

Canada took the wrong side

Ottawa Citizen

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SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 2011

"To see ourselves as others see us, would from many a blunder free us," advice as sound and pertinent today as when first offered the world by Robbie Burns a couple of centuries ago. Our government's opposition to the Palestinians' application to join the UN may be such a blunder; it will in any case likely burden Canadian foreign policy for years to come.

The government has characterized the position it is taking on the Palestinian application as principled and democratic. But many others see it as merely supporting the stance of a very hard-line Netanyahu government, beholden to intransigent and fundamentalist parties. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has in the past accused Benjamin Netanyahu of not having "made a single step to advance peace." Former Bush and Obama defense secretary Robert Gates described Netanyahu as ungrateful and endangering Israel by refusing to grapple with its growing isolation. Former U.S. president Bill Clinton has said that the Netanyahu government has received all of the assurances previous Israeli governments said they wanted but now won't accept those terms to make peace.

Our government has criticized the Palestinian application as "unilateral." What much of the world sees as unilateral, and also illegal, is the Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem, the 44-years long occupation of the West Bank, the continuing confiscation of Palestinian property, the decades of building Israeli settlements on Palestinian land and the continuing transfer of Israeli civilians there - 500,000 to date - the placement of the security barrier not along the 1967 borders but on Palestinian land, the punitive character of the blockade of Gaza, the flouting of UN resolutions, etc. Last year, the Obama administration's pleas to the Netanyahu government to continue the moratorium on settlements-building, so that there was something left to negotiate for, were rebuffed, including tellingly in a high-profile announcement during Vice-President Joe Biden's visit to Israel.

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Our government has not explained why the Palestinian application for full membership is such a bad idea. Many in Israel, foremost the Netanyahu coalition government, see it as anathema but others see it as a necessary step to restart a peace process that has run its course and has become a sham, delivering process not peace and providing cover for ongoing illegal settlements building. Had the Palestinians not acted, we would not be revisiting the elements of a peace deal in the UN today. Moreover, Palestinian membership in the UN would not change the need for the Palestinians to negotiate peace with the Israelis,

as both sides have acknowledged, just as the independent states of Egypt and Jordan have negotiated peace agreements with Israel in the past, agreements that endure. Further, in an age of high-tech missile weaponry and drones, such a peace will come more readily and securely from Israel's expanding the stake its neighbours have in economic co-operation than from preserving a few kilometres of strategic depth.

What a successful UN membership application would change is that it would give the Palestinians the standing of a state, which would reduce, but hardly eliminate, the decided tilt in the playing field enjoyed by the much more powerful Israel, backed by the still unmatched U.S. At the same time, a successful application would entail de facto perhaps even de jure recognition by the world community, including the Arab countries, not just of Palestine but of Israel as well. In addition, while the Palestinians would enjoy the rights of statehood, including accession to treaties and recourse to international courts, they would also incur corresponding responsibilities, particularly the obligation under the UN Charter to preserve the peace, including with Israel. Palestinians would also incur the legal jeopardy in those courts for any crimes perpetrated against Israel and Israelis. The reverse would also be true, but such "lawfare" is infinitely preferable to warfare. And, curtailing impunity and reinforcing the rule of law in international relations has long been an objective of Canadian foreign policy.

More broadly, while it is up to Israel to make its own calculations, it is not evident that time is on its side. One consequence of the Arab Spring is that the Arab governments it affects appear to find it necessary to be more representative of and responsive to their people than their autocratic predecessors have been. It is apparent that the Palestinian issue, which is seen in most Arab (and Muslim and Third World) countries as unjust, is one in particular on which those governments will have to heed their own public opinion. Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan have become precarious and its ties with moderate, non-Arab Turkey are poor, putting in jeopardy a co-operative relationship dating not only to Israel's modern birth but to the Second World War and even to the Spanish Inquisition, when Jews fled into the Ottoman Empire. Palestinian membership of the UN, and genuine peace negotiations with Israel, would do more to reverse Israel's deepening self-isolation than anything else.

The Canadian government is backing the Netanyahu government to the hilt, not only by opposing the Palestinian application, but apparently by actively campaigning against it. Canada, like every other country, has an enormous stake in a peaceful disposition of the Israel-Palestine issue and in a progressive evolution of the Middle East. Whatever the outcome of this current chapter of Middle East diplomacy, Canada's policy will have been widely noted by the Palestinians and their many friends. They will likely see little in it that is principled or democratic, and will draw their own conclusions, as a consequence. As for us, we would be wise to see how so many others see us, and why.

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