

DFAT White Paper: Bob Bowker comments on Middle East-related issues

On the basis of over 45 years working mainly on and in the Arab and Muslim world, including 37 years with DFAT as a Middle East specialist, and as a UN official and academic, I offer some thoughts regarding the direction of Australian policy toward the Middle East region in coming years. I would welcome an opportunity to discuss these issues with the Task Force in more detail.

The Middle East will remain a major focus for Australian policy makers. It is a region in transition whose economic and political trajectory is uncertain. That uncertainty is set to continue for at least a decade hence, fostered by uneven economic growth, security and political challenges to the authority of governments, deep-seated rivalries between leading regional governments, and the rise and entrenchment of sectarian divisions. Developments in the region affect the interests of the major global powers, pose serious challenges to multilateral institutions and alliance relationships important to Australia, and command the attention of significant audiences in Australia and elsewhere.

Because of the political and strategic importance accorded to the region in Washington, Australian policy toward the Middle East will continue to be shaped to a large extent by concern for the anticipated consequences of policy decisions for the effective management of the ANZUS alliance.

There is also, of course, substantial overlap between Australian and US interests in certain aspects of the Middle East. We are both affected by the challenges of terrorism and jihadist ideology directed against western interests. We have developed worthwhile defence and intelligence links with Arab countries of the region, largely because of the need to ensure the protection of Australian forces deployed in conjunction with the US presence. We have a lightly-staffed but comprehensive diplomatic presence across the region.

Like the US, and most other western countries, Australia has a substantial stake in the stability of the Persian Gulf. It is an important market for primary products and a growing source of support for Australian tertiary industry, including the education and tourism sectors. Global economic security and Australia's economic well-being depend to some extent on Middle East energy (both oil and gas) being readily available to major consumers. We would prefer to see governments in the region that are accountable, stable and progressive in the values they promote.

A secure Middle East protects and promotes those Australian interests.

Australian firms, individuals and embassies have sustained an enviable reputation for Australia in the Arab world and Iran over many decades. In large part, that situation arises because in the eyes of the region we remain without historical baggage. Few are aware of our history of military activity in the region. We are seen as honest and reliable interlocutors from a country devoid of self-seeking political agendas where the region is concerned.

Our commitment to Israel and other governments seen to be responsive to our values and interests is generally accepted by those who may hold very different views of those governments themselves.

We are not seen as an important interlocutor on the major security and political questions shaping the regional outlook. In practice, when Australian interests are pursued in bilateral dealings, our stance on the detail of regional political issues has proven to be inconsequential. We should be content for that to remain the case.

In the multilateral domain, however, our ability to command respect and to secure regional support, especially for Australian candidacies, will be made easier if our overall policy positions are broadly in step with other western countries regarding issues of particular sensitivity. Prominent among those issues will be western responses to Israeli settlement activity, the status of Jerusalem, the rights of minorities and dealings with Iran and Syria.

In a rapidly changing Arab social context, it is also in Australia's interest to see our values known and respected in the Middle East.

Generational changes, graduate unemployment, global connectivity and debate over what it means to be Arab or Iranian, Muslim and 'modern' are reshaping Arab and Iranian society. Attitudes toward authority, and gender, are changing. Demographic and environmental pressures will pose enormous social challenges in most countries of the region in the coming decade, particularly if economic growth remains inadequate to allow remaking of traditional or familiar, but increasingly dysfunctional, authoritarian political and economic systems.

However Arab and Iranian values will only be rebooted by those societies themselves. External ambitions to affect that process directly are likely to produce unintended consequences, most likely to the disadvantage of those reformists we would wish to see succeed.

A more productive approach over coming decades for Australia would be to seek opportunities for advancing people to people and institution to institution cooperation. That will apply especially in areas where Australia's reputation for providing expertise relevant to regional countries' needs is highest.

Food security concerns loom large for the region, and Australia has almost unique skills and experience to share. In that regard the end of Australian assistance through ACIAR to dryland farming research in the region through the International Center for Agriculture Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) was especially unfortunate. Not only was ICARDA an institution that showcased Australian skills and technology, but the end of Australian support limited the contact between Australian and Arab researchers and research programs to our mutual disadvantage.

We should restore Australian funding to ICARDA, and seek more such opportunities for capacity building using Australian expertise—including in such non-traditional areas as regulatory reform, taxation, curriculum development, mining regulation and environment law.

At the same time, we should remain consistent in affirming the values underpinning our foreign policy in regard to multilateral cooperation, including the role of United Nations agencies, notably UNRWA, and the UN Security Council. In the Middle East context, as elsewhere, multilateral approaches to building peace and security, while imperfect, nevertheless serve Australian interests better than departure from the obligations upon state actors and the moral authority arising from international law.

We should focus on lending practical support to programs to strengthen the observance of human rights in the region, rather than taking a higher profile than other western countries on concerns about the record of individual countries. But we should not disassociate ourselves from criticism of Israel, Iran, Turkey, Syria and others—including both state and non-state actors—where their actions impact upon Australian interest in the emergence of a stable, secure and progressive region, and challenge respect for international humanitarian law.

Securing Australia's interests within the ANZUS alliance framework requires continued careful calibration of the nature and timing of Australian commitments and pronouncements, based on

evaluation of where the balance of Australian interests may lie. Responses to the needs of the alliance can take a variety of forms, and calls for Australian military involvement, in particular, need to be weighed against clear-sighted evaluation of the goals, objectives, achievability and sustainability of US approaches. We may have to manage adroitly what ultimately we cannot entirely control.

The capacity to make such judgements will hinge upon having the expertise independently to evaluate regional conditions and to assess the potential risks and benefits of possible Australian actions. The area skills, including language skills relevant to the region, and the networks developed since 1973 among regional defence and security circles need actively to be maintained. Ministerial visits to the region, both federal and state, are important for the networking opportunities they provide.

There is also a need to build area skills in other Australian government agencies contributing their expertise to policy deliberations. And investment of resources in the capacity of the embassy in Washington to keep Canberra abreast of US policy thinking in regard to the Middle East will be vital to the protection of Australian interests in an environment—both in the United States and in the Middle East—which promises to be less predictable than usual.