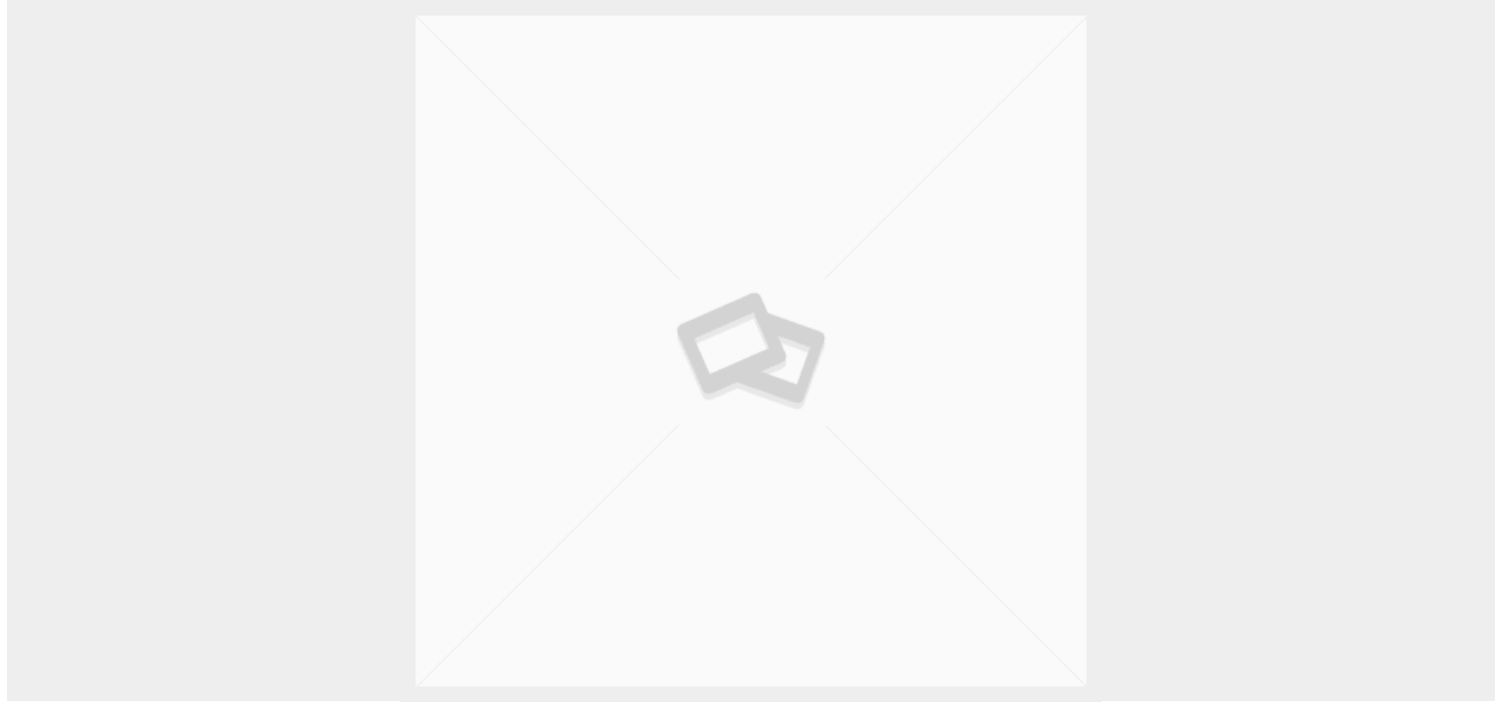


CANADIANS FINDING OTHER WAYS TO HAVE THEIR VOICES HEARD

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By Haroon Siddiqui, [*The Toronto Star*](#), Mar 19, 2009

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Canada used to have a more balanced view than the United States of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Now both the Conservative government and the Liberal opposition are competing to see who can be more pro-Israel. That's their right. They will reap their reward or take their lumps in the next election.

But equally clearly, their narrative is divorced from the reality of the conflict: the reality of how most of the world, including human rights organizations, views what Israel did in Gaza, and the emerging reality of a policy shift in Europe and even the U.S.

The Tory-Liberal position is also out of tune with Canadians in general and a grassroots movement in particular, including an increasingly vocal minority of Jewish Canadians, against Israeli excesses.

The Gaza operation, besides all the unconscionable horrors it inflicted on the essentially defenceless Gazans, has proven costly for Israel. Israel not only stands accused of operating out of the bounds of international law and norms, it failed to achieve its main objective: destroying Hamas.

The leadership of Hamas is intact despite the bombing blitz. Gazans have not risen up against Hamas, nor is their spirit broken, despite the killing and maiming of their kith and kin, as well as the destruction of their homes and homeland. In fact, Hamas has emerged stronger – just as Hezbollah did after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006.

Mahmoud Abbas, Israel's current favourite interlocutor, and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Israel's staunchest Arab ally, are seen as accomplices in the Gaza tragedy. A poll last week showed Abbas trailing Hamas's Ismail Haniyeh for president.

Britain has announced its readiness to deal with the terrorist-designated Hezbollah, saying the group is "a political phenomenon and part and parcel of the national fabric in Lebanon. We have to admit this."

Europe is probing ways to engage Hamas. Egypt is hosting talks for a Hamas-Fatah unity government. Israel itself has been dealing with the terrorist-designated group through Egypt.

Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton has pointedly restated the American resolve for a two-state solution; initiated tentative contacts with Syria; and is opening contacts with Iran – policies that are anathema to Benjamin Netanyahu.

In Canada, Gaza energized the pro-peace camp and breathed new life into this month's Israeli

Apartheid Week on university campuses.

Despite the political and media establishment's consistent efforts at censoring or suppressing criticism of Israel and demonizing its critics, many Canadians are finding ways to have their voices heard. They are going beyond street marches to Barack Obama-like grassroots mobilizing through Web networking, seminars and teach-ins with prominent speakers.

This emerging movement is increasingly multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-faith, motivated mainly by secular, humanitarian and human rights concerns.

In January, more than 80 professors and other staff at Quebec universities and colleges placed an ad in *Le Devoir*, criticizing Harper for condemning " Hamas, an elected government, as a terrorist organization yet consistently supporting Israel, which has used weapons causing mass destruction on a mainly civilian population, including attacks on children and schools."

A Feb. 18 open letter, signed by more than 350 professors from 40 universities across Canada under the banner F4P (Faculty for Palestine), defended freedom of speech and assembly on campuses.

Alan Sears, professor of sociology at Ryerson University, said the signatories wanted to "defend the right of people to hold and speak during Apartheid Week, even if they themselves wouldn't use that term."

He was gratified that "the university administrators, to their credit, didn't buckle."

A combative declaration was issued last week by 160 Jewish Canadians, including Anton Kuerti, Ursula Franklin, Naomi Klein, Meyer Brownstone (recipient of the Pearson Peace Medal) and Judith Deutsch, president of the Canadian group, Science for Peace.

"We are appalled by recent attempts ... to silence protest against Israel. We are alarmed by the escalation of fear tactics (which) bring the anti-Communist terror of the 1950s vividly to mind."

But both Deutsch and Sears say they feel far less lonely these days than they used to.

"There has been a real shift over the last few years where being a marginalized troublemaker is less marginalized and more acceptable," Sears said.

That seems in tune with broad Canadian sentiment. The annual BBC World Service Poll, based on interviews with 13,500 people in 21 countries and released last month, showed that while Germany and Canada enjoyed the highest ratings, the three most negatively rated countries were Iran, Israel and Pakistan.

While Iran had the poorest average rating (55 per cent), Israel was seen negatively in the largest number of countries – 19 out of 21.

Israel's rating: on average, 21 per cent positive, 51 per cent negative. In Canada, the breakdown in attitudes toward Israel was 28 per cent positive, 52 per cent negative.

And that was before Gaza.

hsiddiq@thestar.ca

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