



<http://pm.gc.ca>

Prime Minister Stephen Harper with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu in Israel

A funny thing happened on the way to the peace process

Stanley Hartt examines the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict and explains how the Prime Minister's strategy of resolute support for Israel is both sincere and prudent. Hartt suggests that as the US continues to play its brokering role, it is a trusted and unconditional friend such as Stephen Harper who may be best-positioned, at a difficult moment, to impart counsel which would be suspect coming from anyone else.

Stanley H. Hartt

Even as US Secretary of State John Kerry was preparing his framework for Middle East peace talks, a first-time visitor to the region showed up in Israel with several hundred of his friends and admirers. Stephen Harper, Canada's Prime Minister, was not there to assert what so many on the left of the political spectrum continue to imagine as Canada's "traditional" role as "honest broker." Rather, he set out a refreshingly unique approach to how a world leader could make an actual difference in resolving one of the globe's most intractable international disputes.

Harper's starting point was one of principle: Israel, the only functioning democracy in the area, is beset by a conflict that began with Israel's Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948 and which continues to this day. Democracies that do not support and sustain one another increase the dangers to themselves in this perilous era. Moreover, the foundation for Israel's democracy was based on Resolution 181, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 29, 1947, after the horrors of the Holocaust created a moral imperative for the international community to establish a Jewish homeland in the British mandate territory theretofore known as Palestine. Following the

unprincipled manoeuvring which characterized the French and British administrations of the territories entrusted to them by the League of Nations in the period between the two World Wars, and the conflicting promises made regarding the eventual fate of the region, it seemed only proper to attempt to reconcile Zionist aspirations with what might have been avoided had, say, the Balfour Declaration been honoured.

When Israel defended its infant independence against its vastly more numerous and better-equipped Arab neighbours — using a combination of courage, home-made weapons and ingenuity — the world saw its people as underdogs. Building a modern, innovative, technologically-advanced State and making the desert bloom with revitalized arable land were generally seen as admirable achievements. It is hard to pinpoint precisely when the notion that this tiny nation, under constant threat and repeated attack from across its fragile borders, began to be singled out as an obstacle to peace.

In the Suez Crisis of 1956, Israel proposed to join with the UK and France to force the reopening of the canal after Egypt's President Nasser had nationalized it. The United Nations' response, inspired in good measure by Canada's then-Secretary of State for External Affairs, Lester

B. Pearson, was the establishment of the United Nations Expeditionary Force, to which our reputation as peacekeepers undoubtedly owes its origins. But in the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War that followed, Israel had not yet been burdened by the opprobrium that now surrounds its strategic attempts to enhance its security while continuing to demonstrate openness to a lasting, peaceful resolution with its neighbours.

International reservations undoubtedly gained momentum as Israel dealt for decades (and still does) with suicide bombings, rocket attacks and continued threats to its perimeters in a context where “land for peace” had become the premise of international efforts to bring about the ultimate resolution. Israel’s various incursions into Lebanon and Gaza, the two Intifadas, and a settlements policy born not out of intransigence but as a strategic reflection of facts on the ground, were not seen as the minimal efforts at self-defence which any country in similar circumstances would take to preserve its existence. Nothing to date has persuaded its Arab interlocutors to chin themselves to the huge concessions needed on their side to achieve the goal of peace, namely recognition of the State of Israel and its Jewish character, abandoning the so-called “right of return” and an agreement on the status of Jerusalem which acknowledges that it will continue to be the capital of Israel.

The standard to which some academics and self-declared “progressive” religious groups hold Israel and the lengths to which they have gone to castigate it for its strategies of self-preservation has taken on an air of one-sided bias, not even-handedness. As the Prime Minister noted in his Knesset remarks, what should we call “criticism that selectively condemns only the Jewish state and effectively denies its right to defend itself while systematically ignoring — or excusing — the violence and oppression all around it?”

The journalists accompanying Mr. Harper had criticisms about the size of his delegation and the cost of the gesture of support he was intentionally and conspicuously offering to the people of this land, which is holy to all three Abrahamic religions. The sincerity of the emotions he conveyed in his moment of private prayer at the Western Wall which surrounded Judaism’s ancient temple, the poignancy of his wreath-laying at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, the significance of having named in his honour a bird sanctuary in the Hula Valley in northern Galilee, right up beside the Golan Heights and near the Lebanese border, visited annually by some 500 million birds of all manner of species on their annual migrations between the steppes of Eastern Europe and Asia to and from Africa, and the gravitas of receiving an Honorary Doctorate from Tel Aviv University, were all overshadowed by the constant decrying of what the media perceived as an absence of “even-handedness”. They asked repeatedly why his public remarks did not reproach his hosts for strategies perceived as making peace more difficult to bring about, some of which are listed as contrary to Canadian policy according to an official Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development website, all the while assuming that remonstrating his hosts’ misconduct was what Canada needed to do to “position” itself to play a more conciliatory role.

Canada has never been, and never would be, the natural international go-between to urge Israel and its Arab neighbours to finally resolve this conflict. For decades now, that role has, frustratingly for them perhaps, belonged to the United States. From the Oslo Accords, signed on the

White House lawn in 1993 with President Clinton presiding, to the Camp David Summit in 2000, to the July, 2002 “Road Map” for peace, to the direct talks initiated by Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, the US has owned this process and is the only nation with the influence and power which can be brought to bear on both sides to instill the political will, and the hope, for a breakthrough to success.

But this is not a game of musical chairs, where Mr. Harper has developed his principled stance merely because the role of intermediary is occupied. What the hand-wringers, who nostalgically hope for some “honest broker” function to be played by Canada, are missing is that mediators do not proceed by telling both sides to a dispute that they are right. In fact, successful mediators do the very opposite. Because in virtually any circumstance where mediation is necessary, the third-party attempting to assist the parties to reach an agreement has absolutely no power to force them to concede anything (especially highly-charged political concessions like those which must be on the table here), a good mediator needs to demonstrate to the parties why they should want to resolve matters for their own sake. A skilful mediator makes it abundantly clear to each party — usually not in the glare of public or media scrutiny and not necessarily even in the presence of the other party — what the weaknesses of their position are and what will happen if that party declines to present meaningful proposals, including the most difficult compromises. It is by stressing their need to make concessions, not by endorsing the negotiators’ self-righteous pretensions, that any successful intermediary generates progress.

Not seeing this conflict as one in which both sides have equivalent moral value to their positions, Mr. Harper has resorted to a far more subtle approach. Should Mr. Kerry produce a “heads of agreement” document worthy of further discussions, and should some momentum develop towards an alignment of the forces required for an historic breakthrough, Mr. Harper will be the one person in the world who has declared himself an unconditional friend of Israel and its Prime Minister, having said, in his address to the Knesset, “...through fire and water, Canada will stand with you.”

Such a trusted and unconditional friend can be one who, at a difficult moment, tactically and politically, can impart wisdom which would be suspect coming from anyone else, and quietly and privately convey to his friend his views on which objectives might be achievable, which concessions might be manageable and where the path to harmony might lie. That sort of trust is not gained by rote, public criticisms of a friend’s failures or by equating the positions of two parties, one of whom is attempting to preserve his nation’s existence while the other believes it is possible to produce a desirable outcome by threatening to drive the first into the sea. Embracing the doctrine of moral equivalence in circumstances such as these simply does not get the job done. ❁

Stanley Herbert Hartt, OC, QC is a lawyer, lecturer, businessman, and civil servant. He currently serves as counsel at Norton Rose Fulbright Canada LLP. Previously Mr. Hartt was chairman of Macquarie Capital Markets Canada Ltd. Before this he practised law as a partner for 20 years at a leading Canadian business law firm and was chairman of Citigroup Global Markets Canada and its predecessor Salomon Smith Barney Canada. Mr. Hartt also served as chairman, president and CEO of Campeau Corporation, deputy minister at the Department of Finance and, in the late 1980s, as chief of staff in the Office of the Prime Minister.