

# Canada and Palestinian self-determination

By Peyton Lyon

Canada has become a bold champion of human rights, most notably in the Soviet bloc and South Africa. It is also a leading promoter of Francophone unity. Hence the widespread amazement and dismay when Canada emerged at the Quebec Francophone Summit as the only one of the forty participants to withhold support from a resolution in favor of Palestinian self-determination. Compounding the puzzle is the fact that Canada had been inching towards balance in its Middle East diplomacy. In UN voting, for example, it now supports the resolution calling for an international peace conference, and it is less often isolated in an uncomfortable minority of three, along with Israel and the United States. Mr. Clark's 1986 visit to the area, especially his firm speech in Tel Aviv, went down well in the Arab world. This trend has not only augmented our ability to promote specific Canadian interests, such as trade, but also our potential as a peacemaker in the Middle East, once the setting for our most creative diplomacy.

Why then the embarrassment of our apparent rejection of self-determination? Canada's negative stand at Quebec was not new. Rather it dates back to Trudeau who, despite great sympathy for the Palestinian cause, appeared to believe that support for self-determination in Palestine, or Biafra, might encourage self-determination in Quebec. This concern, if ever valid, is so no longer.

UN and Commonwealth procedures had till now enabled Canada, without drawing great attention, to withhold support from Palestinian self-determination. The rules for the Francophone Summit are different, however, and caused our solitary stand to become the focus of widespread criticism.

## Citizens and diplomats agree

Many Canadian observers, and most Canadian diplomats who bear responsibility for our relations with the Middle East, have long been critical of our apparent inability to recognize that equity in the Middle East, and enduring peace, demand that the Palestinians be accorded rights comparable to those enjoyed by all other nations in the area, including Israel. "Self-determination" is the most basic and obvious of human rights. How can one fail to support this right for a nation and then claim to be its friend? And the friend of its friends? Would Canadians tolerate any questioning of their own right to self-determination? That of any of their friends and allies? Or, indeed, of any nation apart from the Palestinians? Why do we single them out for this negative discrimination?

Our spokesmen stress that we are not like the Israelis and Americans who unambiguously reject self-determination for the Palestinians under any circumstances. Rather, the official Canadian position adds up to "not necessarily self-determination, but self-determination only should it happen to emerge from

peace negotiations." Joe Clark contends, incorrectly, that "self-determination" has a unique meaning in the Middle East, i.e., "independent statehood." To say now that we favor self-determination, he reasons, would "prejudge" the outcome of the negotiations: we would be telling the Palestinians they must be independent whether they want to be or not! Mr. Clark claims that eight or nine other countries also take this strained position in the UN, but he cannot name a single one. We are in fact just as isolated in the UN as we are in la Francophonie.

Why should "self-determination" necessarily mean "independent statehood" in the Middle East or anywhere else? Surely "self-determination" simply means deciding one's form of government and affiliation. That *could* be sovereign statehood; just as logically it could mean merger with another state or states in a political or economic union. In joining Canada, for example, the Newfoundlanders exercised self-determination.

## Palestinians objectives

The Palestinians can expect the return of only a skimpy fraction of their former lands. If only for economic reasons, therefore, they might well exercise their self-determination to form an economic union or confederation with one or more of their neighbors, perhaps Jordan or even Israel. But if they insist upon sovereign statehood, what right have *we*, or anyone else, to oppose? If denied self-determination, moreover, the Palestinians are bound to continue to be a source of disturbance in this precarious area.

Israel is now the predominant military power in the Middle East, and it is backed by the United States, the most potent nation in all history; nevertheless Israel demands absolute guarantees for its security. Although granting these might well detract from Palestinian sovereignty, the PLO leaders have indicated that they are willing to pay this price in order to terminate Israeli occupation. The case of Austria is often cited: to regain independence, it met heavy Soviet security demands that included an Austrian pledge to become neutral. (It should be recalled, however, that Palestinian security has suffered more than Israel's, and also that, while Austria was a willing accomplice in a criminal war, the Palestinians are the innocent victims of the return *en masse* of an alien people.) The point that matters is that the Palestinians are prepared to accept limits on their freedom in order to contribute to regional peace and to gain the substance of independence.

Although protesting that we must not "prejudge" the outcome of Middle East negotiations, Canada's curious stand accomplishes just that. If it becomes general, statehood would be ex-

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Peyton Lyon is Professor of Political Science at Carleton University in Ottawa.