INTELLIGENCE SHARING

Israel eyes close ties on security with Australia

EXCLUSIVE

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Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid has opened the door to deepening security ties with Australia and the Five Eyes spying network to counter Iran's cyber attacks and combat terrorism.

Mr Lapid said Australian law enforcement agencies had the opportunity to hunt Hezbollah's global terror network after the Morrison government last month declared the Lebanese group a terrorist organisation.

Mr Lapid said Israel was "very interested in deepening our ties with Australia and with all countries in the Indo-Pacific".

Mr Lapid said striking a free trade agreement with Australia was also a priority which would "expand trade and help create jobs in both our countries", and he floated the prospect of direct flights between the countries.

His comments suggest that Israel wants to become more relevant in the Indo-Pacific region amid escalating tensions between China and the United States.

In recent years, there have been calls from many national security experts for an expansion of the Five Eyes spy network – which includes Australia, the United States, Britain, New Zealand and Canada – with Japan and Israel named as potential additions.

Mr Lapid said Israel already had extensive ties with Five Eyes nations, including an "incredibly close intelligence sharing and security partnership with our closest ally, the United States", but would look to deepen the relationships.

"We're focused on continuing to deepen these ties through their existing frameworks and agreements," he said.

Australia in November listed all of Lebanese political party and militant group Hezbollah as a terrorist entity, making it a criminal offence to be a member.

Mr Lapid, who spoke with Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne last month, said Israel was "interested in deepening our security cooperation with Australia" in light of the move.

"A major first step in this regard was Australia's decision just last month to declare the entirety of Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation," he said.

He said countering Iran's state-sponsored cyber attacks and its support for "brutal dictators and terrorist proxies" should also be a priority for both countries after signing a memorandum of understanding on cyber security in 2019.

"In the cyber realm, Iran and its proxies frequently attack security, economic, and even civilian infrastructure in countries all around the world," he said.

The Israel-Palestine conflict continued to be a source of tension in the Australian Labor Party this year after violence in May which included protests, rocket attacks on Israel by Hamas and Israeli airstrikes on the Gaza Strip.

Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese in July slammed a Labor motion backed by former NSW premier Bob Carr calling for a boycott of Israel over its treatment of Palestinians, saying it was counterproductive and not supported by anyone in his party room.

Asked whether ALP divisions were a concern, Mr Lapid said Australia's friendship towards Israel had "thrived under the leadership of governments left, right and centre in Israel, and led by both parties in Australia".