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Who Calls the Shots?

An inquiry into the effect of Jewish and Arab lobbies on Canadian Middle East policy.

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On March 10, 1988, during the First Intifada, external affairs minister Joe Clark spoke at the annual dinner of the Canada-Israel Committee, the organization taken to be the official body representing the Canadian Jewish community on relations between the two countries. In the lion's den, as it were, Clark argued that Israel was committing grave human rights violations against the Palestinians that were not only "illegal" but were also designed to reimpose Israeli control by "force and fear." CIC chair Sidney Spivak, a supporter of the Progressive Conservatives, stood up and noted that Jewish voters would bear in mind what they had just heard in the next election. Dozens of people walked out on Clark. The CIC then issued a press release criticizing Clark's position.

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A cascade of activity followed: The next day Clark sent Spivak a letter confirming Canada's "unwavering support" for Israel and assuring him that he was not blaming one side over the other. On March 12 Prime Minister Brian Mulroney held a press conference at which he referred to Clark as a "firm and loyal friend" of Israel. On March 22 Mulroney sent his own letter to several Jewish leaders to assure them that "Canadian policy towards Israel is clear, consistent and unchanged: Israel is our friend." On March 23 Clark met Canadian Jewish leaders to discuss their concerns and reassure them. And at a speech the next month to the Edmonton Jewish community, Clark insisted that Canadian policy had not changed, and he commended Israel more—enough that the CIC declared itself satisfied that Clark remained a friend.

The entire incident has two different interpretations. To some, it seems like the normal behaviour of an interest group whose priorities were ignored and of elected politicians trying to avoid political fallout in the normal course of politicking. To others, the episode represents the power of an ethnic community to control Ottawa's foreign policy.

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It also symbolizes a highly sensitive topic in the media—namely, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, how Jewish and Arab groups lobby third parties, and whether these groups' real loyalties lie

with Israel and the Arab states or with their country of residence. I contend that Canadian Jews and Arabs maintain a complex system of identity. They advocate for specific policies because they genuinely believe these meet Canadian interests and build on Canadian values. Of course, sometimes specific groups can veer off from this general direction (e.g., the participation of Croatian Canadians in the arming of Croats fighting Canadian troops during the wars in the former Yugoslavia^[1]). But when family members behave badly, do we condemn the entire family?

In their advocacy work, both Arab and Jewish communities refer to Canadian values and interests; they argue that their preferences fit with Canadian identity. Canadian Jewish groups assert that Canadian values such as democracy and negotiation should encourage policies more favourable to Israel, and that Canadian identity naturally predisposes a closer relationship with the Middle East's only genuine democracy. The Canadian Arab community argues that Canadian values such as the rule of law and human rights should prompt a more critical policy toward Israel: that Israel's treatment of the Palestinians precludes a close Canada-Israel relationship.

The notion that any ethnic community should be suspect because it maintains a connection to kin in an ancestral homeland at the expense of loyalty to Canada ignores the fact that these communities do not see a clash between their dual identities. Indeed, of all the Jewish and Arab community leaders I have interviewed in four years of research, not one indicated a preference for being Jewish or Arab over Canadian, and when they appeared distressed by the direction of Canadian policy, much of it was because they viewed it as weakening the specialness of Canada. (It is from those interviews that many of the quotes in this article are taken.)

Five processes have converged to raise the profile of this issue. To begin with, it is part of a broader flood of scholarly attention to the activities and loyalties of ethnic communities. Starting in the 1990s, American scholars began exploring anew the power of these groups. This was coupled with more critical studies asserting that such activities undermined the "national interests" of the United States and weakened the fabric of American society.

Second, a 2006 essay by prominent American academics John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt in the *London Review of Books*, later expanded into the book *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, specifically criticized the power of the American pro-Israel (primarily Jewish) community for its control over American Middle East policy and the damage it was doing to American interests. Criticisms and defences of the book and its methodology abounded. In Canada some government officials (current and former) have confessed to a certain appreciation for the essay and book, for openly raising the issue of powerful Jewish influence dampening what would otherwise be a necessarily frank discussion on foreign policy toward Israel and Palestine.

Third, concerns have been raised since the 1990s of the perceived limits to Canadian multiculturalism. One of the leading critics of this policy, Jack Granatstein, has lamented the focus on the study of different ethnic groups rather than a broader understanding of Canadian history, which in turn has undermined the teaching of what he considers "real" Canadian identity.^[2]

Fourth, events taking place elsewhere in the world involving the ethnic kin of Canadians have, unsolicited, inserted themselves into Canadian politics, including the aftermath of September 11 and the importation of various violent regional conflicts.

Fifth, Stephen Harper's public pronouncements on the conflict have drawn attention. For the first time, a Canadian prime minister has unequivocally taken a firm position on the Arab-Israeli conflict by siding with one party over the other because he considers it the "moral" and "principled" thing to do. In the 2006 Lebanon war, Harper bucked western condemnation of Israel to insist that Israel was appropriately defending itself against terrorism, and in the 2008–09 Gaza war his foreign minister, Lawrence Cannon, blamed the violence on Hamas. The government has been accused of defunding non-governmental organizations such as Kairos, Rights and Democracy, the Canadian Arab Federation and Mada al-Carmel (an Arab NGO based in Israel) because of their criticisms of Israel.

Yet despite all this interest, explanations of the process of ethnic group lobbying remain at best incomplete. The matter is clouded by a variety of factors, most important of which is how to define and measure influence. Others include the reluctance of many community officials, politicians and civil servants to discuss openly such a prickly topic (Arab leaders are more vocal about their ideas, perhaps reflecting their frustrations);

restricted access to relevant government documents; the partisan nature of many existing studies; and the very question of where to draw the line between expected interest group behaviour in a democracy and more sinister efforts to hijack Canadian policy.

Still, given popular interest, three specific questions require attention: Who wields influence on Canadian policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict? What have been the outcomes of that influence? And do those policies even matter?

The widely held notion that an imbalance in organization and resources exists between the two communities is correct: the Jewish community has been more successful than the Arab at translating its preferences into policy. But stopping at the end of this statement misses further important considerations. The most important is that success is historically contingent.

Put simply, Jews have had a much longer history of acclimatization into the Canadian economic, social and political environment. After Aaron Hart's arrival in 1759, the first Jewish synagogue was established in 1768, and Canada's first Jewish member of Parliament took his seat in the 1870s. But it took time for Jews' early arrival in Canada to translate into political influence. Anti-Semitism was rife within Canadian politics in the middle of the 20th century, severely limiting the ability of Canadian Jews to get the government to admit Jewish refugees into the country even during the horrors of the Holocaust.^[3] Detailed archival work has also demonstrated the difficulties Canadian Zionists had in getting Ottawa to support the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, and then to recognize Israel once it was established.^[4]

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Over the long term, external developments created conditions of domestic support for the Zionist cause. Lack of an independent homeland, persecution in Europe, the Holocaust and the subsequent treatment of Jews in Europe's displaced persons camps generated considerable popular sympathy for the Zionist position. In public opinion, romanticized visions of the Bible prompted the rise of many Christian Zionists, and even non-Zionist politicians sometimes related to the Jewish claim to the land. Lester Pearson himself, in his memoirs, noted the impact of his Sunday school teachings on his views.

Today, Statistics Canada lists 315,000 Jews in Canada. Since there is only one Israel, and it occupies an important place in the identity of Canadian Jews, the community has had an easier time coalescing in support for it. The Diaspora-Israel relationship is intimate, with close cooperation between the two. At the same time, the community has become highly centralized, particularly through the creation of a hierarchical series of authoritative communal institutions, allowing for greater concentration of resources. The 1967 war galvanized the community into the creation of the CIC, which took over the main Middle East lobbying role from the Canadian Jewish Congress and prominent individuals. The CIC remains the mainstream pillar, but there are smaller groups as well, representing disagreements: B'nai Brith (considered a more aggressive, right-leaning organization) and Independent Jewish Voices (a far-left group accused by some of being outright anti-Zionist). There are also smaller right-wing groups. And a plethora of articles in *Outlook*, *ZNet* or *Canadian Dimension* attack (sometimes fiercely) the mainstream institutions for their Zionist and pro-U.S. positions. But unlike the United States, where the emergence of J Street, a more left-wing lobby group, has provided an increasingly effective alternative to what had long been the official mainstream position of the community as represented by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, Canada has not seen the rise of an effective and successful J Street-style counterpart to the CIC.

This has left the field of advocacy to the CIC, which is supported by large segments of the Canadian Jewish population and is recognized by the government as the primary institution to interact with on issues related to Canadian-Israeli relations. Until the 2000s, the CIC was run by a board consisting of the CJC, B'nai Brith, the Canadian Zionist Federation and the Jewish Federations (the communal organizations in the major urban areas); in other words, all the community's major institutions. In the early 2000s several prominent Canadian Jews, including Steven Cummings, Brent Belzberg and Larry Tanenbaum, initiated a process of further centralization, creating the Canadian Council for Israel and Jewish Advocacy. The CIJA became the primary institution responsible for coordinating and funding the activities of other groups, including the CIC, the CJC and organizations responsible for university outreach. Since the end of 2010, plans have been ongoing to further restructure these institutions. The precise configuration is not yet publicly clear, but it will lead to even greater concentration of decision making and advocacy.

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In contrast to all of this, the Canadian Arab community is much newer and therefore less acclimatized. Although there were a couple of thousand Arab immigrants in Canada at the

end of the 19th century (mostly Syrian and Lebanese Christians), it was not until the 1940s and particularly the 1960s and '70s that mass immigration from the Arab states occurred, although even then figures were much smaller than the Jewish population. Arab Christians founded their first church in Canada between 1905 and 1908, while the first mosque was not built until 1938. The first Arab MP was elected only in 1968.

Although the Arab community did not experience something similar to the deep anti-Semitism that struck the Jewish community, its members were still perceived as outsiders. Unlike the Jews, the Arabs did not have a story of persecution and rootlessness that might appeal to Canadians' sympathy, and they lacked the biblical and cultural connection to Canadian Christians. There was also a degree of self-isolation in Canadian politics that persists to this day. One Arab leader noted that many Arabs have come "to this country to escape politics" because of their experience with it in the Middle East. This self-isolation has been heightened by the "otherness" imposed by the events of September 11 and the subsequent responses in law enforcement and immigration, which have made the community more timid, as another community official described it.

But Arab efforts to establish a communal institution for dealing with Canadian foreign policy underwent a parallel process to the Jewish one. In 1967, members formed the Canadian Arab Federation, an umbrella group of about 40 smaller organizations. Later, in 1985, the National Council on Canada-Arab Relations was established. Both institutions are viewed by the government as the official representative bodies of the community regarding Middle East policy.

The exact population of Arabs in Canada is difficult to ascertain. This is because Statistics Canada lists "Arabs" as well as specific national communities, and respondents can choose to be listed in more than one category. The total of all these categories is about 489,000. Apart from NCCAR and CAF, there are a host of smaller political, social, religious and cultural groups representing the various sectors within the community. There are Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian, Iraqi and other country-delineated institutions; mosques and various churches; and local community organizations. National and religious differences often come into play: Lebanese Christians (the largest Arab group in Canada) often blame Muslim Arabs for their community's woes in Lebanon as much as they do Israel. Although the Palestinian cause is a source of unification, these other divisions dilute such unity.

These historical conditions have led to a clear disparity in lobbying outcomes. But measuring success depends on how it is defined and what each community's goals are. The Jewish community does not view Ottawa's position vis-à-vis Israelis and Palestinians as a zero-sum game. As one community official put it, "Canada's support for Israel should not be at the expense of the Palestinian people" and support for Israel should not be seen as "opposite to legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people." While the CIC believes that government aid should be withheld from Hamas, it argues that the aid should bypass Hamas and go directly to the population of Gaza.

By contrast, government officials regularly remark on the negative position taken by Arab groups (although the impression is that NCCAR is less so), particularly in lobbying for a disruption of the Canadian-Israeli relationship. Arab demands are less realistic: for

example, calls to cut air and trade links between the two countries. The public spat in March 2009 between Jason Kenney and the Canadian Arab Federation, in which CAF president Khaled Mouammar referred to Kenney as “a professional whore who supports war” during the Israeli campaign against Hamas in Gaza, makes it easier for the government to dismiss CAF as unreasonable. Should this be tallied as Jewish influence or Arab disorganization?

Take voting patterns at the United Nations. Every year the General Assembly votes on a series of non-binding resolutions that are much more critical of Israel than of the Palestinians. Canada tended to vote alongside the majority of its western allies, voting either with the criticism or abstaining. The CIC has persistently made a change in Canadian UN votes a priority. And yet no such change came about for a long time. Given the ineffective Arab lobbying efforts described above, a fair assessment would be that Arab influence was less relevant than the bureaucratic considerations of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in maintaining Canada within the western consensus and cognizant of the many Arab states’ concerns.

Only in the summer of 2004, when Paul Martin’s government re-examined the resolutions, did the CIC effort begin to have an effect. That November it was announced that Ottawa would change a few of its votes. The explanation was that such votes were so clearly one sided as to be damaging to peace efforts.

This leads us to consider the most obvious issue today: Harper’s clear pro-Israel stance, a minority position alongside the United States. The question most often asked is whether this change, and others like it, is the result of Jewish influence or other factors.

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When asked about this, virtually all Arab leaders answered identically: the influence of the Zionist lobby, leading to Canada’s “clear support” for Israeli expansionism and violation of Palestinian human rights. “Doors have been consistently closed” to their entreaties. Others argue that Harper’s position is a strategic effort to pry the Canadian Jewish vote away from the Liberal Party, where it has long resided; and there is a general, anecdotal sense that he has been somewhat successful.

But consider how Jewish community officials have reacted to Harper. Some, certainly, have become identified with his position on Israel: the “defection” of Heather Reisman and Gerry Schwartz, erstwhile fundraisers for the Liberals, to the Conservatives is cited as one example. Yet community officials have also acknowledged that Harper’s pro-Israel position might become a wedge issue in Canadian politics, undermining their efforts to retain good relations with all political parties. Still others note that the government’s policies sometimes precede lobbying efforts: one community official noted that in the lead-up to the Durban II Review Conference of 2009, while CIJA and its agencies were debating whether they should press for Canadian involvement, Harper announced that Canada would not attend.

One area where the Jewish community has been successful is in creating a climate of greater understanding for Israel's position, a longstanding CIC goal. At the same time, as one community official put it, "more important is the role that Canada can sometimes play behind the scenes working with fellow democracies to help Israel become more normalized in the international community." Canadian efforts in moving Israel from isolated status at the UN into the Western European and Other Group—an official grouping—is one example. Canada also voted for Israel's recent acceptance into the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. These kinds of successes can be partially credited to CIC. The autocratic nature of the Arab states and Palestinian factions militates against similar activity by CAF and NCCAR.

But these are not high-profile issues that seem to matter in popular discussion. Combined with a list of Jewish "failures"—inability to get Ottawa to enact anti-Arab boycott legislation in the 1970s and '80s, to move the Canadian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and to get a wholesale change in Canadian voting at the UN—the picture is murkier than assumed.

It is also not clear that there has been a major shift in substance in the conflict itself. In spite of Harper's pro-Israel move, Canadian positions on sharing Jerusalem, the illegality of settlements and the right to an independent and viable Palestinian state are longstanding and have not changed. One government official referred to UN votes as "mostly theatre" and of primarily symbolic value. The provision of aid to Palestinians is one area where a difference of substance has taken place: with the 2006 election of Hamas to the Palestinian Authority, Canada was the first country to cut off aid to the PA (although it later began to restore some funding). Still, one item does not a list make.

Does any of this matter for Canada's international position in the Middle East or elsewhere? Ottawa's failed bid for a seat on the UN Security Council is proposed as a marker of how it does. Some, particularly former government officials, suggest that Harper's favouring of Israel undermined Canada's credibility and led to a loss of votes for the seat. Others argue that a number of other Canadian policies—such as Ottawa's policies on climate change, human rights and foreign aid—and Harper's own disposition mattered equally.

The debate is connected to the larger discussion of whether Canada should be involved in the Middle East because it can make a difference based on its history as a fair-minded arbiter of conflict. But the days of Pearsonian influence on, for example, UN peacekeeping are long gone. Our era is dominated, instead, by American unipolarity and the rise of several regional powers. The short-lived human security agenda is essentially gone too.

There probably are a couple of places where Canada can contribute. Canada chaired the Refugee Working Group during the Madrid multilaterals in the 1990s, acquitting itself well on the technical work. Some of this will likely be incorporated into any final peace agreement. Canadian aid and governance training can also help strengthen Palestinian institutions and help develop joint Israeli-Palestinian projects. But these are not unique to Canada.

It remains to be seen whether global and domestic changes will affect the balance of influence between the Jewish and Arab communities within Canada. There is evidence of growing sophistication in Arab advocacy. If the community can be mobilized, its growing population in Canada might earn it a similar moniker given to the Hispanic community in the United States: a sleeping giant. Time itself will inevitably acclimatize the Arabs to Canadian political culture. Finally, the popular protests in the Arab world might—if they lead to genuine liberal democracies—prompt a change in Canadian attitudes toward the “otherness” of Arabs.

Critics are right that Ottawa cannot let its foreign policy be commandeered by ethnic groups. But this is not happening. At the UN, Canadian Jewish organizations understand that Canadian decisions are subject to a range of constraints; in their advocacy work, Arab groups argue that Canada’s support for international law is precisely the vehicle that should be used to move Israel out of the West Bank.

Canadian Jewish and Arab rhetoric about Canadian values and interests are not cynical tactics, and effectiveness or clumsiness are not measures of authenticity. Both groups believe passionately in Canadian identity, because they believe it is part of their identity, too. There certainly are disagreements over these issues, but that is the nature of politics in any country.

Notes

1. See Carol Off’s *The Ghosts of Medak Pocket: The Story of Canada’s Secret War* (Random House Canada, 2004). [\[back\]](#)
2. See J.L. Granatstein’s *Who Killed Canadian History?* (HarperCollins, 1998). [\[back\]](#)
3. See Irving Abella and Harold Troper’s *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933–1948* (Random House, 1983). [\[back\]](#)
4. See David Bercuson’s *Canada and the Birth of Israel: A Study in Canadian Foreign Policy* (University of Toronto Press, 1985). [\[back\]](#)

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