

The Long History of Zionism in Canada

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Canada's Conservative government is trying to convince Canadian Jews to support its right-wing imperialistic worldview.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper recently spoke to the annual Toronto gala of the Jewish National Fund, which has a long history of dispossessing Palestinians and discriminating against non-Jews.

Echoing the words of Theodor Herzl, a founder of political Zionism, Harper told the 4,000 attendees that Israel is a "light of freedom and democracy in what is otherwise a region of darkness."

Shortly before this event the Minister for Employment and Social Development Jason Kenney spoke at the launch of the Canadian chapter of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). Established by a former colonel in the Israeli military, MEMRI selectively (mis)translates stories from Arab and Iranian media in a bid to advance expansionist Israeli interests.

Kenney told the audience assembled at Montreal's Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue that MEMRI is "a peaceful weapon of truth-telling in a civilizational conflict in which we are all engaged."

The comments from Harper and Kenney certainly play well with those in the Jewish community committed to Israeli and Western imperialism, but they also spur that sentiment. Most people respect power and when leading politicians say a country is involved in a "civilizational conflict" against "a region of darkness" it tends to shape opinion.

Few Canadian Jews — or others among the target audience for that matter — realize that Harper and Kenney don't take this "clash of civilizations" talk literally (if they did they wouldn't be deepening political ties with a number of Middle Eastern monarchies and selling billions of dollars in weaponry to the region's "darkest" regime, Saudi Arabia.)

While the Harper government's pro-Israel comments are particularly extreme, they are far from unique in Canadian history. For more than a century non-Jewish Canadians have promoted a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Similar to Europe, Zionism's roots in Canada are Christian, not Jewish. Early Canadian support for Zionism was based on the more literal readings of the Bible that flowed out of the Protestant Reformation.

They were also tied to this country's status as a dominion of the British Empire, which in the latter half of the nineteenth century began to see Zionism as a potential vehicle to

strengthen its geostrategic position in the region.

At the time of confederation, Canada's preeminent Christian Zionist was Henry Wentworth Monk. To buy Palestine from the Ottoman Empire in 1875, Monk began the Palestine Restoration Fund.

Unsuccessful, seven years later he took out an ad in the Jewish World proposing a "Bank of Israel" to finance Jewish resettlement. Irving Abella's book *A Coat of Many Colours: Two Centuries of Jewish Life in Canada* describes Monk as "an eccentric but respected businessman" who took up a campaign in Canada and England to raise funds for buying land in Palestine during the 1870s and 1880s.

"In 1881 Monk even proposed setting up a Jewish National Fund," Abella writes. "He issued manifestoes, wrote long articles, spoke to assorted meetings and lobbied extensively in England and Canada to realize his dream."

Monk called for the British Empire to establish a "dominion of Israel" similar to the dominion of Canada. In the 1978 book *Canada and Palestine*, Zachariah Kay notes: "Monk believed that Palestine was the logical center of the British Empire, and could help form a confederation of the English-speaking world."

Monk was not alone in Canada. Citing a mix of Christian and pro-British rationale, leading Canadian politicians repeatedly expressed support for Zionism. In 1907, two cabinet ministers attended the Federation of Zionist Societies of Canada convention, telling delegates that Zionism had the support of the government, according to Kay's book.

Kay's book also states that Arthur Meighen, then solicitor-general and later prime minister, proclaimed in November 1915: "I think I can speak for those of the Christian faith when I express the wish that God speed the day when the land of your forefathers shall be yours again. This task I hope will be performed by that champion of liberty the world over — the British Empire."

The 1917 Balfour Declaration, which declared British support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, boosted support for Zionism in this country. In the years thereafter, Canadian politicians of various stripes repeatedly urged Jews (and others) to support Zionism.

During a July 1922 speech to the Zionist Federation of Canada, the anti-Semitic Prime Minister Mackenzie King "was effusive with praise for Zionism," explains David Bercuson in *Canada and the Birth of Israel*. King told participants their aspirations were "in consonance" with the greatest ideals of the "Englishman."

A dozen years later, Prime Minister R.B. Bennett told a coast to-coast radio broadcast for the launch of the United Palestine Appeal fund drive that the Balfour Declaration and the British conquest of Palestine represented the beginning of the fulfillment of biblical prophecies.

According to a 1962 book by Canadian Zionist Bernard Figler, Bennett said, "When the promises of God, speaking through his prophets, are that the home will be restored in the homeland of their forefathers...Scriptural prophecy is being fulfilled. The restoration of Zion has begun."

Jewish Zionism must be understood from within the political climate in which it operated.

And Canada's political culture clearly fostered Zionist ideals.

British imperialism, Christian Zionism and nationalist ideology were all part of this country's political fabric. Additionally, in the early 1900s most Canadians did not find it odd that Europeans would take a "backward" people's land, which is what settlers did to the indigenous population here.

A number of books about Canada's Jewish community discuss how elite Canadian Jews, especially after the 1917 Balfour Declaration, were more active Zionists than their US counterparts. In *Canada's Jews: A People's Journey*, Gerald Tulchinsky explains: "The First World War accentuated differences between Canadian and American Jewry. For example, loyalty to Britain's cause provided Zionists with opportunities to identify their purposes with Britain's imperial mission."

When British General Edmund Allenby led a campaign in late 1917 to take Palestine from the Ottomans as many as 400 Canadians (about half recruited specifically for the task) fought in Allenby's Jewish Legion. Sometimes beleaguered Jewish communities were praised by the media for taking up England's cause to conquer Palestine.

Since Israel's creation in 1948 different Canadian governments have expressed varying degrees of support. But overall, the laudatory public declarations have continued.

After a long career of support for Zionism as external minister and prime minister, Lester Pearson referred to that country as "an outpost, if you will, of the West in the Middle East."

External Affairs Minister Don Jamieson echoed this sentiment in an October 1977 speech. "Israel is an increasingly valuable ally of the West and Jews and non-Jews alike should see to it that Israel remains ... an ally of the Western world," Jamieson said. "We in Canada must see to it that when Israel is making such tremendous sacrifices, we should stand ready to help Israel with oil and material assistance."

Yes, the current government is more aggressive in its public declarations than any before it and this has helped drive the establishment Jewish community to an even more hardline position.

To the Conservatives' delight, two years ago the ninety-year old Canadian Jewish Congress was disbanded by its wealthy donors in favor of an even more Israel-focused Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs. Similarly, the Conservatives' strong ties to Christian Zionism has prodded the Zionist lobby group B'nai Brith to deepen its ties with Canada Christian College and the prominent right-wing evangelist Charles McVety.

At the same time, the anti-racist sectors of Canada's Jewish community have made major strides in recent years. Groups such as Independent Jewish Voices, Not In Our Name, Jewish Voice for Peace, the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network, Women in Solidarity with Palestine and Jews for a Just Peace, have undercut the notion that all Canadian Jews support Israeli policy or Zionism. But these groups are unlikely to become dominant voices within the Jewish community until there is a shift in Canada's political culture.

Canadian Zionism has long been part of the religious and political establishment. In every community there are those who take the side of the rich and powerful.

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