



AUSTRALIA



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Plenary

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Item 14: The Situation in the Middle East

Statement by Dr Andrew Southcott MP Parliamentary Adviser to the Delegation of Australia to the United Nations

(Check against delivery)

Mr President

Last year when Australia spoke under this item, we had some grave concerns over the situation in the Middle East and our prognosis was bleak. One year later, we have seen some significant changes, and while much remains that is of concern, nevertheless we feel there is cause for at least guarded optimism. After a long period of stagnation on negotiations and a vicious spiral of violence, some heartening steps have been made on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process – including Israel's remarkable withdrawal from Gaza. And although the Middle East continues to experience the evils of terrorism, we have been encouraged by some of the spirit of cooperation that has underscored the international community's efforts to eradicate this scourge.

Mr President

The Australian Government has been a steadfast supporter of the spread of democracy, including in the Middle East. Not only do we believe that democracy will bring greater freedom to the peoples of the Middle East, but that it will also encourage a more stable and secure environment, and in turn achieve a sense of security that has been so sorely lacking.

Australia thinks the sceptics who say democracy is a Western concept that will never take root in the Middle East are wrong. Democracy is a liberating concept that has equal relevance and application to all the peoples of the world. Not limited by geography, by culture nor by faith, the merits and appeal of democracy are truly universal. We have seen this when looking at the Iraqi people and the way that after decades of living under a brutal regime they have eagerly embraced the opportunity to determine their own government and shape their own future. And we have seen it this year in Lebanon with their democratic elections free from outside interference, symbolising a new found freedom and national unity. These examples do not by any means exhaust the list of promising democratic developments in the region. No one should underestimate the challenges that lie ahead for the region, but the dynamics are more promising than we have seen for some time.

Mr President

The establishment of a Palestinian state living in peace, security and prosperity alongside Israel remains the paramount goal of the Middle East peace process and we were buoyed by some progress made toward this objective in 2005.

Australia commended Egypt's hosting of the February summit in Sharm El-Sheik, which promoted agreement between President Abbas and Prime Minister Sharon to formally end more than four years of bloodshed. While significant in its own right, this agreement also helped pave the way for Israel's historic withdrawal from Gaza.

Australia recognised and applauded the courage and commitment shown by Prime Minister Sharon in successfully achieving Israel's disengagement from Gaza. Disengagement should bring renewed hope and an invigorated momentum to the Roadmap to Middle East peace and we urge both parties not to pass up this opportunity to give further impetus to the peace process .

While significant steps have indeed been taken this year and we remain optimistic about the chances for lasting peace, we recognise the major challenges that remain. A commitment by the Palestinians to stop terrorism and incitement to further bloodshed, and by Israel to address the issue of settlements will remain pivotal.

It is incumbent on us all to help the parties to the dispute to seize the opportunities now at hand. Australia will continue to support practical measures to push the peace process forward. The secondment in 2005 of an Australian Defence Force officer to the International Security Sector Working Group, which is working with Israel and the Palestinian Authority, is but one example of the tangible contribution we have made. We also continue to provide practical support to the Palestinian people through our aid program.

Mr President

Iraq has come a long way since Australia spoke last year. We saw many brave Iraqis turn out to vote for a new government on 30 January and again for a new constitution on 15 October. We congratulate the brave Iraqi people and wish them all the best as they prepare to vote again for a permanent government on 15 December. Mr President, throughout the year we have seen all sides of Iraqi politics and society begin to engage in the political process. And in this the Iraqi people have so clearly demonstrated that they have chosen freedom and democracy over the dark tyranny of terrorism. This brave choice deserves all our support and we encourage the international community to redouble its efforts in support of Iraq and its people as they seek to create freedom and prosperity.

Iraq's neighbours have a particular role to play in stopping the flow of terrorists, and the arms and funds that would support terrorists, to Iraq. For its part Australia will not falter in its commitment to Iraq as it journeys towards a stable democracy governed by the rule of law.

Mr President

As a member of the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Australia has worked and will continue to work constructively in support of international efforts to resolve the many outstanding questions about Iran's nuclear activities and to obtain credible assurances from Iran that its nuclear activities are for exclusively peaceful purposes.

In keeping with the concerns expressed by Secretary General Annan in late October, Australia registered strong condemnation of Iranian President Ahmadinejad's comments calling for Israel to be "wiped off the map". Such extremist views were totally unacceptable and did nothing to reassure the international community that Iran is prepared to be a responsible international citizen.

Mr President

The situation in the Middle East today remains a major challenge for us all. Now is the time for the international community and the United Nations work together and to encourage those measures which encourage stability and security for the Middle East and which will help build a better future for all its peoples.