

BEHIND the HEADLINES

A READER RESPONDS

WEB SUPPLEMENT

Canada and the complexities of Middle East peacemaking

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*A response to Michael Bell's "The
Israeli/ Palestinian Conundrum: Is
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Michael Bell responds

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Canada and the complexities of Middle East peacekeeping

a response to Michael Bell

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Decades of Middle East peace efforts, including the Oslo process, have failed to produce the Israeli-Palestinian agreements that many have sought. Indeed, the negotiations, interim agreements, summit meetings, and cooperative projects have often left the region in greater turmoil, and the conflict appears no closer to a solution now than was the case 57 years ago.

While Canada certainly cannot be blamed for these failures, as a major player and hopeful mediator, efforts to understand this history and its impact are very important for Canadian foreign policy in the region. Despite relatively limited resources, in terms of military force or economic assistance compared to the US and the EU, Canada “punches above its weight” in the UN and in other international frameworks, and its diplomats are relatively well informed and widely respected. In the roller-coaster path of Arab-Israeli peace efforts, Ottawa’s impact as an independent voice has been significant, and successive Canadian governments have highlighted the importance of high-profile involvement in this region.

From this perspective, Ambassador Michael Bell’s essay (“The Israeli/Palestinian Conundrum: Is there a way out?”, published by the Canadian Institute of International Affairs) represents an important contribution. Bell is a very senior and accomplished diplomat, having served in Cairo, Amman, and most recently in Tel Aviv, and this article demonstrates that he is well versed in the history of the conflict. Going beyond the simplistic analyses, Bell reminds his readers of the complex history—from the origins of Zionism through the British Mandate and Palestinian rejectionism. The current violence,

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he acknowledges, is a direct extension of “the countrywide riots in 1929, which included the massacre of many members of the long-established Jewish community in Hebron.” As Bell notes, Arab rejectionism and Palestinian violence are not new or recent additions to the political landscape, but began long before the 1967 war. From this historical perspective, post-1967 “occupation” and “settlements” are symptoms of the conflict, in sharp contrast to the conventional wisdom, which simplistically views them as the main obstacles to peace.

Bell’s understanding of the complexities that have kept this conflict going for so long leads him to warn his fellow diplomats in Ottawa and elsewhere to avoid the “standard templates” and simplistic formulas. He recognizes that good intentions are not enough, and another round of conferences and negotiations will not end this conflict. Bell also refutes arguments of diplomats and academics who “give the impression that the confrontation might be well on its way to a solution, if only one side or the other would simply change this or that particular strategy.” In a stark attack on the conventional approach, Bell declares that “outsiders” and third party mediators who continue to pursue this dead end formula simply “don’t get it”.

On this basis, he issues a carefully phrased and limited endorsement of the concept of unilateral disengagement, as presented by the Israeli government under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. While finding numerous faults with this approach, this experienced Canadian diplomat reluctantly acknowledges that separation provides the most realistic foundation for reducing the violence and managing the conflict under existing conditions. The problem is that the analysis provided to support this conclusion is incomplete, often contradictory, and does not reflect the strength of the case, making it too easy to fall back into the old myths.

DISTORTED MAPS AND THE VOCABULARY OF CONFLICT

Like many other prominent Canadian policy makers, journalists, and academics, Bell has trouble accepting the implications of the disastrous end to the Oslo process and the deep complexities of the region. Despite his warnings, he also seems unable to discard the distorted rhetoric and conventional wisdom emanating from the United Nations and from much of Europe. Throughout this sweeping examination, the Palestinians are pictured as passive and helpless victims, with Israel as the “stronger party”, (ignoring the presence of all of the Arab countries and the threats they pose). The distorted map artificially shrinks the conflict to a few hundred kilometers

stretching from the Mediterranean shore to the Jordan River, excluding everything from Hizbollah's bases in Lebanon, to the military, political and economic war still being waged against Israel from North Africa to Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran. On this map, few Israelis see themselves as "the stronger party", obliged to take all of the major risks in return for a very distant hope of peace.

Similarly, much of Bell's terminology—which is widely shared by Canadian diplomats, political leaders, journalists and academics—reflects such subjective and ideological prejudices. Prime Minister Sharon's carefully considered policies are described in terms of hostile media stereotypes (e.g. the "iron fist approach") and Bell refers to Israel's security barrier—initiated after the peace negotiations collapsed and Palestinian terror has taken almost 1000 lives—as a "land grab" that is "contrary to international law". The automatic dismissal of Israel's interpretation of the 4th Geneva Convention and regarding Palestinian refugee claims, without exploring the basis of these disagreements, is unconvincing and unfair. Bell and the Canadian government also disagree with the Israeli rejection of claims regarding the moral authority of anti-Israel resolutions adopted in a very biased United Nations framework, but without an honest explanation of these differences, this discussion lacks credibility.

In addition, even where Bell finds fault with Palestinian policy and with the failed leadership of Yassir Arafat, he immediately returns to criticism of Israel. This form of "balance" has long been a core principle of Canadian Middle East policy, particularly in this region, and is based on the mistaken belief that successful international mediators and peacekeepers must be seen to be "evenhanded". But the evidence clearly shows that successful mediators are few and far between, and when they are effective, it is also because of the assets—carrots or sticks—that they bring to the table¹.

Indeed, balance in diplomacy often becomes the foundation for moral neutrality, in which the distinction between terrorists and their victims loses all meaning. This was clearly the case during the Chrétien government's long hesitation in declaring Hizbollah and other groups to be terrorist organizations (ostensibly due to a distinction between political and "military" wings). Such artificial balance also erases the uniqueness of Israeli democracy in a rough neighbourhood dominated by military dictatorships, despots, and royal families. This is a primary difference between US and European policy—the Americans embrace Israeli democracy, Europe belittles it—and Bell, reflecting Canadian policy norms, echoes the continental perspective. In his analysis, as in many other aspects of

Canadian government policy vis-à-vis this conflict, Israeli democracy and its implications go unmentioned and apparently unnoticed.

VICTIMIZATION AND RESPONSIBILITY

The most significant problem with Bell's artificial balancing is the penchant to excuse Palestinian rejectionism and terror as unavoidable. After recalling Arab rejection of UN Resolution 181 (November 29 1947) that would have created two states, he argues: "The Palestinian Arabs could not accept that division of what they felt was their homeland. Full-scale inter-communal warfare broke out." This invocation of inevitability allows Bell to ignore the Palestinian and Arab moral failure and responsibility for 57 years of war. Like the Jewish (soon to be Israeli) leadership under Ben Gurion, Arab leaders could have accepted historic compromise between the two competing claims, but instead elected to take the path of confrontation. And "communal warfare" (a euphemism for terror and a military invasion) did not simply "break out" in 1947 or in September 2000, but was a deliberate choice by the Arab side of the conflict.

The implication that the Palestinian leadership fell into violent confrontation (i.e. bus bombings and suicide attacks), rather than selecting this strategy, is another illustration of the similarity between European and Canadian perceptions. Bell goes back to the 1920s, explaining Palestinian attacks as the result of a "vivid sense of inferiority, displacement and fear" resulting from the successes of Zionism. The possibility that decades of violence are the result of deep religious and culturally based rejection of the concept of Jewish sovereignty and political equality—the "dhimmi" syndrome—and the evidence to support it, does not arise in his discourse. Instead, Bell—like many Canadian diplomats and journalists—blames the Israeli victims.

The theme of Arab victimization and powerlessness is repeated at each stage of Bell's historical overview. The 1967 war is not attributed to the continued goal of destroying the State of Israel, as Egyptian leader Nasser declared as his troops marched towards the Sinai, but Bell gives the Egyptians an alibi. "Nasser himself was the victim of a highly effective Soviet disinformation campaign, which falsely claimed that the Israelis were mobilizing." Nasser may have swallowed bad information, but he did this in the context of the ongoing goal of defeating and destroying Israel². And after the war, Bell repeats the standard interpretation—"Given their humiliation, the Arabs refused to negotiate." The result is a portrait of Arabs as

perpetual victims, trapped by emotions, manipulated by outside powers, and freed from the responsibility for making choices and living with the consequences.

LEARNING FROM OSLO'S FAILURE

Bell's analysis of the breakdown of the Oslo negotiation efforts and the renewed campaign of Palestinian terrorism that began in September 2000 opens on a more substantive note. Although, like many others, he places too much emphasis on Ariel Sharon's Temple Mount visit, he acknowledges that "Yasser Arafat had done little to prepare the Arabs for hard decisions on final status. He frequently asserted that Israeli offers were simply tactics to perpetuate the occupation, rather than publicly underlining the progress made during deliberations." At Camp David, Arafat slapped the Clinton Administration in the face by making absurd claims on Jerusalem that were designed to block discussions. But Bell repeats the excuses for this behavior: "[Arafat] feared being labeled a traitor to the Palestinian cause and was therefore unwilling to contemplate the end of claims against the Israeli state." However, in a parenthetical remark, Bell also admits that "Some characterize this attitude as a failure of leadership, which I believe it was...."

Yet, even on this critical issue, Bell is unable to bring himself to depart from the myth of "balance" and "evenhandedness". Instead of focusing on Arafat's failure of leadership and other flaws in Palestinian society that contributed to the brutality and violence of the past four years, Bell goes back to the assertion that "at the end of the day, neither side proved capable of sustaining essential understanding of the other's requirements." This false balance erases Prime Minister Ehud Barak's far-reaching proposals for agreement, and ignores Arafat's blanket failure to put any option on the table at Camp David and the aftermath. And despite his earlier warnings regarding the complexity of the relationship and the underlying fault lines, Bell perpetuates the illusion that the Oslo "peace process" had made great progress, and with only a few minor changes, could have produced Palestinian-Israeli peace.

Similarly, his claims that the outcome was still in doubt when the Palestinian campaign of violence began in September 2000, and that the "erosion of trust" played a major role in this process, are more than questionable. By this time, the trust and hopes of a fundamental change in the relationship had essentially disappeared. The conventional wisdom misses the bigger picture and instead focuses on the micro-events of this period, including Israeli opposition

leader Ariel Sharon's reassertion of Jewish religious and historic rights on Jerusalem's Temple Mount, according to the ancient Jewish tradition, on September 28 2000.

In Bell's version Sharon's action outraged Palestinians and "Young protestors filled the streets, threw stones, burned flags and attacked Israeli settlements." But on this as on every other topic related to the history of this conflict, there are many other and equally plausible versions of events. Bell readily acknowledges that Arafat could have halted the violence, but as in the case of the Arab leadership in 1947 and Nasser in 1967, he avoids assigning responsibility. Similarly, there is no evidence to support the theory that Arafat's policies were the result of misperception, rather than a carefully chosen strategy.

Bell acknowledges that Arafat did not prepare Palestinian society for compromise, but he omits the rest of the picture. At Camp David, his blanket denial of Jewish links in Jerusalem reinforced other evidence that while tactics change, Arafat's strategic goal remains anchored in 1947, and the rejection of coexistence with a Jewish state. Furthermore, Hizbollah's perceived success in using terrorism to "evict" Israel from Southern Lebanon in May 2000 provided a model, while Kosovo was a precedent for gaining international intervention³. Indeed, the violence, referred to as the "Al Aksa Intifada" in order to convey the image of a spontaneous uprising related to Jerusalem, immediately became the basis for international campaigns to condemn and isolate Israel internationally. (Some of the events that Bell includes in his chronology are badly garbled—the terror attack on a Jerusalem pizzeria, which killed 15 Israeli civilians—did not take place "during the uneasy September" that followed Arafat's stonewalling at Camp David, but a full year later, in August 2001, by which time, the Palestinian terror campaign was in full swing.)

Bell's particular interpretation of these events leads him to the conclusion that a return to "permanent status negotiations . . . on the basis of minimum justice for both" can halt the conflict and lead to peace. But here, he contradicts his earlier warning regarding the dangers of claims that the "confrontation might be well on its way to a solution, if only one side or the other would simply change this or that particular strategy."

This sharp contradiction and the return to the simplistic formulae that he had rejected earlier highlight's Bell's failure to consider the underlying flaws in the process that had steadily eroded the foundations for peace. By September 2000, any "fragile trust" that might

once have existed was long gone, but the diplomatic community had missed the signals. (Bell's analysis of the Israeli political process also confuses the sequence of events and the implications. The collapse of Barak's government did not begin with the resignation of Foreign Minister David Levy in August 2000, but earlier, when Minister Natan Sharansky led a three-party walkout before the Camp David summit in protest over the proposals that Barak prepared to present. Had Barak returned with an agreement, his government would probably have survived, with or without Levy, Sharansky and other coalition partners.)

THE IMMENSE IMPACT OF NETANYA AND DURBAN

In the aftermath of these events, the foundation and the hope that was created during the beginning of the Oslo process has disintegrated completely, undermining claims that a return to "permanent status negotiations" will bring agreement and peace. The horrific violence of the past four years—the severed bodies of Israelis and Palestinian cult of martyrdom—and the deep expressions of hatred and rejection of Israeli legitimacy, including the UN's Durban Conference have disillusioned and destroyed the Israeli "peace camp". The internal Israeli debate no longer focused on borders and other issues in which compromise is possible, but on existential issues of legitimacy and national survival⁴.

Instead, the issues that now dominate both Israeli and Palestinian societies were formed in the reality of terrorism and response, reaching a crescendo with the Netanyahu Passover massacre in March 2002, followed by Israel's Defensive Shield operation in Jenin and elsewhere. It will take many years or even decades before the impact of this violence on the Palestinian-Israeli relationship might begin to recede. This reality and its long-term impact must be confronted and not ignored.

Here, as elsewhere, Bell absolves the Palestinian side of moral responsibility, claiming that "under the brunt of the Israeli Defense Forces' tough response, Fatah cadres became convinced that they had to join in the terror to be seen as legitimate and relevant." The Palestinian terrorism that continued throughout the Oslo "peace process", under Arafat's strategic guidance, is swept under the rug.

Furthermore, Bell greatly understates the evidence that Palestinian terror is motivated by deep irrational hatred. Reflecting the strong Kantian framework that dominates international diplomacy in Europe and Canada, Bell rejects Israeli "Hobbesian" realism, as if this was a lifestyle choice, rather than a response to a very hos-

tile environment. There is no mention of the extensive incitement and the evidence from Palestinian texts and broadcasts, as well the pervasive anti-Semitism in the Arab media.

In fact, the failure of the eager “third parties”—including the EU, Canada, and the Clinton Administration—to pay attention to and combat pervasive Palestinian expressions of rejection and demonization during the Oslo process is a powerful indictment. The transition from war to peace requires complex societal change, but this dimension was largely neglected. Bell also fails to mention the poisonous impact of the vilification and demonization of Israel produced in the United Nations, including the mass attack on Israel in the annual meetings of the UN Commission on Human Rights and in uncountable pro-Palestinian special sessions, seminars, film festivals and “cultural” events. This campaign of delegitimation reached a fever pitch in the Durban Conference on Racism that took place in September 2001, which restored the “Zionism is racism” formula back to the center of attention⁵.

The Canadian government was more than a passive bystander in this process. In the UN General Assembly, Canada did not vote against a single one of the dozens of anti-Israel resolutions that were introduced. Canada played an important role in helping the UN and the politicized NGOs organize the Durban Conference, but failed to use its influence to change course, and its delegation stayed when the US and Israel walked out. (To its credit, the delegation did issue a strong statement opposing the final communiqué, but by this time, the damage had been done.) UNRWA (the United Nations Refugee and Works Administration), which survives in large part due to Canadian support, uses its classrooms and other resources for anti-Israeli incitement among Palestinians and far beyond. Yet none of these central factors that perpetuate the Arab-Israeli conflict are on Michael Bell’s agenda, and this is also the case for most other Canadian, and indeed European diplomats, journalists and academics who work in this area.

THE “INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY” AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

In the absence of a detailed examination of these dimensions, Bell’s conclusions and recommendations on future options, including after implementation of Israel’s unilateral disengagement plan, should be viewed with caution. This is where the implications of his observations regarding the complexity of the relationship are most crucial. The emphasis on the urgent need for humanitarian relief, repair of

the Palestinian infrastructure, and assuring “commercial movement into and out of Gaza” are all well and good, but once again, the devil is in the details—particularly related to security and prevention of yet another round of terrorism.

The international participation sought by Canadian officials, along with their counterparts from Europe and the United Nations, lacks credibility, particularly after the complete failure to disarm Hizbollah and fulfill other obligations following the Israeli pull-out from Southern Lebanon. Yet, on this crucial dimension, few lessons have been learned from the past, which is far from reassuring. How would Canadian and other peacekeepers prevent Palestinians from again using aid and “commercial movement” as a cover for smuggling arms and explosives for use in killing Israelis? What will the division of labor be between international peacekeepers and humanitarian efforts and the Egyptian forces likely to return Gaza (also Jordanians to the West Bank), in coordination with Israeli forces? These scenarios must be addressed in detail, and credible strategies are developed and implemented, before any international involvement will be feasible.

Similarly, Bell’s call for the creation of “a mainstream and effective Palestinian government” capable of “working with Hamas” is the diplomatic equivalent of squaring the circle—a theoretical exercise that recent history, including the failed Roadmap initiative, proved to be unreachable in practice. To be taken seriously, both internally and externally, such an “effective Palestinian government” will have to prove itself capable of maintaining a monopoly on the use of force, meaning disarming of Hamas and all of the other groups. Such a scenario is highly unlikely to take place under Arafat’s rule, and a new generation of Palestinian leaders will have to emerge, which will take some time. And the absence of the necessary conditions for this to take place, realistic alternatives must be prepared.

The bottom line is that beyond recognizing the complexities of Arab-Israeli relations, Ambassador Bell’s analysis illustrates the dangers resulting from dependence on a hostile and unreliable “international community”. As he warns in the opening section, these “outsiders” and would-be “third party mediators” in the UN, Europe, and elsewhere, still “don’t get it”. Beyond short-term conflict management, hope for the future cannot be based on the failed myths, but rather on a concerted commitment to educate the next generation of Palestinian children to renounce violence and hatred.

Compromise and mutual understanding are still the keys to any peace process, but shortcuts based on excusing Palestinian terrorism,

coupled with routine and unthinking condemnation of Israel for protecting its citizens, need to be discarded. Canada can make a major contribution to a peace process by using its influence and resources to help transform the zero-sum framework of total confrontation into accommodation. This must include halting the complicity of the UN and other international organizations in the demonization of Jewish sovereignty. The only way to peace is through mutual acceptance based on compromise, and in order to effect this transformation, school-books and television shows that now preach hatred must be entirely rewritten. Until these difficult processes reach a critical mass, conflict management through unilateral separation appears to be the best and only viable option.

If Canada and the international community are to play a positive role finding a way out of “the Israeli/Palestinian conundrum”, their policies must be based on a realistic foundation. The events of the past decade are poignant reminders that wishful thinking based on “standard templates” and simplistic formulas will not work.

ENDNOTES

1. See Saadia Touval, “Mediation and Foreign Policy”, *International Studies Review* (2003) 5(4), 91-95
2. Michael Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Presidio Press, 2003
3. Among the many analyses of Arafat's role, see “One Year of Yasser Arafat's Intifada: How It Started and How It Might End”, *Jerusalem Issue Brief*, 1:4, 1 October 2001, ICA/Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs; Yezid Sayigh, “Arafat and the Anatomy of a Revolt” *Survival* 23 (3), 2001; Alan Dowty, and Michelle Gawerc “The Intifada: Revealing The Chasm” *MERIA* 5 (3) 2001.
4. For a detailed analysis on the major changes in the Israeli political framework, see Gerald Steinberg and Jonathan Rynhold, “The Impact of the Failure of Oslo on Israeli Politics”, with Jonathan Rynhold, *Israel Affairs*, (“Israel at the Polls: 2003”)
5. On the impact of Durban, see Tom Lantos “The Durban Debacle: An Insider's View of the World Racism Conference at Durban”, 26.1, *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, Winter/Spring 2002; and Irwin Cotler, “Durban's Troubling Legacy One Year Later: Twisting the Cause of International Human Rights Against the Jewish People”, *Jerusalem Issue Brief* 2:5, Institute for Contemporary Affairs/Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, August 2002, <http://www.jcpa.org/brief/brief2-5.htm>

Comments by Michael Bell

Dr. Steinberg's critique of my monograph seems at first glance to be remarkably comprehensive but he has missed the basis of my approach. His piece, a near line by line analysis filled with detailed comments, ignores many of the realities in which Israel lives, despite his claims to the contrary. His Israel is besieged, true enough, but Israel is also an occupier. His cultural absolutism and political exclusionism seem based on a paradigm of distrust and fear, a demonization of the other, which will ultimately threaten the foundation of the Zionist democracy which Israel's founders sacrificed so much to create.

He gets my background wrong as well. In addition to the seven years I spent in Arab countries I spent nine wonderful years of my career serving in Israel on three postings spread between 1975 and 2003. I am no longer a member of the Department of Foreign Affairs or an employee of the Canadian government. I was not reflecting official views in what I wrote despite Dr. Steinberg's seeming belief that I remain a spokesperson. The views I put forward in the monograph are nothing but my own. My only reference to Canadian policy was to urge greater Ottawa involvement in efforts to make Gaza stable when Israel withdraws. When Ambassador in Israel, I recommended against Canada distinguishing between the military and civilian arms of Hezbollah, unsuccessfully as it turned out.

Nor are my views a mirror of those of the UN or of the Europeans as Dr. Steinberg argues. My greatest inspiration in fact has been those of his fellow countrymen who believe Israel must cope with its inner demons, and demographic realities, if a Jewish state and democracy are to survive and prosper. I am not looking for exclusivist moral judgments but a way of bringing violence to an end so that Israeli kids can ride a bus, eat a pizza, go to the cinema without parents worrying if and when they will come home: so that Palestinian kids can help parents pick olives on undisputed land, play with friends on the streets without the need for an Israeli mili-

tary outpost manned by young men who would far rather be back in Israel dating.

In my piece, I stressed the essential need for both sides to understand where the other is coming from. I said that “success requires mutual understanding, acknowledgement of the real and imagined history of both peoples, and recognition of the need of both for dignity.” Dr. Steinberg is crystal clear that he sees Israelis as the victims, indeed the sole victims. He addresses Palestinian and Arab failings, and I agree there are many, but he declines to consider even in passing why Palestinians might feel the way they do, particularly given the settlement enterprise, which I’m sorry is a land grab. No one argues any more that settlements contribute to Israel’s security. The reality is they threaten that security because they prevent the realization of a homogeneous Jewish state.

Dr. Steinberg suggests that I labor under the misguided “myth of balance and evenhandedness.” I prefer to describe my approach as open and fair-minded. I try to see the failings, the complex domestic issues, the frustration, the fear, the successes, the disasters, and the dead on both sides. I see the need for dignity and, in the words of a Canadian jurisprudence expert, Irwin Cotler, “minimum justice for both peoples.” Dr. Steinberg might wish that it were otherwise but he can’t have it both ways. His binary thinking is death to any negotiating process, but then his expertise is in conflict management not conflict resolution.