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## Canada and Israel

### Unlikely allies

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#### Israel's new North American friend

THE last time Binyamin Netanyahu visited Canada, in 2002, he had to cancel a stop at a Montreal university after protests turned violent. When Israel's prime minister meets Stephen Harper, his Canadian counterpart, in Ottawa on May 31st, he can expect a far warmer welcome. While Israel's relationship with the United States has been strained during Barack Obama's presidency, its ties with Canada have flourished under Mr Harper. "It is hard to find a country friendlier to Israel than Canada these days," said Avigdor Lieberman, Mr Netanyahu's ultranationalist foreign minister, on a trip to Ottawa last year. "No other country in the world has demonstrated such a full understanding of us."

Mr Harper wasted little time in changing Canada's traditionally even-handed stance towards the Middle East. One of his first moves as prime minister was to cut funding to the Palestinian Authority after Hamas's victory in legislative elections. In July 2006, he called Israel's controversial pounding of southern Lebanon "measured". He stood by his words even after seven Canadian civilians and a Canadian UN peacekeeper were killed in the onslaught. Peter McKay, then the foreign minister, explained that "it's not a difficult choice between siding with a democracy that's being attacked by terrorists and a group of cold-blooded killers."

The government has not changed its official position in favour of a two-state solution to the Palestinian problem. But at the UN, Canada now consistently supports Israeli positions. It has even stopped funding the core budget of the UN Relief and Works Agency, a body that assists 4.7m Palestinian refugees spread across the Middle East. Although pro-Israel groups accuse the agency of being infiltrated by Hamas, the United States still contributes to it. This year, a junior minister declared that "an attack on Israel would be considered an attack on Canada".

The government has also tried to shift Canadian opinion in favour of Israel. It ended a grant of C\$7m (\$6.6m) over four years to KAIROS, a Christian charity, alleging that the group was anti-Semitic. Another government grant, this one of C\$447,000 to the Canadian Arab Federation, was axed in March 2009—albeit after the organisation's president called the immigration minister a "professional whore" for denouncing the flying of Hamas and Hizbullah flags at a protest.

Encouraged by a succession of former Liberal governments to think of their country as the honest broker of international politics, many Canadians are uncomfortable with their diplomats so clearly taking a side. Mr Harper himself has never fully explained his partiality. His opponents say he is pandering to Jewish voters in Toronto and Montreal. His Conservative party has issued leaflets in some districts held by the Liberals accusing them of supporting Hamas and Hizbullah. But the main reason for his Israel policy is probably his own conservative beliefs. In this, at least, Mr Harper looks like a conviction politician.

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