

Killing Aid Workers: Australia's Muddled Policy on Israel

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*The Australian Prime Minister, **Anthony Albanese**, was distraught and testy. It seemed that, on this occasion, Israel had gone too far. Not too far in killing over 32,000 Palestinians in Gaza, a staggering percentage of them being children. Not too far in terms of using starvation as a weapon of war. Not too far in bringing attention to the International Court of Justice that its actions are potentially genocidal.*

Israel had overstepped in doing something it has done previously to other nationals: kill humanitarian workers in targeted strikes. The difference for Albanese on this occasion was that one of the individuals among the seven World Central Kitchen charity workers killed during the midnight between April 1 and 2 was Australian national **Lalzawmi "Zomi" Frankcom**.

Frankcom and her colleagues had unloaded humanitarian food supplies from Cyprus that had been sent via a maritime route before leaving the Deir al-Balah warehouse. The convoy, despite driving in a designated "deconflicted" zone, was subsequently [attacked](#) by three missiles fired from a Hermes 450 drone. All vehicles had the WCK logo prominently displayed. WCK had been [closely coordinating](#) the movements of their personnel with the IDF.

In a [press conference](#) on April 3, Albanese described the actions as "completely unacceptable." He noted that the Israeli government had accepted responsibility for the strikes, while Israel's Prime Minister, **Benjamin Netanyahu** had conveyed his condolences to Frankcom's family, with assurances that he would be "committed to full transparency".

The next day, the Australian PM [called](#) the slaying of Frankcom a “catastrophic event”, reiterating Netanyahu’s promises from the previous day that he was “committed to a full and proper investigation.” Albanese also wished that these findings be made public, and that accountability be shown for Israel’s actions, including for those directly responsible. “What we know is that there have been too many innocent lives lost in Gaza.”

Australian Foreign Minister, **Penny Wong**, [restated](#) the need for “full accountability and transparency” and Australian cooperation with Israel “on the detail of this investigation.” She further acknowledged the deaths of over 30,000 civilians, with some “half a million Palestinians” starving.

Beyond an investigation, mounted and therefore controlled by the Israeli forces themselves, nothing much else can be hoped for. The Albanese approach has been one of copybook warnings and concerns to an ally it clearly fears affronting. What would a ground invasion of Rafah do to the civilian population? What of the continuing hardships in Gaza? Push for a humanitarian ceasefire, but what else?

Australian anger at the government level must therefore be severely qualified. Support roles, thereby rendering Australian companies complicit in Israeli’s military efforts, and in ancillary fashion the Australian government, continue to be an important feature. The F-35, a mainstay US-made fighter for the Israeli Air Force, is not manufactured or built in Australia, but is sustained through the supply of spare parts stored in a number of allied countries. [According](#) to the Australian Department of Defence, “more than 70 Australian companies have directly shared more than \$4.13 billion in global F-35 production and sustainment contracts.”

The Australian government has previously [stated](#) that all export permit decisions “must assess any relevant human rights risks and Australia’s compliance with its international obligations”. The refusal of a permit would be assured in cases where an exported product “might be used to facilitate human rights abuses”. On paper, this seems solidly reasoned and consistent with international humanitarian law. But Canberra has been a glutton for the Israeli military industry, [approving 322 defence exports](#) over the past six years. In 2022, it approved 49 export permits of a military nature bound for Israel; in the first three months of 2023, the number was 23.

The drone used in the strike that killed Frankcom is the pride and joy of Elbit Systems, which boasts a far from negligible presence in Australia. In February, Elbit Systems [received](#) a A\$917 million contract from the Australian Defence Department, despite previous national security concerns among Australian military personnel regarding its Battle Management System (BMS).

When confronted with the suggestion advanced by the Australian Greens that Australia end arms sales to Israel, given the presence of Australian spare parts in weaponry used by the IDF, Wong displayed her true plumage. The Australian Greens, she [sneered](#), were “trying to make this a partisan political issue”. With weasel-minded persistence, Wong again quibbled that “we are not exporting arms to Israel” and claiming Australian complicity in Israeli actions was “detrimental to the fabric of Australian society.”

The Australian position on supplying Israel remains much like that of the United States, with one fundamental exception. The White House, the Pentagon and the US Congress, despite increasing concerns about the arrangement, continue to bankroll and supply the Israeli war

machine even as issue is taken about how that machine works. That much is admitted. The Australian line on this is even weaker.

The feeble argument made by such watery types as Foreign Minister Wong focus on matters of degree and semantics. Israel is not being furnished with weapons; they are merely being furnished with weapon components.

Aside from ending arms sales, there is precedent for Australia taking the bull by the horns and charging into the mist of legal accountability regarding the killing of civilians in war. It proved an enthusiastic participant in the [Joint Investigation Team](#) (JIT), charged with combing through the events leading to the downing of the Malaysian Airlines MH17 over Ukraine in July 2014 by a Buk missile, killing all 298 on board.

Any such equivalent investigation into the IDF personnel responsible for the killing of Frankcom and her colleagues is unlikely. When the IDF talks of comprehensive reviews, we know exactly how comprehensively slanted they will be.

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