

# Will Canada join Israel's next war?

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Since taking office in 2006, Stephen Harper's minority federal Conservative government has shifted Canada's foreign policy sharply to the right. It has championed Canada's role in the Afghan war and the use of "hard power" in foreign affairs and loudly proclaimed Ottawa's allegiance to US foreign policy objectives and support for Israeli aggression in Lebanon and Gaza. Now, a junior cabinet minister has implied that the Canadian Armed Forces would fight alongside Israel in the next Middle East conflict.

On February 12, *Shalom Life*, the online magazine of the weekly Jewish newspaper *Shalom Toronto*, published an interview with Peter Kent, the minister of state for foreign affairs (Americas). "Prime Minister Harper," Kent told *Shalom Life*, "has made it quite clear for some time now and has regularly stated that an attack on Israel would be considered an attack on Canada."

Whilst Harper, a proponent of Canadian participation in the illegal US-British invasion of Iraq in 2003, has lost no opportunity to voice his and his government's support for Israel, he has not made any such remark, at least publicly.

The implication of Kent's statement, reflecting as it does the wording of the NATO treaty, is that if Israel were to find itself at war, Canada would automatically deploy the Canadian Armed Forces to fight by Israel's side.

Not surprisingly, Kent's interview caused some of the national media to take notice, setting off a flurry of bewildered commentary. But Kent has not retracted his statement, nor has the government repudiated it.

In January 2009, during the criminal Israeli assault on Gaza, 42 people were killed in an Israeli barrage on a clearly marked United Nations-run school in the Jabaliya refugee camp. Peter Kent put the blame for the deaths on the Palestinians, telling the *Globe and Mail*: "Hamas bears a terrible responsibility for this and for the wider deepening humanitarian tragedy. The burden of responsibility is on Hamas to stop its terrorist rocketing of Israel." Kent's callousness faithfully reflected the attitude of both the Conservative government and the Liberal opposition. In the official Canadian view, Israel was the victim of an attack by Hamas and responded in self-defence.

Can Kent's *Shalom Life* remarks be interpreted to mean that if Israel repeats its Gaza incursion, Canadian troops will lend a hand in shelling Palestinian refugee camps?

Placed in context, Kent's remarks appear even more ominous. The focus of the *Shalom Life* interview was Canadian policy towards Iran. After the usual disclaimers about wanting to resolve matters peacefully, Kent said: "A military strike is the last possible option but that remains in the broad range of options and unfortunate possibilities." Any such military strike by Israel would of course be portrayed yet again as an act of legitimate self-defence.

Is Canada now committed to sending troops to support an Israeli attack on Iran?

On the face of it, Kent's remarks appear to be a case of a relatively inexperienced politician—he was first elected in 2008—"mis-speaking" and embarrassing the leadership of his party. However, Kent made no retractions when approached by the *Globe and Mail*. While refusing to state categorically whether Canada was or was not committed to going to

war at Israel's side, he explained: "There is no military treaty but I think the Prime Minister's...commitment is quite clear: We don't pay lip service to our commitments to friends and allies."

The *Globe and Mail* had no more success in obtaining a clear-cut statement from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). The PMO insisted that Kent's words reflected previous speeches by the prime minister, citing a statement made by Harper in 2008 that expresses solidarity with Israel but is far from invoking NATO Treaty-type language: "Those who threaten Israel also threaten Canada, because, as the last world war showed, hate-fuelled bigotry against some is ultimately a threat to us all, and must be resisted wherever it may lurk."

In the normal course of political events, the opposition parties would have been expected to raise questions in the House of Commons seeking a clarification of whether Kent's words reflected a change in government policy. However, the Canadian parliament did not meet till the middle of this week. In December, Prime Minister Harper had the unelected Governor General prorogue or shut down parliament for two months in order to avoid embarrassing questions about the role of Canadian troops in the torture of Afghan detainees. Due to this flagrant violation of democratic procedure, Kent's remarks remain unchallenged and unexplained.

Prior to 2006, successive Canadian governments had tried to maintain an image of being an "honest broker" with respect to the Middle East. As with most other "nice-guy" Canadian posturing, the image was window-dressing on a thoroughly imperialist policy. However, even the appearance of impartiality went by the wayside when the Conservatives came to power in 2006.

In that year, using the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by the militant Shiite group Hezbollah as a pretext, Israel launched a well-planned invasion of Lebanon, inflicting several thousand civilian casualties. Despite the hugely disproportionate suffering between the two sides in the conflict, Harper publicly praised Israel for its "measured" response. Harper refused to make any criticisms of Israel, even after four UN peacekeepers, including a Canadian, were murdered by an Israeli air force bomb. A subsequent board of inquiry revealed strong evidence that the peacekeepers had been deliberately targeted because they had witnessed terror attacks against Lebanese civilians. There was no protest from the Canadian government.

The year 2006 also saw the victory of the militant Islamic group Hamas in the first democratic elections to be held on the territories controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA). Canada immediately responded by cutting off all aid to the PA, the first of several Western nations to do so. Funded by the United States and aided by the governments of neighbouring Arab States, PA President Abbas's Fatah party triggered a civil war that resulted in the division of the PA in 2007 into the West Bank, controlled by Fatah, and Gaza, controlled by Hamas.

Since then, Gaza has been under siege by Israel (a siege enforced with the aid of the Egyptian government) in what amounts to an attempt to starve the Palestinians into submission. Israel also launched a punitive military incursion into Gaza in December 2008, giving rise to the callous cheerleading by Peter Kent quoted earlier.

Canada's latest contribution to Middle East "democracy" comes in the form of a reallocation of aid dollars. In the past, Canada has given about \$10 million annually to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Palestinians in 59 refugee camps, expelled from their homes in Israeli-controlled territory, depend on UNRWA for their basic survival. In January of this year, Canada announced that it was ending its support for UNRWA. According to the Israel National News website, Victor Toews, president of the Canadian Treasury Board, announced that: "Canada has made a \$300 million commitment over five years to the Palestinian Authority, but we want to put that money only into programs that are consistent with Canadian values. We are going to focus directing our funds on institution-building in the PA, such as building a proper functioning justice system.... [Canada's] paramount concern is the security of Israel."

In other words, Canada will tighten the economic noose around Gaza a few more notches while beefing up the repressive machinery available to the PA and Fatah for crushing opposition.

Canada's pro-Zionist stance abroad is reflected domestically in an escalating series of attacks on democratic rights.

In March 2009, George Galloway, the British member of Parliament known for his support for Palestinian rights and opposition to the war in Iraq, was denied entry into Canada on the grounds he represented an unspecified threat to "national security." The campaign to prevent Galloway from coming to Canada drew support from a variety of Zionist and extreme-right organizations. Galloway's visit was first brought to the government's attention by the Jewish Defence League (JDL). The JDL, founded by the racist fanatic Meir Kahane, is notorious for plotting and carrying out terrorist attacks in the United States.

Toronto's York University has become an obsessive target for right-wing Zionist and Christian groups. Accusations of anti-Semitism are routinely used to intimidate staff and students, while university authorities are under continual pressure to place bureaucratic obstacles in the path of initiatives such as the annual Israeli Apartheid Week. In July 2009, e-mails obtained under a Freedom of Information request revealed that the ubiquitous Peter Kent and a member of the (Ontario) Provincial Parliament, Peter Shurman, were covertly encouraging Conservative students to monitor elections to the York Federation of Students, with the intention of casting doubt on the legitimacy of the elected student leadership.

At the end of last year, the Conservative government set its sights on a government-funded organization called Rights and Democracy. The organization's mandate is to support democracy and human rights around the world, while operating at arm's length from the government. This did not stop the government from appointing three new pro-Zionist members to the organization's board with the clear intention of bringing Rights and Democracy into line with Harper's ideological views.

Matters came to a head in January 2010 during a meeting in which the new board members demanded that funding be cut to three human rights organizations, two Palestinian and one Israeli, that had been critical of the Israeli attack on Gaza. Immediately after the acrimonious meeting, the president of Rights and Democracy, Rémy Beauregard, died of a heart attack. Gérard Latulippe, the government's replacement, is a notorious right-winger, who has openly voiced bigoted views against immigrants, especially Muslim immigrants. Even the pro-Zionist Liberal leader, Michael Ignatieff, found it necessary to write to the prime minister complaining that: "Your government has demonstrated time and again that it aims to impose on our country's independent institutions the most extreme views espoused within your own political party. And when this approach is applied to an independent organization dedicated to the promotion of human rights and democracy, it is particularly offensive."

The Conservative government's support for Israel is partly influenced by electoral politics. Jewish voters have traditionally voted for the

Liberals. The Conservatives calculate that unwavering support for Israel will cause some Jewish voters to switch to the Conservatives.

But the Conservatives' championing of Israel is fundamentally rooted in its turn, and that of the Canadian bourgeoisie, to a more aggressive, or in Harper's words "robust," foreign policy. Under conditions in which the world economic and geo-political order is being reshaped by the rise of new powers, the Canadian bourgeoisie calculates that to assert and advance its interests it must be a "player" in policing and upholding the existing imperialist order.

The Conservatives have been quicker to embrace the new reality than the opposition parties and have consequently been basking in the warm sun of the approval of broad sections of the nation's elite. Led by the right-wing national newspaper *The National Post*, the media has been quick to approve of the government's pro-Zionist positions and stridently denounce any criticism of Israeli foreign policy as anti-Semitic.

The opposition parties, however, are quickly catching on and falling into line. The beginning of March sees the sixth annual Israeli Apartheid Week, with educational seminars in more than 40 colleges and universities across the world. On February 26, the Ontario Legislature passed a resolution condemning the event and expressing outrage at the use of the word "apartheid" in connection with "democratic" Israel. The resolution was introduced by Conservative MP Peter Shurman but received unanimous support from all parties, including the Liberals and "left-wing" NDP.

While the resolution has no immediate legal consequences, it strengthens the hand of university administrators seeking to deny facilities to Israeli Apartheid Week. As a direct response to the resolution, Chris Spence, director of education for the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), sent out an e-mail on March 2 to all teachers and administrators prohibiting the use of TDSB facilities for any events connected with Israeli Apartheid Week. Insofar as there are no such events planned on TDSB facilities, the intent of the e-mail would appear to be to warn teachers that there are limits to the TDSB's stated goals of "building awareness, understanding, skills, knowledge and critical thinking among students."

For the second year in a row, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff was quick to issue his own ringing denunciation of Israeli Apartheid Week. Unfortunately for him, a blogger for the rabble.ca website uncovered an article in the UK newspaper *The Guardian* in 2002, in which Ignatieff referred to the West Bank as a "Bantustan." This will not stop the federal Liberals voting in favour of an anticipated resolution, similar to that passed by the Ontario Legislature, when Parliament reconvenes.

Regardless of whether Kent's statement to *Shalom Life* constitutes official Canadian policy or not, what is incontestable is that the government and the Canadian ruling class are increasingly embracing militarism and social reaction.



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