

Canada: Conservative government unconditionally defends Israel's assault on Lebanon

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At an emergency meeting of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs August 1, Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay resolutely defended the minority Conservative government's stand in support of Israel's military offensives in Lebanon and Gaza.

MacKay charged Hezbollah with sole responsibility for Israel's month-long assault on Lebanon, while rejecting calls for an "immediate ceasefire."

MacKay repeated Prime Minister Stephen Harper's claim that it was Hezbollah that initiated the current conflict by capturing two Israeli soldiers. "Canada cannot be neutral on fundamental issues," he added, justifying the assault on Lebanon as a part of a supposed war of "terrorism versus democracy."

"This is not your classic war between states," MacKay later told reporters. "This is a terrorist organization that has an ongoing history of violence, unilateral attacks across an international border. Israel has taken steps to change that circumstance." A Conservative Member of Parliament dismissed the civilian fatalities of the Israeli assault (by then numbering well in excess of 500) and the 800,000 refugees as "collateral damage."

In fact, Israel has been practicing state terrorism, dropping thousands of US-supplied bombs and missiles on Lebanese homes, roads and bridges, instituting an air, land and sea blockade that has stopped the inflow of vitally needed food and medical supplies, and occupying much of the south of the country.

In supporting the Israeli aggression against Lebanon, the Conservative government stands shoulder to shoulder with the Bush administration and hopes to lend it and Israel a measure of international credibility.

The only goal of the diplomatic maneuvers undertaken by the Bush administration and supported by the Harper government is to buy time for Israel's long-planned military operation. This operation aims to collectively punish the entire Lebanese people, while weakening Hezbollah, and

thereby change the balance of power in the Middle East.

The United States is actively supporting Israel's military campaign, so as to limit the geopolitical influence of, and prepare for possible future military action against, Syria and Iran—states the US ruling elite has identified as obstacles to its drive to consolidate its hegemony over the oil- and natural-gas-rich Middle East.

After having declared that "the utmost Israeli restraint is needed to avoid as far as possible civilian casualties," MacKay said that he didn't believe that the "lasting" ceasefire the Harper government has been demanding is realizable, at least not before many more days and weeks of Israeli aggression. "We are dealing with terrorists," affirmed MacKay. "I'm not even sure who speaks for Hezbollah or whether they can even begin to keep their word."

Since the beginning of Israel's assault on Lebanon, the Conservative government has shown nothing but indifference to—even disdain for—the fate of hundreds of thousands of people directly caught up in the conflict, including a significant number of Canadian citizens.

Taking the position that the Israeli intervention in Lebanon was "measured," the Conservative government was one of the last Western governments to organize the repatriation from Lebanon of its nationals and refused to grant any assistance whatsoever to Canadian permanent residents (non-citizens) visiting Lebanon.

Only when faced with public outrage did the government even offer condolences to a Lebanese-Canadian family that lost eleven members in an Israeli bomb attack. Several days later, the Canadian government blamed the UN for the death by an Israeli bomb of a Canadian soldier who was serving as part of a four-member UN observation force. In the hours before their observation-post was destroyed, UN officials had repeatedly warned Israel its military operation where placing the observers' lives at risk.

At the July 26 Rome conference on Lebanon, the Canadian government aligned itself with the Americans and the British

in calling for an “enduring ceasefire”—in other words, leaving Israel a free hand to do whatever it pleases.

The three opposition parties in parliament, the Bloc Québécois (BQ), the New Democratic Party and the Liberal Party of Canada, have sought to profit from a wave of popular opposition to Harper’s foreign policy. (A recent poll indicated that 3 out of 5 Canadians having an opinion on the subject were opposed to the Conservatives’ stand.) To this end, the opposition parties forced the holding of an emergency meeting of the House of Commons’ Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs last week to debate the evacuation of Canadian nationals from Lebanon, the humanitarian situation there and the crisis in the Middle East.

Conservative MPs were clearly on the defensive and tried to limit debate on an opposition motion that called on the government to demand an “immediate cease-fire” in Lebanon. In criticizing the Conservatives’ foreign policy, however, the opposition parties have been very careful not to alienate the Canadian elite, which entirely supports the foreign policy of Harper and Washington.

An initial motion presented by BQ MP Francine Lalonde was deemed too radical. Lalonde’s motion had condemned Israel’s bombings for not respecting the “principle of proportionality which marks the right of countries to defend themselves.” In the end, the Commons committee adopted a much more limited, non-binding resolution that called on the Canadian government to exhort all parties to the conflict to declare an immediate ceasefire.

All of the participants in the debate upheld the right of Israel to defend itself, and none condemned the Bush administration’s hypocritical diplomacy. They either repeated the arguments of the Conservatives, blaming Hezbollah, Syria and Iran for supposedly refusing to come to the negotiating table, or they advanced the idea that Canada should simply demand an “immediate ceasefire,” completely ignoring the fact that the Israelis would not have been able to go ahead with their assault had they not had a green light from the United States and that a mere ceasefire would leave unaddressed the crucial issues of Israeli war reparations to the Lebanese people and the Israeli occupation of much of the country’s south.

Traditionally, the Canadian elite has sought to defend its interests by balancing between the European capitalist powers and the United States. In the post- second war world period, Canada, while one of the closest economic and military partners of the US, also positioned itself as a mediator between the great capitalist powers and a “peacekeeper” in Asia and Africa. The contrast between a militaristic US and a peace-keeping Canada constituted an important element in the redefinition of Canadian

nationalism effected by the ruling class in the 1960s.

Today an economically weakened US elite has abandoned the system of multilateral relations and organizations it helped establish following World War II and is instead seeking to bolster its world position through unilateralism and militarism. Washington is seeking to use its massive military advantage over its rivals to gain a stranglehold over the world’s energy resources and prevent the emergence of any power or coalition of powers able to challenge it for world dominance.

Faced with this turn, the Canadian financial, industrial, and political elite have determined that they cannot afford to find themselves outside Fortress America, (40 percent of Canadian production is destined for the US market). Furthermore, with Washington resurrecting war as a “normal” instrument of geo-politics, they have come to view the notion of Canada as a “peacekeeper” as an obstacle to their using the Canadian Armed Forces to assert their predatory interests on the world stage.

While Harper’s enthusiasm for Canada playing a major role in the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan, his support for the Israeli aggression against Lebanon, and more generally his pro-Bush stance have angered ordinary Canadians, they have served to solidify the support for his government—as evidenced in the pro-Conservative editorials cranked out by the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post*—among Canada’s corporate elite. Indeed, the elite welcomes Harper’s readiness to defy public opinion and his indifference to the civilians in Lebanon, including Canadian nationals, as showing that he has the “right stuff” to pursue a socially incendiary domestic policy aimed at eliminating what remains of the welfare state and further redistributing the country’s wealth in favor of the most privileged.



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