

Strategic Realignment and Diplomatic Divergence: An Empirical Analysis of Canadian-Israeli Relations from the Harper Doctrine to the International Criminal Court Mandates (2006–2026)

The geopolitical landscape of Canadian-Israeli relations has undergone a transformative and increasingly volatile evolution over the two decades spanning 2006 to 2026. This period, initially characterized by an unprecedented "principled" alignment under the Conservative administration of Stephen Harper, has transitioned through a phase of nuanced Liberal support under Justin Trudeau, culminating in a state of diplomatic breakdown and legalistic confrontation under the leadership of Mark Carney. To understand this trajectory, one must move beyond mere political rhetoric and examine the empirical shifts in institutional frameworks, bilateral trade agreements, United Nations voting patterns, and the integration of international criminal law into domestic Canadian statutes. The transition from Harper's "fire and water" commitment to Israel's security to Carney's willingness to enforce International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrants against Israeli leadership reflects a fundamental redefinition of Canadian national interest and its role as a middle power within the rules-based international order.

The Harper Doctrine and the Foundation of Unyielding Support

The ascent of the Conservative Party of Canada in 2006 signaled a definitive break from the traditional Pearsonian mantle of the "helpful fixer." Under Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Canadian foreign policy was recalibrated around a doctrine of moral clarity that explicitly rejected the perceived ambiguity of previous administrations. This "principled" approach was anchored in the belief that Canada should not "go along to get along" with the international community, particularly regarding the defense of democratic allies. For the Harper government, Israel was not merely a regional partner but a fellow liberal democracy whose existential security was inextricably linked to Canadian and Western interests. This alignment was fundamentally ontological, resting on the assertion that Judeo-Christian values formed the core of Canadian civilization and that "Jewish values and the rule of law" were entirely consistent with Canadian liberal democracy.

This era saw the institutionalization of pro-Israel sentiment across the federal apparatus. The Harper government viewed the world through a lens of "friends and foes," with the Middle East specifically framed by the threat of "global Islamist terrorism". Consequently, Canada shifted its position on the Israel-Palestine conflict from a neutral arbiter to a vocal partisan, frequently standing in isolation at the United Nations General Assembly. Following the Conservative majority win in 2011, Harper realigned Canada's voting record to join a core pro-Israel bloc comprising the United States and a small number of Pacific island microstates, often opposing

motions that had been standard Canadian policy for decades. This realignment was not merely symbolic; it was a rejection of the multilateral consensus that often "singled out" Israel for criticism in international fora.

Economic and Security Institutionalization (2006–2015)

The empirical strength of the Harper-era alignment was most visible in the deepening of bilateral economic and security ties. The administration prioritized the Canada-Israel Free Trade Agreement (CIFTA) as a pillar of the relationship, facilitating an annual trade volume that reached approximately \$1.8 billion. This economic integration extended into the Canadian tax system, where Israeli investments became eligible for inclusion in tax-protected portfolios such as Registered Retirement Savings Plans (RRSPs), Registered Education Savings Plans (RESPs), and Tax-Free Savings Accounts (TFSA).

Bilateral Instrument/Agreement	Date/Era	Core Objective and Empirical Impact
Canada-Israel Free Trade Agreement (CIFTA)	Expansion (2014)	Facilitated \$1.8 billion in annual trade; eliminated tariffs on industrial and agricultural goods.
Canada-Israel Security Agreement	Harper Era	Established formal protocols for counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, and public safety cooperation.
CIDA-Israel Development Pact	2013	Integrated Canadian and Israeli international development strategies to share "triangular" aid expertise.
JNF Hula Valley Bird Sanctuary	2014 (Commencement)	A \$20 million philanthropic-diplomatic project linking the PM's name to Israeli environmental research.
Foreign Aid Suspension (UNRWA)	2010 (Initial)	Canada became the first country to cut funding to UNRWA, citing transparency and neutrality concerns.

The security dimension was equally robust. The Canada-Israel Security Agreement formalized cooperation in countering what the administration identified as the "scourge of global Islamist terrorism". This agreement wasn't just a document of intent; it involved practical cooperation, including Canada sending planes to assist in combating the massive Carmel Forest fire and the appointment of Canadian observers to international investigating committees during regional conflicts. Harper's personal bond with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—often described as an "epic bromance"—was the catalyst for this institutional deepening. Netanyahu lauded Harper for his "moral leadership," while Harper famously serenaded the Israeli leader with "With a Little Help from My Friends" during a private dinner in Jerusalem in 2014.

The 2014 Knesset Speech: Rhetorical Peak and

Strategic Insulation

The zenith of this period occurred in January 2014, when Stephen Harper became the first Canadian Prime Minister to address the Israeli Knesset. The speech was a Masterclass in principled alignment, characterized by the pledge that Canada would stand with Israel "through fire and water". Harper used the platform to denounce the Boycotts, Divestments, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, equating the "new anti-Semitism" of selective criticism against the Jewish state with the Nazi-era boycotts of Jewish businesses in the 1930s. He argued that while no state is beyond legitimate criticism, the "unjust international pressure" and "moral ambiguity" surrounding Israel's defense were unacceptable to the Canadian government.

However, the empirical reaction to the speech within Israel revealed a complex internal dynamic. While Netanyahu and his Likud-led coalition gave Harper a standing ovation, the address was met with a walkout by Arab-Israeli Members of the Knesset (MKs), such as Ahmad Tibi and Abu Arar. These MKs characterized the speech as "unbalanced," arguing that it ignored the systematic discrimination faced by the 20 percent Arab minority within Israel and the humanitarian realities of the occupied territories. Critics from the Israeli left and Canadian academics argued that Harper's refusal to "single out" Israel for criticism while in the region meant he was essentially sweeping "truths under the carpet," such as the expansion of West Bank settlements which Canada officially opposed.

Analysis of the "Two-State" Paradox under Harper

Despite the staunchly pro-Israel rhetoric, the Harper government maintained a formal commitment to a two-state solution, though its empirical application was highly restrictive. Harper's Knesset speech included a "hidden" appeal to the Israeli right, noting that Canada supported a "just and secure future for the Palestinian people" and a "viable, democratic Palestinian state". This support, however, was predicated on the Palestinians making peace with Israel first, with the caveat that Israel must be the "first country to welcome" such a state.

Event/Action	Position	Empirical Rationale/Justification
2011 Palestinian UN Bid	Opposition	Termed "unilateral action" that was "not helpful" for long-term peace negotiations.
2012 UN Observer Status	Voted No	Argued statehood must only come through bilateral negotiation, not international decrees.
West Bank Settlements	Official Opposition	Maintained a paper policy of opposition but refused to verbalize it during state visits to avoid "singling out" Israel.
2014 Ramallah Visit	Symbolic Engagement	Met with Mahmoud Abbas but primarily focused on security and criticizing Palestinian "incitement".

This stance created a strategic insulation for the Netanyahu government. By refusing to criticize settlement expansion in public, Harper allowed the Israeli right to interpret his support as a "blind endorsement" of the status quo. Some analysts suggested that Harper's approach

actually pushed peace further away by strengthening Netanyahu's "feelings of victimization and isolationism," thereby reducing the incentive for compromise. This era established a precedent where Canadian foreign policy was fused with domestic political identity, targeting specific diaspora communities and aligning with conservative-classical liberal networks such as the Civitas Group.

The Trudeau Pivot: Continuity, Erosion, and the Gaza Catalyst

The transition to the Liberal government under Justin Trudeau in 2015 did not immediately result in the wholesale reversal that many anticipated. Instead, the early Trudeau years were characterized by a pragmatic attempt to sustain the "best friend" relationship while reintroducing traditional Liberal multilateralism. Trudeau's chief fundraiser, Stephen Bronfman, famously claimed the Liberal leader was an "even better friend of Israel" than Harper, citing Trudeau's personal visits to the country. In his first year, Trudeau's government continued to vote with Israel and the U.S. at the UN, including opposing a 2016 resolution that guaranteed Geneva Convention protections to Palestinian civilians—a motion supported by 167 other nations. The erosion of this relationship began in 2019, driven by two primary factors: the increasing extremism of Israeli domestic politics and the mounting humanitarian evidence from the Palestinian territories. As Netanyahu's coalition shifted further to the right, incorporating ultra-nationalist figures, Canada began to deviate from its strict voting pattern. In 2019, Canada voted for a UN motion affirming Palestinian self-determination, a move roundly condemned by pro-Israel advocacy groups like the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) as a "dramatic departure" from the Harper-era record.

The October 7 Massacre and the Breakdown of Consensus

The October 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas, which resulted in the massacre of over 1,000 Israelis and the taking of 240 hostages, initially galvanized Canadian support for Israel. However, the subsequent Israeli military response in Gaza and the spiraling humanitarian crisis served as the ultimate breaking point for the Trudeau-Netanyahu relationship. The empirical indicators of this breakdown were manifested in the following areas:

1. **UNRWA Funding Crisis:** Canada faced intense friction with the Netanyahu government over the suspension and subsequent restoration of funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Following Israeli allegations of staff collusion with Hamas, Canada initially suspended aid, but restored it after Israel failed to provide what Ottawa deemed "timely and actionable intelligence" to justify a permanent cutoff.
2. **Settler Violence Sanctions:** By 2024, the Canadian government began imposing sanctions on radical Israeli settlers in the West Bank, signaling a willingness to directly penalize Israeli nationals for activities that undermined the viability of a Palestinian state.
3. **The Jenin Incident:** A major diplomatic flashpoint occurred on May 22, 2025, when the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) fired shots at a Canadian diplomatic delegation in Jenin. Prime Minister Mark Carney (then moving into a leadership role) called for a "full investigation," marking a rare instance of Canada publicly accusing the IDF of endangering its diplomats.

The Carney Administration and the International Criminal Court Mandate

The ascension of Mark Carney to the Prime Ministry in 2025 finalized Canada’s transformation into an advocate for international legal enforcement against Israeli leadership. This period is defined by two historic actions: the formal recognition of a Palestinian state and the commitment to arrest Benjamin Netanyahu under an ICC warrant. On September 21, 2025, Canada officially recognized Palestinian statehood, coordinating this announcement with the United Kingdom, Australia, Portugal, and several other European nations. Carney explained that this shift was a direct response to the "designs" of the Netanyahu government to "end any possibility of a Palestinian state" in violation of the UN Charter.

The most significant empirical challenge to the relationship arose on November 21, 2024, when the ICC’s Pre-Trial Chamber I issued arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu and his former Defense Minister, Yoav Gallant. The warrants alleged criminal responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity, specifically focusing on the use of starvation as a method of warfare and intentionally directing attacks against civilian populations in Gaza.

Empirical Basis for the ICC Arrest Warrants (2024–2025)

The ICC’s decision was based on "reasonable grounds" established through an investigation of the conflict spanning at least October 8, 2023, to May 20, 2024. The Chamber’s findings were exhaustive, detailing the systematic deprivation of objects indispensable to human survival.

Charge Category	Specific Findings of the Pre-Trial Chamber I	Legal Context
War Crime: Starvation	Intentional deprivation of food, water, medicine, fuel, and electricity from the civilian population.	Violation of the law of international armed conflict.
War Crime: Directed Attacks	Failure as civilian superiors to prevent or repress attacks against Gazan civilians.	Responsibility for activities of Israeli government bodies and armed forces.
Crime Against Humanity: Murder	Deaths of civilians, including children, resulting from malnutrition, dehydration, and medical supply blockades.	Result of conditions of life "calculated to bring about destruction".
Crime Against Humanity: Persecution	Deprivation of fundamental rights (life, health) based on political and national grounds.	Systematic targeting of the civilian population in Gaza.
Crime Against Humanity: Inhumane Acts	Forcing medical procedures, including amputations, without anesthesia due to intentional supply limits.	Intentional causing of extreme pain and suffering.

Carney’s definitive "Yes" in response to whether Canada would arrest Netanyahu if he visited was more than a political statement; it was a reflection of Canada’s domestic legal obligations. Canada is a signatory to the Rome Statute and has implemented its provisions into domestic

law via the Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Act. This act provides the RCMP and the CBSA with the jurisdiction to execute ICC warrants, theoretically making any visit by Netanyahu a trigger for a massive law enforcement operation.

The Geopolitical Risk of Enforcement: NORAD, Airspace, and the US-Canada Friction

The commitment to enforce the ICC warrant has introduced a profound "middle power problem" for Canadian foreign policy. Unlike Canada, the United States remains a non-signatory to the Rome Statute and has actively opposed the warrant, going so far as to sanction the French judge, Nicolas Guillou, who presided over the panel that issued it. This has created a tactical and diplomatic chasm between Ottawa and Washington.

The most acute manifestation of this tension is the "Wing of Zion" overflight dilemma. On December 29, 2025, and February 10, 2026, Netanyahu's official aircraft flew through Canadian airspace over Newfoundland and Nova Scotia on its way to the United States. Under international aviation protocols, Netanyahu's team had to submit an application to Global Affairs Canada three business days prior to entry. The Canadian government's failure to intercept these flights led to intense scrutiny and accusations of hypocrisy from legal advocacy groups.

Tactical and Security Considerations of an Arrest

The logistical reality of arresting a sitting Prime Minister of a military ally is nearly unprecedented in Western history. Analysts have identified several catastrophic failure points in a potential arrest scenario:

1. **Military Confrontation:** The "Wing of Zion" is fully staffed with Shin Bet security forces. Any attempt by the RCMP or the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) to force the aircraft to land or extract Netanyahu would likely involve a loss of life for Canadian personnel.
2. **NORAD Integration:** Canada and the U.S. share an integrated air defense system. A unilateral RCAF decision to intercept a high-profile diplomatic flight of a U.S. ally would fundamentally compromise the operational trust required for North American security.
3. **Diplomatic Isolation:** While 124 other nations are theoretically obligated to arrest Netanyahu, the empirical record shows widespread non-compliance. Hungary's Viktor Orbán invited Netanyahu for a state visit in April 2025, stating the warrant would have "no effect". Poland and the Czech Republic have also signaled they would not comply, leaving Canada as one of the few Western nations maintaining a hardline stance.

If Canada remains in a position where it cannot fulfill its Rome Statute obligations due to these logistical and geopolitical pressures, some legal scholars suggest it may consider withdrawing from the ICC to preserve the court's credibility, as the current situation sets a "very unfortunate global precedent".

Comparative Humanitarian Metrics: The Harper Era vs. the Carney Era

The shift in Canadian policy is empirically grounded in the deteriorating humanitarian conditions in the Palestinian territories as documented by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). A longitudinal comparison of OCHA data from the Harper era

(specifically the 2014-2015 conflict) and the Carney era (2025-2026) highlights the escalating severity that has influenced Canadian diplomatic thinking.

Humanitarian Indicator	Harper Era (2015 OCHA Data)	Carney Era (2025-2026 OCHA Data)
Gaza Food Insecurity	47% of households.	Near-universal risk of famine; 100% of population aid-dependent.
Internal Displacement	100,000 IDPs in Gaza.	Over 2 million IDPs; total population displacement.
Civilian Death Toll	Approx. 2,200 (Highest since 1967 at the time).	Tens of thousands (Unprecedented levels of destruction).
Infrastructure Damage	20,000 housing units destroyed.	Majority of civilian objects and hospitals destroyed/rendered inoperable.
Access to Power/Water	12-16 hour outages daily.	Near-total collapse of energy and water infrastructure.

The OCHA reports from 2015 already identified the "systematic denial of Palestinian rights" and a "protracted protection crisis". However, the reports from 2025 characterize the situation as a "humanitarian catastrophe" where there is "no safe or dignified site" left in Gaza. This empirical shift provided the Carney government with the "moral and factual grounding" to argue that the Netanyahu administration had moved beyond legitimate self-defense into the realm of systemic violations of international law.

The Post-Premiership Stance of Stephen Harper (2024–2026)

The enduring legacy of the "Harper Doctrine" is visible in Stephen Harper’s continued advocacy for Israel after leaving office. In February 2024, Harper published a 1,200-word essay in the *National Post*, arguing that Israel’s war in Gaza was a "Just War" and that Hamas must "surrender or be eliminated". Harper’s post-premiership stance has been characterized by a refusal to acknowledge the humanitarian context described by OCHA or the ICC. He draws a "straight line" from the Holocaust to October 7, viewing the latter as a second iteration of genocidal violence.

Critics argue that Harper’s 2024 analysis "leapfrogs 75 years of history," ignoring the Nakba, the military occupation, and the construction of settlements that have occurred since 1948. His position remains that any criticism of Israel’s military campaign is a consequence of "decades of institutionalized antisemitic indoctrination" rather than a response to Israeli aggression. This serves as a stark contrast to the Carney government’s view that the Netanyahu administration’s conduct is "explicitly designed" to end Palestinian statehood.

Conclusion: The Erosion of Middle Power Influence and the Rule of Law

The 20-year arc of Canadian-Israeli relations reflects a fundamental crisis in middle-power

diplomacy. The Harper era demonstrated that a middle power can achieve significant bilateral intimacy by aligning its foreign policy with the domestic ideological preferences of an ally, yet this "blind support" potentially undermined Canada's long-term capacity to act as a credible arbiter. Conversely, the Carney era's pivot to international legal enforcement demonstrates the limitations of the "rules-based order" when the primary regional power (the United States) and the targeted state (Israel) refuse to acknowledge the jurisdiction of international courts. Empirically, the relationship has moved from a \$1.8 billion annual trade partnership anchored in "shared values" to a state of near-total diplomatic breakdown where Canadian leaders are prepared to arrest their former counterparts. The integration of the Rome Statute into Canadian law under the Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Act has fundamentally changed the risk profile of bilateral relations, transforming diplomatic visits into potential legal liabilities. As Canada enters 2026, it faces a stark reality: its commitment to international law has placed it at odds with its most important strategic ally and its former "best friend" in the Middle East. The future of this relationship will depend on whether Canada can reconcile its identity as a champion of international justice with the practical security requirements of a NORAD-aligned middle power in an increasingly lawless international environment.

Works cited

1. Principles and Prejudice: Foreign Policy Under the Harper ..., <https://www.cips-cepi.ca/publications/principles-and-prejudice-foreign-policy-under-the-harper-government/>
2. The Blogs: Stephen Harper, a proud pro-Israel Canadian PM ..., <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/stephen-harper-a-proud-pro-israel-canadian-pm/>
3. Former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper Defends Israel in Viral Video - UN Watch, <https://unwatch.org/former-canadian-prime-minister-stephen-harper-defends-israel-in-viral-video/>
4. How Canada's relationship with Israel went from 'best friend' to ..., <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-israel-friendship-gaza-1.7541957>
5. Netanyahu Has Lost His Best Friend, But Has Israel? - i24NEWS, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/89736-151021-analysis-netanyahu-has-lost-his-best-friend-but-has-israel>
6. A friendship with few benefits - Macleans.ca, <https://macleans.ca/uncategorized/a-friendship-with-few-benefits/>
7. Stephen Harper's visit garners scant coverage or praise from Israeli media | CBC News, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/stephen-harper-s-visit-garners-scant-coverage-or-praise-from-israeli-media-1.2506242>
8. Netanyahu calls Harper 'great friend of Israel' as PM arrives in Middle East - CTV News, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/article/netanyahu-calls-harper-great-friend-of-israel-as-pm-arrive-s-in-middle-east/>
9. Still 'standing with' Israel?: Canadian foreign policy and the legacy of ..., <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12126181/>
10. Hidden within Harper's speech: Why the Israeli Right is wrong | The ..., <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/op-ed-contributors/hidden-within-harpers-speech-why-the-israeli-right-is-wrong-340246>
11. Stephen Harper: Why the Israeli right is wrong | Paul Gross | The Times of Israel, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/stephen-harpers-speech-why-the-israel-right-are-wrong/>
12. Occupied Palestinian Territory - OCHA, <https://www.unocha.org/occupied-palestinian-territory>
13. Trudeau says Canada would 'abide' by ICC arrest warrant for Israel PM Netanyahu, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/article/trudeau-says-canada-would-abide-by-icc-arrest-warrant-for-israel-pm-netanyahu/>
14. Canada would enforce ICC arrest warrant against ... - Anadolu Ajansi,

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/canada-would-enforce-icc-arrest-warrant-against-netanyahu-prime-minister/3721864> 15. Carney says Canada will arrest Netanyahu if he visits, in keeping with ICC warrant, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/carney-says-canada-will-arrest-netanyahu-if-he-visits-in-keeping-with-icc-warrant/> 16. Netanyahu ICC Arrest Warrant and Duty to Arrest - Diplomacy and Law, <https://www.diplomacyandlaw.com/post/netanyahu-icc-arrest-warrant-and-duty-to-arrest> 17. ICC arrest warrants for Israeli leaders - Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ICC_arrest_warrants_for_Israeli_leaders 18. International Criminal Court issues arrest warrants: Pre-Trial Chamber I rejects Israel's challenges to jurisdiction and issues warrants of arrest for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant (Non-UN Document), <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/icc-arrest-warrant-netanyahu-21nov24/> 19. Middle Power Problems: What if Canada had arrested Netanyahu ..., <https://justiceinconflict.org/2026/02/24/middle-power-problems-what-if-canada-arrested-netanyahu-when-he-flew-over-its-provinces/> 20. Canada's Obligation to Prevent Genocide | Letter to Canadian Members of Parliament, <https://www.lrwc.org/canadas-obligation-to-prevent-genocide/> 21. ICC judge sanctioned by US for warrant against Netanyahu says he can no longer use credit cards, order things online - Anadolu Ajansı, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/icc-judge-sanctioned-by-us-for-warrant-against-netanyahu-says-he-can-no-longer-use-credit-cards-order-things-online/3875305> 22. The Heroes Saving Us from a Lawless World - PassBlue, <https://passblue.com/2026/04/26/the-heroes-saving-us-from-a-lawless-world/> 23. Occupied Palestinian Territory: Humanitarian Pooled Fund - Annual Report 2015 - OCHA, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/occupied-palestinian-territory-humanitarian-pooled-fund-annual> 24. Fragmented lives - Humanitarian Overview 2015 - OCHA report - Question of Palestine, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-204048/> 25. Former PM Stephen Harper tries to reassure worried conservatives ..., <https://canadatalksisraelpalestine.ca/2024/03/09/former-pm-stephen-harper-tries-to-reassure-worried-conservatives-that-israel-is-waging-a-just-war-its-a-difficult-task/>