Welcome, Mr Netanyahu: the First Israeli PM to Visit Australia

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Our friendship is as old as the state of Israel itself.

Australia was the first country to vote in favour of the 1947 UN partition resolution adopted by the General Assembly, which led to the establishment of Israel in 1948. Following the vote, Israeli representative Abba Eban acknowledged Australia’s contribution: “The manner in which you steered to a vote this second historic resolution … the warmth and eloquence with which you welcomed Israel into the family of nations, have earned for you the undying gratitude of our people.”

The key role Australia played in ensuring the security and prosperity of the Jewish people should be a source of pride for us all.

This week our friendship will take a historic step forward. For the first time, a serving Israeli prime minister will visit Australia. The government is honoured to host Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Our peoples are bound together first and foremost by the values we share — a mutual commitment to freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

And as a majority Christian nation, we share the rich cultural inheritance of the Bible, its stories and values a foundation and a context for our history, our literature, our imagination.

And we could not imagine modern Australia, the most successful multicultural society in the world, without the brilliance and the enterprise of our almost 120,000-strong Jewish-Australian community.

To paraphrase the great Shimon Peres, Australia and Israel understand the value of creativity and innovation. Together our scientists and businesspeople are partners in every field of technology. Australia is vast, Israel is tiny. But both are short of water and we lead the world in making every drop count so that deserts can bloom.

I’m particularly keen to discuss with Prime Minister Netanyahu the progress of our “landing pad” in Tel Aviv — the second of five innovation hubs to be established globally — which is helping Australian entrepreneurs make the connections they need to link into Israel’s world-class start-up and innovation ecosystem.

While in Australia, Prime Minister Netanyahu and I will oversee the signing of an air services agreement to enhance air links; explore opportunities for greater collaboration in cyberspace; commit to negotiations on an agreement on science and technology co-operation; and announce a declaration of intent to create a fully operational and commercial farm around Wagga Wagga. The new facilities will provide Australian farmers with an opportunity to benefit from world-leading Israeli dairy and agricultural technology.

Israel is a miraculous nation. It has flourished despite invasion, conflict and an almost complete lack of natural resources, other than the determination and genius of its people.

And yet in a region racked by war, it succeeds as the sole liberal democracy, a world leader in every field of science and technology, its culture of innovation the envy of the world.

Despite these achievements and the breadth of our relationship, many view Israel exclusively through the lens of its conflict with the Palestinians. They demand that the government take the side of those in the international community who seek to chastise Israel — and it alone — for the continuing failure of the peace process. In a speech to the UN General Assembly in 2015, Prime Minister Netanyahu pointed out that in the preceding 12 months, the General Assembly had adopted 20 resolutions critical of Israel, compared to just one in response to the war in Syria, which has resulted in more than 250,000 killed and millions driven from their homes.

My government will not support one-sided resolutions criticising Israel of the kind recently adopted by the UN Security Council and we deplore the boycott campaigns designed to delegitimise the Jewish state.

At the same time, we recognise that Israel and the Palestinians need to come to a settlement and we support a directly negotiated two-state solution so that Palestinians will have their own state and the people of Israel can be secure within agreed borders.

We believe that with so many other larger, more destructive and intractable disputes in the Middle East, this is a time when Israeli and Palestinian leaders, supported by the global community, should return to the negotiating table and work towards a solution that upholds the rights of both peoples to live side by side in peace and security.