

A LOSS OF BALANCE ON ISRAEL

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Shocked by the horrors of the Holocaust, Canada played an important role in United Nations decisions that led to the establishment of Israel in 1948. But what Canada supported was a package deal in which Palestine would be partitioned into two states, one Jewish and one Arab.

Whatever the flaws of that model, one thing is clear. No Canadian official ever advocated what has become the reality today: that a Jewish state would be created, while the much larger Arab population in Palestine would be left stateless six decades later, and in fact living under Israeli military occupation.

That Canadian attempt at even-handedness has utterly disappeared under Stephen Harper, who lavishly celebrated Israel's 60th anniversary with promises of Canada's "unshakeable" support, while utterly ignoring the fact that this is also an anniversary – although a very different one – for the Palestinians.

Israel's founding 60 years ago last week is also the 60th anniversary of what Palestinians call the *naqba*, or catastrophe, when some 700,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled in the face of violence by militants determined to establish a Jewish state. Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, speaking recently in Toronto, described this as "ethnic cleansing."

This bloody history has been largely banished from discussion in the mainstream North American media in recent years.

But at the time, violence by Jewish militants was widely acknowledged. Menachem Begin, a militant who later became Israel's prime minister, unabashedly pointed out in his memoirs that in the late 1940s British newspapers and politicians branded him "Terrorist Number One."

Members of the Canadian UN delegation that voted 60 years ago in support of partition did so partly to avoid more Jewish violence in the region. R.G. Riddell, a member of that delegation, described the partition plan as "dangerous and provocative" but he argued that failure to adopt it would "play into the hands of Jewish extremists who are said to be prepared to seize the whole of Palestine by force."

Another member of the delegation, Elizabeth MacCallum, a Middle East expert from the external affairs department, questioned Canada's support for a partition plan that would "turn over 65 per cent of the territory to the Jews, who now own only 6 per cent of the land."

Canada's justice minister, James Iles, expressed concern that partition didn't sufficiently answer "the very strong moral and political claims" of Palestine's Arab community.

To celebrate the founding of Israel without at least acknowledging the flip side of this occasion – the beginning of the Palestinian diaspora – is to deny that there are two sides to this story. With this denial, Harper – in line with the Bush administration – has become an obstacle to reaching a Middle East peace.

To continue to portray Israel as uniquely vulnerable stretches credulity. Yes, crude Palestinian rockets can reach into Israel. But Israel's existence is well-established. It is one of the world's best-armed countries, with a massive nuclear arsenal and unwavering U.S. support.

Meanwhile the Palestinians – in refugee camps, under military occupation in the West Bank and under siege in Gaza – barely eke

If Harper isn't willing to be even a tiny bit even-handed, it would be helpful if he'd at least stop trying to play a role in the Middle East tinderbox.

Linda McQuaig's column appears every other week. lmcquaig@sympatico.ca

