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Australia-Israel ties hit their lowest point

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Australia's ties with Israel are under significant pressure after Canberra decided to recognize Palestinian statehood, a move that has led to sharp diplomatic exchanges. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly criticized Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, calling the decision harmful to Israel and to Australia's Jewish community.

The dispute has intensified with reciprocal visa cancellations, raising concerns among political leaders and analysts who view the situation as one of the most difficult periods in bilateral relations.

Australia has historically been a strong ally of Israel, having recognized the state in 1949. Successive governments maintained close ties, often referring to Israel as a partner. That history is now under strain as the Albanese government moves forward with recognition of Palestine while limiting entry for specific Israeli officials.

This week, Netanyahu repeated his criticism on social media, accusing Albanese of distancing Australia from Israel. Albanese responded that his government approaches foreign leaders with respect and pointed out that Netanyahu has made similar remarks about other leaders who supported Palestinian statehood.

Tensions increased after Australia denied entry to Simcha Rothman, a member of Israel's Religious Zionism party and part of Netanyahu's coalition. Rothman has drawn attention internationally for rejecting a two-state solution and for comments about Palestinians.

The decision followed earlier sanctions against Bezalel Smotrich, Israel's finance minister and leader of Rothman's party, whom Australia cited for remarks seen as encouraging violence in the West Bank.

In response, Israel announced it would revoke visas for Australian representatives to the Palestinian Authority. Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar said the measure was directly connected to both the recognition of Palestine and the refusal of Rothman's visa.

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong called Israel's move unjustified and warned it could limit Canberra's diplomatic work in the region.

The opposition voiced criticism of the government's approach. Deputy Liberal leader Sussan Ley questioned the denial of Rothman's visa, while Senator James Paterson described current ties as the lowest point in decades.

The Albanese government defended its decision, stating that visa policies are applied consistently, citing prior cases such as the 2017 refusal of Palestinian activist Bassem Tamimi. Officials stressed that Australia has the authority to exclude individuals whose presence could heighten tensions domestically.

Experts noted that Netanyahu's criticism of Australia aligns with his responses to other Western governments. Jessica Genauer of Flinders University explained that Israel acted similarly toward Norway after it recognized Palestine and has used comparable language regarding other European states.

Martin Kear of the University of Sydney added that Israel has consistently resisted external efforts to advance a two-state solution and often responds firmly to international recognition of Palestine.

Finance Minister Katy Gallagher said Israel's response was disappointing but consistent with earlier precedents. She told the ABC that dialogue between countries remained important despite differences.

Rothman said the refusal of his visa amounted to a rejection of Israeli voices in Australia. He argued that the Albanese government was undermining support for Israel.

Analysts, however, pointed out that Australia's decision was consistent with previous visa rulings and reflected efforts to prevent divisive rhetoric while continuing international engagement.

As the dispute continues, relations between Australia and Israel remain tense, with future cooperation likely to depend on how both governments manage the issue of Palestinian recognition.