



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Attack on Israel is an attack on Canada, Kent says

Junior foreign minister Peter Kent attends a Calgary news conference on Sept. 1, 2009.

Comments to Toronto publication not to be taken as indication Harper government's pro-Israel stance has altered, he adds

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Junior Foreign Affairs minister Peter Kent is suggesting Canada would rush to Israel's defence in a military confrontation, telling a Toronto publication that “an attack on Israel would be considered an attack on Canada.”

But he later declined to say whether this means that Canada would automatically declare war on an aggressor attacking Israel.

In an interview published Feb. 12 in Shalom Life – discussing the threat from Iran – Mr. Kent said: “Prime Minister Harper has made it quite clear for some time now and has regularly stated that an attack on Israel would be considered an attack on Canada.”

Mr. Kent's statement appears to be evidence the Harper government is shifting to an even stronger pro-Israel stance.

His wording – which goes beyond Mr. Harper's previous comments on Israel – evokes Article 5 of the NATO treaty which says “an armed attack against one or more [parties] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.”

In an interview with The Globe and Mail, Mr. Kent, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the Americas, dismissed the idea he was altering Canadian foreign policy, saying his comments paraphrased what Stephen Harper has said before.

Mr. Kent declined to say whether this means Canada is ready to join a war against a country that attacked Israel.

“You're putting words in my mouth; we don't have to be this absolute,” he said.

At the same time, Mr. Kent sounded a warning note, saying that even though Israel and Canada don't have a military treaty – like the NATO pact – Ottawa is not bluffing.

“There is no military treaty but I think the Prime Minister's ... commitment is quite clear: We don't pay lip service to our commitments to friends and allies.”

He apologized for the “sometimes imprecision of diplomacy,” but said Israel is clear on what Canada means.

“Israel is not in any doubt ... as to the degree of Canada's commitment,” Mr. Kent said. “And I would hope that any potential aggressor would consider that seriously.”

Shimon Fogel, CEO of the Canada-Israel Committee, said it's hard to predict exactly what Canada's commitment would entail in the event of an attack on Israel by Iran.

But he lauded Canada's decision to stand in solidarity with Israel as a democracy. “It's an incredibly positive and assertive comment,” he said. Mr. Fogel said it's also recognition an attack on Israel would have an incredibly destabilizing impact on the region. He said statements such as Mr. Kent's ultimately send a signal to Iran that Canada will stand together with Israel if it is attacked.

“We're not simply talking about a rhetorical statement,” he said.

The Prime Minister's Office backed up Mr. Kent, saying his words mirror what Mr. Harper has said before, including a speech in May, 2008, in which he said: “Those who threaten Israel also threaten Canada, because, as the last world war showed, hate-fuelled bigotry against some is ultimately a threat to us all, and must be resisted wherever it may lurk.”

Khaled Mouammar, national president of the Canadian Arab Federation, panned Mr. Kent's comments, saying Canada is joining arms with a country alleged to have committed war crimes in Gaza strip during the 2008-09 conflict there.

“It is regrettable that our government has chosen to ally itself with the government of Israel which the United Nations fact finding mission, led by renowned Jewish South African judge Richard Goldstone, found guilty of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Gaza,” Mr. Mouammar said in a statement.

The extremely controversial UN report by Mr. Goldstone in fact accused both Israel and Hamas of war crimes during the 2008-09 conflict.