

Double-Standard Middle East Policy

By Reem Bahdi

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Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon travelled to the Middle East and met with Palestinian and Israeli leaders earlier this month.

According to his department's press releases, the minister confirmed Canada's backing for President Mahmoud Abbas and encouraged him to renew peace efforts with Israel.

Minister Cannon also met with several Israeli leaders, discussed a range of co-operation initiatives and took the opportunity to restate what has now become a familiar refrain: "Canada-Israel relations are strong and are founded on our support for Israel since its creation in 1948 and on our shared values of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law."

Various sources told me that Minister Cannon had been scheduled to visit Ramallah. A few days before his expected arrival, news of the impending visit had become an open secret amongst Palestinians. But the visit was cancelled shortly before the arrival date and Minister Cannon met President Abbas in Jordan instead. He did, however, visit Israel.

The fact that Canadian leaders rarely take the time to visit the Palestinian areas or understand their needs does not escape notice in Ramallah. Nor do Palestinians disregard that our government is prone to making statements asserting political support for Israel while offering Palestinians aid that many observe ultimately works to support (Israeli) military security at the price of (Palestinian) human security.

A Canadian official in Ramallah commented to me several years ago that the international community's aid response to Israel/Palestine over the last few years is like that of a zoo keeper who opens up the cages every now and then to throw in some the food while reinforcing the cages' iron bars.

In Jordan, Minister Cannon reiterated Canada's offer of \$300 million in aid to President Abbas over five years. How this will break down remains unclear. Minister Cannon reaffirmed \$4 million in aid to Gaza humanitarian relief, but delegated the bulk of the funding to efforts aimed at propping up President Abbas' ailing government. For example, a Department of Justice lawyer confirmed that the department is on the verge of signing a contract with CIDA which would give the Canadian Justice Department \$20 million to provide training and other support to the Palestinian Attorney General's Office.

Such support is controversial in part because Palestinian priorities at this point in time are clearly humanitarian in nature. One Palestinian analyst questioned me: "We thought you had new legislation that ensured poverty reduction is given priority in international development. We are

surprised to see aid to the Prosecution and similar ideas being rushed through so quickly. Is it political?"

Others pointed to the disconnect between our political statements, which stress justice and building the rule of law, and the way in which Palestinians experience the rule of law. For Palestinians, law is largely an instrument of oppression.

While in Ramallah, I arranged a visit to an Israeli Military Court as part of my work on Juvenile Justice. Palestinians within the West Bank and Gaza charged by Israelis appear before military courts that provide virtually no due process rights and are presided over by a military judge. Israelis who commit crimes are tried before regular Israeli court with full due process rights. A recent review of the Israeli military court system found that almost 100 per cent of the accused are found guilty and that the average hearing lasts approximately two minutes.

I watched a teenager being brought into the court room. Contrary to international norms, his legs were bound in chains. I was surprised to learn of the charges against him—throwing stones. In an era where, according to some, white phosphorous can be dropped in droves from the sky without violating the rule of law, it seemed absurd that this boy should be shackled and made to stand before a military authority for throwing stones in an act of resistance and defiance against military occupation.

He was a thin boy, barely taller than my own 11-year-old son and slighter in build. His mother, who happened to be sitting next to me at the back of the court room, told me that he was not yet 16 and had two years to finish his tawjihi (high school) diploma.

We waited together for the child to be sentenced. A plea bargain brought him four and a half months and a 500-sheckle fine in addition to time already served. She teared up. He would lose his year in school and she now had to cobble together money for a fine from relatives who shared her home in Jalazon Refugee Camp.

The defence attorney, a weary looking Palestinian lawyer, tried to comfort her by noting that most boys get harsher sentences that can range into several years for the same stone-throwing offence. "It's a good thing this is his first time charged," he said, mustering a smile.

How can Canada talk about supporting the rule of law while ignoring such Israeli practices? I am asked this question by all manner of Palestinian citizens.

President Abbas, meanwhile, is discussing the prospects of a unity government with Hamas. Hamas appears to have gained popularity following Israel's military operation, Operation Cast Lead, which was launched on Dec. 27. If it comes to pass, a Palestinian unity government will be formed by the end of March. Minister Cannon announced that funding to Palestinians will support Abbas's government. Presumably the funding will not be delivered if President Abbas enters into a unity government agreement with Hamas because Canadian law considers Hamas a terrorist organization.

Members of Abbas's government are far more realistic about their future than the press releases issued by Foreign Affairs Canada. I bumped into a high-ranking member of the Palestinian Authority on my last day in the region. Warmly reprimanding me for not calling during my brief visit to Ramallah, the official commented in passing that the next time we meet, he may be out of office.

"Perhaps then," he said, "we can work together on something important that doesn't involve government delusions."

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