A Fierce Attachment: Canada, Israel, Palestine and the Harper Years

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The Harper Decade: Canada has changed

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On November 29, 2012, the United Nations General Assembly debated a historic motion to upgrade the status of Palestine from observer to “non-member observer state.”  The General Assembly was almost full, and waves of applause swept through the cavernous auditorium as various speakers in favour of the motion – including Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority, and the foreign ministers of Indonesia and Turkey – made their way to the Assembly’s lectern. When John Baird, Canada’s Foreign Minister, was called upon to speak, the auditorium turned distinctly quiet. Baird’s short speech – a robust, poke-in-the-eye scolding – condemned the motion “in the strongest terms”, and, foreseeing the inevitably of the vote’s outcome, lamented “this body’s utterly regrettable decision to abandon policy and principle.” A few hours later, the General Assembly voted 138 to 9, with 41 abstentions, to adopt the motion. In dissent, Canada stood beside the United States, Israel, the Czech Republic, Panama, and the American-dependent Pacific island states of the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru and Palau.

Canadian political leaders have long aspired to be thought of as Israel’s “second-best friend,” in the words of a former Liberal external affairs minister. Perhaps the real shift in the foreign policy of Stephen Harper has been his ambition to elevate that status, at least symbolically. To be sure, Canada will never be more than a secondary player in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it possesses none of the formidable diplomatic, military and economic weight that the United States deploys to protect Israel. From the 1980s to the mid-2000s, Canada stayed close to Israel, while following the international consensus by voting at the UN against some Israeli practices in the occupied territories, expanding its funding of social programs for the Palestinians, and becoming actively engaged in the Oslo peace process as the chair of the multilateral committee on the Palestinian refugees. Canada has always trailed behind other middle powers in acknowledging the orphaned political status of the Palestinians, but its willingness to modestly distance itself in recent years from the excesses of American foreign policy and Israeli conduct gave it some diplomatic cachet in the modern world.

Now, in the Harper years, Canada stands quite isolated on Middle East policy within the international community, and our broader cachet has plummeted. While many reasons have contributed to our reputational decline since 2006 – our environmental performance, the more bellicose use of the Canadian military in international conflicts, and the government’s growing disengagement from the United Nations and multilateralism generally – Stephen Harper’s tight embrace of Israel over the past decade has been a significant contribution. Even as Israel’s governments have steadily marched rightward, as the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem have substantially thickened, as the faint hope that Israel would allow a genuine Palestinian state to emerge from any peace process has been eclipsed, and as most of the world, and particularly Europe, has recoiled from defending recent Israeli conduct, Canada has stood virtually alone in siding with Israel on every major issue dealing with the Middle East conflict. Even on those occasions when Israel has been publicly admonished by the United States – as when its intransigence triggered the collapse of the 2013-14 peace process, when it shelled United Nations schools in Gaza that were sheltering civilians, and when Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu vowed on the eve of the March 2015 Israeli elections to never permit a Palestinian state to emerge during his tenure – no criticisms were issued by Canada. “I think Canada’s an even better friend of Israel than we [Israelis] are,” stated Israel’s then-Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz from the right-wing Likud Party in 2012.

Canada’s unprecedented loss at the United Nations in its bid for a two-year seat on the Security Council in 2010 was widely attributed by foreign policy observers as, in part, a reaction against the Harper government’s policy towards Israel and Palestine. After a few weeks of defensive explanations following the UN vote, the government found its new theme: Canada’s foreign policy was based on principle, and it would not, as Stephen Harper and John Baird proclaimed: “go along to get along.” This theme would be repeated tirelessly during speeches by Canadian cabinet ministers to Jewish audiences and lobbying groups for Israel, and during state visits to Jerusalem. When Harper spoke to the Israeli Knesset in January 2014, he lamented that “we live in a world where …moral relativism runs rampant,” thereby opening the door to a new and virulent anti-Semitism. But, he said, principle demands that “the shared values” between the two countries – particularly Israel’s experience as a “vibrant democracy, a freedom-loving country with an independent and rights-based judiciary” – commits Canada to stand by Israel “through fire and water.”

The Israel that Stephen Harper defends, however, is a different country from what many diplomats and human rights organizations describe, what many Israeli critics of their country’s own practices write about, and what almost all Palestinians experience. As Henry Seigman, the former national director of the American Jewish Congress, has observed about Israel: “A political arrangement that limits democracy to a privileged class and keeps others behind military checkpoints, barbed-wire fences and separation walls does not define democracy. It defines its absence.” Israel has occupied the Palestinian territories for 48 years, by far the longest occupation in the modern world. While it disputes that it occupies these lands – it refers to them as “Judea and Samaria” and, if pressed, it will call them “administered territories” – the rest of the world (including the United States) considers them to be occupied under international law, and therefore beyond any legitimate Israeli claim of sovereignty. The 220 settlements that Israel has built in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are expressly illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention according to the United Nations Security Council, the International Court of Justice and even Canada’s Foreign Affairs website. The 570,000 Israeli settlers in the Palestinian territories live under Israeli law, travel primarily on settler-only roads, enjoy full citizenship rights and provide a reliable bloc of votes for the right-wing parties that now dominate the Israeli government. For the 2.75 million Palestinians living among them, every single aspect of their daily lives is determined by their ethnicity and their lack of rights. As the Israeli philosopher and Ghandi scholar David Shulman has recently written in the New York Review of Books, “Israel’s policy of colonizing the West Bank” includes “the massive theft of land, the disenfranchisement of millions of Palestinians, an entrenched regime of state terror, and the lack of meaningful legal recourse to those living under the Occupation.” Gaza, where another 1.8 million Palestinians reside, has been free of formal Israeli rule for a decade, but its land borders, airspace and access to the sea have been completely blockaded by Israel since 2007, making it, in the words of British Prime Minister David Cameron, “a giant open prison.” The World Bank in May 2015 reported that real per capita income in Gaza is 31 percent lower than in 1994, its unemployment rate is the highest in the world at 43 percent, and the 2014 war – which killed 1500 Palestinian civilians – reduced its anemic GDP by $460 million (US).

In the Harper era, a genuine political debate about Canadian policy towards Israel and Palestine has been distressingly absent both in Parliament and the mainstream Canadian media. Indeed, one curious consequence of the Harper policy has been the quiescence of the opposition parties on the topic. Throughout Israel’s 2014 war on Gaza (“mowing the grass,” in its parlance), both Harper and Baird were vociferous in their defence of Israel, even as the rest of the international community grew increasingly critical of Israel’s conduct as the civilian death toll and the scale of urban destruction mounted. But neither Thomas Mulcair nor Justin Trudeau created much daylight in their positions. All three federal parties emphasized Israel’s right to defend itself, none of them questioned the conduct of the asymmetrical warfare – the region’s most powerful military against a poorly armed militia (which, to be sure, also committed war crimes by its targeting of Israeli cities and towns) – and none of them placed the conflict in the context of the Israeli occupation, the ongoing dispossession of the Palestinians or Israel’s self-defeating blockade of Gaza. Indeed, during the Harper era, neither of the two main opposition parties has posed probing questions on the Harper government’s policy on Israel and Palestine during Question Period, nor have they initiated a Parliamentary debate on the topic during a crisis or a pending major international decision. The mainstream Canadian media has been hardly more critical. Either the newspaper chain or the broadcaster has declared an undying attachment to Israel – such as the National Post, Maclean’s and the Postmedia/Sun Media network  – or it has been largely anodyne in its coverage and editorials, such as the Globe & Mail and, somewhat less so, the CBC and the Toronto Star. Yet, this uncritical coverage appears to reflect elite opinion, with recent polling of public opinion indicating that Canadians have a more deeply skeptical view of Israel’s role as a genuine agent for peace in the Middle East.

Contrast Canada’s milquetoast approach to the emerging debate in other democracies. The New York Times, while remaining editorially sympathetic to Israel even as it demurs from the country’s current political direction, has opened its opinion pages up to highly critical and informative debates on the crisis in Israel and within Zionism. Likewise, the western European press has become more diverse in its coverage of the conflict. In October 2014, the British House of Commons voted overwhelming (274-12) in favour of a non-binding motion to recognize a Palestinian state, after a lengthy debate in which the Conservative chair of the House select committee on foreign affairs, Sir Richard Ottaway, stated that Israel’s recent conduct had driven him, a long-time friend of the country, to despair: “If they are losing people like me, they will be losing lots of people.” Since the war in Gaza, the Swedish government and the Vatican have  announced their recognition of Palestine as a state, and a number of European national assemblies – including Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Ireland and the European Parliament – have adopted symbolic resolutions of support. The European Union, which is Israel’s largest trading partner and the largest donor for the Palestinian government, has been lately considering whether to impose mandatory labelling for products from Israel’s settlements. While none of these actions will immediately improve the steadily worsening facts on the ground in Israel and Palestine, they reflect the effort of European governments to catch up to changing public opinion across the continent. Daniel Levy, an Anglo-Israeli political analyst now working with the European Council on Foreign Relations, has recently written that, while these resolutions remain symbolic: “recognition has become the next step on a journey towards creating tangible consequences on Israel if it continues to pursue policies antithetical to peace, to Palestinian statehood, and to international law. Nothing is likely to change in Israel until its public feels that impunity for occupations and settlements is eroding.”

Stephen Harper’s supine embrace of Israel ultimately embarrasses Canada while comforting a truculent government deeply at odds with international law and opinion. Canada’s foreign policy in the wider Middle East – our boycott of Iran, and our opposition to the recent UN initiative on nuclear weapons in the region, to name but two examples – has become an echo chamber of Tel Aviv’s thinking. Harper’s call for a two–state solution is a deliberate exercise in magical thinking, considering whom he politically stands beside in Israel.  The country’s new government – the most right-wing in its history – contains no parties that even rhetorically accept a two-state solution, or anything more than an ersatz Palestinian statelet. As Israel Defence Minister Moshe Ya’alon has said: “Our intention is to leave the situation as it is: autonomous management of civil affairs. If they want to call it a state, let them call it that. If they want to call it an empire, by all means. We intend to keep what exists now.” The embarrassment of being on the wrong side of history – to his credit, Brian Mulroney recognized the end of days for South African apartheid – will be acutely felt as an enduring stain on our record. To ease that stain, we might begin by acting upon the recent observation of Avraham Burg, the former Speaker of the Israeli Knesset, who wrote that it is impossible for Israel “to be treated as the only democracy in the Middle East while it is also the last colonial occupier in the Western world.”