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Foreign Ministries

What to do when diplomats subvert elected officials



IN LATE DECEMBER, the murder by Hamas of a Canadian-Israeli citizen, 70-year-old Judith Weinstein Haggai of Kibbutz Nir Oz, was confirmed. As has been their habit, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mélanie Joly, and Canada’s ambassador to Israel, Lisa Stadelbauer, were all silent.

I was not.

My rebuke of the Canadian ambassador on X (formerly Twitter) provoked a response from one Wendy Gilmour, a former senior Canadian diplomat who, until quite recently, served as NATO’s assistant secretary general for defense investment. “You seem happy profiting in the grief of others,” she wrote. “As another former Head of Mission who should know better, this disgusts me.”

That the stereotype of the Jew as a profiteer in human misery resurfaced in the bilious rant of a Canadian foreign-policy expert lays bare the point of this essay.

Throughout my time as Canada’s ambassador to Israel, I was (and continue to be) subjected to abusive vitriol from the “professional” diplomatic corps. From the day that my appointment was announced by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs mobilized to promote their view that I, as a Jew, was by definition neither trustworthy nor loyal to Canada. It was a rear-guard battle I was forced to fight during my 30-month tenure, from January 2014 to June 2016.

The tendency to denigrate and mistrust Jews taints not just Ottawa, but the foreign-policy machines in Washington, London, and elsewhere: a broad sweep, but one that is anchored in history. As with all institutions, there is a dominant culture in diplomatic services—even as there are many honorable exceptions. And the “Jewish issue” has long presented special challenges.

Paris, 1919: Representatives of the great powers finalized the terms for a lasting peace. In addition to sealing the defeat (and humiliation) of Germany through economic subjugation, the Allies set about carving the map of the Middle East. The demise of the Ottoman Empire presented opportunities for the victors to formalize their power in territories of interest. Lines were drawn, many ruler-straight, reflecting extraterritorial ambitions rather than any natural boundaries dictated by terrain or national movements. The imposition of the nation-state model was a force fit in a region of tribes, sects, ethnicities, and clans. But safeguarding European interests in the region dictated friendly relations with the new Arab regimes. It was

in these years that the Arabist approach to Middle East foreign policy became entrenched in the diplomatic corps.

Following the rise to power of the Nazi Party in Germany, the Western nations were tested afresh. After the Anschluss in March 1938, persecution of German and Austrian Jews intensified, and they were desperate to find refuge. In response, President Roosevelt convened the Evian Conference in July of that year. His callousness toward the distress of Europe's Jews has been well documented. Before the conference, Roosevelt reassured many invitees that there would be no pressure to increase Jewish immigration quotas.

Thirty-two nations attended as full participants in the French resort town to consider solutions to the "Jewish problem." Other governments and many organizations were granted observer status, among them the Histadrut labor organization in Mandatory Palestine, represented by Golda Meyerson.

Later known as Golda Meir, Meyerson listened as each country politely demurred and explained their refusal to accept Jewish refugees. No need for more "traders." No desire to "import racial issues." "We've done enough already." (A year later, Frederick Blair, Canada's minister of mines and resources, with responsibility for immigration matters, would be asked how many Jewish refugees should be admitted to Canada. "None is too many," he replied.) Only the Dominican Republic agreed to receive 100,000 Jewish refugees, to cultivate agricultural land of questionable potential.

Speaking to the press when the conference concluded, Meyerson was reportedly emotional and enraged. Years later, in her retirement, she recalled Evian as a "turning point" in her life. "I realized then that a world which is not necessarily antisemitic—because Hitler was denounced at the conference and there was considerable pro-Jewish sentiment—could stand by and see others who were weaker victimized. . . . We can't depend on any others."

Also attending Evian were Nazi Party observers who returned to Germany with a message for Adolf Hitler: Nobody cares about the Jews. We can do what we want with them.



When the full extent of the horrors that Nazis had perpetrated against Jews became known after the war's end, the "issue" arose again: What to do with the Jews?

In the unrest following the end of the war, Western democracies were preoccupied with containing the expansion of Communism on the European continent. Tens of millions of European civilians were displaced, with Jews a mere fraction of them. In spite of the unique tragedy that had ravaged Europe's Jews, the sympathy of the West was hardly overwhelming. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish survivors of Nazi genocide were left to languish in displaced-persons camps, often for years. No country rushed to give them refuge.

British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin expressed distaste at the pressure being applied on the U.K. to allow in greater numbers of postwar refugees. "I am very anxious that Jews shall not in Europe over-emphasize their racial position," he said in 1945, following extensive briefings from his Foreign Office staff. "If the Jews, with all their sufferings, want to get too much at the head of the queue, you have the danger of another antisemitic reaction through it all." In the immediate wake of the Holocaust, Bevin crassly invoked the stereotype of the "pushy Jew" to explain his policy.

Statehood for the Jewish people presented an even more significant threat to Western diplomats than immigration did. Britain was keen to maintain its oil supply from Arab producers while preserving its hold on the Suez Canal. It also wanted to avoid the ire of India's large and increasingly restive Muslim population as it managed its pending

withdrawal from the former crown jewel of its empire. For all these reasons, support for the establishment of a Jewish state elicited virulent opposition from the British Foreign Office. Bevin also smarted from the humiliation of the British retreat from Mandatory Palestine. Britain deferred formal recognition of Israel to January 1949.

American diplomats had a different concern — that a Jewish state led by a socialist prime minister would be aligned with the Soviet Union, which had provided Israel with many of the weapons with which it won independence. Much of the international support for the early Zionist movement came from its association with left-wing organizations, which enjoyed a surge in popularity in Europe in the postwar period. George Marshall, the secretary of state, aggressively and persistently undermined President Truman’s support for immediate recognition by America of the newly declared Jewish state. Truman prevailed, but it was not for two decades — until the 1967 Six-Day War — that U.S. foreign policy began to tilt toward Israel as it proved its worth as a Cold War ally.

Then there was Canada, which took a full year after Israel declared its independence before recognizing the Jewish state and later, under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, went out of its way to court Yasser Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization. In these pages, the late Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney directly acknowledged the institutional antisemitism in Ottawa’s diplomatic corps: “I appointed Norman Spector as Canada’s first Jewish ambassador to Israel, smashing the odious myth of dual loyalties that had prevented Jews from serving in that position for 40 years.”

More than 20 years later, Prime Minister Harper’s announcement of my appointment was received with public derision by retired and still-current diplomats. My Jewish identity, some said publicly, impaired my ability to fulfill my professional duties with honor. I was, by definition, disloyal. At a gathering in Toronto in September 2016

to recognize my service, Harper said that in his 10 years in office, the most difficult department for his government to work with was Foreign Affairs. The “Israel file,” he added, consistently caused the most friction, and he graciously acknowledged the degree of hostility I encountered “every single day” throughout my service.

I was not alone. During my tenure, the British ambassador to Israel, Matthew Gould, a career diplomat, shattered the Jewish glass ceiling at Whitehall. Gould’s appointment was controversial, initially and throughout his time in Israel. That he distinguished the office with exemplary service was of no consequence. As with every Jewish diplomat serving in the Middle East, his religious and ethnic identity indelibly tainted his integrity in the eyes of many.



Today, in the aftermath of October 7, Jews are being tested to a degree unmatched since the Holocaust, both by Islamists intent on annihilating the Jewish state and by Western progressives determined to make political, moral, and material support for Israel all but impossible. President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have steadfastly supported Israel in the face of strong global opposition — over vociferous dissent among the ranks of State Department officials. Blinken’s skill in managing these pressures will be tried in the coming months and possibly years. A full-frontal assault on Israel’s legitimacy and right to exist is just building momentum internationally.

The challenge is how to manage, confront, and defeat such determined adversaries. Jewish communal organizations in the Diaspora have tended to favor an approach of appeasement. They take pains not to alienate or offend, preferring to strive to please, to show how self-effacing and *not* aggressive they are. These mollifying approaches will only perpetuate prejudice.

In the summer of 2015, a year after Israel's war with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, I was invited to a dinner of European diplomats. The topic of discussion was the announced intention of the European Union to pass legislation permitting the labeling of products originating, even in part, from places of business located in the West Bank. Consumers, the EU felt strongly, ought to know whether their purchase was supporting the occupation and all that supposedly entailed.

Ayelet Shaked, then the minister of justice in the Israeli government, joined for the first hour to discuss the Israeli opposition to such a measure.

After she left, the room heated up. A lot. Support for the measure was strident among many of the 10 attendees. Others were quiet. Canada did not support the legislation for a number of reasons. I sat there, wanting to disappear, but not allowing myself that option.

"Tell me," I asked one of the more vocal ambassadors supporting the legislation. "Has the EU ever considered — never mind drafted — similar legislation to apply to any other country in the world?" I presented the question in that way because it reflected the principled position of Prime Minister Harper. While he may not have supported Israel at all times, what he did object to was the manner in which it was constantly the target of diplomatic bullying. It was well known among the diplomatic and foreign-policy community that this particular legislation had been drafted years earlier and was ready to be dusted off. Many EU members pounced at what they perceived to be the opportunity to get it passed.

The answer to my question, of course, was negative. Which, again, speaks volumes.

And it clearly hit a nerve. The diplomat to whom I had addressed the question — who made no secret of a strong personal contempt for Israel (contrary to the policy of the diplomat's government) — sat

back, crossed arms, and asked me, with attitude, “So, Vivian. What are your personal views on the topic?”

To which I responded: “My personal views are irrelevant. As are yours. I represent the policy of the government of Canada.”



What to do?

In the postwar years, foreign-affairs bureaucracies in Western democracies ballooned in size. Foreign-service officers saw themselves as better-informed and -trained to manage diplomatic complexities than the elected officials they supposedly served. They also mastered the art of diffusing responsibility and outcomes among the many layers and offices engaged in any particular issue. As a practical matter, this means that neither success nor failure is attributed to individuals, resulting in a lack of accountability throughout the organization. It also means that internal sabotage of the will of government is more easily effected and concealed. Where authority and responsibility are blurred, accountability is impossible.

When public servants consider it appropriate and justifiable to subvert the policy of elected officials, that is a serious problem. It is also, surprisingly, easily managed, provided there is sustained political will.

A quite straightforward remedy for diplomatic high-handedness is for elected officials to appoint executives in the foreign-policy bureaucracy who understand and accept their role as advisers. To a degree, this practice is already in place in the State Department, where the top layers are hand-picked by elected officials. But this practice is much less prevalent in His Majesty’s Diplomatic Service, and not at all in Global Affairs Canada.

Even deputy ministers (the equivalent of a deputy secretary) tend to be recruited from the public-service ranks in Canada and the U.K. Their loyalty inclines toward their bureaucratic colleagues and institutions over elected officials. It is virtually impossible to successfully implement any policy when the most powerful people in the bureaucratic structure are opposed.

Early in my service, I was called to Ottawa for two weeks of “Head of Mission” training with the class of 2014, for those assuming ambassadorial postings. When then–Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Daniel Jean spoke to the group, the first question he was asked astonished me: “What do we do if—as happens frequently with this government—we propose a particular policy approach and it is not accepted by the minister’s office?”

In response, Jean reminded my colleagues that we served in a Westminster-style democracy, meaning that our role was to advise and execute but not to decide. Decision-making was within the exclusive purview of elected officials who were ultimately accountable to the people who put them in public office. Jean further took the opportunity to share with the group that, of the various prime ministers he had served over his decades-long career, Harper was the most deferential to and respectful of the expertise of the public service. “He follows our advice 85 percent of the time,” Jean shared. “And when he does not do so, it is invariably for a very sound political reason.”

This vignette makes clear the imperative of elected political interests to take control of the machinery of government. To accomplish this, a much greater degree of accountability must be introduced into the system.

Prime Minister Harper was clear from the outset that he appointed me, an Ottawa outsider but political insider, to mitigate the manner in which career foreign-service officers had undermined his policies regarding Israel and the Middle East. What he expected from the sys-

tem was professionalism and loyalty. What he encountered in his 10 years in office was a foreign service saturated with antisemitism, hostility toward Israel, and a deep loathing of his government's policy in this particular matter.

Ultimately, there can be only two remedies to the challenge. The first is that foreign-policy bureaucracies find ways to reform themselves. Senior officials can discipline recalcitrant diplomats who openly and persistently flout the views of the elected government. They can recruit officials, including those in mid- or even late-career, with more diverse professional experience and a wider range of skills to bring to the role. They can take care that there is genuine viewpoint diversity in their ranks to avoid the dreary intellectual groupthink that tends to take hold in government ministries. The reality is that fiscal pressures have forced many foreign-service bureaucracies to engage in such reform, but they have done so half-heartedly and tended to focus on entitlements and perquisites rather than systemic dysfunction. They are a powerful bloc interest and maintain the advantage of controlling the system. Elected government officials come and go. That certainty is the source of bureaucratic resistance to reform.

The second — and companion — remedy would have elected governments appoint or remove officials in the middle and even lower ranks of the service, eventually altering if not breaking the model of a permanent bureaucracy. That's a far more radical step that would meet fierce resistance from the bureaucracies and their media allies, and require sustained political will. But it may be the only way in which elected governments can do what they are supposed to do: carry out the will of the people, irrespective of the views of their supposed betters. *