

Canadian government indifferent to Israel's murder of eight of its citizens

By Keith Jones
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Canada's Conservative government has responded to the murder of eight Canadian citizens in an Israeli air strike with a shrug of its shoulders.

The Canadians, four adults and four children aged from 1 to 7, were among eleven members of the Al-Akhrass family who were killed as the result of Israeli strafing of the south Lebanese village of Aitaroun last Sunday. All four of the family's houses in Aitaroun were destroyed by Israeli bombs.

In the past such an event would have triggered a strong Canadian protest, with Ottawa likely calling in the Israeli ambassador for an official dressing down. All the more so, since it is indisputable that the Israeli action against Lebanon, ostensibly launched in response to the kidnapping of two soldiers by Hezbollah, has taken the form of a punitive mission, with the Israeli military besieging the country and targeting Lebanese infrastructure and civilians

Of the three hundred people killed in the past eight days of fighting, the overwhelming majority have been, like Montreal pharmacist Ali Al-Akhrass and his family, innocent civilians.

The Conservative government, however, is callously indifferent to this loss of life, even when the dead are those whom it purportedly represents.

It has voiced not even a murmur of protest over the Israeli attack on Aitaroun. Nor does it appear Ottawa has done anything to investigate what happened in Aitaroun, apart from asking the Israeli government, whose military killed the Canadians, to provide details.

At a press conference Monday, Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper offered "condolences" to the families of the Canadians killed in Lebanon, but only after reaffirming his government's contention that Hamas and Hezbollah bear sole responsibility for the undeclared war now raging in the region and advancing arguments to justify the horrific loss of civilian life at the hands of the Israeli military.

There is a crisis in the Middle East, said Harper, "because of the actions of Hamas and the actions of Hezbollah" and "the onus remains" on them "to take steps to end the conflict."

"But obviously," continued Harper, "we urge Israel and others to minimize civilian damage."

Lest this be construed as criticism of Israel for the deaths of the Canadians, Harper hastened to add, "It is difficult, though. We recognize it is difficult when you're fighting a non-governmental organization that's embedded in a civilian population."

On Tuesday, Harper conceded that the wiping out of a large part of the extended Al-Akhrass family was a "tragedy," but within the context of a vigorous defence of his July 13 statement that the Israeli response to the kidnapping of its soldiers by Hezbollah and Hamas was "measured"—i.e. appropriate.

"Measured," says Harper, although the Israeli government has for all intents and purposes declared war on the Lebanese and Palestinian people and has made clear it has no real interest in negotiating for the release of the kidnapped Israeli soldiers. Rather it is using their seizure as the pretext to bloodily rewrite the geo-politics of the Middle East.

If anything, Israel has been more concerned about the deaths of the Canadians in Aitaroun than the Harper government. While Ottawa's action over the matter has been limited to a routine request for "information" from Tel Aviv, Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert telephoned Harper yesterday to offer the Israeli's government "condolences."

The Harper government's attitude toward Israel's killing of its citizens exemplifies its complicity and that of the Bush administration and other western governments in Israel's latest war of aggression—a war in which a massive military machine, equipped with the most sophisticated and deadly weaponry, is terrorizing an almost completely defenseless population in the name of "eradicating terrorism."

As would be expected, Harper's callous indifference to their relatives' fate has angered the surviving members of the Al-Akhrass family. At a press conference in Montreal Monday, they denounced Israel for the slaughter of civilians and the Harper government for supporting the Israeli aggression against Lebanon.

"I am crying for all the innocents that are dying," said Ali Al-Akhrass' sister, Maysoun.

"I am crying because my country is being destroyed. By whom? Israel. Nobody, not the media, not Mr. Harper, is supporting Lebanon. Nobody is telling the truth."

Family members said that Ali had brought his wife and four children to Aitaroun in late June for a five-week visit to their ancestral home. When fighting erupted last week, they contacted the Canadian embassy in Beirut for assistance in

getting out of Lebanon, but embassy staff told them to stay put.

(Although more Canadians are reputed to be in Lebanon than the combined total of the nationals of all other western countries, several European states and the US began evacuating their citizens well-before Canada did. Only yesterday did Canada's evacuation effort begin and in, what the press conceded was, widespread confusion.)

Canadian Arab Federation President Khaled Mouammar told a Toronto press conference Tuesday. "We are here to express our anger about statements made by the prime minister."

"... The prime minister is justifying the murder of Canadian civilians in Lebanon and Palestine and he says nothing to condemn these attacks."

Mouammar contrasted the Canadian government's indifference to the deaths of the Al-Akhrass family with its vigorous demands that Iran investigate and prosecute those responsible for the death of Zahra Kazemi, a Canadian photographer who died in an Iranian prison after being brutalized by Iranian security personnel.

Canada's corporate media, meanwhile, has lauded the Harper government for using the Israeli aggression to shift Canada's foreign policy sharply to the right and adopting yet again the policy and posture of the Bush administration as its own.

"The Harper government's foreign policy shift," enthused the *Globe and Mail's* John Ibbitson, "amounts to a change of sides in the schism between North America and Europe over the Middle East. During the 2003 war with Iraq, Liberal foreign policy placed Canada on the side of France, Germany and Russia in opposition. Now Canada is onside with the United States, Britain and Australia in

support of Israel ..."

Various press commentators have mocked opposition politicians, including interim Liberal leader Bill Graham for suggesting that the lack of "nuance" in the Harper government's stance on the conflict in the Middle East will make Canada irrelevant in future diplomatic negotiations.

And the *National Post*, the flagship publication of the Canwest media empire, devoted a series of columns and its lead editorial Monday to exonerating Israel for any responsibility in the deaths of the eight Canadians. "Horrible as such deaths are," declared the *Post* editorial, "there is an important moral distinction to be drawn between terrorists who kill civilians *deliberately*, as in the case of Hezbollah rockets attacks; and an army that accidentally kills civilians in the course of attacking military and strategic objectives."

In fact, as the body count demonstrates, the target of Israel's assault on Lebanon is its population. Israel aims, as several strategic analysts have explained, to inflict such misery and terror on the Lebanese that they will "turn against" Hezbollah—a movement that arose in response to Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, an invasion which led directly to the massacre of Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

The Harper government's indifference to the murder of eight Canadians in Lebanon epitomizes its nature. In pursuing the agenda of big business—the repositioning of Canada on the global stage as a significant military power closely allied with the United States, the dismantling of what remains of the welfare state, and the systematic redistribution of wealth in favor of the owners of capital and the most privileged sections of the middle class through tax cuts and privatization—the Conservative government is utterly indifferent to the fate of the Canadian people.

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