

CONFLICT ZONES, ISRAEL AND DIASPORA PERSPECTIVES IN CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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Key Points

- While Canadian Jewish community organizations (among others) are actively engaged in lobbying the Canadian government on its foreign policy with Israel and Palestine, it is not at all clear that the perspectives of the Jewish-Israeli diaspora¹ that have emigrated from this conflict zone have been considered. The absence of diaspora voices from the region seems a missed opportunity for the development of a more comprehensive foreign policy position.
- The Canadian government’s position has departed from its traditional stance as a nation committed to peacekeeping in the region. This raises the question of whether those who escaped the conflict zones also support this repositioning of policy.
- Considering that Canadian Jewish organizations have had influence on the Canadian government’s position, and some Jewish-Israelis report feeling marginalized within Canadian organizations, the government should take steps to build trust and increase opportunities for Jewish-Israeli participation by actively reaching out to this diaspora community.

Introduction

Approximately 20 percent of Canadians were born abroad (Statistics Canada 2006), yet the Canadian government makes little attempt to understand the transnational dimensions of immigrant experiences and the extent to which these communities could contribute to developing a peace-building policy for their homelands (Mosaic Institute/Gordon Walter & Duncan Foundation 2011). Understanding these experiences could be particularly important when formulating foreign policy in regions with long-standing conflicts, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict.

While there is a range of opinion on the Israel-Palestine conflict, much of what is known and represented to the public is through the lens of Canadian Jewish organizations — and to a lesser extent, through the lens of Canadian Arabs (Sasley 2011). What is not at all clear are the opinions of Israelis living in Canada, in particular Jewish-Israelis² (Habib 2013).

While the Canadian government’s official policy on Israel has not changed, its discursive stance has and it is far more “pro-Israel.” The call for examining Jewish-Israeli diaspora perspectives begins with the acknowledgement that Israelis do not speak with one voice on the topic of conflict. After fairly extensive

1 The word “diaspora” is used in the Jewish context to most commonly refer to Jews living outside of Israel. Its meaning has now been widened to include immigrants, exiles, refugees and those who continue to have a relationship to their homelands (see Habib 2004; 2013). This policy brief is particularly interested in Jewish-Israelis born in Israel who emigrated to Canada, and their families.

2 Of course, there are Palestinians holding Israeli citizenship whose voices should also be heard, and whose voices are not always reflected in discussions of “Arab” perspectives or lobby organizations. This policy brief focuses on Jewish-Israeli voices, but the same claim could be made about including the voices of Palestinians with Israeli citizenships living in Canada.

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research examining Canadian national newspapers and activist newsletters, it becomes clear that little to no consideration has been paid to identifying or including Israeli diaspora voices.³

The Israel-Palestine conflict is more than half a century old. Canada has long been an important actor in the peace process — for example, on the refugee side-table during the Oslo Peace Process. A Canadian policy of engagement is critical, both for the success of any peace process as well as for fostering good relations among local, regional and international actors alike.

This policy brief focuses on the importance of engaging Jewish-Israeli diaspora communities in Canada in the process of making foreign policy decisions regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict. It argues that better Israeli diaspora engagement in foreign policy development fits Canada's values for informed decision making.

Background

The Canadian position toward Israel has shifted in recent years. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's official statements, which are framed as Canada and Israel sharing values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law, offer clear evidence of this shift. In the context of violent conflict, this framing strengthens Israel's position and implicitly, if not explicitly, represents "the other side" — Palestinians — as not sharing those values.⁴

In 2006, when many nations criticized Israel for using disproportionate military force during the Israel-Hezbollah conflict, Canada was among the first to pronounce that the Israeli response had been "measured" (Gollum 2012). In addition, Canada became the first country to announce it would not take part in the United Nations' anti-racism conferences of 2009 and 2011, condemning those conferences as forums for criticizing Israel (Edwards 2008). The most striking departure from Canadian tradition occurred during the summer of 2014 when, despite evidence of widespread harm coming to the civilian population of Gaza, Harper firmly asserted Israel's right to security (Siddiqui 2014). In addition to its strong support for Israel, the Canadian government is also quick to accuse individuals and organizations critical of Israel's actions as anti-Semitic. While anti-Semitism exists, such a policy is clearly one-sided and does not allow for the possibility that there is legitimate opposition.

Israel is a diverse country and it should come as no surprise that there are Israelis, including Jewish-Israelis, who are deeply engaged in peace and human rights efforts, and who are critical of Israel's stance (Habib 2010). Some of those individuals

3 The authors conducted an analysis of activist organizations in Canada, finding that Jewish-Israeli voices were not clearly identified or largely absent from the literature.

4 Conclusions drawn were based on a content analysis of Harper's speeches, conducted by the authors.

have a long military service record. Israelis in diaspora — like most individuals in diaspora communities — continue to have very close ties to their homeland, and yet the range of their perspectives does not appear to have been considered at the community or government levels.

Previous examples in which Canada has included diaspora communities in its policy making can provide evidence of the positive impact this can have. For instance, according to a Mosaic Institute and Walter Gordon & Duncan Foundation report (2011), the Canadian government actively engaged the Afghan-Canadian community. Many government officials have participated in outreach events with diaspora groups to share their field experiences in Afghanistan. In addition, Afghan-Canadian community leaders were invited to Parliament for the official state visit of Afghanistan's president in 2006. Even though the interactions between the Canadian government and the Afghan-Canadian community have been few, the federal government's efforts increased the likelihood of sound judgment in the development of Canada's Afghan policy (ibid.).

Why Do Diaspora Voices Matter for Canada?

According to 2001 census data, there are around 329,000 Jewish individuals living in Canada (Statistics Canada 2001).⁵ However, not all of these individuals are necessarily Israeli-born, nor do all of them have any ties to Israel. Jewish identities and Jewish-Israeli identities vary significantly (Habib 2004). In fact, a 2009 study found that only 14 percent — or between 45,000 and 60,000 individuals — of the Jewish community in Canada actually comes from the state of Israel (Kirshner 2009).

The argument for the inclusion of diaspora communities stems from a range of different perspectives.

Arguably, individuals in diaspora communities may possess specific knowledge, insights and expertise that could prove beneficial to tap into. Amassing these resources could improve Canada's peace-building efforts, which would be in the interest of Israel and its regional partners. Considering that Jewish-Israelis emerge from a state that has been in conflict since its establishment, their unique perspective could provide much-needed insight. It may be more critical of the less-than-neutral discursive trend that the Canadian government has recently adopted, but, in the long run, their insights could prove more enduring.

Furthermore, inclusion of Jewish-Israelis in the making of foreign policy is also consistent with Canadian values. As Canada is committed to pluralism, this commitment should also extend to Jewish-Israeli diaspora communities.

⁵ Religion-based census data past 2001 in Canada are not available. However, the Jewish Virtual Library suggests that, as of 2014, there are 385,300 Jewish individuals living in Canada. See www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/.

Including Jewish-Israeli diaspora in the foreign policy-making process has the potential to strengthen Canada's social fabric and to bridge the divide felt by some in the Jewish-Israeli diaspora communities. Diversity is a Canadian fact; however, this diversity does not necessarily imply social cohesion. Jewish-Israeli migrants have often expressed the existence of a large gap between themselves and Canadian-born Jews (Harris 2006). These gaps are not unique to this community, but could be attributed to, for example, the language barrier that Israeli Jews encounter upon landing in Canada (Hebrew versus English). As is often the case, new immigrants tend to align with individuals with comparable experiences. This gap extends to Jewish-Israelis who hold Canadian citizenship, many of whom often express difficulty identifying as Jewish-Canadians (Mackey 1999), especially as the majority of Jewish-Israelis remain strongly connected to their Israeli identity.⁶ Having lived in Israel, their relationship to the state is different from those who have not (Habib 2004; 2013).

Recommendations

The following recommendations must be carried out in conjunction with one another. Resolving the issues outlined in this brief requires an integrated governmental and diaspora community approach. The government must spearhead the initiatives and diaspora communities must actively respond to these initiatives. Furthermore, a great level of empathy and understanding is required among all involved parties. There must be preparedness from officials and community organizations for sensitive and difficult conversations, as well as a commitment to learn from one another.

The Canadian government should encourage and sponsor further research into diaspora community organizations, community members' experiences of conflict, and their potential contribution to peace-building efforts. In particular, and because the Canadian government has a long-standing interest in the Israel-Palestine conflict, the government should sponsor research that would help it to understand Israeli perspectives on the conflict. This research will provide the Canadian government with better insight and understanding of the behaviour of diaspora communities and their contribution to peace-building efforts.

The Canadian government must be willing to recognize that there is a diversity of opinion on resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict. This would necessitate understanding that constructive criticism of the Israeli government's actions should not be taken in simplistic terms and labelled "anti-Semitic."

⁶ Information from informal interview with research participant, conducted by authors.

Creating an environment where individuals with differing views feel safe to express themselves should be a goal in a multicultural democracy. Governments and organizations could commit to embracing more diverse positions by including marginalized voices — often those of new Canadians. This would also strengthen Canada's efforts at integrating immigrants into Canadian society through understanding their experiences, such as with trauma and conflict, and finding meaningful ways to mitigate their consequences.

The Canadian government should explore and identify the views and priorities of Israeli émigrés regarding Canada's relations with Israel.

An effort should be made by the Canadian government to identify Israeli diaspora members and recognize the diversity of opinion within this community. This recognition would allow for the possibility that new ideas and inputs could make better-informed policies. It is recommended that the government, through its tri-agency and other research programs, promote research and inquiry on diaspora communities from conflict zones, including the Middle East, which would encourage researchers to conduct field research with Jewish-Israelis, among others, in Canada.

The Canadian government should provide platforms in which Israeli diaspora voices can be included in policy forums and discussions.

There is a need for all Canadians with foreign policy-related interests and agendas to be able to share the information and knowledge they possess. The Canadian government should make an effort to simplify the interface between the Canadian government and diaspora communities. It is already a challenge for migrants to deal with the government due to its organizational complexity. This platform could take the form of annual conferences between relevant government officials (such as the minister of foreign affairs, local Members of Parliament and members of the Privy Council Office) and diaspora leaders and activists that the government has identified, as recommended above. The conference agenda should focus on building partnerships, information and idea sharing, improving communication and fostering trust.

Conclusion

Canada's Jewish-Israeli voices are missing in Canada's foreign policy with Israel. As with other diaspora communities, there is currently no formal organization that individuals or groups can participate in to have their voices recognized (Mosaic Institute/Gordon Walter & Duncan Foundation 2011). An issue that arises is that Israelis themselves may not be interested in providing a meaningful contribution to Canadian foreign policy. It is also possible that Israeli diaspora members are critical of the Israeli government. Ignoring such criticism from individuals who have

experienced life within Israel, as well as life outside of it, limits the policies that Canada can adopt. The current government speaks for Canada, but excludes important Canadian voices; more specifically, it excludes the voices of Israelis living in Canada today. In taking measures to include these voices, Canada would be taking steps toward being more inclusive of its population. It addresses the challenges of alienation faced by these diaspora communities and sustains Canada's international reputation as a multicultural society. Adopting these recommendations ensures Canada's continued prosperity toward inclusiveness, diversity and multiculturalism.

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