

Canada Has Become A Rogue State On Israeli Apartheid

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This year will be remembered as the one where using the term “apartheid” to describe Israel broke into the mainstream.

While Palestinians have been using the “apartheid” term to describe Israel’s regime of oppression for many decades (Edward Said, for example, compared Israel to apartheid South Africa in his famous 1979 essay “Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims,”) the first half of 2021 has brought a new wave of interest in the concept.

Perhaps most significantly, in late April, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a 200-plus page report concluding that Israeli officials are committing the crimes against humanity of “apartheid” and “persecution” against the Palestinian people. In light of these findings, HRW argued that governments must re-evaluate their relations with Israel, and recommended that concrete sanctions should be imposed against Israeli officials.

Despite the significance of a mainstream, international human rights body accusing Israel of apartheid, a word the state’s defenders have tried hard to keep taboo, the report was initially ignored in Ottawa.

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Only One Side Is To Blame For Israeli Apartheid

The goal of ‘both sides’ rhetoric is to rob Palestinians of every means of resistance until they have none left.

Apart from a dismissive comment from Anthony Housefather, the chair of the Canada-Israel Interparliamentary Group, no MPs brought any attention to the HRW report’s findings. Meanwhile, in a statement to the Canadian Press, Global Affairs said only that they were reviewing the report.

However, just weeks later an escalation of violence in the Middle East transformed the political landscape, as MPs from all major parties endorsed the use of sanctions against Israel, and the NDP called for an arms embargo.

A growing number of NDP, Green and Independent MPs have shared statements describing Israel’s actions in terms of apartheid or ethnic cleansing, and even some Liberal MPs have either mentioned the HRW apartheid report, or told their constituents it was being reviewed.

What really brought the debate over apartheid into the open, however, was Green MP Jenica Atwin, who used the term “apartheid,” crossing the floor to join the Liberals following repeated public threats from senior staff inside the party leader’s office.

Seeing this as an opportunity to attack the Liberals for being insufficiently pro-Israel, the Conservative Party used Atwin’s statement to smear her as antisemitic, and one Conservative candidate challenged her to a public debate on the topic.

The Liberal Party took the bait: When faced with a question about Atwin’s “apartheid” tweets in Question Period, Foreign Affairs Minister Marc Garneau explained that the government “categorically” rejects the “apartheid label,” and that “it is not part of our approach with respect to Israel or the Jewish community.”

A few days later, Liberal MP Ya’ara Saks issued a letter arguing that the language of apartheid is “ill-informed,” characterizing it as antisemitic and claiming that “recent statements and events have made Jewish Canadians feel targeted, and that is

unacceptable.”

Even though this letter was clearly an attack on Atwin (without directly naming her), it was “liked” and shared by several other Liberal MPs. Although Atwin at first said she stood by her use of the term, she later deleted her statements on the issue.

Apartheid’s New Critics

The Liberal government’s flat rejection of the term “apartheid,” and the vilification of those who use it, is nothing new. However, while the Liberal position remains entrenched, the world around them has been changing rapidly.

In just the first half of this year, many new observers, in addition to the HRW, have concluded that Israel’s practices toward the Palestinians should be described in terms of apartheid:

Israel’s largest rights group B’Tselem published a position paper in January concluding that Israel is an apartheid regime, labelling it “a regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.” This followed a report published last year by Israeli group Yesh Din, which concluded that Israel is committing apartheid in the West Bank.

Cyril Ramaphosa, the president of South Africa, told France 24 in May that Israel’s actions brought back “very terrible memories of our own history and apartheid,” and said that Israel could “quite easily” be characterized as an “apartheid type of state.” This is not an aberration. Major leaders of the South African anti-apartheid struggle, including Desmond Tutu, Ronnie Kasrils and Denis Goldberg, have been insisting for years that Israel’s occupation is comparable, if not “worse,” than apartheid in South Africa, and this position is broadly popular within the country.

Two former Israeli ambassadors to South Africa wrote in June that Israel’s activities in the occupied Palestinian territories amount to a “reality” of apartheid, adding: “It is time for the world to recognize that what we saw in South Africa decades ago is happening in the occupied Palestinian territories too.”

Namibia’s ambassador to the United Nations told the UN Human Rights Council in March that Israel was practicing apartheid against the Palestinian people, and called for the restoration of the UN Special Committee on Apartheid. South Africa illegally occupied Namibia (known then as South West Africa) for decades, where the regime imposed its apartheid policies on the population.

An April survey of all Israelis and Palestinians living between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean sea (analyzed as a single population unit) found that about 25 per cent of Jewish Israelis believe the term “apartheid” is a fitting or very fitting description of the Israeli regime, as did a strong majority (75 per cent) of Palestinians.

A February survey found that a “strong majority” (59 per cent) of Middle East scholars would describe the current reality in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, as “a one-state reality akin to Apartheid.”

Ban Ki-moon, former secretary-general of the United Nations, wrote in June that Israel’s “structural domination and oppression” of the Palestinian people “arguably constitutes apartheid.”

It’s not clear on what basis the Canadian government has decided to “categorically” reject the apartheid analysis, and what insight they may have that’s not available to Palestinian and Israeli human rights groups, the post-apartheid governments of South Africa and Namibia, Middle East scholars, or even a substantial minority of Jewish Israelis themselves.

Disincentives To Acknowledging Apartheid

Canada’s decision to dismiss out of hand the credible and authoritative findings of Palestinian, Israeli and international human rights organizations exposes the bankruptcy of its stated commitments to human rights and a “rules-based international order.”

Dig Deeper



Canadians Overwhelmingly Want Israel Investigated For War Crimes

Canada’s attempts to deter an ICC investigation of Israel are at odds with popular opinion, according to a new EKOS survey.

If Canada’s foreign policy was guided by these concerns, officials would have no choice but to take the conclusions of the HRW and B’Tselem reports seriously and start to radically redraw the government’s relations with Israel, as there can be no business-as-usual with an apartheid state.

Instead, Canada’s denial of Israeli apartheid is not grounded in a realistic assessment of the facts, but in its material interests. In the interests of maintaining close economic and security ties, Canadian officials would prefer to avert their eyes — regardless of the credibility of the accusations.

After all, if adopted, HRW's recommendations would have real consequences for Canada-Israel relations: Canada would impose Magnitsky-style sanctions on Israeli officials, the same that it does on Russia and China; Canada would revise its free trade agreement so that it no longer gives preferential access to goods from illegal settlements; Canada would ban arms sales with Israel until steps are made to end apartheid.

Events this year have shown that the world is slowly gaining the confidence to acknowledge the reality of Israel's crimes of apartheid against the Palestinian people. This is a trend that will only continue, so long as the human rights situation on the ground keeps deteriorating.

Canada can't hide from the truth forever. If the government doesn't change direction soon, one day Canada will no longer be remembered for its actions in opposition to apartheid in South Africa (however limited those actions really were), but only for aligning itself with apartheid in Israel.

Michael Bueckert is Vice President of Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME). He has a PhD in Sociology and Political Economy from Carleton University.

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