

# HELPING MAKE HISTORY

*The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between Israel and Canada prompts renewed appreciation for Lester B. Pearson's key role leading to the creation of the Jewish state*

**By ROBERT SARNER**

To most Israelis, and even many Canadians, the name 'Pearson' means surprisingly little. Some simply associate it with Canada's largest, busiest airport, commonly known as Toronto Pearson.

Others, of course, recognize the name as that of a former prime minister of Canada, Lester B. Pearson, for whom Toronto's main airport was rechristened 40 years ago. Those with a firm command of history also know Pearson was a distinguished Canadian statesman who played a seminal role at the United Nations leading to the establishment of Israel and later helped strengthen ties between Ottawa and Jerusalem.

This month, as both countries mark 75 years of bilateral relations, Pearson has pride of place in the first chapters of the story. His legacy reflects the close, enduring and mutually beneficial friendship between Canada and Israel.

"This milestone 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary reminds us of how far our two countries have traveled together and the importance we attach to our relationship with Canada," says Iddo Moed, Israel's Ambassador to Canada since 2023. "We have every reason to remember Lester Pearson with much gratitude for what he did for the Jewish people, starting at the UN where he was instrumental in making the birth of Israel possible. To me, his legacy is intrinsically linked to his skilful display of statesmanship, which incorporated a unique combination of personal and national commitment to Israel's security and peace. The values he upheld continue to bind our nations to this day."

As democratic allies, Israel and Canada have long enjoyed strong economic, diplomatic, security and cultural bonds, sharing a commitment to freedom, human rights and the rule of law. Today, despite occasional differences in opinion, the two countries benefit from extensive cooperation in many fields, especially since they signed the Canada-Israel Strategic Partnership in 2014.

Such a fruitful state of affairs would surely warm the heart of Lester Pearson if he were alive today given his work at the UN paved the way to statehood for Israel.

Following the Second World War, the situation in Mandatory Palestine became increasingly untenable for Britain, which had administered the area since 1920. Amid

growing hostilities between local Jews and Arabs over the fate of the land and violence against British forces, London sought to leave Palestine. To that end, in April 1947, it asked the UN to devise a post-British plan for the Holy Land. A month later, the world body created the Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), consisting of 11 countries, including Canada, to study the reality and make recommendations.

Pearson, then Canada's Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, played a leadership role in UNSCOP's work. He pushed for the idea of a Jewish state as part of Palestine's future despite the reservations of his boss, Prime Minister McKenzie King. With his diplomatic acumen, Pearson convinced committee members to accept his compromise draft of a detailed plan for Palestine, whose fate would be decided by the UN.

On Nov. 29, 1947, a date that would figure prominently in Israel's history, the UN General Assembly convened to decide on Resolution 181, formulated by UNSCOP. It called for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state, a proposal sharply contested by many UN member states. Behind the scenes, ahead of the vote on the Partition Plan, Pearson appealed to other countries to approve it. The Holocaust had further convinced him of the need for Jews to have their own country.

"...It had been made necessary," Pearson stated, "by the slaughter of Jews in Europe, [the result of which] arrangements should be made in at least one country in the world for Jewish people to be definitely freed from the limitations and the fears imposed by minority status."<sup>1</sup>

Without Pearson, the requisite two-thirds majority likely would not have been achieved in the historic UN vote. Canada was among the 33 countries that approved the plan, which gave international legitimacy to the Zionist vision of a state for Jews in their ancestral homeland and set the stage for the birth of Israel.

"I never had a doubt that this problem is unsolvable without recognizing a Jewish state in the Land of Israel," Pearson wrote in his memoirs. "For me, it was always the centre of the issue. A Jewish state in the Land of Israel, a national home, it is something that I felt was a sine qua non for every arrangement."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [The Hub, by Antony Anderson, Dec.9, 2023 - https://thehub.ca/2023-12-09/antony-anderson-canadas-forgotten-role-in-the-partition-of-palestine-and-the-creation-of-israel/](https://thehub.ca/2023-12-09/antony-anderson-canadas-forgotten-role-in-the-partition-of-palestine-and-the-creation-of-israel/)

<sup>2</sup> [From Comments by Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein on January 20, 2014 welcoming Prime Minister Stephen Harper to the Knesset, as posted on the website of The Pearson Centre for Progressive Policy - Article titled Pearson's Key Role in Israel, Aug. 25, 2015 - http://thepearsoncentre.ca/progressive-memos/pearsons-key-role-in-israel/](http://thepearsoncentre.ca/progressive-memos/pearsons-key-role-in-israel/)

Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948. Canada recognized the Jewish state *de facto* on Dec. 24, 1948 following Pearson's appointment as Secretary of State for External Affairs the month before. While it was one of his first acts in his new role, Canada only established formal diplomatic relations with Israel on May 11, 1949, once it had been admitted to the UN.

Before his work at the UN, Pearson served as a Canadian diplomat in London from 1935 until 1941, during which he closely monitored the rise of Nazi Germany and the early years of the Second World War. In 1942, he was dispatched to the U.S. to serve as second-in-command at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C. In 1945, he was named Ambassador to the US. That year, he attended the founding conference of the UN in San Francisco, and in 1952 was elected President of the UN General Assembly.

Born just outside Toronto in 1897, Pearson was raised in a Christian household, the son of a Methodist minister. In his youth, he learned about the Holy Land's deep Jewish roots, later referring to Israel in his memoirs as "the land of my Sunday school lessons" that taught him "the Jews belonged in Palestine."

After earning a BA from the University of Toronto, he did a fellowship at St. John's College, Oxford. His time at university was interrupted by military service in Europe during the First World War, mainly with the Canadian Army Medical Corps, followed by five years of teaching history at university before joining the Department of External Affairs in 1928. That proved an auspicious career move, later facilitating his transition to political life.

In late January 1956, during a debate in Canada's Parliament on the export of military equipment to the Middle East, Pearson, as Secretary of State for External Affairs, made his position clear.

"I think there would be no contribution on our part to improving the chances of peace in that area," he said, "by cutting off all shipments of defense equipment to the State of Israel."<sup>3</sup>

In the same speech, he called for negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbours. All these years later, his words still ring true, showing that *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* in the Middle East when it comes to those hell-bent on Israel's destruction.

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<sup>3</sup> Government of Canada, Statements and Speeches, "The Middle East," Jan. 24, 1956, bottom of Page 7, from Israel Archives

“It seems to me that an essential, indeed, a first requirement, is that Arab states should recognize the legitimate and permanent existence of the State of Israel...” Pearson told Parliament. “The people of Israel have the right to know that their national existence is not at stake. That seems to me to be fundamental. Efforts to bring peace and all its benefits to the Middle East will be of no avail unless Israel and the people of Israel are released from the overhanging fear which naturally envelopes the country as a result of the threats of destruction and of the political and economic warfare directed against it by its neighbours.”<sup>4</sup>

Later that year, Pearson’s understanding of the Middle East and his diplomatic prowess proved critical to ending a major conflict in the region with global repercussions. In November 1956, he intervened in the Suez Crisis, leading to his most celebrated international achievement. Prompted by Egypt’s nationalization of the all-important Suez Canal, risking oil shipments to Europe; its continued blockade of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping; and terrorist attacks on Israel from Egyptian-controlled territory, Israeli, French and British forces invaded Egypt, taking control of the canal.

Seeking to end fighting and the prospect of a broader war and reduce divisions among Western allies over the conflict, Pearson addressed the UN General Assembly on two successive days. He successfully argued for the creation of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), an armed peacekeeping unit dispatched to the area to oversee the end of hostilities and withdrawal of British and French soldiers, and later those from Israel. For defusing the crisis, Pearson was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957.

True to his affinity for Israel, Pearson participated in a special celebration in Montreal of the 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the country’s founding. Speaking at the event on April 16, 1961, he paid tribute to the Jewish state.

“Surrounded by unfriendly and apprehensive neighbours who will not admit her right to peaceful or, indeed, to any form of national existence, Israel exists,” he said. “Her people gathered together from all parts of a turbulent world and from the dark past of persecution and suffering, live and work and achieve in a free society of their own choice. They have shown what democracy, combined with devotion and determination, can do in a land not flowing in milk and honey, with not much living space, with troubled borders and hostile neighbours... Through their efforts, the hard past has been

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<sup>4</sup> Government of Canada, Statements and Speeches, “The Middle East,” Jan. 24, 1956, bottom of Page 10, bottom paragraph, from Israel Archives

converted into a present of high adventure. Because of the achievements of a free Israel, Jews who remain in other lands can hold their heads higher.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1963, Pearson was elected Canada’s 14<sup>th</sup> prime minister. In late May 1967, on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, he took part in the official welcoming ceremony for then-Israeli President Zalman Shazar’s state visit weeks before Canada’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

“Your visit during our Centennial Year is more evidence of the close and cordial relations between Israel and Canada, which we so deeply value,” Pearson said at the event. “These relations are made stronger by the important and distinguished contributions the Jewish citizens of Canada have made since our early days and are making today in so many ways to our national life and our development.”

[“[Transcript of the Prime Minister’s Remarks at the Official Welcome of His Excellency President Shazar of Israel, Parliament Hill, May 21, 1967,](#)” Page 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph, from Canadian Archives]

Nearly a year later, in early May 1968, shortly after retiring as prime minister, Pearson’s Israeli counterpart, Levi Eshkol, sent him a letter, paying tribute to his time in office.

“Upon your resignation from the premiership of Canada,” Eshkol wrote, “I should like to give expression to my profound feeling of friendship, reflecting my personal appreciation of your efforts, as prime minister and as an individual, to advance the cause of peace and understanding in the Middle East, as well as the long-standing bond of friendship that links our two peoples.”<sup>6</sup>

Pearson visited Israel in early December 1968 when the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot made him an honorary fellow at a special ceremony and established a chair in protein research in his name.

In November 1969, Pearson spoke at the Zionist Organization of America’s annual dinner in New York where he received the ZOA’s Theodor Herzl Award “in recognition of his commitment to Jewish freedom and Israel.”

When Pearson died on Dec. 29, 1972, Canadian Jewish leaders expressed grief, praising him as a long-time ally.

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<sup>5</sup> “[Address by the Honourable Lester B. Pearson, 13<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Founding of the State of Israel, Montreal, April 16, 1961,](#)” Pages 5-6, from Canadian Archives

<sup>6</sup> LETTER - “[Rosh Hamemshala/The Prime Minister, Jerusalem, May 3, 1968, Dear Mr. Pearson,](#)” 1st paragraph, from Canadian Archives

[Pearson was] “a great friend of Israel and the Jewish people,” Sol Kanee, President of the Canadian Jewish Congress, said in a statement, lauding him as “the architect of the plan which resulted in the creation of the State of Israel.”<sup>7</sup>

For his part, Philip Givens, President of the Canadian Zionist Federation, extolled Pearson for having “conducted the brilliant negotiations that led to the establishment of the State of Israel by the United Nations on Nov. 29. 1947.” He voiced gratitude for Pearson having continually expressed concern “for the survival of the Jewish State.” He added, “Canada has lost a remarkable citizen and Jews a good friend.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.jta.org/archive/jewish-leaders-express-sorrow-at-death-of-lester-b-pearson> - 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.jta.org/archive/jewish-leaders-express-sorrow-at-death-of-lester-b-pearson> - 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph