

**House of Representatives, Thursday 20 September 2001**

**COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Report**

**Mr JULL** (Fadden) (10.29 a.m.)—On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade I present the committee's report, incorporating a dissenting report, entitled *Australia's relations with the Middle East*, together with evidence received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

**Mr JULL**—by leave—Almost 20 years have elapsed since the committee's last comprehensive review of the relationship between Australia and the Middle East region, which culminated in a report entitled *The Gulf and Australia*, presented in 1982. However, the passage of time has certainly not diminished the committee's interest in that part of the world. In February 2000, the Minister for Foreign Affairs referred to the committee the matter of Australia's relations with the Middle East. The terms of reference were particularly wide ranging, and required the committee to consider all major aspects of the political, strategic, economic, social and cultural links between Australia and the Middle East region, which includes the states surrounding the Persian Gulf.

Generated principally by the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict and the virtual collapse of negotiations between the Palestinian leadership and Israel, tensions in the Middle East continue to have international repercussions. Together with other responsible members of the international community, Australia has viewed with concern the escalation of violence and the relentless cycle of revenge, particularly in the 'occupied territories' and very recently in Israel. When the committee concluded its deliberations in August, no-one could have foreseen the enormity of the worst terrorist attack in history—against the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon—on 11 September. It is still difficult to come to terms with the horror and scale of the attack and the huge loss of innocent lives. While the committee's observations in chapter 4 on international terrorism and other forms of extreme political action have been completely overshadowed by last week's events, the committee strongly reiterates its total condemnation of terrorism in all its forms. Australia supports all efforts by the international community to prevent acts of terrorism everywhere and to bring to justice those responsible for perpetrating such hideous crimes.

Given the tensions prevailing in many parts of the Middle East, it would be surprising if members of the various communities in Australia did not hold strong views about the events unfolding in the region. While acknowledging the strong emotions which have been generated by the ongoing and escalating regional disputes, the committee has sought to achieve a balance in assessing the views presented in submissions and other evidence to the inquiry. In a region where complex and highly sensitive issues are in dispute, there is no single cause which is right and just above all others. The various Middle Eastern communities in Australia cannot expect unqualified support for their particular points of view, only the opportunity to express and to explain them.

The strategic importance of the Middle East to the world, and to Australia, scarcely needs to be stated. A stable Middle East is important to Australia and, within the limits of Australia's influence, promotion of regional security is a primary concern. Australia has clear interests in combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, in reducing possible threats to lines of communication between Europe and East Asia, and in seeing the continued flow of oil essential to many of our trading partners as well as to Australia itself. The two-way trade and investment relationship is important to Australia, and it has therefore warranted significant attention in the committee's latest report. Against the background of Australia's established commercial interests in the Middle East, the committee has made several

recommendations that would, we believe, result in increased exports from Australia. A radical new approach is needed, however, to lift Australia's disappointing share of total imports to the Middle East. Among other suggestions, the committee has recommended the establishment of a business advisory group to coordinate an effective 'team Australia' approach, with a sharp trade focus.

Major sections of the report have also been devoted to examining the following key issues: promotion and protection of human rights in the region; migration from the Middle East; the enhancement of the social and cultural links between Australia and the region and Australia's response to asylum seekers, particularly from the Middle East. The committee has made a number of recommendations designed to increase the effectiveness of Australia's contribution in all these areas.

The report concludes with a detailed discussion of Australia's overseas aid program to the Middle East, and suggests ways in which it might be improved. The longstanding priorities of supporting the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and the projects managed by Australian and local non-government organisations continue to be important. In addition, the committee has recommended that Australia's aid program for the Middle East include a forward commitment of at least \$10 million per annum in non-food aid to the region.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the members of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee for their commitment and contribution over many months to the completion of this review. My thanks are also extended to the secretariat staff who provided excellent research, procedural and administrative support for the committee both during the inquiry and in the production of this comprehensive report. I commend the report to the House.

**Mrs CROSIO** (Prospect) (10.35 a.m.) — by leave—In speaking to the report entitled *Australia's relations with the Middle East* of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee, I would like to put on the record that the inquiry was referred to the subcommittee in February 2000, seven months before the visit of then General, now Prime Minister, Sharon to Al-Haram Al-Sharif. The report covers strategic and political issues re the Middle East conflict, as well as the role of the United Nations and the impact of sanctions, particularly in relation to Iraq. We also covered Australia's developing trade relations in the Middle East, as well as people-smuggling. I too pay credit to the staff of the subcommittee: to Cliff Lawson, to Inga Simpson who was then with us, followed by Alex Olah, to Belinda Stewart and to Richard Haureliuk. It has not been an easy task to present the history and the representations in a fair and even-handed way. Many people on both sides of the Middle East conflict will probably say that we have not gone far enough, and from their own point of view they could be absolutely correct. But I say to them that we have tried to collate and record in this report what is continuing to be a never-ending saga of political conflict. We have recommended more input from the Australian government, including the revival of the multilateral working groups in which Australia was very prominent. They seem to have slipped away a little bit. I am referring to the arms control regional security working group and the water resources working group. We have also recommended that the Australian government make preparations to establish a permanent Palestinian mission with full diplomatic status as soon as significant progress has been made in the 'final status' negotiations between the parties.

The section on Australia's trade relationship with the region covered by the chairman of the subcommittee has a number of recommendations that we believe it is imperative for the government to act upon. In the chapter on Australia's response to asylum seekers from the Middle East, paragraph 9.67 recommends that the Australian government increase its efforts, in conjunction with other members of the international community, to focus world attention on measures to reduce the huge burden placed on countries of first asylum, which are supporting large numbers of asylum seekers from the Middle East.

World Vision Australia have stated in their submission to us that the Palestinian refugees constitute the largest refugee population in the whole of the world today. A permanent peace process will require action from both sides in the Middle East with support from the United Nations. It will be difficult to achieve if there is no halt to the building and the expansion of the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. In fact, former US Senator George Mitchell released an interim report in May 2001 which said in part that what is required is an immediate cease-fire and renunciation of terrorism; an agreement on confidence-building measures; the resumption of discussions of security issues; the cessation of construction of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories; and the lifting of Israel's economic restrictions on the Palestinian controlled areas. That was in May. Nothing has changed, as that is still required and needed.

Since September last year, many hundreds of people have lost their lives, and thousands of civilians have been injured. Let us hope that agreement will be reached and that in some small way this report will assist in overcoming some of the perceived anomalies that exist in the relationships between Israel, Palestine, Australia and the Middle East. Violence does beget violence, and we as a nation must continue to support an enduring and comprehensive peace settlement in the Middle East. We must continue to denounce all acts of terrorism, but there is an urgent need for the international community to develop a more humanitarian approach to sanctions and to the persecution of people because of their religious or political beliefs. We must continue to condemn it.

As of right with every group, we have a dissenting report, as indicated by the chairman. I say to the members who put in the dissenting report, as I repeated in the committee, in reference to page 339 of that dissenting report regarding chapter 3, paragraph 3.33, 'Australia's contribution to the Middle East peace process', the Friends of Palestine's submission was in the report because they actually took the time, effort and trouble to put a submission to the committee.

Other delegations that were made covered that ground but did not take the time or effort to put one in. If we are going to have dissenting reports, we should have factual reports, and I believe that has to be said for the record. Again, I congratulate the chairman and the committee. It was not easy, at times. It was also very emotional at times. It is a superb report for reading, and I commend and congratulate the staff for a job well done.

**Mr JULL** (Fadden) (10.39 a.m.) —I move:

That the House take note of the report.

I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.