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The Changing Israeli-Palestinian Relationship: Implications for Canadian Policy in the Middle East

Executive Summary

The Palestinian-Israeli relationship has deteriorated, and the peace process collapsed long before the outbreak of violence in Gaza and Lebanon. These changes also affect Canada, which must now redefine its role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and transform itself into a conflict manager, if it is to look after its security, economic, moral, and humanitarian interests in the area.

On the Israeli side, Israelis have come to accept that there is no Palestinian partner for peace, and that Israel must take unilateral action to protect itself. This entails little or no cooperation with them. On the Palestinian side, there has been a growing frustration with the leadership of *Fatah* and a growing appreciation for *Hamas* and what it can do and has done for Palestinians.

This has led to the election of a government unwilling to recognize, much less negotiate with, Israel. The net result has been a shift among Israelis and Palestinians toward greater mistrust and intolerance of each other, and made it very unlikely that serious peace talks will reconvene any time soon.

These changes in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship mean that Canada must adjust its own policy toward this area. Since the parties themselves are not currently amenable to any serious peace process, Canada must re-focus its policy to manage the conflict more effectively, rather than resolve it. It cannot be resolved so long as the parties to it do not want to resolve it together. Instead, Canada's efforts must be focused on generating

immediate stability and security, and laying the groundwork for a longer-term policy that will, in the future, allow Canada to build on its present efforts.

Israel and Convergence

Changes in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship stem directly from shifts in popular and elite attitudes within Israel and the Palestinian areas. In the case of Israel, there have been two primary changes that have impacted on relations with the Palestinians. Although one focuses on the domestic arena and one on foreign affairs, they have come together into a policy of less tolerance for Palestinian rejectionism and violence and greater acceptance of unilateral Israeli actions. The onset of the second intifada in September

Brent E. Sasley

2000 crystallized these changes, but their roots go back several years prior.

In domestic terms, both survey and anecdotal evidence indicates that since the second half of the 1990s, Israelis have become more interested in focusing on their own socio-economic conditions than on foreign policy. It is commonly believed that Israeli elections have always been about relations with the Arab states and the Palestinians, but this has been true only since the 1990s, and even then foreign affairs was only one of several other (domestic) issues that Israelis ranked high on issues of electoral concern.

The 2006 national elections marked a high point of this shift in concerns (though, as discussed below, foreign policy also played an important role in voter considerations). Israelis clearly indicated that they wanted their leaders to focus on fixing Israel's widespread social and economic problems, reflected in the rise of support for parties focused primarily on these issues. The Pensioners Party, concerned almost solely with bettering the standard of living for Israel's elderly and running in its first election, received 7 seats in the Israeli parliament. The Labor Party, now led by the former leader of Israel's largest labor union, received 19 seats – the same as the previous election, but at a time when *Kadima*, the forerunner, dominated the campaign with its focus on Israel's external relations.

In foreign affairs, there has been a growing perception among Israelis that the Palestinian leadership is not interested in peace, and that it made a tactical decision to resort to violence to achieve its political goals. Yasser Arafat was considered to be the key representative of this policy,

and his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, is not held in higher regard.

The victory of *Hamas* in the January 2006 parliamentary elections, and its formation of a new government in March, has only underlined this belief. *Hamas's* refusal to recognize Israel or renounce violence is considered evidence that there is no serious Palestinian partner for peace, and that if Israel is to ensure its security, it must do so on its own and not in conjunction with the Palestinians.

These domestic and foreign concerns have connected in the notions of *separation* and *unilateralism*. Separation means a complete severing of all ties with the Palestinians, including political and economic links such as gradually reducing the number of Palestinian laborers working in Israel and cutting trade ties. The Palestinians are to be left to their own devices.

This might be viewed as collective punishment of the Palestinians for their intransigence. More accurately,



Israeli PM Ehud Olmert (Getty Images photo, newsday.com)

it rather reflects a belief that efforts to date to engage the Palestinians have not brought peace, and that Palestinians themselves are not ready to end the conflict.

Instrumentally, separation is to be achieved through unilateral Israeli actions.

Under this concept, Israel will act on its own to protect its security, with little or no coordination with the Palestinians. The first consequence of this new policy was the separation barrier being erected along the Green Line and looping into the West Bank in some places. The second result was disengagement from Gaza in August 2005, under which Israel withdrew all civilians and military personnel from the Strip, though it still controls most of Gaza's borders and its airspace.

Separation and unilateralism also come together in the *convergence* plan.

This plan is currently touted by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his *Kadima* party, the senior partner in Israel's coalition government.

The plan is meant to "converge" Israeli settlers and military personnel into a few key areas close to the Green Line, Jerusalem, and in the Jordan Valley. It is unclear if the details of convergence are set or if there is room for negotiation on them, but it is clear that Israel has made the idea behind convergence (that is, separation and unilateralism) its policy parameters. If the Palestinians can work within these parameters, Israel will work with the Palestinians. If they cannot, Israel will act alone.

The Election of Hamas

There have also been shifts among Palestinians, and here too there has been a foreign and a domestic element. In foreign affairs, Palestinians credit *Hamas* with having helped drive Israel out of Gaza. *Hamas's* terrorist attacks (rocket fire, suicide bombings, shootings, and so on) are considered to have made the Israeli presence in Gaza untenable. Its policy of violence has been favorably compared to the policy of negotiation generally advocated by *Fatah*, the largest faction within the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Arafat's and Abbas's own group, which is perceived to have failed to provide any real benefits for Palestinians.



Hamas supporters celebrate electoral victory (Indianapolis Star/AP Photo)

In domestic terms, Palestinians have become fed up with the leadership of *Fatah*. This organization dominated the struggle for Palestinian self-determination since it took control of the PLO in 1969, and dominated the Palestinian executive and legislature from their creation in the Oslo Accords until *Hamas's* electoral victory in 2006. *Fatah* is widely considered, by both Palestinians and outside observers, to be corrupt. It is

run mainly by old-time cronies of Arafat, and seems more concerned with enhancing its power and the wealth of its members than taking serious care of Palestinians.

Hamas represents a fresh face in politics at the national level in a system that has been presided over by the same people for decades. *Hamas* has traditionally done well in elections at the municipal level, and this has given Palestinians a feel for its local accomplishments, particularly in the provision of social welfare services. Its decision to run in national elections was seen as a major development in Palestinian politics, and one that was warmly greeted by many Palestinians eager for change.

Hamas's role in both foreign and domestic matters helped Palestinians vote for it rather than for *Fatah*, which led to a surprise *Hamas* victory in the January elections.

These elections were run on a joint system, which combines the proportional representation party list with the first-past-the-post individual

district system. In the proportional representation the voters in Gaza and the West Bank were asked to choose among various parties. In the first-past-the-post system, which broke the Palestinian areas into individual voting districts, *Hamas* did considerably better, winning 45 seats compared to *Fatah's* 17.

Apparently, Palestinians have come to believe that *Hamas* is better suited to improving their living conditions and better able to meet their needs.

It should be noted that factional fighting within *Fatah* played a role in *Fatah's* loss as well.

The Impact on the Peace Process

As a result of these changes in the Israeli and Palestinian areas, the peace process has been completely disrupted and is unlikely to be renewed on a serious basis for at least the next few years. Given the asymmetry of power in the relationship, particularly in military terms, Israel is in a better position to unilaterally set the agenda. Israeli measures will be designed not to end the conflict, but rather reduce its more harmful effects on Israeli citizens. Israel will largely determine the contours of the conflict, and this will remain so until Israel perceives a change in the Palestinian leadership.

There is also nothing to suggest seriously that *Hamas* will change its position.

Hamas is certainly not going to change its ideology, in the near future. The hard-line leadership in both Damascus and Gaza, which opposes conciliation with Israel, has maintained ultimate veto over policymaking. As such, there is no reason to expect that Israel will deviate from its new policy of unilateralism and separation. Indeed, recent radical actions in Gaza, culminating in the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier, and the subsequent Israeli military response, will likely confirm in Israeli minds the correctness of this new policy.

This mindset was further reinforced by the subsequent events in Lebanon, as Israelis showed consistently strong support for a military

response to *Hezbollah* provocations, despite discomfort over the number of deaths among Lebanese civilians. The inability of the Lebanese government to assert control over *Hezbollah*, and the lack of political will in the international community thus far to enforce stability along the border, have convinced Israelis that a unilateral response in Lebanon is the only viable policy.

One might point to the disengagement from the Gaza Strip as an example of some positive developments in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship.

As a step toward the fulfillment of Israeli obligations under numerous international arrangements, disengagement was a good starting point. It removed a major point of friction between Israelis and Palestinians, gave the Palestinians a chance to govern their own affairs over a large, contiguous piece of territory, and demonstrated that difficult decisions can be carried out despite significant opposition within Israel, which even threatened violence.

The disengagement also illustrated

that even in cases of Israeli unilateralism, there is still room for some cooperation with the Palestinians, such as on the sale of some economic enterprises from Gaza settlers to Palestinians.

But the disengagement was still primarily a unilateral affair. If it is applied to the West Bank, as the convergence plan is intended, unilateral action will have a profoundly negative impact on the peace process. With Israel setting the borders on its own, Israeli disengagement from the West Bank will shatter Palestinian expectations of the size and borders of their eventual state, leave some Palestinians, and noteworthy pieces of land under Israeli control, particularly in Jordan Valley, which will cut off a Palestinian state from Jordan, and remove Jerusalem completely from negotiations.

This will only harden popular and elite Palestinian attitudes against Israel, and likely create conditions of tolerance for radical, violent solutions to achieve Palestinian statehood. It may also strengthen radical groups such as *Hamas*, which will argue that the Palestinians have gained without having to make any concessions of their own. Indeed,

many Israeli analysts and politicians now think along this line.

Most likely, continuing terrorism will be the result. In response, Israel will likely engage in a policy of limited invasions of the Palestinian

state, much as it is currently doing in Gaza and southern Lebanon. Civilian suffering on both sides, and the instability it will generate, again as demonstrated in both areas, will undermine any positive progress in Israeli-Palestinians relations.

Canada's Past Role: Peacekeeper and Facilitator

Canada has a well-established presence in Middle Eastern peacekeeping. Its first involvement in peacekeeping began in 1954, when it contributed soldiers to the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization established during the 1947-1949 Arab-Israeli War. Altogether Canada had been involved in six missions, including in the Sinai, the Golan Heights, and Jerusalem.

In the narrower Israeli-Palestinian arena, Canada has also taken on the role of facilitator. In the aftermath of the Madrid Peace Conference in October 1991, multilateral frameworks were set up to deal with specific issues in Arab-Israeli peace. Canada became the chair of the Refugee Working Group, designed to find a fair and accepted resolution to the existence of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. As gavel-holder, Canada's role was to facilitate negotiations between Israel and other Arab states, and the PLO after 1993.

Canada's focus on multilateralism, its status as a middle power in international affairs, and the fact that both the Israelis and the Palestinians view Canada as one of the more even-handed and truly neutral parties to the conflict have defined Ottawa's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, changing political circumstances



An Israeli bus blown up by terrorists (ic-creations.com photo)

have forced all parties to alter their policies, and Canada is no different. The key question for Ottawa is how to adopt a new policy position while still maintaining traditional Canadian values about and interests in, and positions on various issues, and yet remain involved in this area.

Canada's Shift to Conflict Manager

The most effective response for Canada is to immediately adapt to the changed circumstances on the ground in the Palestinian-Israeli relationship. The nature of that relationship has changed significantly since the onset of the Oslo process in 1993, as outlined above. Currently, all feelings of trust have broken down, and there is very little desire on the part of leaders of both sides to work together in a stable negotiating framework to resolve the conflict.

Dominant elite and public feelings in the heyday of Oslo – that dedication, hard work and familiar relationships amongst negotiators on both sides would lead to peaceful coexistence between a Palestinian state and Israel – have completely disappeared. They have been replaced by feelings of anger, frustration, resentment, and gloom. With more Israeli unilateral actions such feelings will harden.

Given this reality, Canada cannot continue its traditional role in Palestinian-Israeli peace-making.

First, these changes require immediate response and results. This is why Canada must manage the conflict, in order to achieve short term solutions and stabilize the

relationship, making it possible for longer-term changes to take place *after* the immediate problems have been sorted out.

Second, peacekeepers are not an option at the moment; there is no political-military space for them. The Temporary International Presence in Hebron was an exception, but the concept has not worked well at all. Without a military mandate or political will, Israeli soldiers have been required to do the job of international peacekeepers there. Israeli soldiers now escort Israeli settlers around the town and protect Palestinians from settler attacks.

Peacekeepers can only be effective in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza if they can physically separate the parties with well-armed soldiers, who have a mandate to physically prevent violence from being done or to arrest those who have committed it.

Israel's acceptance of the international efforts currently underway to put together a robust peacekeeping force with the mandate and the capabilities to prevent *Hezbollah* from re-asserting itself in southern Lebanon, combined with growing interest among some Israeli academics and policymakers in peacekeeping as a necessary solution, is a signal that, if there is coordination with others (in this case also the Lebanese), Israel may be willing to change its position on this issue. But it remains to be seen how effective such a force will be in meeting key

Israeli demands, such as preventing the re-arming of *Hezbollah*.

There is at the moment little evidence that the conditions are right for such an endeavor. *Fatah*, the party most likely to agree to such an arrangement, remains weak and riddled by internecine quarrels, the international community has shown less interest in becoming directly involved, *Hamas* has not altered its position, and Israel has little patience to wait. The agreement in principle to station international observers at the Karni crossing point from Gaza into Israel is focused on delivery of humanitarian aid and economic links, not security.

Third, there is no room for the facilitation of negotiation, since *Hamas* refuses to negotiate with Israel and Israel does not believe there is anyone on the Palestinian side with the will and ability to engage in serious peace talks, including Mahmoud Abbas. If the parties themselves have not agreed on a framework for discussion, Canada or any other external power cannot do it for them.

In addition, other regional developments have also combined to limit the capacity for peace negotiations and a Canadian role in them. These



Israeli missile strike on a car in Gaza (hollandsentinel.com photo)

include *Hezbollah's* violent provocations across the northern border; Israel's military response and the resulting humanitarian crises in Lebanon and northern Israel; the increasingly aggressive rejectionist and confrontational stance of Iran; Syria's refusal to play a constructive role in resolving regional disputes; and the persistent insurgency in Iraq. All these dilute attention from the Israeli-Palestinian arena and make it difficult for any involved party to adopt positive attitudes and offer serious concessions.

In light of all this, Canada cannot be a problem-solver, but must instead become a *conflict manager*. This entails three elements.

First, Canada must provide for immediate stability in the relationship. This means working to end the violence committed by both sides. Though there should be no fear of the violence expanding into a wider regional war, the violence does make the Palestinian-Israeli relationship too volatile and unstable.

Canada should push Israel to end the violence. It should also push Mahmoud Abbas to exert control over Palestinian militants, including *Hamas*, and try to illustrate the benefits that would accrue to Palestinians once the path of violence is renounced. This would not break the international boycott of *Hamas*, which must be maintained until it agrees to the international community's demands, but it would demonstrate what *Hamas* could gain by being more cooperative. Canada could also work through the Arab countries that do maintain relations with *Hamas*.

Lebanon can again serve as a model.

Canada should push for a cease-fire or agreement that addresses the underlying conditions that led to the current violence and remove the major points of volatility in the relationship. This includes disarming of all private militias, an end to terrorism, and a withdrawal of Israeli soldiers from Gaza and an end to the limited invasions. It should be made clear in such efforts that Israel should have the right to take actions necessary for defence, as it does in Lebanon; otherwise, the militant groups in Gaza would not have any incentive to curtail their violence.

Second, and drawing on the first element, Canada should seek to provide greater individual security. This necessitates a focus on pressing humanitarian considerations, such as providing basic necessities to civilians in need, particularly food and medicine.

The boycott of *Hamas* must be maintained as a form of pressure.

If not there would be no incentive for *Hamas* to recognize Israel and renounce violence. At the same time, Canada should press for a faster international effort to get these necessities to Palestinian civilians. This should be done through qualified non-governmental organizations that do not have ties to *Hamas* or the Palestinian government, and there should be adequate amounts of funding.

Third, Canada should keep the door open for future considerations. Canada should encourage peace initiatives and contacts between the two sides and maintain links with factions willing to consider such actions. The purpose here is to prepare for an eventual resumption



Israeli security barrier route (Israeli Ministry of Defence photo)

of negotiations, and facilitate their smooth start.

Such contacts are difficult to maintain in the current climate, but there are groups and individuals on both sides that are willing, and they should be supported. Evidence from previous experience suggests that in times of violence many of these links are cut off or at least put under severe stress. Canada must help maintain them, in preparation for the moment when the political climate will improve. It can do so by providing financial and logistical support, primarily in terms of keeping maintaining links among individuals and groups after initial contact.

In all these, Canada can only manage the conflict, that is, reduce its intensity and mitigate its harsher consequences. Until the parties are ready to do otherwise on their own

or until they are pushed by powers stronger than Canada, there is little more Canada can do. But by engaging in these types of conflict management, Canada can help contribute to a reduction in violence and suffering, and maintain its influence among the parties.

At the same time, in addition to these immediate, short term policies, Canada should also adopt one long term goal: changing attitudes among Palestinians and Israelis. Canada already devotes some funding to the development of democratic institutions in the Palestinian areas, and it is difficult to argue that funding be redirected away from emergency humanitarian programs under the current circumstances. But a primary, long-term program should be focused on "attitude generation," with emphasis on the Palestinian side of the equation – given the disparity in wealth and standards in comparison with Israel.

Attitude generation is about the educational, religious, and social environments in which Palestinians are raised and the impact on Palestinian attitudes toward Israel, Israelis and Jews, and the peace process.

There is ample evidence of the hatred and intolerance advocated in state-run Palestinian media, mosques, and schools. Canada must push and encourage the Palestinian Authority to change its message to a focus on tolerance and respect. The Palestinian people, especially the youth, must be better prepared for peace and more ready to accept that their demands will not all be met. Israel's disengagement from Gaza may be said to be the equivalent of such efforts on the part of Israelis,

and there is no reason to expect the Palestinians to do any less.

Although more research must go into the design of such programs, one place to start could be through more Canadian-led organizations that focus on direct people-to-people contacts. These programs would concentrate on the development of tolerance, exploration of myths of both sides, the necessity not just the desire of achieving peace, and so on. Currently, some Canadian funding through the Canadian International Development Agency goes toward related activities, but it is not nearly enough.

Conclusion

Simply put, Canada is not a major player in Middle Eastern politics. But it can be, and has been, an important player.

Its primary advantage lies in the perception by Palestinians and Israelis that Canada is neither pro-Israeli like the US, nor pro-Palestinian like the European Union. In the past, its chief results came only by supporting the efforts

of greater powers or by assisting the efforts of the local parties themselves.

However, since the circumstances in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship have now changed and are not likely to revert to their previous more positive tone in the near future, Canada may in fact be better able to use its neutralist and even-handed stance to further its own influence and at the same time help end some of the violence and instability in the Palestinian-Israeli relationship.

It is essential that Canada tailor its foreign policy in the Israeli-Palestinian arena to the changed circumstances on the ground there.

There is nothing to suggest that Israelis or Palestinians will be ready for serious peace negotiations any time soon. The suggestions for policy consideration made in this report provide an avenue for Canada to maintain its influence while also reducing the more negative consequences of the conflict.

The immediate concern with stability, individual security, and the maintenance of contacts, combined with the longer-term considerations of attitude generation, seem to be the most that can be done at this point. The spiraling violence and political intransigence and frustration do not allow for much else. Canada can and should refocus its efforts on conflict management, in the terms outlined here. If it does not, it risks undermining the promotion of its interests and values in a critical region of the world.



Israel and Palestinian areas after the 1967 war (Scholastic photo)

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