



January 14, 2014

Right Honourable Stephen Harper
Prime Minister of Canada
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON

Dear Prime Minister:

Re: Your impending visit to the Middle East

We are the United Network for Justice and Peace in Palestine and Israel, a group of United Church of Canada members and supporters from across Canada. We want to take the opportunity of your visit to the Middle East to provide you with our views regarding actions we believe the government of Canada ought to engage in to support a just resolution to the Palestinian – Israeli conflict, one that would provide for an integral Palestinian state, with the same rights and responsibilities of all UN states, and that would enhance the long term prospects for security for Israel.

As Christians, we believe in the dignity of every human and in the need to be in solidarity with those who are powerless and suffer injustice. We follow the teachings of Jesus, who constantly challenged the power structures that oppressed people on the margins. We support all Palestinian and Israeli people who promote non-violent responses to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, now in its 47th year.

We agree with a fundamental tenet of Canadian Middle East policy, namely that “*the Israeli settlements in the occupied territories are a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention*” and “*the settlements also constitute a serious obstacle to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace*” (Government of Canada web site). Unfortunately, the rhetoric and actions of your government indicate a diminishment of Canada’s promotion of the application of the Fourth Geneva Convention when it comes to the ever expanding Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and at worst, a tacit approval of the settlements. This is evident in Canada’s silence or mild reactions to Israeli announcements of settlement construction, and in Canada’s pattern of voting against United Nations resolutions that refer to Israeli violations of international law.

Your government publicly supports a viable, territorially contiguous Palestinian state. The greatest impediment to such a state are the hundreds of settlements that divide the West Bank into Palestinian enclaves. How can a “viable, contiguous” state emerge in the face of these settlements? Since the latest round of peace talks began in July 2013, Israel has announced tenders for 5,500 settlement units, including 1,400 on January 10, 2014 just days before your visit to Israel. Mr. Prime Minister, what will you say to Prime Minister Netanyahu regarding these settlements? More importantly, what will Canada *do* in the face of the Israeli government’s repeated rebuffs of international demands to comply with international law and halt settlement construction?

In the December 1 2013 statement in which you announced your visit to Israel, you referred to the importance of “the rule of law.” The most pertinent laws applicable to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are those that comprise the Fourth Geneva Convention. We urge you to take the following actions to uphold these laws in your meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu:

1. Express Canada’s consistent and firm opposition to settlement expansion and the continued presence of existing Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Call for an immediate freeze of all settlement expansion. Reaffirm our position that Canada does not acknowledge any Israeli sovereignty of territory beyond the Green Line of the 1967 border.
2. Tell Prime Minister Netanyahu that Canada will no longer provide favourable tariff-free status to Israeli settlement products that currently enjoy such status under the Canada-Israel Free Trade Agreement. If your government believes the settlements are a serious obstacle to peace, then it will not encourage their growth by supporting their economies.
3. Inform Prime Minister Netanyahu that Canada will follow the lead of the European Commission which last year published guidelines prohibiting the financing of or investment in Israeli settlements by EU countries. There are numerous Canadian companies that currently engage in economic investment in various settlements which provides the settlements with support contrary to their illegal status.

We urge you to repair Canada’s fractured relationship with the Palestinians. You have led Canada into a relationship with the Palestinian people that many would characterize as antithetical to their aspirations for sovereignty and self-determination. Your government’s opposition to the Palestinian bid for state recognition at the UN in 2012, consistent opposition to UN resolutions to enhance the possibility for Palestinian statehood, and support for Israel’s brutal wars against the Gazan people in 2009 and 2012 and ongoing blockade are indicative of the fact that your government seems to have little sympathy for the plight of ordinary Palestinians who have suffered unjustly and enormously under the Israeli occupation.

Fulfilling the three actions above would speak volumes to the Palestinian people about a return to a human rights/international law based Middle East policy for Canada. We also believe it would enhance the long term prospects for a democratic Israeli state that could live in peace with its neighbours. If Israel continues on its present course of deepening its occupation of Palestine, it will diminish its possibility of being a democratic state as Palestinians living under Israeli rule are denied fundamental human rights. Violence only begets more violence and Canadian support for aggressive Israeli military responses to Palestinian non-violent resistance actually undermines the possibility for peace for all people in the Middle East, including Israelis.

The calls for action in this letter would put Canada on a very different course from the one that you continue to chart. You speak of a “principled” approach to the Middle East but those principles are ones that appear to support one people at the expense of another. We urge you to apply the principles of human rights and international law equally to the Palestinians and Israelis. That kind of approach will greatly enhance the prospects for a just and lasting peace in the region.

Sincerely,



Rev. Marianna Harris
Co-coordinator, UNJPPI



Rev. Steve Berube
Co-coordinator, UNJPPI

cc: Honourable Thomas Mulcair, Leader, New Democratic Party of Canada
Honourable Justice Trudeau, Leader, Liberal Party of Canada
Paul Dewar, NDP Foreign Affairs Critic
Dominic LeBlanc, Liberal Foreign Affairs Critic