



# The Mark Holland Update

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Mark Holland, Member of Parliament., Ajax-Pickering

## Harper's pro-Israel cheerleading is dangerous foreign policy shift

Stephen Harper's reversal of Canadian foreign policy and one-sided pro-Israeli stance is short-sighted, and dangerous, says MP Mark Holland.

Holland condemns the recent violence in the Middle East and the killing of innocent civilians on both sides of the conflict. He also urges the Government of Canada to take a balanced approach and to work with the international community to restore peace to the region.

"I condemn all acts of violence directed at civilians, whether by states or non-state actors," says Holland. "All conflicts must be resolved in accordance with international law, and UN Security Council resolutions must be respected."

At a time when Israel was bombing civilians and infrastructure around Beirut in response to the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by the Hezbollah militia, Harper called the Israeli response "measured." Even after a family of eight Canadians was killed by Israeli bombs in southern Lebanon, and the fighting escalated, Harper refused to back down from this statement.

"Beirut is well over 100 kilometres from the Israel-Lebanon border, and the Lebanese government is not a belligerent in this conflict," says Holland. "Israel has the right to defend its people from attacks by Hezbollah, but attacking other parts of Lebanon and bombing civilian areas is not a 'measured' response."

The Harper government's abrupt shift in policy from a balanced one to pro-Israel cheerleading has been condemned by foreign policy thinkers such as former Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy and former Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations Paul Heinbecker.

"Canada's recent posture ... is, in fact, a major step away from helping find solutions that can end the violence and killing," Axworthy wrote recently. "It is another example of how Canada is becoming captive to

the politics of stubborn, unbending conviction buttressed by get-tough rhetoric unmindful of meaningful action that begets useful results."

"The new Conservative government is apparently staking out a one-sided position on the Lebanon war and departing from Mideast policies adopted by previous Canadian governments," wrote Heinbecker. "The consequences could be far-reaching – and negative."

The recent fighting was apparently triggered by the capture of an Israeli soldier by Hamas in Gaza and the capture of two more Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah near the Israel-Lebanon border. Hezbollah is a Shia Muslim militia operating in southern Lebanon independently of the Lebanese government.

A balanced approach, says Holland, is not the same as fence sitting or neutrality. It means condemning violence against civilians by both sides, but also recognizing that the conflict in the region has historical roots, and didn't begin with the capture of the Israeli soldiers. It means working with both sides and the international community to try to bring about a settlement, rather than cheerleading for one side and ignoring that side's responsibility in the conflict.

"We can certainly condemn the extremism of Hezbollah and Hamas," says Holland, "but we need to recognize that these groups didn't develop in a vacuum. The root causes of the conflict are in displaced and impoverished peoples, and the failure over decades to reach a comprehensive peace settlement."

At various times, Canada has worked with other nations to try to bring about a settlement.

"Canada has a tradition in the Middle East as an honest broker ever since Lester Pearson helped to negotiate an end to the Suez Crisis in 1956," says Holland. "To throw away that tradition overnight for the

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# PM's office botched evacuation effort

The Prime Minister's Office has been blamed for botching the evacuation of Canadians from Lebanon in the early stages of the recent Middle East conflict.

A July 20 story in the Globe and Mail revealed that Prime Minister Harper's secretive "Communications" Director, Sandra Buckler, issued an edict to suppress information about the deteriorating situation involving tens of thousands of Canadians in Lebanon. This impeded the flow of necessary information to the worried public.

The story also says the PMO insisted on centralized control, meaning that all decisions had to be approved in Ottawa, six time zones away, and this slowed down response times.

Further problems occurred when the Prime Minister, who was in Paris, ordered his plane to be diverted to Cyprus to pick up Canadians fleeing from Beirut. The move was claimed to be a "humanitarian" mission,

but was widely seen as a glorified photo op when it was revealed that Harper kicked the media off the flight, but brought his official photographer Jason Ramsom. When the plane arrived in Cyprus, and no Canadians had arrived yet, embassy officials had to scramble to divert Canadians, who by then were headed for Turkey, to avoid embarrassing the Prime Minister.

The evacuation was marked with confusion and conflicting information, and the Canadian Embassy in Beirut closed down over the critical weekend of July 15-16, leaving many Canadians in the dark about evacuation procedures.

A PMO staffer told one evacuee that that the blame for the fiasco was "Liberal-appointed" ambassador Louis de Lorimer. In fact, de Lorimer is a highly respected career diplomat who once worked as a ministerial liaison to Conservative Joe Clark.

## Holland condemns Harper's Middle East policy

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sake of crass politics, as the Prime Minister has done, is tragic and a disgrace."

Holland agrees with Axworthy, who points out that Canada can better contribute to a solution when it engages in bridge building. "If we simply become wedded to one side of the equation, then our role as that mediator, convener of those types of initiatives becomes lost," Axworthy said.

Canada's foreign policy has shifted over the years, but never before has it been so strongly pro-Israel. In 1979, former Progressive Conservative Prime Minister Joe Clark announced plans to move the Canadian Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a city whose status is disputed. When he was strongly condemned for this decision, he backed down and left the embassy in Tel Aviv.

Holland notes that many Harper policies, both domestic and foreign, appear to mirror the positions taken by U.S. President George W. Bush. In this instance Harper's pro-Israel position has been even stronger

than that of Bush. While Bush clearly supported Israel, his statements included some token acknowledgement that Israel must show restraint.

Even Britain, a close ally of the Bush administration, has taken a more even-handed approach in calling for a ceasefire. British Foreign Office Minister Kim Howells has criticized Israel's overreaction: "The destruction of the infrastructure, the death of so many children and so many people: these have not been surgical strikes," Howells told BBC. "If they are chasing Hezbollah, then go for Hezbollah. You don't go for the entire Lebanese nation."

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour, a former Canadian Supreme Court Justice, has warned that war crimes may have been committed in the recent conflict.

"Indiscriminate shelling of cities constitutes a foreseeable and unacceptable targeting of civilians," she said. "Similarly, the bombardment of sites with alleged military significance, but resulting invariably in the killing of innocent civilians, is unjustifiable."

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