

Is Stephen Harper's Canada Israel's New Best Friend?

With the Middle East in turmoil, Europe moving backward and the United States fatigued from years of war and recession, Canada has emerged as a staunch supporter of Israel. At a time when Israel is routinely singled out for condemnation, Canada has been at the forefront of those defending Israel and criticizing its enemies.

This outspokenness comes amid the growing economic and political clout of Canada, a country that is traditionally accustomed to keeping a low profile internationally. While Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper embarked on his first trip to Israel, from Jan. 19-22, the Jewish state rolled out the red carpet for him. Has Israel found a new best friend?

"[Harper] really understands the importance and moral justification for a Jewish state. He gets it," Rabbi Philip Scheim of Toronto's Beth David Synagogue, who is traveling as part of Harper's delegation to Israel, told .

Since World War II, Canada's foreign policy has centered on multilateralism and participation in international organizations. But Harper has moved beyond those traditional corridors and has focused on a stronger and more independent Canadian foreign policy.

Part of this new independent foreign policy has been supporting Israel, an often-unpopular position around the world. Immediately upon taking office in 2006, Harper bucked world opinion and supported Israel in its war against the Lebanese terror group Hezbollah. This outward support has continued in every military engagement Israel has been involved in since.

Canada has also supported Israel in the U.N., joining only a

handful of small nations and the U.S. in voting against upgrading the Palestinians to nonmember observer state status in 2012 and repeatedly voting against resolutions condemning Israel.

On Iran, Harper has aligned more closely with Israel's position than with the positions of some of its allies in Europe and the U.S. In 2012, Harper cut diplomatic ties with Iran and expelled Iranian diplomats from Ottawa, Canada's capital. More recently, Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird said he was "deeply skeptical" of the interim nuclear deal with Iran and reaffirmed that Canada would maintain its sanctions against Iran.

These positions have come with some costs for Canada. In a shocking outcome in 2010, Canada lost a bid for a seat on the U.N. Security Council. Some speculated that Harper's strong pro-Israel stance might have played a role in straining relations with the U.N.'s large Islamic bloc.

"This is really something we have not seen before, a prime minister of Canada taking a really strong position at a great political cost. He knows that this could really hurt him in some areas, but he doesn't care, because this is what he really believes," Scheim told .

Harper, an evangelical Christian who belongs to the Colorado-based Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, has also come under fire from critics who claim that his faith influences his foreign policy.

"My sense is that there may be an element of religious connection [to Israel]. But that is certainly not all of it; I think it also has to do with his sense of the world, his sense of justice and understanding of history, especially Jewish history," Scheim said.

But Canada, like its American and European allies, still has a vocal anti-Israel movement within the country, particularly on

college campuses and in certain media outlets.

In 2005, Toronto's York University became the first school to host "Israel Apartheid Week" (IAW), and its student union, the largest in Canada, voted last year to divest from Israel. IAW events have also spread to other Canadian universities.

Harper's recent selection of Vivian Bercovici, who is Jewish and has been a vocal supporter of Israel, to be Canada's next ambassador to Israel has also drawn some criticism in the Canadian media. In an interview with Baird, CBC anchor Evan Solomon questioned whether it is appropriate to appoint a pro-Israel Jew to be the ambassador to Israel.

"Vivian Bercovici is Jewish, so there are going to be some questions. Why not appoint someone who doesn't even have the perception of any kind of bias [in favor of Israel]?" Solomon asked.

Yet despite the criticism of Harper's pro-Israel stance, Shimon Fogel, CEO of Canada's Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, credits Harper for making support for Israel a mainstream position in Canada.

"Adopting those positions on Israel is what a mainstream party should look like in the eyes of most of the Canadian electorate today," Fogel told .

This support has shown itself in the positions of the leaders of Canada's two main opposition parties, the centrist Liberal Party and the center-left New Democratic Party (NDP).

"Yes, the Liberal Party will have Israel's back—but not because it's in our political interests to do so at home, but because it is the right thing to do on the world stage," Liberal Party leader Justin Trudeau recently told a crowd of 500 people at Beth Tikvah Synagogue in Toronto, the *Jewish Tribune* of Toronto reported.

Meanwhile, NDP leader Thomas Mulcair has strong Jewish ties. Mulcair's wife is a French Sephardic Jew whose parents are Holocaust survivors, and his children are being raised Jewish. Mulcair has described himself as an "ardent support of Israel in all instances."

Adding to their credentials, both Trudeau and Mulcair have also visited Israel before.

"The opposition parties are very close to the position of the Conservative government [on Israel]. But it has to be recognized that this government [Harper's Conservative Party] established that benchmark," Fogel told .

Amid the political implications, one aspect of Harper's trip that may be overlooked is the economic component. Like Israel, Canada has successfully weathered the global economic crisis over the past five years and has invested heavily in high-tech areas.

"One of the things we have done over the last decade has tried to broaden the base of support for Israel. We have spent a lot of time to helping foster interest and engagement of the private sector in seeing Israel as a high-tech destination. There has been a ton of partnerships and investments from the private sector," Fogel said.

Joining Harper on the trip to Israel are 30 of Canada's top business executives, including billionaire real estate and media moguls David Asper and Albert Reichmann, as well as Air Canada CEO Calin Rovinescu.

Upon touching down in Israel for the first time, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu greeted Harper and praised him as "a great friend of Israel and the Jewish people."

"I think he has taken a moral stand worthy of admiration, and I welcome him on behalf of the Israeli government and on behalf of all the citizens of Israel," Netanyahu said, the

Jerusalem Post reported.

At a time when few countries around the world come to Israel's defense, Rabbi Scheim believes the trip is an opportunity for Israel to finally express its appreciation for Harper.

"He is very well-known in Israel,"Scheim told . "You go to the U.S., nobody knows who the prime minister of Canada is, but in Israel, the whole country knows him, and I am very proud to identify with him."

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