

Canada's Blank Check for Israel

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Questions have been raised over which country's cabinet John Baird has served. (DFATD/[Flickr](#))

The [announcement](#) that [John Baird](#) is to stand down as [Canada's](#) foreign minister came about a year too late for [Gaza](#).

For it was Baird who had gleefully embodied Canada's ugly stance on last summer's Israeli attack.

Not content simply to ignore the slaughter of sleeping children and unarmed civilians [fleeing while waving white flags](#), Baird and his Conservative Party boss, Prime Minister [Stephen Harper](#), rose to the unconditional defense of Israel, pretending the Palestinian question originated with [Hamas](#), implying parity between the two "sides," smoke-screening the longstanding [siege of Gaza](#) and blaming the dead for their own annihilation.

Curiously, some pundits in Canada's mainstream press who seemed happy with Baird's sledgehammer statecraft during his tenure, which includes cutting all diplomatic ties with [Iran](#), have just now begun questioning his approach to Palestine.

Writing in *The Globe and Mail*, for instance, Middle East correspondent Patrick Martin [observes](#) that "There were times, when John Baird was foreign minister, that people weren't quite sure in what country's cabinet he served."

"Baird, for all his intelligence and charm, chose not to untangle the Arab-Israeli complexities and help build a bridge between the parties," Martin adds, "but to take a side, that of Israel, to which he gave *carte blanche*."

While many would say these observations are far too little and much too late, there's no doubt this view is widely shared by Palestinians and their supporters.

[Saeb Erekat](#), chief negotiator for the [Palestinian Authority](#), wrote an opinion piece headlined "[It is John Baird who needs to apologize to the Palestinian people](#)." According to Erekat, the Western-backed PA "has been engaged in a diplomatic effort to obtain those very same ideals Canadians hold dear — to achieve freedom and dignity. We have been working tirelessly to exercise our right to self-determination and establish a state of our own — a state that lives in peace and security with its neighbors, including Israel."

In practice, as many Palestinian critics of the PA have pointed out, this has meant making endless [concessions](#) to Israel on fundamental issues such as [settlements](#) and [Jerusalem](#), as well as [collaborating closely](#) with Israeli occupation forces against any form of Palestinian resistance.

“Instead of rewarding the Palestinians for their insistence on pursuing peace and for their deep commitment to the stability and security of the region,” Erekat added, “Mr. Baird has chosen to deride and stand against Palestinians at every corner.”

An absent opposition

One could be forgiven for thinking that free-flying spittle seems rather un-Canadian, and admittedly the international media have bigger fish to fry than documenting the increasingly cynical immorality of the country’s foreign policy under Harper and his sidekick Baird.

And while we’re at it, it’s only fair to note that their ill-considered and ahistorical views went virtually unchallenged by either of the country’s putative “opposition” parties. There’s the formerly progressive New Democratic Party, one of whose legislators, Sana Hassainia, [quit](#) over her party’s failure to condemn Israeli aggression in Gaza, and was subsequently subjected to a smear campaign.

And then there’s the formerly centrist Liberal Party, now led by Justin Trudeau, whose father, the late former Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau, was the only real statesman to have led Canada during my lifetime.

My Lebanese-Canadian grandparents were so loyal to the pro-immigrant Liberals of their day, they kept a framed picture of their local member of Parliament (MP) on the mantelpiece alongside family photos.

In fact, at the height of last summer’s Gaza onslaught, a group of eight Liberal and Conservative MPs embarked on a “[fact-finding mission](#)” to Israel sponsored by the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs.

Not one of those MPs — who remain mute to this day on Israel’s [targeting](#) of [UNRWA](#) schools, the four-figure Palestinian death toll and Israel’s [near-daily ceasefire violations](#)— set foot in Gaza on this quest for “facts.” Instead, their time was spent visiting injured Israeli soldiers to offer sympathy and condolences.

Still, I confess to a soft spot for the former Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien, whose swan song consisted of refusing the invitation by US President [George W. Bush](#) and UK Prime Minister [Tony Blair](#) to help invade [Iraq](#).

Contrast that with Baird’s ennobling *cri de coeur*: the announcement on 18 January of a formal pact between Canada and Israel to fight efforts to boycott Israel.

As The Electronic Intifada has [reported](#), the move was denounced by Palestine’s [Boycott National Committee](#), the steering group for the global boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement, which accused Canada of “further deepening its collaboration with Israel’s occupation and launching a shameful, propagandistic attack on free speech in the process.”

“Aversion to justice”

The pact with Israel came on the heels of Baird’s [pronouncement](#) that the Palestinian bid to join the [International Criminal Court](#) (ICC) was “a huge mistake.” This view was challenged forcefully by Paul Heinbecker, the country’s last ambassador to sit in the UN Security Council and a foreign policy advisor to former Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

Describing the ICC as “a court of last resort,” Heinbecker [writes](#) that “[Ottawa’s](#) bluster in response to the Palestinian initiative looks more like an aversion to justice than a devotion to principle.”

There was precedent, of course. On 16 July, just a week after Israel’s 51-day-long summer assault on Gaza began, Harper’s Conservative party released the video [Through Fire and Water, Canada Will Stand with You](#), a two-and-half-minute-long blank check for any acts of terror or criminality Israel might undertake.

To the beat of military drums and a backdrop of flags waving in slow motion, Harper offered this context for Canada’s unconditional support: “At the great turning points of history, Canada has consistently chosen — often to our great cost — to stand with others who oppose injustice and to confront the dark forces of the world.”

Those unfamiliar with Canadian history might wonder about the “turning points” to which Harper refers. Perhaps he’s talking about the resolution of the 1956 Suez Crisis, which earned Lester B. Pearson, the Canadian president of the United Nations General Assembly, the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957.

In fact, just six weeks after the release of *Through Fire and Water*, [B’nai Brith](#), an influential Canadian Jewish and pro-Israel organization, nominated Harper for the same prize to widespread outrage.

The comparison might seem risible until one considers Pearson’s proactive role in helping to create Israel in the first place. Before he took the helm at the UN General Assembly, Pearson had chaired the UN Special Committee on Palestine which supported existing plans to carve up the land, and rejected a [one-state solution](#) proposed by the Arab Higher Committee in which all religious and ethnic groups would live side by side and be entitled to equal rights.

In fact, throughout the country’s history there has often been tension between Canadians’ self-regard as decent, honest brokers and its less principled policies. Nonetheless, Canada’s foreign policy has reached its nadir under Harper.

The writing was on the wall back in 2010 when Canada lost its bid for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for the first time in history. In response, then Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon perversely [declared](#) that “some would even say that, because of our attachment to [democratic and human rights principles] we lost a seat on the council. If that’s the case, then so be it.”

I’m not sure my friends at some of Canada’s human rights organizations shared Cannon’s analysis of the unprecedented loss, nor the misplaced *chutzpah* his remarks exposed. The bigger question is whether Canadians at large will recognize how far the country is shifting away from a growing consensus on Israeli aggression and Palestinian rights, and whether they’ll prioritize rehabilitating Canada’s global standing.

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