

Accidents of Eccentricity: Israel's Pacific Hold

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Cunning, subtle, understated. Israeli policy in the Pacific has seen United Nations votes cast in its favour, the foreign policies of certain countries adjusted, and favours switched. While China may be considered the big, threatening beast competing alongside that large, clumsy figure called the United States, the small state of Israel is directing its expertise, and charm, in very specific ways in the Indo-Pacific.

When it came to voting for a nonbinding resolution in the United Nations General Assembly on the subject of a "humanitarian truce" regarding the conflict in Gaza in October, 14 countries were [steadfastly opposed](#). Of those were six Pacific Island states: Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Tonga, Nauru, Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia.

The same pattern could be seen in 2012, when a mere nine nations [voted against](#) the issue of recognising Palestinian statehood, among them being Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Palau and Nauru.

A few theories have been offered on this seemingly anomalous occurrence. Grant Wyeth [suggests](#) that the dynamics of power in this context may be less significant than that of faith and religious force. "Much of the Pacific is highly observant in their Christianity, and they have an eschatological understanding of humanity." Wyeth emphasises those Protestant denominations that took a keen interest in the creation of Israel in 1948.

Much as with the hot fire evangelicals that helped Ronald Reagan win the White House in 1980, Israel's creation was seen prophetically, the biblical step to religious finality. Eschatologically speaking, the Jewish people needed to return to the Holy Land for the final rites of humanity to be read. (Previously antisemitic bible bashers now had a strategic reason to like Jewry, knowing that, in the Final Judgment, the inhabitants of Israel would be pegged to God's finishing line.) "Support for Israel is therefore a deeply held spiritual belief, one that sits alongside Pacific Islands' other considerations of interests and opportunities

when forming foreign policies.”

Papua New Guinea offers one such example, having become one of just five countries to formally open an embassy in the contested city of Jerusalem. On the occasion of its opening in September, PNG **Prime Minister James Marape** effusively [declared](#) that, “We are here to give respect to the people of Israel to the fullest.” The embassy’s establishment had taken place “because of our shared heritage, acknowledging the creator God, the Yahweh God of Israel, the Yahweh God of Isaac and Abraham.”

The religious theme throbs throughout Marape’s justifications.

“Many nations choose not to open their embassies in Jerusalem but we made a conscious choice. This has been the universal capital of the nation and people of Israel. For us to call ourselves Christians, paying respect to God will not be complete without recognizing that Jerusalem is the universal capital of the people and nation of Israel.”

Never one to avoid an opportunistic flourish, Marape [also revealed](#) that Israel will be funding the cost of the embassy for the first three years of its operations.

“But going forward, they’ve indicated land available for us & we look forward to proceeding, setting up our permanent mission there.”

He also made it clear that God and matters divine are not taking exclusive billing on the policy slate of Port Moresby. The economic relationship between Israel and PNG is so small as to be barely worth a mention (\$1 million per annum), but Israel’s bold prowess in various fields such as agriculture, education, finance and infrastructure is being eyed with relish. That aspect of foreign policy has been vigorously [encouraged](#) by Mashav, Israel’s foreign aid department otherwise known as the Centre for International Development and Cooperation.

Former ministerial advisor **Sean Jacobs** [recalls](#), “as a junior attaché to PNG’s 2011 Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) delegation, supporting a very brief bilateral with Israeli representatives in the margins” the offer of Israeli assistance “where it matters most – in PNG’s health sector and through in-kind, small-scale on ground medical equipment and expertise.”

PNG’s opposition leader, **Joseph Lelang**, [was less enthusiastic](#) about Marape’s less than balletic manoeuvring.

“We have aroused the ire of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas has warned us in the strongest terms that PNG must reconsider that decision and move out.”

Lelang’s concern was for diplomatic personnel who could find themselves at risk.

“This is a serious warning and I feel for the foreign mission staff and the ambassador who will be based there.”

The Palestinian foreign ministry’s displeasure was also expressed in a [statement](#) accusing Port Moresby of being involved in “an aggression against the Palestinian people and their rights.” The move would, it alleged, cause “great harm to the chances of achieving peace on the basis of the two-state solution.”

Other Pacific Island countries have thrown in their lot with the Israeli State, softening the hungrily lethal retaliation in Gaza in favour of the country's right to self-defence. There are such [statements as those](#) from Fiji's foreign ministry on October 31, a bold, unabashed endorsement of Israel and its policies.

"Fiji affirms its solidarity with Israel and commitment to global peace in the midst of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas."

In explaining why the Pacific country voted against the UN resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas War, issue was taken with "ground realities and correct factual omissions" regarding the role played by "Hamas for initiating the crisis, holding hostages, and using them and civilians as human shields since [the] October 7 2023 terrorist attack." Banally and, in any operational sense meaningless, the statement goes on to claim "that Israel's primary target is Hamas, not the Palestinian population."

As Israel runs the wells of international empathy dry with its incessantly ruthless destruction of Gaza, it can continue, through a quirk of European colonial history, to rely on a measure of support among various Pacific Island states. History, in that sense, is less cunning than teasingly eccentric.

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