

Notes for a Presentation

by Paul Heinbecker*

on Canadian Policy and the Middle East

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Society (AKCESS)**

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Check Against Delivery

* Paul Heinbecker is a Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation, in Waterloo, Director of the Centre for Global Relations at Wilfrid Laurier University and Canada's former Ambassador to the UN. He is solely responsible for the content of these remarks.

Introduction

I came despite a conflict in my program and with some trepidation.

There has been a high degree of tension on university campuses this week because of this issue.

I agreed to attend only if there was a reasonable prospect that the event would not turn into a one-sided blame fest or a two-sided slug fest.

The organizers could give no such guarantee but confirmed that that was there hope, and expectation.

So, I did come because this is an important issue that students should be able to discuss and inform themselves about.

And professors and practitioners should help them to do so

Canada's Position

First, some basics of the Canadian position.

Canada has supported Israel's right to exist since its creation by UN General Assembly Resolution 181 in 1947.

In 1949, Canada voted in favour of UN General Assembly resolution 273, supporting Israel's entry into the United Nations

Canada has always recognized Israel's right to defend itself, including its right to take proportionate measures under international law.

Since 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza, we have made it clear that we would not recognize permanent Israeli control of 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.

On May 21, 1968, Canada supported United Nations Security Council Resolution 252, opposing Israel's unilateral annexation of East Jerusalem, whose ultimate status was, in our view, to be determined by a comprehensive peace settlement.

Over time, we came to support the creation of a sovereign independent Palestinian state.

We continue to support a two-state solution.

We continue to support UN resolution 194 which recognizes that refugees from the 1948 war have, as do all refugees, the right to return to their homes or to compensation, in the context of a comprehensive peace agreement.

We supported UNSC Resolution 242 emphasizing the inadmissibility of acquiring land by force and UNSC Resolution 338 reinforcing 242.

Together these two resolutions constitute the basis for trading land for peace.

We have supported a series of attempts, mostly under US leadership, to negotiate peace—the Oslo Accord, the negotiations at Sharm el-Sheikh, Camp David and Taba, the “Road Map”, Annapolis,

All have ultimately failed.

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 occupied Palestinian lands since 1967 and has gone on building settlements in the West Bank ever since.

More recently it has imposed a siege on Gaza, before reinvading in December.

Palestinian militants, for their part, have been resorting to terrorism, both in contravention of international law and in defiance of the will most of the international community.

Contrary to frequently made allegations, previous Canadian Governments have not been neutral on these intractable issues.

Canada has pursued what successive governments consciously characterized as a “fair minded and principled” policy, calling the issues as they saw them.

Voting patterns on the various annual UN General Assembly resolutions on Arab-Israeli issues changed little from year to year because they were based on clear principles and policies.

In a letter to the Canada Israel Committee, former Foreign Minister John Manley wrote that any significant change in our voting pattern in the United Nations which did not stem from alterations in the resolutions themselves would imply a change in the underlying principles of Canada’s Middle East policy, which had been endorsed and tested over the years by successive governments.

Oncoming to office, nonetheless, the Martin government started changing some of Canada's long-standing positions on UN resolutions, tilting our stance towards Israel.

That put Canada increasingly in the voting company of just the United States, Israel, Palau, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands and apart from the other sixty or so other democracies in the UN.

On coming to office, the current Conservative government progressively aligned Canadian policy still further with the US and Israel, including on UN votes.

The problem with that is that the more we align ourselves with American foreign policy and with Israel, the less others bother to distinguish Canadians from Americans and Canada from the United States, and an important voice is lost.

Potentially more significant, 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 in this country thus far has been that we have put Canadian national interests above Diaspora politics.

The more the government favours the cause of one group over another, the more the public peace is put at risk.

All of us, especially Jews and Muslims, have ample reasons to avoid taking such a risk.

This is not an argument for pacifism or neutrality; Canada's record in the two world wars, Korea and Afghanistan are the evidence that we do not relegate ourselves to the moral sidelines.

But it is a plea for principle and perspicacity—and independence.

Conclusion

What should any Canadian Government do in response to this most thorny of problems?

My advice is to adopt a pro-Canadian policy, that recognizes that Canada's interests in the world are more than the sum of Diaspora interests, that recognizes that on this most decisive of issues, there are Canadian communities on both sides of the disagreement, that asks neither group to ignore what is happening between Israel and the Palestinians but insists that neither import the violence that has been so tragically prevalent in the Middle East into Canada, that stands ready to facilitate an agreement if that ever happens, and in fact works with the parties to resolve issues like governance in the Old City of Jerusalem, that, in the meantime, bases Canadian positions on international law, including international humanitarian law, that puts the protection of innocent civilians at the heart of our policy, and that calls them as it sees them, without fear or favour, whatever the advocates of either side might wish.

Like many Canadians, I have friends on both sides and I sense, but probably don't fully comprehend, their anguish.

My experience is that neither side wants to hear dispassionate analysis on this subject.

Both sides have a narrative that is the truth as they perceive it.

What they want from others is endorsement and support.

The narratives are true as far as they go but they are also incompatible.

If Canada wants to maintain its “fair-minded” posture, it should judge the issues in this conflict on their merits—or demerits-- using international law and practice as the criteria, notably the UN Charter, UN resolutions, the Geneva Conventions, etc.

That way we would condemn violations of international law, as we see them, on both sides, defend the principles of distinction and proportionality in war, and make judgments on issues such as settlement building, the separation wall, the disposition of the occupied territories, the expropriation and destruction of property, the use of checkpoints, the siege of Gaza, the kidnapping of soldiers, the cross border rocket attacks, terrorism against civilian populations, etc.

It might not be welcomed at times by either side to the conflict, and their supporters in Canada, but it is the only way of being “fair-minded and principled” in practice as well as in rhetoric.

Thank You