

Violence in Gaza and Israel has left behind a changed political landscape in Canada

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Evan Dyer

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Return of armed conflict accelerating breakdown of consensus on Mideast conflict

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A pro-Israel supporter stands in front of pro-Palestinian supporters before being escorted from a demonstration by police in Toronto on Saturday, May 15, 2021. (Chris Young/The Canadian Press)

In 2004, Paul Martin's Liberals chose to drop Jean Chrétien's policy and tack in a more pro-Israel direction. The change became public when Canada voted alongside the U.S. against a motion at the United Nations that affirmed the right of Palestinians "to mobilize support for their cause."

Although Stephen Harper and his Conservatives would continue to claim to be better friends of Israel, it was clear from 2004 on that the differences between the parties amounted to only a matter of degree.

Differences shrank further in 2012 when Tom Mulcair, a self-described "ardent supporter of Israel in all instances and circumstances," won the leadership of the New Democratic Party.

That consensus of party leaderships began to dissolve with Jagmeet Singh's election as NDP leader in October 2017.

The latest Gaza war has shaken things up again. "I don't think Canadian politics on this particular issue is the same as it was a month ago," said Liberal MP Nathaniel Erskine-Smith. "And I don't know that it ever will be the same."

Today, Paul Manly represents Nanaimo-Ladysmith for the Greens, but until 2014, he was a New Democrat.

"I was one of 14 candidates that were rejected by the NDP for having said anything about Israel and Palestine," he told CBC News.



Former New Democrat MP Jim Manly makes a statement in a pre-recorded video released on YouTube on Oct. 20, 2012, after the ship Estelle was commandeered by Israeli troops. (Canadian Press)

In 2012 Manly's father, Jim, himself a former NDP MP and United Church minister, was detained by Israeli commandos who boarded a vessel that was attempting to break Israel's naval blockade and deliver supplies to Gaza.

"When my father was in detention in Israel, no NDP MP would speak out for him, and my own member of Parliament was told that she couldn't speak about the issue," Manly said. "So to not be able to speak up for a constituent stuck in an international situation when other countries are speaking for their citizens really lays bare the hard line that was taken by Tom Mulcair at the time."

Greens divided

But Manly's new party has also experienced friction in the wake of recent events.

A statement by Green Party Leader Annamie Paul calling for a ceasefire and condemning both Palestinian rocket attacks and excessive Israeli military force appeared to be an attempt to put forward a moderate position close to that of the Trudeau government.

Green MP Jenica Atwin responded on Twitter: "It is a totally inadequate statement.... End Apartheid."



Green MP Jenica Atwin blasted her own leader's statement on Gaza as "totally inadequate." (Twitter)

Paul, who converted to Judaism 20 years ago, has spoken in Israeli media about the prejudice she faced when running for the Green Party leadership.

"It started out as innuendo, with veiled suggestions and attacks against me as a Zionist," she said. "And then because neither we nor others responded to it, people became more emboldened and more explicit."

"I was accused of the usual tropes, including being in the pocket of foreign agents, being embedded in a political party to further the goals of those foreign agents, and the usual things related to money."



Green Leader Annamie Paul, a convert to Judaism, says she's faced prejudice in politics. (Adrian Wyld/The Canadian Press)

The recriminations fly

This month, as tensions in the Middle East flared, it was Paul's senior adviser, Noah Zatzman, who charged that "a range of political actors" were disseminating "appalling antisemitism and discrimination ... beginning with Jagmeet Singh and [former Green leadership candidate] Dimitri Lascaris and many Liberal, NDP and sadly, Green MPs." (The entire Green caucus has only three members.)

Zatzman told CBC News he wanted to be clear that his comments about Green MPs did not refer to Elizabeth May, whom he called "a great friend of the Jewish community."

He said he has suffered ongoing harassment as a result of the position he took within the party, to the extent that his parents felt compelled to delist their address.



A Facebook post by Noah Zatzman, senior adviser to Green Party leader Annamie Paul, accused the party's own MPs of antisemitic behaviour. (Facebook)

"I think using accusations of antisemitism to shut down legitimate criticism of human rights abuses is offensive and dangerous, and it dilutes the weight that word carries when it's used to identify real antisemitism," Manly told CBC News.

Manly responded to Zatzman's claims by publishing an article by his friend and chief of staff, former Israeli soldier Ilan Goldenblatt, entitled "Criticizing Human Rights Abuses Is Not Anti-Semitism."

NDP position shifting

Paul Manly would not be disqualified from today's NDP.

Singh hasn't moved the party as far or as fast as his critics on the left would like. But the party has moved beneath his feet.

Delegates to the NDP's April convention supported motions calling for "an end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian land" and an end to "all trade and economic cooperation with illegal settlements in Israel-Palestine."

When similar motions were proposed at the NDP convention in 2018, they failed even to come to a vote.



The NDP's approach to Middle East policy seems to be shifting under leader Jagmeet Singh. (Adrian Wyld/The Canadian Press)

The motions led the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) to accuse the NDP of harbouring "a toxic obsession with Israel." It said Singh's comments on the recent conflict — by focusing on Palestinian victims while overlooking deaths and injuries from Hamas rockets

— were "cold-hearted, morally reprehensible and inconsistent with his previous statements on the matter."

But Singh has continued to recalibrate his position. "If we want to achieve peace, we need to apply pressure to achieve it," he said this week, making it clear that pressure should be on Israel.

Trudeau: Harper-era policy on autopilot

Conservative Foreign Affairs critic Michael Chong gave CBC News a restrained statement just before the ceasefire:

"Canada's Conservatives have been clear that Israel is one of Canada's closest allies and we support Israel's right to defend itself. Dialogue and peaceful negotiation are the only path forward towards a settlement between Israelis and Palestinians and an eventual two-state solution. We urge calm and sincerely hope that hostilities cease."

While the Conservatives haven't changed their position on the topic, they have dialed back the volume. Support for Israel is no longer a staple of party fundraisers and the foreign policy focus has clearly shifted to China. The Conservative Party isn't really seeking to highlight differences with Trudeau's Liberals on the conflict — partly because there really aren't any big ones.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau maintained, without fanfare, Stephen Harper's pro-Israel voting record at the UN and, a few months after becoming prime minister, voted in Parliament to condemn BDS (the movement to boycott Israel) "both here at home and abroad."



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has largely maintained the Harper government policy on UN votes related to Israel. (Amr Alfiky/Reuters)

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asked Trudeau to intercede to discourage the International Criminal Court at The Hague from investigating the 2014 Israel-Gaza War, Trudeau wrote to the court that Palestinians, as stateless people, had no right to bring cases for war crimes.

But some in his party no longer seem willing to go along with that approach.

Splits in Liberal ranks

Liberal MP Erskine-Smith said the government is too tolerant of Israeli settlements.

"For as long as I've followed politics, we haven't seen Canadian governments that have acted vocally consistent with Canadian foreign policy, which is that settlement expansion is contrary to international law," he said.

In April, Erskine-Smith presented [a petition](#) calling on Canada to oppose the pending evictions of Palestinian families from homes in the Sheikh Jarrah district of East Jerusalem, an issue that helped trigger the recent deadly conflict.



Liberal MP Nathaniel Erskine-Smith says his government should take a harder line on Israeli settlement expansion. (CBC)

"There's an asymmetry to the conflict between Palestine and Israel," he told CBC News. "And pressure needs to be brought to bear upon Israel to ensure that we don't see continued settlement expansion and we do see greater concern around human rights."

The Trudeau government has voted against dozens of UN resolutions that affirm existing tenets of Canadian policy — such as UN resolution 17/96, guaranteeing the protections of the Geneva Convention to Palestinian civilians. Like the Harper government, it says it does that to protest what it calls the singling out of Israel.

Friendly criticism

Erskine-Smith said he agrees that "there are many other countries deserving of criticism on human rights bases as well. And so the singling out of Israel, I think, can be problematic.

"My overall view, though, is that for the very reason that we hold up Israel as an ally, as a democracy with an independent judiciary that shares our values in relation to human rights, it's on those grounds that we ought to criticize as a friend."

Both Liberal MP Erskine-Smith and Green MP Manly said they have been deluged with mail about events in Gaza, and both say they believe that strong reaction was conditioned by a year of protests over racial justice in North America.

Changing times

Erskine-Smith described a recent friendly conversation with an Israeli diplomat.

"My message to him was: I've not seen this level of correspondence from people who don't follow politics and aren't seized with this really complex issue," he said. "And I think those who represent the Israeli government and Canada need to know that."

The MP said he told the diplomat that current Israeli policies are "undermining Canadian support for our continued friendship."

If currents are shifting in Canada, Israeli politics are in turmoil. There is a strong chance that the Netanyahu era is drawing to an end. For those whose task it is to argue Israel's cause in Canada, a new Israeli government could make life easier. Israel's longest-running prime minister is too much of a known quantity to change many minds on either side of the debate in Canada.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. (Sebastian Scheiner/The Associated Press)

While the NDP says it wants to halt Canada's arms sales to Israel (which are negligible anyway), what really matters to Israel is Canada's diplomatic support. Without it, Israel's guaranteed votes at the UN could shrink to only the U.S. and the handful of small Pacific Island states that vote with U.S. foreign policy.

And even Washington's support — the cornerstone of Israel's security, along with its nuclear deterrent — is looking much less certain in these changed times.

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