

Tilting toward Israel

By Paul Heinbecker*, *Globe and Mail*

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For good or ill, the crisis in the Middle East is a defining moment for Canadian foreign policy. The new Conservative government is apparently staking out a one-sided position on the Lebanon war and departing from policies on the Middle East adopted by previous Canadian governments. The consequences could be far-reaching, and negative.

Contrary to frequently made allegations, previous Canadian Governments have not been neutral between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Canada has pursued what successive governments consciously characterized as a “fair minded and principled” policy, calling the issues as they saw them. Canada has supported Israel’s right to exist since its creation in 1948 and recognized Israel’s right to defend itself, including its right to take proportionate measures under international law to defend itself against terrorist attacks.

Since 1967 when Israel legally pre-empted an attack on itself by neighbouring Arab countries, and ultimately occupied the West Bank and Gaza, Canada has made it clear that we would not recognize permanent Israeli control over the territories it occupied or that it had a right to build settlements in the West Bank and Gaza in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. We opposed Israel’s unilateral annexation of East Jerusalem, whose ultimate status should be determined by a comprehensive peace settlement.

We came over time to support the creation of a sovereign independent Palestinian state. We have continued to support UN resolution 194, which recognized that refugees from the 1948 war, as do all refugees, have a right to return to their homes or to compensation, in the context of a comprehensive peace agreement.

A peace agreement remains elusive, despite the Oslo Accord, the negotiations at Sharm el-Sheikh, Camp David and Taba and the “Road Map”, and there is plenty of blame to go around for failure on this most complex and intractable of issues. The crux of the matter is that Israel has gone on building settlements in the West Bank in the 39 years since occupying the land and Palestinian militants have been resorting to terrorism, in both cases in contravention of international law and defiance of most of the international community. The point is that this conflict did not begin with Hezbollah’s kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers.

Nor have Hezbollah’s illegal actions given Israel a carte blanche. As Michael Kerr of LSE has observed, consider how the world, including the United States, would have reacted had the UK bombed Dublin and blockaded and invaded Ireland in response to the shooting of British soldiers in Belfast. Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and former Yugoslav Tribunal prosecutor and Canadian Supreme Court Justice, has reminded us that “indiscriminate shelling of cities by Hezbollah constitutes a foreseeable and unacceptable targeting of civilians, and the bombardment by Israel of sites of alleged military significance, but resulting invariably in the killing of civilians, is

unjustifiable”. She has put both sides on notice that “the scale of the killings in the region and their predictability, could engage the personal criminal responsibility of those involved, particularly those in a position of command and control”. UN Secretary General Annan has echoed that warning and urged an immediate halt to the fighting. Under international law, all states, including Canada, have the obligation to do what they can to stop war crimes and the right to prosecute their perpetrators. There are, thus, excellent legal reasons for Canada to maintain its “principled and fair-minded policy” in this particular case.

There are also powerful political reasons for doing so. Tilting towards Israel actually began with the Martin government’s changing Canada’s long-standing positions on UN resolutions in New York, putting Canada increasingly in the voting company of just the United States, Israel, Palau, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands and apart from the other fifty or so other democracies in the UN. These votes, and the approach of the Conservative Government to Lebanon, are progressively aligning Canada with the Bush administration’s foreign policy at a time when independent US polling is registering plummeting international support for US policy. Most of the world regards American foreign policy, particularly its conflation of “the war on terror” with its invasion of Iraq, as well as its strong backing for Israel, as fuelling a growing animosity among Muslims towards the US. The US’s de facto green light to Israel, endorsed by Canada, to go on attacking Lebanon is only the latest chapter in this failed foreign policy. It is not a policy worth emulating.

Nor is it in our interests to do so. Canada has a well-earned reputation precisely for being fair-minded and principled, because we have brought a constructive attitude to international problem-solving, carry no colonial or racist baggage and have integrated minorities into our society as well or better than any other country on earth. That reputation is why Canadians (and not only Canadians) sew the Maple Leaf on their backpacks. It affords Canadians travelling and working, and fighting, abroad a measure of protection and respect. The more we align ourselves with aggressive American foreign policy, however, the less others will bother to distinguish Canadians from Americans and Canada from the United States. This is not to say we should differ with the Americans for the sake of differentiating ourselves from them. It is to say that on issues where we think they are wrong, we should not shrink from parting company with them.

Perhaps equally important, our international reputation is part and parcel of our domestic harmony. One reason we have been able to enjoy our peace, order and good, albeit not always, good enough government has been that we have put Canadian interests above Diaspora politics. The more we appear to favour the cause of one group over another, the more we put that peace at risk.

Finally, there are good moral and humanitarian reasons for pursuing an independent, principled and fair-minded foreign policy, particularly with respect to the Lebanon crisis. There are reports that more than 330 people have died already and 500,000 have been displaced. Many more will perish if this conflict is allowed to continue in the vain hope of ending it once and for all militarily. The disproportionate Israeli response to Hezbollah

will, like the American invasion of Iraq, create more terrorists than it kills and make the prospect of liberal democracy in Lebanon and the Middle East ever more remote.

The Prime Minister has said he believes in making decisions on the basis of their merit not their popularity. That will require him to criticize intransigence on both sides, including Israeli occupation of Arab land and the disproportionate aspects of Israel's response to Hezbollah. Otherwise, his government's decisions will be neither popular nor meritorious, just ideological.

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