to deepen our bilateral relationship, which also extends to the relationship between our militaries and defence industries.

The Dialogue again highlighted that there's significant potential for growth in the security relationship, especially military to military cooperation and sharing experiences and perspectives of defence industry. Israeli delegates expressed their country's willingness to share technology and innovation and a desire to build on the existing government MOU on defence industry cooperation. Importantly, notwithstanding the priority for Australia of the Indo-Pacific coupled with the focus on Russia's illegal war on Ukraine, the Dialogue concluded that there's much more to be done by Australia and Israel to work together and with allies such as the US to tackle the strategic challenges both countries face. The common threats remained vast, from countering terrorism and foreign interference to combatting authoritarian regimes that sought to achieve strategic objectives through means such as economic coercion and abuse of technology.

Throughout the dialogue, both sides agreed on the importance of ongoing and regular bilateral discussions, including due to the alignment of Australia-Israel national interests in a range of areas. As friends and partners, it was also agreed it was essential to have frank and open discussion, including importantly where there were different viewpoints. The sign of an intimate relationship was where differences

and disagreements could be discussed and resolved openly. This was reflected in our dialogue, which included discussion of the Australian Government's decision to reverse recognition of West Jerusalem, the prospects for a two-state solution, the application of sanctions on Iran for its violation of human rights, the views of Israel in countries such as Indonesia and the respective relationships with China and Russia. The Be'er Sheva Dialogue remains an invaluable forum for having these candid and constructive debates. The participants looked forward to the 2023 Dialogue in Israel.