

## Stephen Harper's troubling foreign policy

### *Breaking the Canadian consensus*

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MONTREAL (CUP) – Since coming to office, the Stephen Harper Conservatives have sought to break with Canada's consensus stance on the Middle East, developed since the birth of Israel 60 years ago and held to by governments of both conservative and liberal stripes over the years.

**Where once we were a candid (and when appropriate, critical) friend of Israel, we have now become their stooge — and it is Canada's international credibility that has suffered greatly as a result.**

Harper's latest tactics aimed at imposing his narrow pro-Israel agenda on the Rights and Democracy agency in Montreal is but the latest example of his heavy-handed campaign to realign Canada's foreign policy away from the balanced position of past governments. The defunding of Kairos, a respected humanitarian group which operates in the Middle East, was equally an attempt to stifle any and all criticism directed at the Jewish state, even when such criticism came from Israeli human rights groups.

The Conservatives have even blanketed the ridings of Liberal MPs with objectionable flyers irresponsibly linking their nuanced criticisms of the Israeli state to anti-Semitism — even when those MPs are Jewish themselves.

All of which leads us to the palpable irony and paradox inherent in the Evangelical Christian-inspired "pro-Israel" movement, whether it be Harper and the Reform-Alliance wing of the Conservative Party here or George W. Bush and the Republican Party in the United States. Put simply, Israel is a democracy. Defenders of the Jewish state repeatedly point to this fact with near religious fervour to explain their unequivocal support of the country's policies.

**And yet, their defence of the state is, in and of itself, totalitarian in its drive to shut down legitimate debate of Israel's actions; in truth, what we too often call the "pro-Israel" camp is actually pro- a particular segment of the Israeli population, namely the right wing represented by Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his governing coalition of hardliners.**

**In smearing legitimate criticism of Israel's government as anti-Semitic, the Conservatives**

**are simultaneously smearing huge swaths of the Israeli (and Canadian) populations who rightfully object to actions carried out by a particular governing party within a democratic system.**

Are the Labor and Kadima opposition parties in Israel, who together have ruled for most of the country's history, anti-Semitic? Is the respected and progressive \*Ha'aretz\* newspaper, among the chief critics of Israel's West Bank settlement policies, also anti-Semitic?

The inability of this basic absurdity to withstand even the most superficial prodding is a further sign of its ideological origins. What's more, the consistent attempts by its proponents to narrow and suppress legitimate debate by smearing dissenters with charges of racism is proof only of the insecurity of their position and their incapacity to win a debate on rational grounds.

**Harper's new alignment with Israel has also aggravated tensions between the Jewish and Arab communities in Canada, which itself is certain to carry toxic implications down the road. Bringing Canadians together has never been this prime minister's strong suit however, and true to type, the exacerbation of these domestic tensions doesn't seem to faze him — especially if dividing and conquering can deliver him votes.**

Canada's once proud role of intermediary in the Middle East has also been sacrificed on the altar of Harper's ideology. **Our steadfast and unconditional support of Israel's actions, no matter how questionable, has gravely undermined our credibility on issues of human rights, and has alienated many in the Arab world who considered us friends and allies.**

For now at least, it seems Canada's name generally still means something in Israel: fairness, justice, decency and goodwill. But a friend can only spit in your face and side with a foe for so long, irrespective of right and wrong, before they start to question the relationship's worth. For Canada, this point is fast approaching — faster with every year the Harper government, guided by its dogmas, remains in power.

**If Canadians care about our country's good name in the world, about the unity of our people here at home, then it's time to elect a government that places Canadian values of fairness and human rights above rigid ideologies, and who will uphold them equally and indiscriminately, regardless of race or religion.**

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