On October 12th, 2010, Canada failed in its bid for a temporary seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), one of the most influential decision-making bodies for global governance. Canada has served six two-year terms on the UNSC since 1948; the October vote marked its first unsuccessful bid. Canadian and international opinion was in virtually unanimous agreement that fundamental shifts in Canada’s foreign policy are to blame for its declining international reputation. The Harper government, and Canada with it, has been consistently losing stature due to its positions on a number of issues from a lack of action on climate change, to reduced international development aid, to the occupation of Afghanistan and abandonment of international peacekeeping. Yet the shift in foreign policy is especially apparent and damaging in regards to the Middle East, particularly on Israeli-Palestinian issues.

**How has Canadian foreign policy in the Middle East shifted?**

For decades following the creation of Israel in 1948, Canada maintained a respected position as an honest broker in successive rounds of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. It also chaired the multilateral Refugee Working Group to help address ‘final status’ issues of the peace process. It lent troops to UN peace-keeping missions in the region, and was a major contributor to humanitarian and development relief, particularly for Palestinian refugees and nascent Palestinian institutions. Over the decades, Canada maintained a UN General Assembly (UNGA) voting record consistent with international law and a commitment to Palestinian self-determination alongside a safe and secure state of Israel. Unfortunately, all of this has changed in recent years.

Canada’s shift in UNGA voting (which began under former PM Paul Martin but was escalated by the Harper Government) reflects a policy of unreferenced support of Israel and denial of Palestinian rights to self-determination.¹ This trend persists despite Israel’s rightward, confrontational, and militaristic drift over the past years.² Even as the Israeli government becomes more heavy-handed in its relationship with the Palestinians, Canada’s support is unwavering. In 2009, Ottawa hosted Avigdor Lieberman, Israel’s controversial Foreign Minister whose party, Yisrael Beiteinu, successfully advocated for racially-based loyalty oaths for Israeli citizens, and has even proposed ethnic population “transfers” in the past.³ Neither the PMO nor Foreign Affairs have questioned these moves despite the fact that they run counter to fundamental Canadian values enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

During Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 2006, Prime Minister Harper maintained throughout that Israel’s response was a “measured” act of self-defence. Harper held to his position despite reports of indiscriminate cluster munitions and hugely disproportionate attacks on civilian population centres by Israel.⁴ The Harper government refused to call for a ceasefire during this conflict despite being called to do so by a majority vote of the Foreign Affairs Committee. During the 2008/2009 Israeli bombardment of Gaza which killed 1400 and drew international condemnation, the Canadian government again refused to call for a ceasefire. This again, even after it came to light that the Israeli military was deliberately targeting civilian infrastructure and preventing humanitarian relief.⁵ In 2010 Canada was the only donor country to reduce funds to UNRWA, the international agency mandated to provide medical services, humanitarian assistance, and livelihood training to Palestinian refugees who are approaching their fifth generation without a state.⁶

**Is there evidence this shift in policy contributed to failed UNSC bid?**

Yes. Voting for UNSC seats is conducted by secret ballot, so it is therefore impossible to provide voting records as to which countries supported Portugal and Germany over Canada, and why they decided to do so. Nevertheless, pundits and UN analysts agree, however, that Canada’s unquestioning support for Israel greatly contributed to the loss.⁷ The Economist called the loss of the seat an international ‘snub’ that came about in large part because of “outspoken support of Israel’s hardline government, alienating the Muslim countries that make up a third of the UN’s membership.” Ha’aretz, Israel’s leading daily newspaper, opined that Canada’s announcement to increase bilateral trade with Israel may have been “the last nail in the coffin for Canada’s Security Council aspirations.”⁸
Prime Minister Harper himself attributed the loss of the seat to his government’s self-described ‘principled foreign policy’, the centre piece of which is its unconditional support of Israel. Citing international pressure to support anti-Israel sentiment and punish pro-Israel views, the PM made the following statement just weeks after the failed UN bid:

Whether it is at the [UN] or any other international forum, the easiest thing to do is simply to just get along and go along with this anti-Israeli rhetoric, to pretend it is just about being even-handed and to excuse oneself with the label of honest broker. There are, after all, a lot more votes – a lot more – in being anti-Israeli than in taking a stand.

This statement is telling on at least two fronts. First, it illustrates that his government has abandoned Canada’s historically respectable position as an honest broker in the Middle East, and in fact derides the position. The Harper government has referred to multilateralism as a “weak-nation strategy,” and its Middle East policy follows from this larger perception about international relations. Second, the statement recognizes that the majority of the international community is of the opinion that taking an unreflective, pro-Israel stance is not something that ought to be rewarded with international influence, and Canada’s loss at the UNSC reflects this opinion.

**Does Canada’s position affect the Israeli/Palestinian negotiations?**

Yes. The current negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority are beset by a series of structural and political barriers that preclude a just settlement and the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. Not least among these are: Palestinian political fragmentation between the Fatah and Hamas, the lack of inclusion of the refugee question in negotiations, Israel’s demands that the Palestinian Authority recognize Israel as a Jewish state, expansion of colonies (a.k.a. “settlements”) in the West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem, and subsequent Israeli reluctance to delineate final borders. Though Canada cannot single-handedly remove these barriers, a failure to emphasize principles and play the honest broker only reinforces the deadlock.

Canada entrenches the political fragmentation of Gaza and the West Bank by refusing to recognize the democratically-elected Hamas government as a legitimate player in the negotiations. Despite the obvious reservations regarding Hamas’ worldview, it is difficult to foresee any chance for a negotiated resolution between Israelis and Palestinians while the group remains isolated.

Canadian inaction as chair of the international Refugee Working Group (RWG), the legitimate multilateral forum for discussing final status solutions for Palestinian refugees, has also been disappointing. Having refused to convene the RWG, Canada demonstrates its unwillingness to provide leadership or enable progress within this important forum. Canada is bound by international humanitarian law and domestic law to oppose the expansion of illegal Israeli colonies in the occupied Palestinian Territories. In March of 2010, Lawrence Cannon, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade stated that “on the expansion into East Jerusalem, we feel that this is contrary to international law and therefore condemn it. We are very concerned with what is taking place now.” Yet despite this promising rhetoric, Canada did nothing to leverage its economic or political ties with Israel to push for a colony freeze or statement on final borders. Canada’s current passivity thus highlights its one-sided support of Israel – a position which will no doubt lead to a further decline in international stature, and regrettably a decline in Canada’s contribution to international solution-making.

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4. The use of cluster munitions on civilian centres and agricultural land has been exhaustively documented by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and USAID.
7. A UN reporter found no evidence among UN delegates that Ignatieff’s prior comments had impacted the vote. Ignatieff was unknown to most.
8. “Did Canada's support for Israel cost it a seat on UN Security Council?” Haaretz, Oct. 17, 2010
11. The Economist, op. cit.