Opinion

Is Israel above criticism?

HARRY STERLING

Israel's criticism of Israeli government policies is a taboo subject, akin to covert anti-Semitism? Recent comments by Immigration Minister Jason Kenney implying that some of those criticizing Israeli policies might actually be motivated by anti-Semitism than anything else raise disturbing questions for anyone who believes strongly in freedom of speech in a democratic society.

Although Mr. Kenney's views were essentially related to the subject of Israel's actions and policies in the volatile Middle East, particularly its occupation of the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza, his comments have implications which go far beyond simply the issue of Israel and anti-Semitism.

If those critical of any government's policies were expected to refrain from legitimate and well-founded criticism because their comments could be claimed to be realmotivated by other undeclared intentions and objectives, those passing judgment on what constitutes valid and acceptable opinion could effectively restrict or even eliminate unwanted criticism.

If one took Mr. Kenney's views literally, it would be impossible for anyone to question or criticize the actions and policies of governments anywhere without running the risk of being denounced as having a hidden agenda or even being unpatriotic.

Opposition parties in Canada's Parliament got a taste of this reality during the controversy over allegations the Harper government failed to prevent the torture of Afghan prisoners. Prime Minister Stephen Harper went so far as to portray opposition parties who demanded a full inquiry as unpatriotic and even being unpatriotic.

Immigration Minister Jason Kenney in conversation with Liberal Human Rights critic Irwin Cotler at the Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Anti-Semitism last week.

Nonetheless, it's imperative governments everywhere be held accountable for their actions, including Israel.

For example, Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic's ethnic cleansing of Kosovo's Muslim population would never have resulted in him being charged with crimes against humanity if other governments were reluctant to condemn the bloodletting and suffering he instigated. Nor would President al-Bashir of Sudan be held by an international court with the mass killings in Darfur.

(On a less contentious level, it wouldn't be acceptable for the European Union to admonish the governments of Romania and Bulgaria for their lackadaisical attitude towards corruption, as the EU did a few months ago when it froze EU development funds to both countries for their lack of commitment to fighting corruption within their own administrations.)

Notwithstanding the justification for holding governments responsible for their actions, it's also obvious governments have always shown a high degree of selectivity when passing judgment on the actions of other governments.

Many are quite prepared to criticize the perceived deficiencies of certain other countries, particularly their human rights records while conveniently ignoring similar deficiencies in countries with whom they are friendly, allied or whose goodwill is too important to jeopardize. Saudi Arabia is one such country.

Despite the willingness of governments and others to regularly criticize the lack of basic freedoms in China and its purported persecution of religious groups, Western governments are strangely silent about the lack of democracy and religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, a monarchical system without an elected parliament and where non-Muslim religions cannot be publicly celebrated.

The reason for such tolerance is not difficult to see. Saudi Arabia sits on the world's largest petroleum deposits and has been considered by many capitalist countries, especially the United States, a bulwark against radical leftist movements. (Moreover, the trade report received by Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda comes from Saudi Arabian sources, including from members of the extremist royal family whose significant percentage of anti-Western madrassas and mosques are also funded by Saudi Arabia.)

From a purely Canadian perspective, some might wonder whether Jason Kenney's concerns over criticism of Israel are not just about the viability of covert anti-Semitism but also about winning the political support of ethnic and religious groups in this country for the Conservative Party, including the influential Jewish community.

Prime Minister Harper himself has demonstrated what many consider a lack of balance in his views on the Middle East. His controversial comment that the devastation inflicted on Lebanon in 2006 by Israel, including the use of controversial cluster bombs in civilian areas, was a "measured" response, shocked many people. His response to the horrific events in Gaza a year ago against Hamas—with more than 1,400 Palestinians killed compared to 13 Israelis—was similarly viewed as biased by many observers.

The fact that Jason Kenney is now expressing concerns over his government's actions and policies may be a form of anti-Semitism is an extremely dangerous contention. The truth is, given that both Israel and Hamas have been accused by the United Nations report of having committed crimes against humanity during the Israeli invasion of Gaza. The report was prepared by a Jewish South African judge.

Mr. Kenney should be aware that even sectors of Israeli society have expressed concern over their government's actions in the occupied territories. Israeli human rights organizations have condemned the Netanyahu government's refusal to allow badly needed building material to be permitted into Gaza to carry out reconstruction there. Israeli military personnel have also issued statements criticizing the way Palestinian civilians were treated during the invasion.

Should one assume such criticism of Israeli policies by those themselves is a form of anti-Semitism?

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The myths of Canadian peacekeeping

JIM CRESKEY

There is at least one member of Canada's military establishment who holds out hope that Canada will again become a peacekeeping nation. That person is military college professor and former operations analyst Walter Dorn. He came to prorogation-bound Ottawa last week to tell whomsoever would listen that he believes Canada will become a peacekeeping nation once again.

But, Dorn says, Canada is still held back by two false military peacekeeping mythologies. The first one is that Canada is still a peacekeeping nation. This couldn't be any farther from the truth when we look at the 55 military peacekeepers left of the thousands that once led the way from one world hot spot to the next. At one time Canada was the number one contributor of United Nations peacekeeping operations, contributing 10 per cent of the world's peacekeeping forces. Today Canada's contribution is .01 per cent.

The other false story is that Canada was never a peacekeeper to begin with. That, Dorn patiently explains, is equally untrue. Of course, Canada's military has played important roles in combat operations around the world. But the record shows that Canada was rapidly becoming one of the main architects of a bold, new way of using military might to prevent competing sides from slaughtering each other while opening the door to diplomatic solutions.

The art of peacekeeping has always been an imperfect one, just as the United Nations has always been a flawed organization. And there have been failed missions and successful ones.

But peacekeeping is the one military venture that actually has a future. Wars, small ones and big ones alike, do not make a future except for the arms dealers. And the UN is the only world body that offers an alternative narrative to war.

Dorn says that Canada didn't win a Nobel Peace prize for nothing. A vision was launched and Canadian blood was shed. But its creators like Lester B. Pearson knew that inside the military there is also a new will-