



AUSTRALIAN MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS

E-mail [australia@un.int](mailto:australia@un.int)

150 East 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, New York NY 10017-5612 Ph 212 - 351 6600 Fax 212 - 351 6610 [www.AustraliaUN.org](http://www.AustraliaUN.org)

**United Nations General Assembly**  
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## **Statement to the UN on the Situation in the Middle East**

**Statement by H.E. Gary Quinlan  
Ambassador and Permanent Representative  
of Australia to the United Nations**

(Check against delivery)

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Mr President,

It has been a turbulent year. The historic changes taking place across the Middle East and North Africa demonstrate clearly the common human aspiration for freedom, justice and peace.

As Australia's Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd, said to the 66<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, "the cry for freedom and for democracy, is both indivisible and universal."

"Australia stands with the rest of the international community in applauding the courage of those citizens seeking what is naturally theirs — in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Libya — and now in Syria and across the wider Middle East."

The Tunisian people have led the way by bringing about unimagined changes in less than 12 months. The historic democratic election for Tunisia's National Congress in October was a credit to the Tunisian people. The successful opening session of the National Constituent Assembly on 22 November is another example of the successful steps Tunisia has taken towards establishing the institutions necessary to underpin democracy. Much work remains – including the drafting of a new constitution and holding of

presidential elections – but Tunisia is moving steadily towards realising the democratic aspirations of its people.

Egypt's transition faces many challenges and will require tolerance, respect and patience. The democratic aspirations of the Egyptian people must be respected, the rule of law maintained and human rights protected.

Australia is deeply troubled by the recent clashes in Egypt that have resulted in the deaths of dozens of people and injuries to thousands more. It is crucial that all parties work together to re-establish calm and stability, and to progress Egypt's democratic transition to civilian rule. We are encouraged by initial positive reports of strong participation by Egyptians in elections. Despite some reports of violence and voting irregularities, the elections appear to be progressing well and this is a credit to the Egyptian people.

Australia recognises the courage of the Libyan people in standing up to a regime that had long lost touch with the rights of its people. We welcome the UN system's swift and decisive response to the threat to Libyan civilians posed by Qaddafi and his forces at the start of the year. We further welcome the commitment shown by the new authorities in Libya to uphold the principles of the revolution, including respect for the rule of law, democracy and the protection of human rights.

Australia provided humanitarian assistance to the Libyan people during the conflict. With a contribution of \$41.1 million, we were the third-largest humanitarian donor.

With the announcement of a Libyan Transitional Government on 22 November Australia stands ready to take forward – under the coordination of the United Nations - support for Libya's political and economic transition.

As the Libya transition showed, the Arab League has a leading role to play in assisting positive transformation in the Arab world.

We whole-heartedly support the Arab League's efforts to end the bloodshed in Syria.

We urge Syria to cooperate with the Arab League, to stop its brutality, and to implement credible democratic reforms. President Assad should step aside to allow these changes to begin without delay.

We commend the many brave Syrians who continue to demand their legitimate freedoms. In circumstances where the Syrian authorities are failing to implement meaningful reform and reneging on their commitments to regional leaders to end the violence, Australia calls on the UN Security Council to demonstrate the same courage by continuing to condemn the violence and to refer the situation to the International Criminal Court.

Mr President,

Australia welcomes the signing of the agreement on 23 November in Riyadh between Yemeni President Saleh and the representatives of Yemen's ruling and opposition parties, and the subsequent announcement of new Presidential elections to take place on 21 February 2012. We commend the work of the Gulf Cooperation Council in brokering the agreement.

On Lebanon – we remain firm in our support for the sovereignty, independence and unity of the Lebanese state and its people. We continue to call on all parties to cooperate with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon in accordance with UNSCR 1757, and to allow it to complete its work.

Against the background of the political upheaval in much of the region, we have not lost sight of longstanding threats to its stability, notably Iran's nuclear program, and the still unanswered question about Iran's nuclear weapons-related activities. We urge Iran to comply with its obligations under successive UN Security Council Resolutions and to engage seriously and without preconditions in talks on its nuclear program.

We also condemn the storming of the British embassy and diplomatic compound in Tehran yesterday, and call on Iran to ensure it fulfils its international obligations by preventing any such future incidents, including by investigating the attacks and prosecuting those responsible.

Mr President,

It is obvious that events in the Middle East and North Africa are changing wider political dynamics, even as we watch. People throughout the region are making their voices heard and are demanding governments which will be responsive to the legitimate aspirations of their peoples for greater transparency, democracy and inclusiveness. We need to recognize this profound shift in the dynamics of the region demands that efforts to resolve conflicts in the region be re-energised.

Pre-eminent among these is the situation of Israel and Palestine. Australia remains committed to a negotiated two-state solution that allows a secure Israel to live side-by-side with a secure and independent Palestinian state.

We commend ongoing international efforts to promote direct talks to realise peace, including by the Quartet and in the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative.

We have consistently called on Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas to resume direct negotiations.

These should occur on the basis of the 1967 lines plus mutually-agreed land swaps. Other final status issues should also be resolved through these direct negotiations.

We recognise the legitimate concern of Israel that its security be assured. This is an essential condition to be met through the negotiations for an enduring, peaceful solution. We are concerned that in the absence of a negotiated settlement, the security situation could rapidly deteriorate in the year ahead.

It is, therefore, of pressing importance that Israelis and Palestinians refrain from provocative actions which undermine confidence. This includes the new construction and expansion of Israeli settlements and outposts which are an obstacle to the Middle East peace process.

"above all"

It is essential also for the continued success of the Palestinian state-building effort, and the viability of the Palestinian Authority, that Israel maintain tax transfers to the Authority without interruption.

Mr President,

We applaud the success of Prime Minister Fayyad in building the necessary economic and institutional base for statehood. We seriously commend the progress that has been achieved - against the odds - in the implementation of the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan, including greatly improved security control of the West Bank and strong economic performance by the Palestinian Authority.

Australia itself in September signed a five-year Partnership Agreement with the Palestinian Authority. We will provide well over \$300 million over the next five years to the Authority. We will provide a significant scholarships program to train Palestinians in Australia. This is because an independent, viable Palestinian state requires predictable funding to plan ahead and to budget for the provision of services that any functioning state must be able to provide its citizens.

Australia is also among the main donors to the UN Relief and Works Agency. We are increasing our support through a new, five-year partnership which will provide predictable levels of financial assistance; we see multi-year funding as essential.

The situation on the ground in Gaza remains extremely serious. We welcome the relaxation of some Israeli restrictions on access to and from Gaza, but we remain seriously concerned about the humanitarian situation in Gaza. The international community made it clear that this is unacceptable. We also recognise Israel's legitimate security concerns and condemn ongoing rocket attacks on Israel.

"unambiguously"

Mr President,

The parties can help shape the rapidly changing geo-politics of the region by reaching a peace agreement now; if we do not see the Middle East peace process concluded in the near term, the prospects of a lasting settlement may become remote.

As a friend of Israel, we encourage the Netanyahu Government to engage a Palestinian leadership that shares the aim of reaching a two-state solution.

As a friend of the Palestinian people, we believe the time has come for direct negotiations without preconditions.

It really is a simple linear equation: a successful outcome to this process would provide the conditions for the Israeli people to realise the right to live in security and the Palestinian people to realise the right of self-determination.

Australia steadfastly supports both of these rights.

