WHAT PRINCIPLE?

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Stephen Harper defends his policy of unwavering support for Israel as a matter of principle. It should be judged by whether it furthers the cause of peace.

Pour Stephen Harper, le soutien indéfectible à Israël est affaire de principe. Mais pour juger d’une telle politique, il faut se demander si elle fait avancer la cause de la paix.

Canada found itself in a tiny minority when the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly endorsed the Palestinian Authority’s application for nonmember status as an observer state. Canada’s vote against the Palestinian push for a form of statehood was accompanied by a strident speech by Foreign Minister John Baird, a speech that served as a verbal reinforcement of the Stephen Harper government’s position that Canada remains a steadfast friend to Israel. Baird travelled to the UN to deliver Canada’s message in person, castigating those countries that supported the Palestinian Authority or abstained on the vote for what he called an “utterly regrettable decision to abandon policy and principle.”

Harper and Baird have always cast their defence of Israel as a matter of principle. But the government’s unwavering loyalty to one side in the protracted Israeli-Palestinian struggle raises the question of what principle it seeks to uphold. Is it loyalty to a friend? Or is it to the principle of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the declared Canadian policy? That is indeed a principle worth pursuing. The two-state solution is the only one that ensures the respective identity and material needs for both Israelis and Palestinians.

For all his talk about there being “consequences” for the Palestinians if they pressed ahead with the UN endorsement, Baird soon backed off on his warnings. The $300 million in Canadian aid for the Palestinian Authority over five years appears to be intact, though the government has announced it will be reviewed once the package expires in March.

Indeed it was Ottawa that found itself squirming in the days after its “no” vote, when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded to the Palestinian move by announcing plans to expand Jewish settlements into the E1 corridor, one of the most sensitive and contested areas of the West Bank.

If Netanyahu carries it out, Palestinians say the move would effectively sever the West Bank, making a contiguous Palestinian state nearly impossible. Canada’s allies in Europe swiftly condemned the Israeli move, and even the Obama administration opposed it, leaving the Harper government ever more isolated. Though the Canadian government let it be known to reporters that Harper had raised the issue with Netanyahu, there was no statement from the Prime Minister about what — if anything — was said between the two leaders.

Even then, Baird described the settlement building plans in the most anodyne language possible: “unhelpful” to the cause of peace. And in a strange twist of events, the Israeli press reported that Netanyahu “does not remember” the subject of the settlements coming up during the phone conversation between the two leaders.

Despite the overwhelming diplomatic victory achieved at the UN, the Palestinians reacted swiftly and angrily to Canada’s positioning. Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat described Canada as being “more Israeli than the Israelis, more settler than the settlers,” adding, “I think they have disqualified themselves from playing any role in the Middle East peace process.”

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Supporters of the government’s approach use words like honour, integrity and loyalty to explain Canada’s pro-Israeli position, arguing that there is no need for an “honest broker” between an upright democracy facing an existential threat from “terrorists.” The Canadian government’s approach has won praise from Jewish groups in Canada. Frank Dimit, executive vice-president of B’nai Brith, has described Harper as the “answer to the Jewish community’s prayers.”

The Harper government has been quick to condemn criticism of Israel, including from those in Canada, as an attempt to “delegitimize” the Jewish state. They also hint of anti-Semitic motives on the part of some critics of their policies. When Baird addressed the Jewish National Fund’s Negev dinner recently in Ottawa, he referred to critics on his Twitter feed who accused him of “playing settler-colonial diplomacy with the lives of Palestinians.” He said: “Views like this are rooted in ignorance, or worse...much worse.” And he said the “hatred that caused [the] horrors of the Holocaust...has cast itself in a new form...it targets the Jewish state.” And Harper used the religious occasion of the ceremonial lighting of the chanukiah at 24 Sussex Drive to say that he was “somewhat sad” to “see so much of the international community that has not been supporting and has turned its back on our friends in the State of Israel.”

The language Harper and Baird used is the same kind of language favoured by Netanyahu and the Israeli right, as well as by Israel’s supporters in the organized American Jewish community and in Congress. When Netanyahu addressed Congress in 2011, he described Israel as “a nation that rose from the ashes of the Holocaust. When we say never again, we mean never again. Israel always reserves the right to defend itself.”

There is much debate but no clear evidence that mere electoral calculations lie behind Harper’s policy on Israel: the benefits are too slim and could even backfire. Others point to the support for Israel from the evangelical Christian base of the Tory party, but again, Harper’s beliefs appear to be sincerely held rather than rooted in vote counting. Driven by what he sees as a virtue, the Prime Minister is hardly likely to lose sleep over Canada’s isolation at the UN on the issue. He is more inclined to wear it like a badge.

Long gone are the days when Canada chose to speak forcefully to Israel as a friend, the way then-external affairs minister Joe Clark did at the 1988 annual dinner of the Canada-Israel Committee. There, he sharply criticized Israel’s handling of the Intifada, the Palestinian uprising that arguably helped create conditions that led to the Oslo peace accord six years later, including helping Israel realize its unsavoury role as an occupying power over everyday Palestinians.

No one believes that Canada is going to broker a deal to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Only the Americans, and now perhaps the Muslim Brotherhood, have any serious influence over the parties, and to think otherwise is a conceit. Any Canadian role

Israel’s Iron Dome: it is now hard to see any significant role for Canada in the region.
PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK
in Israeli-Palestinian peace was going to be minor and, if history is a guide, more humanitarian in orientation. The heyday of Canada’s involvement in the now nearly strangled Israeli-Palestinian peace process came in the early 1990s, during the multilateral peace talks that flowed from the 1991 Madrid peace conference. Canada was invited to help negotiate one of the thorniest issues: that of the refugees displaced from the events surrounding Israel’s founding in 1948.

The role of mediator on the issue of refugees was significant in its own way. Any actual peace agreement will be bedevilled by the details, and it is here that Canada could have remained a good offices contender. Sadly, it is hard now to see any significant role for Canada in the region. Harper’s position has cast Canada with those in Israel who show little interest in a negotiated peace, who hold a Manichean, good-versus-evil, us-versus-them, democracy-versus-terrorists world view. To add insult to injury regarding Canada’s refugee role, Harper has cut funding to UNRWA (the UN body tasked with the Palestinian refugees).

Given that Israel is the occupying power in the West Bank — and, along with Egypt, largely controls the borders around the Gaza Strip — the question is whether Israel’s government has any appetite for serious territorial withdrawals in the West Bank. The current Israeli government granted Ariel College, jutting deep into the West Bank, university status this past year, despite opposition from the Council on Higher Education. And while Israel’s Supreme Court occasionally declares that an “illegal outpost” be dismantled, the government frequently requests delays. Once the buildings are dismantled, the settlers are often resettled a mere few kilometres away. All this while Israel continues to build “facts on the ground” in the form of the settlements upon which Israel’s government builds its legitimacy with the nationalist and religious right.

While academics and policy-makers have contemplated the kind of settler relocation from the West Bank that will be necessary in the event of a two-state solution, the Israeli government has articulated no serious plans for addressing settler needs, at least not publicly. And when the US attempted to include language about land swaps working from the “1967” borders as the basis for a final peace deal at the G8 summit, Canada succeeded in getting that phrase removed.

The unilateral Gaza withdrawal, where Israel withdrew all of its 8,000 settlers in 2005, was widely seen as an abysmal failure. Israeli settlers felt largely abandoned by their government, as resettlement across the Green Line was clumsily executed. Hamas took power a year later, and Israelis have been vulnerable to rocket attacks ever since. It is a real and intolerable threat. Israel’s challenge is to find the most effective way to stop it. The current Israeli policy of responding with military strikes (endorsed by the Harper government) and extra-judicial assassinations succeeds for a while, at the cost of mostly Palestinian lives, until the rockets resume. Turning these extended cease-fires into real peace will require breaking the cycle of episodic violence.

In his 2011 speech to Congress, Netanyahu told the US lawmakers that, “while Israel will be ever-vigilant in its defense, we’ll never give up our quest for peace. I guess we’ll give it up when we achieve it. Because we want peace. Because we need peace.”

Israel has always held deeply to the idea of peace. The word for hello in modern Hebrew is shalom (peace). Israeli folk songs frequently speak of peace. Israelis cling to the dream of peace like Judy Garland’s plea that somewhere, over the rainbow, the dreams you dare to dream might actually come true.

These days, any peace formula must allow for new variables: the collapse of sclerotic Arab dictatorships and the rise of Islamic political power on Israel’s borders, as well as Iran’s uncertain nuclear potential. Perhaps the calculation has been made that, in this unstable environment, it is better to keep the Palestinians weak and divided, even if it means enduring the occasional skirmish over missile fire from Gaza. A messy status quo may seem preferable to the risks of another gamble on peace.

But that is certainly not what Ottawa claims to be defending as it harnesses the rest of the world, including allies that share its values, for “turning its back” on the State of Israel. A serious foreign policy would not dismiss the complexities of the conflict or appear so callous to the tragedy of violence that kills more innocents than terrorists.

Harper may be the answer to the Canadian Jewish community’s prayers, but it’s a Jewish community that has become mightily disciplined through its organized wing, the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA). When Peter Beinart, a liberal Zionist who is the author of The Crisis of Zionism, was invited by three Canadian liberal Zionist groups to speak in three Canadian cities, CIJA instructed the Campus Hillel groups to avoid meeting with him.

By most measures, the Canadian Jewish community is more traditional than the American one. It contains a higher percentage of Holocaust survivors, and a higher percentage of individuals who were born overseas. But it’s also a Jewish community maintaining a plurality of voices, many of whom cannot abide Israel’s occupation but see little organizational home through which to express their dissent. These are Jewish convictions that are much different from the kind Harper is expressing when he couches Canada’s policies as supportive of Jews worldwide and the State of Israel.

Ultimately, if one is supportive of Israel’s continued existence as a Jewish and democratic state, the principles that are core to Israel’s own professed identity must be upheld. Canadians must ask whether they are comfortable standing alongside those in Israel who are intent upon creating their own unilateral facts on the ground through settlement expansion. They must ask if they are comfortable chastising the more moderate Palestinian wing that seeks a state alongside Israel. And they must be wary of endorsing the status quo. If the Middle East events of the past two years have shown us anything, it is the perils of depending on the status quo.