

Submission by Friends of Bethlehem Inc.

Into: DFAT Feasibility Study on Strengthening Trade and Investment with Israel

The Friends of Bethlehem Inc. is a group in Sydney's inner west which aims to build and develop the sister-city relations between the city of Bethlehem in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the Inner-West Council.

As an organisation, the Friends of Bethlehem Inc. seeks to make Australians better informed of the situation for Palestinians in the Middle East, and we also provide a scholarship for a Palestinian woman studying nursing at the University of Bethlehem.

The Friends of Bethlehem Inc. does not believe that Australia should extend any further favourable trade agreements with the State of Israel, such as a free trade agreement, until Israel accepts its responsibility as a global citizen and begins to respect United Nations resolutions and ceases their military rule and control of the Occupied Palestinian Territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip (which is virtually a large, open-air prison). We consider this continuing military occupation to be a major barrier to trade.

When Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in February and March 2014, Australia was quick to respond with sanctions against Russia and travel bans and financial sanctions against the Russian leaders. However, Israel invaded and annexed the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem in 1967, and Australia still has taken no action. Even the annexation by Israel of a part of neighbouring Syria known as the Golan Heights drew no condemnation by our government. Since 1967, Israel has progressively ethnically cleansed parts of the West Bank of Palestinians to make room for illegal settlements, and again, no condemnation from the Australian government. It would be wrong to reward any government which acts in this manner with special trade agreements.

While the Australian government continue to say that we support "a two State solution" we make no efforts to take the steps to ensure this happens. As a country, we do not even recognise the Palestinian people and their legitimate aspirations to their own nation, even though we very quickly (and rightly) recognised Israel when they had driven enough Palestinians off their land to establish their own State of Israel in 1948.

Australia played a major and significant role in the formation of the United Nations after World War II, with Dr Evatt playing a lead role in both its formation, and its ethos through such things as the UN Declaration of Human Rights. However, although Australia is a signatory of the United Nations, and has ratified most of their decisions, Australia turns a blind eye to Israel's continuing rejection of various UN Resolutions (General Assembly Resolutions 232 and 438) and also Security Council Resolution 238 which call on them to end their military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. As a foundation member of the United Nations, Australia should be supporting multilateral efforts to solve international problems, rather than allowing the world's fourth most powerful military machine to ride roughshod over a people who have no army or weapons of self-defence. If we truly believe

in international law rather than “might is right”, then we should not reward the State of Israel with favourable trade agreements.

Moreover, we strongly believe that it would send the wrong message to Palestinians, Israeli citizens and the whole of the Middle East if we sought to reward the State of Israel with increased trade liberalisation while elements of the Israeli military are under investigation by the International Criminal Court for their treatment of Palestinians living under their military occupation. We certainly should not be involved in any military trade, either purchasing or selling military software or hardware with Israel while these international investigations are underway. We include here any software or algorithms dealing with facial recognition. Australians would not tolerate our government purchasing such equipment from the Chinese government because of their human rights failings – what makes you think Australians would approve of such purchases from Israel with an even worse human rights record.

Our strongest condemnation would be for any trade whatsoever for goods made in the illegal Israeli settlement in the West Bank. Like Europe, we should ban any such goods from being exported to Australia. Would we allow goods to be exported to Australia if they were made by Uighurs in the Chinese western province of Xinjiang?

The Friends of Bethlehem Inc. believe that trade liberalisation or a free trade agreement with Israel would be giving a stamp of approval and normalisation to Israel’s continuing illegal military occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the continued construction of illegal settlements on Palestinian land. If and when the two state solution is completed, and the Palestinian people are living in freedom in their own nation within internationally recognised borders, then it would be an appropriate time to consider a free trade agreement with both nations, Israel and Palestine.

Peter Jennings
Chairperson
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