

White hats, black hats

The Harper government's policy toward Israel

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STEPHEN HARPER WAS pursuing voters in Markham, Ontario on day 12 of the federal election campaign in April 2011. That same evening in Ottawa, several hundred people gathered at the Peace Tower Church not far from Parliament Hill to pledge fealty to Israel and praise Harper as that country's Canadian benefactor. The event, called Canada Celebrates Israel, was one of four held in Canadian cities within a few days. The rallies featured three Israeli politicians who are members of the Knesset Christian Allies Caucus, as well as prominent Conservatives and a cast of Evangelical Christians from Canada.¹

Though the Prime Minister wasn't physically present at these rallies, he made sure organizers knew where his priorities lay. Jim Abbott, a longtime Conservative member of Parliament who had chosen not to run again in 2011, brought greetings from the federal government. Stockwell Day, the recently retired former Treasury Board president, provided a message on videotape (he had attended the Canada Celebrates Israel event in Montreal the previous evening). According to the *Canadian Jewish News*, Day "earned wide applause when he said Israel, as a Jewish state, has 'an aboriginal right to exist' and that the Hebrew scriptures, written as far back as 1,000 years BCE, provide historically accurate evidence of the Jewish presence in what is now Israel."²

In strictly historical terms, the majority of people living in Palestine (west of the Jordan River) in 1948 were Arabs (both Muslims and Christians) and their ancestors had lived there as well. Estimates are that at least 726,000 Palestinians were displaced from the lands within what became the borders of Israel in 1948.³ Unfortunately, for those who prioritize scripture over facts, none of this is important. In Ottawa, those attending the Canada Celebrates Israel rally were asked to stand and recite in unison a Canada–Israel declaration projected on a screen in the church. The declaration read in part:

Whereas we the undersigned, friends of Israel, affirm the eternal and steadfast love of God for Israel and the Jewish People as clearly decreed in the Word of God.... We affirm the noble stand that our Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Stephen Harper, has taken in support and solidarity of Israel.... We affirm the Abrahamic Covenant of God with Israel, and His promises, and in the giving of the land to the Jewish People as their everlasting homeland and eternal inheritance: “I will give you this land as an everlasting possession to your descendants after you.” (Genesis 17:8)⁴

Most Canadians would agree that the state of Israel has the right to exist peacefully among its neighbours. The Harper government’s foreign policy, on the other hand, has been to act as cheerleaders for the Israeli government no matter how its actions may disturb that peace, and no matter the hardship they bring to the embattled Palestinians. Harper has pledged to stand by Israel “through fire and water.” His former foreign affairs minister John Baird put it in equally (and literally) black-and-white terms after a trip to Israel in 2012: “I took a pad of paper and drew a white hat on one side and a black hat on the other. Under the white hat, I wrote ‘Israel’ and under the black, ‘Hezbollah.’”⁵

This policy shift contradicts Canada’s historical position on the complex realities of the Israel-Palestine relationship, with international repercussions for Canada’s standing in the world, and domestic consequences for any organization that publicly disagrees with the government.

Harper in Israel

When Stephen Harper made a trip to Israel in January 2014, he was accompanied by 30 Conservative MPs and Senators. However, his 208-member entourage included a far greater number of people representing the religious wing of his conservative coalition, including 21 rabbis. It is difficult to imagine any Canadian prime minister taking that many Catholic priests on a visit to Rome, or Anglican clerics on a visit to London.⁶

Frank Dimant, the CEO of B'nai Brith Canada, was also on the tour. Dr. Stephen Scheinberg, a long-time national officer of B'nai Brith, has written how, under Dimant's leadership, the organization has moved from its earlier pluralism toward Conservative partisanship while making common cause with Christian fundamentalists.⁷ In August 2014, Dimant announced he was going to nominate Harper to become a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.⁸

Also present in the Canadian delegation were officials from the Council for Israel and Jewish Advocacy (CIJA). That organization has replaced the 90-year-old Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), which was dissolved amid bitter recriminations in 2011. The CJC had been liberal and non-partisan while CIJA, as its name implies, is essentially a single-issue organization created to support Israel. The events coordinator for the Jewish Defence League (JDL) of Canada was also there. The JDL was created in the United States in 1968 with the self-described purpose of protecting Jews from anti-Semitism. Its tactics, however, have been extreme. The *National Post* has reported that "(i)n its 2000–01 report on terrorism, the Federal Bureau of Investigation described the group's U.S. wing as a 'violent extremist Jewish organization,'" and that "(m)embers have been linked to numerous violent acts in the U.S. and Israel since the JDL was founded."⁹

There was also broad representation in the government's entourage from among evangelical Christians, including the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, the Christian Missionary and Alliance Church (of which Harper is a member), a group called Crossroads Christian Communications, and the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem–Canada. This last organization is not really an embassy at all, but rather a conservative Christian group whose main reason for being is to provide support for Israel. There were no progressive Jews, Catholics or mainline Protestants on the junket, which was criticized by groups such as Independent Jewish Voices for the way it was organized and executed.

Prime Minister Harper used every opportunity on his trip to eulogize Israel and to speak darkly about some of its Arab neighbours. In a speech to the Knesset, Harper said that Israel is a close friend, a beacon for democracy, and a Jewish homeland for people who had long been persecuted. "Through fire and water, Canada will stand with you," he said. During his trip, Harper pointedly refused to make any criticism of Israel for continuing to build settlements on Palestinian land, although Canada remains on record as opposing this activity, which the United Nations claims to be illegal.¹⁰

Foreign policy and Israel

It has been the policy of Canadian governments since 1948 to recognize Israel, but also to support repeated calls by the United Nations for a second independent state in land west of the Jordan River. This land was allocated by the League of Nations to Great Britain in 1923 as “mandate Palestine.” It can be argued that Canada’s foreign policy has tilted in favour of Israel over the years, but that at least it contained some nuance and flexibility. All of that ended when the Conservatives formed government in 2006. The Harper government quickly adopted Baird’s white-hat-versus-black-hat approach. This is a perspective that lauds Israel, but dehumanizes Palestinians and demonizes Arab states and non-state actors in the region.

In June 2006, hostilities erupted between Israel and Palestinian groups based in Lebanon. The conflict killed an estimated 1,200–1,300 people in Lebanon and 165 in Israel, left hundreds of thousands homeless in Lebanon and severely damaged civil infrastructure. Despite widespread criticism regarding the scope and ferocity of the Israeli attack, Prime Minister Harper described the bombardment and invasion of Lebanon as a “measured response.”¹¹

Other major Israeli military exercises in Gaza (in 2006, 2009 and 2014), which resulted in even more deaths than the Lebanese invasion, would also expose the significant shift in Canadian foreign policy in the region.

Israel made a surprise attack upon its neighbours in 1967, moving deeply into Palestinian territory and initiating a prolonged and military occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The first Palestinian *Intifada*, or “uprising,” against the occupation began in 1987 and lasted through 1993. The actions began with general strikes, boycotts and civil disobedience, but escalated into a long and violent standoff. Over a six-year period, Israeli forces killed an estimated 1,200 Palestinians while Palestinians killed 100 Israeli civilians and 60 military personnel.

In 1996, Israel decided to withdraw its army and Jewish civilians from Gaza, including Jewish settlements. However, many of those settlers then moved to the West Bank. In Gaza, the Israeli military continued to control all access by land, sea and air, including by means of a naval blockade. In the words of Oxford professor Avi Shlaim, a former member of the Israeli army: “Gaza was converted overnight into an open-air prison.... The living conditions in the strip remain an affront to civilized values [and are] a powerful precipitant to resistance and a fertile breeding ground for political extremism.”¹²

Israel launched military attacks upon neighbouring Gaza in 2006, 2009 and 2014. The Harper government’s position in each of these conflicts was simply that Israel had a right to defend itself. This implies that Israel is the victim rather than

a perpetrator of violence in the region. In the July 2014 conflict, after the Israeli bombing of a UN school in Gaza that killed at least 17 displaced Palestinians who were sheltering there, Harper said: “(w)e hold the terrorist organization Hamas responsible for this. They have initiated and continue this conflict and continue to seek the destruction of the state of Israel.”¹³

Canada and the international community

Shortly after the Canadian election in May 2011, Prime Minister Harper stood alone among G8 leaders meeting in France in his opposition to a joint statement calling on the Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate a two-state solution based on Israel’s borders before the 1967 six-day war. President Obama’s position was that the pre-1967 borders of Israel should form the basis for new peace negotiations. He added that Israel and the Palestinians would have to swap land to take into account the many West Bank settlements created by the Israelis since 1967.¹⁴

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had already flatly rejected that proposal and Israeli newspapers reported that he spoke to Harper about the matter. Since the G8 works on the basis of consensus, upon Harper’s insistence the group’s final statement removed any reference to the 1967 borders.¹⁵

As Prime Minister, Harper rarely referred to the two-state policy, but some of his MPs were not as discreet. Among those accompanying the prime minister on his visit to Israel in 2014 was James Lunney, a past chair of the Canada–Israel Interparliamentary Group. Lunney travelled to Israel frequently and, in an op-ed in the *Jerusalem Post* in October 2013, the MP called for a re-examination of the two-state solution. Lunney described it as akin to “trying to hammer a square peg into a round hole” — even though a two-state solution remains official Canadian government policy.¹⁶ *Globe and Mail* columnist Jeffrey Simpson has suggested the Harper government “insists that it favours a two-state solution, but everyone knows it will do or say nothing to nudge Israel in that direction, or to chastise Israel for doing next to nothing to move in that direction.”¹⁷

In November 2012, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution to upgrade the status of the Palestinian Authority to non-member observer. This designation is similar to the standing accorded to the Vatican. The vote, which passed by a margin of 138–9, was largely symbolic and did not mean the Palestinians would be admitted to the UN. John Baird flew to New York to oppose the resolution “in the strongest terms.” He warned the move would be destructive to a negotiated peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians, and that it would affect the Palestinian–Canadian relationship.¹⁸

It is widely believed that Canada's foreign policy stance on the Israel–Palestine conflict was the reason why, in 2010, Canada lost out to Germany and Portugal for a two-year, no-veto seat on the UN's Security Council. The *Globe and Mail* described the loss as a “humiliating rejection” for Canada and a “deep embarrassment” for the prime minister.¹⁹ Paul Heinbecker, Canada's former ambassador to the UN, described it as a “painful loss” and said many of Canada's decisions — including decreased African aid, its support of Israel, and its stance on climate change and peacekeeping — were unpopular with the international community.²⁰

The Harper government, on the other hand, wore this repudiation at the UN as a badge of honour, proof that its position was one of principle in opposition to an international organization the government has accused of anti-Semitism and of appeasing terrorists.

The attack on human rights organizations at home

For the Harper government, it was not enough to show unwavering support for Israel in international fora and in public statements. The government has, over the past several years, actively attempted to silence or vilify critics of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians.

During a Peoples' Social Forum held in Ottawa in 2014, Alex Neve, the secretary general of Amnesty International Canada, described his concerns with the government's “pervasive and deepening campaign” against key pillars of freedom of expression in Canada. “The space to dissent and advocate on issues such as human rights, environmental rights and social justice is shrinking,” Neve said. “I lament that this is happening in Canada.”²¹

Amnesty is one of a number of groups involved in Voices-Voix, a coalition that keeps a running tally of those organizations and individuals who have been harassed and bullied by the government (see Eliadis chapter). Among them is KAIROS, an ecumenical social justice coalition, and the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development. The latter organization was created in 1990 by then prime minister Brian Mulroney at arm's-length from government and with a mandate to support democracy-enhancing projects internationally.

In November 2009, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) informed KAIROS it would not approve a grant request over the next four years. At the time, KAIROS was given no reason for the decision, but the organization was told later that it did not meet the government's changing priorities for delivering development assistance. KAIROS, which acts on behalf of 11 of Canada's major churches or church-based organizations, and its predecessor groups had received

money from CIDA for 35 years to support partners working in regions experiencing some of the world's most serious human rights violations.

On December 16, Immigration Minister Jason Kenney spoke at a global forum in Jerusalem and made the stunning claim that KAIROS and several other groups had lost their funding because they were anti-Semitic. KAIROS and its church sponsors were outraged, stating the minister's charges were false. "Two points need to be made: Criticism of Israel does not constitute anti-Semitism, and CIDA was developed to fund international aid and not to serve political agendas," said the group.²²

Despite Kenney's claims of anti-Semitism, the government largely stuck to its story that dumping KAIROS was the result of CIDA's changing aid priorities. But one year later, that explanation was publicly debunked in a manner most embarrassing to the government, and especially to Bev Oda, former minister responsible for CIDA. In October 2010, *Embassy Magazine* obtained and published the documents prepared for Oda regarding the KAIROS grant application. They showed the application had actually been recommended for approval by CIDA's president and acting vice-president. Oda also signed the memorandum, recommending that the project be approved, but a handwritten notation inserted the word "NOT" into the final sentence. As a result, the document read as follows: "Recommendation — That you sign below to indicate you NOT approve the contribution of \$7,098,758."²³

Oda and CIDA's then president Margaret Biggs were called to testify before a parliamentary committee in December that year. Biggs acknowledged under questioning that she had recommended the minister approve the KAIROS proposal, and Oda told sceptical MPs that she did not know who altered the memorandum. But she recanted in the House of Commons in February 2011, claiming, "The 'Not' was inserted at my direction."²⁴ In other words, she had lied to the government. Her admission fueled calls for her resignation — demands that became louder when some of her personal spending habits while on government business came under fire. Oda left politics in 2012, avoiding her likely demotion from the cabinet.

The Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (Rights & Democracy) suffered a similar fate to KAIROS under the Harper government. The government started its attack on the organization through allegations against its president, Rémy Beauregard, during and following a particularly tense meeting in January 2010 in which recently appointed members of the agency's board of directors made accusations about financial mismanagement. These new members also asserted that Rights & Democracy was funding terrorist groups in the Middle East. Beauregard died of a heart attack in the early hours of the following day.

A *Globe and Mail* story following Beauregard's death quoted sources as saying the government's new appointments to the board had dramatically altered the organization's direction, placing Beauregard under increasing stress. One of those

appointments was Aurel Braun, a professor at the University of Toronto. He became the board's new chair and, along with some other board members, alleged widespread mismanagement under Beauregard.²⁵

Four Rights & Democracy board members appeared before a parliamentary committee on April 1, 2010. Jacques Gauthier, the new vice-chair, talked about a "dysfunction" at the organization that, he said, had to do with "accounting issues and accountability." Braun described "a private fiefdom using public money" and said that far too much of that money "has gone to terrorist front organizations." They were also harshly critical of three small grants of \$10,000 each to rights monitoring groups in the Middle East. One of them was Israel-based and two were Palestinian.²⁶

By the time they appeared before the parliamentary committee in that April meeting, new members of the board at Rights & Democracy had hired the accounting firm Deloitte to investigate how the agency's money had been spent. The board promised that Deloitte's audit would be ready within five weeks, but more than five months passed without their releasing the report. Paul Wells of *Maclean's* magazine asked several times why the report had not been made public.²⁷

The House of Commons standing committee on foreign affairs and international trade made four requests to see the audit and, in December 2010, finally ordered Rights & Democracy to provide the report or face parliamentary censure. The organization argued that it could not present the report publicly because that might interfere with a lawsuit by three former directors who had been fired and were suing the agency. The committee eventually agreed that the report, or perhaps an abridged version of it, would be presented at an in-camera meeting on December 16.

That meeting never occurred. The government cancelled it at the last minute and so the audit, which had cost \$253,000, was not tabled. It was, however, released in its entirety on the *Globe and Mail's* website. Reporter Daniel Leblanc wrote, "The audit did not come to damning conclusions regarding the agency's financial management."²⁸ Wells, in a column for *Maclean's* titled "Rest in peace, Rémy Beauregard," wrote:

[The audit] shows what Beauregard's defenders have long asserted: that the agency was run without scandal, and without unusually lax management, even before his arrival; that he was taking clear steps to improve its management; and that specific claims against him and his staff from Gauthier [Rights & Democracy vice-president] and others hold no water. In short, that Rémy Beauregard died while fighting back against an unfounded witch hunt perpetrated by scoundrels who today stand unmasked and humiliated.²⁹

The attacks on KAIROS and Rights & Democracy had one thing in common. They were based, at least in part, on information and complaints from an Israel-based

group called NGO Monitor. In February 2010, Wells reported that Gerald Steinberg, the Israeli political scientist who runs the organization, had published an op-ed in the *Jerusalem Post* congratulating the Canadian government for its actions against both aid groups. “Steinberg’s list of organizations he regards as anti-Israel is long,” wrote the *Maclean’s* columnist. “In one publication he decries CIDA aid to what he calls ‘extremist political groups’ opposed to Israel, among which he counts Médecins du Monde, Oxfam, and the Mennonite Central Committee of Canada.” Wells added that NGO Monitor “diligently chronicles international criticism of Israel’s human rights record and portrays it as an attack against Israel’s right to exist.” He described Steinberg as a friend of Braun, who had earlier attempted (unsuccessfully) to have Steinberg speak to the board at Rights & Democracy.³⁰

The idea that the pacifist Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) could be labelled an extremist group is mind-boggling, but MCC was another of the church-based organizations to have its funding cut back by CIDA. The same fate befell a long list of secular development aid agencies that have lost either part or all of their CIDA funding. KAIROS chose to fight back against government bullying and the allegations of anti-Semitism. The resulting publicity has invigorated the organization and public support for it. Many other groups chose to remain silent about their similar treatment. Rights & Democracy was closed down entirely by the government in 2012.³¹

Conclusion

The white-hats-versus-black-hats campaign waged by the Harper government in its approach to questions of Israel and the Middle East is deliberately simplistic, with domestic and international repercussions. Not only does this kind of language consciously avoid both history and current reality, but it has led to important human rights and development organizations being deprived of the public finances they rely on to do good work in areas including the Middle East.

A growing number of church-based and other groups who have dared to criticize government policies regarding Israel, human rights or environmental policy now find themselves the targets of costly and intimidating financial audits by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). The audits are a thinly disguised attack by the government that spreads a chill among organizations that have much to contribute to the debate about Canada’s domestic and foreign policy. The government’s intention is to stifle healthy debate in Canada, and that diminishes an increasingly fragile democracy.

Endnotes

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