

Canada's "Invisible" Middle East Policy: Time for a rethink

Position Paper of the National Council on Canada-Arab Relations

For the first time in recent memory, many Canadians are getting an inkling of the unhappiness that exists in a whole range of the broader Middle Eastern and North African countries which include nearly a half a billion people. And we are seeing for the first time, a powerful thirst for freedom and democracy, in a region that we had mostly thought was submerged in despotism and the increasing influence of radical Islam.

We have also discovered some unsettling things about some of Canada's allies and friends in the region. We have learned that Mubarak was a kleptocratic dictator whose family is fabulously rich. And that Libya's Colonel Ghadafi has used hired mercenaries from sub-Saharan Africa to keep in power. And that Tunisia's now deposed President was also kept in place by a ubiquitous and feared state security apparatus and torture. And that Bahrain is an absolute monarchy through which a Sunni minority representing about 30 percent of the population rules over a Shia majority with the support of the US fleet.

To most Canadians, these revelations come as somewhat of a surprise. We knew vaguely of course, that things were "not very good" over there, but we didn't know that they were "that bad." We quickly and spontaneously sympathized with the downtrodden and oppressed people demonstrating in the streets demanding freedom and democracy. We were happy when our government urged both "calm" and "respect for democracy" as quickly as possible."

We shouldn't have been surprised

But the Mubarak family did not become rich over night. Egyptian opposition leaders have been tortured, imprisoned and killed for years. Ghadafi has been using foreign mercenaries for 4 decades. There has been a severe deterioration of nascent democratic structures in Tu-

nisia under the Ben Ali regime for many years.

While most Canadians are just now discovering the extent of the dictatorships and human rights abuses, all this, and much more, has

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been well known to our professional Canadian diplomats stationed in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Jordan etc. for many years. Canada has excellent Foreign Service officers – ambassadors and their staffs in all these countries. They talk to everyone – including opposition groups, professional associations, business leaders and other ambassadors. And they send back reports to Ottawa.

As a result, the Canadian government has known for a long time that corruption and nastiness lurk in high places in many Arab countries. But we didn't say or do much about it until people were massively demonstrating in the street, and some were getting shot.

So how do we look today in the eyes of the "Arab street" when, after 3 decades of being friendly with Mubarak, Canada suddenly and self importantly "demands" that any new Egyptian government respect human rights, the rights of women and its peace treaty with Israel?

Why we need to rethink our Middle East policy

It's about time we had a serious discussion in Canada about our policy with re-

spect to the Middle East and North Africa. There are three main reasons why we need to do this.

Firstly, our current practice of calling for democracy and human rights in some countries (e.g. Iran, Syria) while turning a blind eye to others (e.g. Egypt, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia) undermines our political credibility in the Middle Eastern Region and North Africa. The reality is that there are few fully fledged democracies in the world, so we have to deal with many countries whose human rights records would not be acceptable in Canada. But thanks to news networks like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, more than 1 billion Muslims around the world now know that Canada is a big supporter of human rights in countries where it suits us, but rather quiet with regard to others. And our apparent hypocrisy is made more evident when a popular revolt breaks out and Canada pretends to suddenly “discover” that our erstwhile friends could be doing such horrible things.

Secondly, our current policy of putting unconditional support for Israel ahead of everything else is undermining our economic and trade possibilities with the Arab/Muslim world. When Canada’s foreign minister Lawrence Cannon blocked a fi-

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nal communiqué from The Forum for the Future in Doha, Qatar in January 2011, Canadians hardly noticed. But it was certainly noticed in the Arab world. His opposition was to a single paragraph in the communiqué reaffirming UN resolutions on the rights of Palestinians. Canada is rightfully concerned about ensuring security for Israelis, whatever the final solution to the Israel/Palestine conflict. But we should not be surprised to find that our one-sided policy has all but evaporated our moral and political authority in the region, and that our business opportunities in the Middle East have also been negatively affected.

Thirdly, our policies in the Middle East are undermining our reputation amongst our allies like Germany and the United Kingdom. As a middle power, Canada exercised influence mostly through “soft power” - our tolerance, our acceptance of immigrants, and our determination to stick to the defense of human rights and international law were the levers through which Canada has traditionally projected its values and extended its influence in the world.

Important European leaders have become increasingly critical of Israel in recent years. Britain’s Prime Minister Cameron has described Gaza as an “open air Prison”. Germany’s Prime Minister Angela Merkel has been quite vocal in condemning Mr. Netanyahu’s continued program of building illegal settlements in the West Bank. (This despite Germany’s own ongoing angst over the holocaust.)

Meanwhile, from Canada, hardly a peep. In the words of former Canadian Ambassador to the UN, Paul Heinbecker, the Harper government “*has remained largely silent on the ongoing building of illegal settlements on Palestinian land, the appropriation and demolition of Palestinian homes in Jerusalem, the location of the Israeli security barrier inside Palestinian territory and the ongoing siege of Gaza, all of which violate the Geneva conventions that the Government of Canada has signed and ratified.*”

The result is that our hard earned international reputation as a principled supporter of international law is being seriously eroded. Canadian diplomats report privately that Canada is no longer looked to for advice at the UN. It’s symptomatic of a larger problem that Canada had to WITHDRAW our candidacy for the UN Security council BEFORE a vote that would have shown how embarrassingly little influence we now have left in international fora.

Why can’t we have an open discussion about this important topic?

Canada has a strategic interest in having a serious re-think of its policies concerning the Arab world, from top to bottom. What are our interests, how do we advance them? What are our

assets? What are our limitations? All this needs a serious discussion. But there are four main obstacles to having this serious conversation.

Firstly, Canadian foreign policy with respect to the Middle East and North Africa has become infected with a near paranoia about terrorism. That there is a terrorist danger is undeniable. That we should take measures to protect ourselves is also undeniable. But a cold look at the facts shows that since the Air India bombing very few Canadians have been harmed by terrorist attacks. And yet since 9/11 there has been a steady drumbeat (admittedly less so here than in the US) about the terrorist danger. This has led us to ally with unsavory dictators in the Arab world, and to turn away when they smash their opposition while assuring us that these opposition leaders are all crazy, dangerous Muslim terrorists. Anybody who has been watching the demonstrators in Cairo, Tunis, Algiers, Sana'a, Bahrain, Amman, Syria or Libya knows that this is far from the case.

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Secondly, official Canadian foreign policy with respect to the region appears to be completely dominated by our desire to protect Israel. Whether it's revolution in Egypt or democratic reform in Jordan, Canada now views almost every event in the Arab world through an Israeli lens. In fact, the defense of Israel has taken on a near religious tone. Any Canadian organization making even mild criticisms of Israel or vague statements of support for the human rights of Palestinians has to brace for punitive action by our government. (The Inter-Church organization Kairos, the debacle at Rights and Democracy, defunding of IDRC research projects and the financial choking of the Canadian Council on International Co-operation (CCIC) bear witness to this approach.)

The current government's attachment to Israel “right or wrong” is echoed by a powerful pro-Israel lobby in Canada, which constantly promotes the Israeli point of view while remaining ready to tar any criticism of Israel, from any source, as “Anti-Semitic”. Of course Anti-Semitism does exist in Canada, and should be fought. But clearly, not every criticism of Israel is motivated by Anti-Semitism. We should be able to both recognize the concerns about Israeli security while criticizing some of Israel's policies and actions. However, at the present time there is little space in Canada for a reasoned discussion of what an appropriate posture for Canada on the thorny Israel/Palestine issue should be.

Thirdly, we lack in Canada depth of knowledge about the Middle East and North Africa. Unlike the United States, we have no think tanks devoted to a serious study of the region. There is clearly not enough capacity in Canadian universities. What knowledge we do have is scattered about – a few professors here, some knowledge concentrated in our Military and Security agencies, some diplomatic information. Even in our diplomatic corps, we have little Arab language capacity.

Fourthly, while we do not like to admit it, Canada also needs to be acutely sensitive to the American concern about terrorism. Any discussion about our Middle East policy has to be extremely conscious of the American perspective. Canada was not attacked on 9/11, but America was. By helping our American neighbours on security issues, we protect our economic partnership and diplomatic alliance. Americans know that their recent interventions in the Muslim world (Iraq, Afghanistan) have earned them enemies as well as friends. And, if we want to continue to benefit from the powerful American economy, we have to be prepared to accommodate their concerns over security.

A modest proposal

Given these constraints, how might we go about having a “rethink” of our Middle East and North Africa policy? We need to have a serious discussion about this issue, one that would consider and balance:

-Canada's interest in promoting human rights and international law in the region
-Our reputation amongst our allies
-Our economic and commercial interests
-Our concerns for the physical security and economic well-being of all the peoples in the region irrespective of religion, race or ethnicity
-Our international standing

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The fact that Canada is not as privileged as the US with think tanks and expertise on the Arab world does not mean that we should do nothing to think our way out of this box.

In late 2010, the Canadian government gave approximately \$500,000 to a Canadian think tank towards the holding of an international conference on Anti-Semitism. The conference objective – fighting anti-Semitism - was seen by the Canadian government as an important public policy objective.

We suggest that the Canadian government fund a similar conference sponsored by the National Council or another reputable Canadian organization to explore, analyze, debate and seek solutions to strengthening Canadian relations with the Arab world. The conference could draw on Canadian expertise such as:

-Academics who teach and study Middle East politics and economics in Canadian universities
-The dozens of organizations representing the Arab community in Canada (e.g. the Association of Egyptian Canadians, the Palestinian Canadian Congress, etc.)
-Representatives of the Jewish community in Canada

-Canadian NGO and academic institutions active in the Arab World
-Canadian diplomats (current and retired) who have served in a number of Arab countries, or in international organizations
-Business associations which deal in trade and commerce with the Middle East and North Africa

The conference could call for papers to ensure that discussion takes place in a focused and serious manner. It could also invite special guest experts from outside the country, including the US, Europe and the Arab countries themselves.

Conclusion

Over the last few years, Canada has stumbled into an incoherent Middle East policy (or set of policies) that has damaged our international reputation and poses potential risks for economic partnerships. It will take some time to reorient our policy, and doing so will require a lot of serious discussion. There is no time to waste.

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