

MIDDLE EAST FOCUS

Prepared by the
National Council on
Canada-Arab Relations
(NCCAR)

A Report on NCCAR's Fact-finding MP Delegation to the Middle East (August 17-24, 2006)



OBJECTIVES

The objective of this mission was to give federal members of Parliament a broader perspective on the humanitarian consequences of the Israeli attacks on Lebanon launched in July, to

learn about the regional implications of this war, and attempt to find a constructive role for Canada.

The mission came about following requests by some mem-

bers of Parliament (MPs) to assess the situation for themselves and meet with civil society, UN agencies as well as government officials in Lebanon, Syria and Egypt.

PREPARATION AND BRIEFING

A briefing was conducted by the Department of Foreign Affairs Canada and International Trade (DFAIT) prior to departure. The MPs had an opportunity to hear the concerns of Foreign Affairs regarding the presence of cluster bombs, unexploded ordnances, traffic jams from the points of entry and also leading up to the south of Lebanon, which were a security threat

from DFAIT's point of view. The MPs, despite the ominous tone of the briefing, insisted on going ahead with the mission.

NCCAR Executive Director Mazen Chouaib provided a briefing that addressed the issue of Lebanon's rich history, the political climate and the issue of Hezbollah as well as the implications of this war on the

entire region. The MPs were informed that this delegation was not going to meet any Hezbollah leaders.

Furthermore, the objective of the trip was not to deal with the issue of Canada's Terrorism List, but rather to give the MPs an appreciation of the situation in Lebanon from a humanitarian perspective.

DELEGATES

At the start of the Mission, NCCAR had received interest from all political parties. Mr Borys Wrznesnewskyj (Liberal), Mr Dean Del Mastro (Conservative), Madame Francine Lalonde (Bloc Québécois), and Ms Alexa McDonough (NDP). While the last two were not able to attend, they

were replaced by two of their colleagues. Mr Dean Del Mastro was instructed by the Prime Minister's Office to withdraw from the delegation on the night of departure, August 15, expressing to NCCAR his disappointment when he picked up his passport on August 16.

The mission proceeded with:

- ◆ Mr Borys Wrznesnewskyj (Liberal)
- ◆ Mrs Maria Mourani (Bloc Québécois)
- ◆ Mrs Peggy Nash (NDP).
- ◆ Mr. Mazen Chouaib (NCCAR Executive Director)

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HUMANITARIAN IMPACT

"Mr. Harper has given us a rather negative international image. We can see here that the attacks were (far) from being 'measured'. The devastation in Lebanon is incredible."

**- Maria Mourani,
MP for Ahuntsic
(Quebec)**

From the start, the impact on civilian life and infrastructure was clear. It was also clear that the targets of Israeli bombs were mostly civilians. The attacks were meant to punish the Lebanese population, cause tremendous fear, and division in Lebanon.

According to Lebanese officials, the damage to the economy is estimated at more than \$10 billion. However, the real impact has yet to be determined. There is another problem that Lebanon will have to deal with—aside from the rebuilding of infrastructure, which is the cleaning up of the thousands of cluster bombs dropped by Israeli planes and thousands of mines left by Israel. Lebanon has been suffering

from the mines left by the Israeli army following its withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. Until today, Israel refuses to provide Lebanon with maps that would allow for a speedy demining effort. Canada has been supporting the efforts of the UN de-mining campaign, but unfortunately, it is not enough. In the past, the issue of landmines in Lebanon was discussed with former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr John Manley, who conveyed the message to then-Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr Shimon Perez, without much success.

During this latest round of attacks,

Lebanon lost over 1200 civilians, numerous factories, over 20,000 housing units across the country, and many villages were left uninhabitable. We saw complete towns destroyed and in some areas nothing was standing. The commercial life of many small towns is based in larger centres, such as Bint Jbeil and Nabatieh which were destroyed completely. One is left to wonder what is the Nabatieh's commercial district/Souk's military significance? According to Amnesty International's recent report, it was not the rockets launched by Hezbollah that Israel was targeting but rather, the widespread destruction of apartments, houses, electricity and water services, roads, bridges, factories and ports. In addition, several statements by Israeli officials suggest a policy of punishing both the Lebanese government and the civilian population in an effort to get them to turn against Hezbollah. Israeli attacks did not diminish, nor did their pattern appear to change, even when it became clear that the victims of the bombardment were predominantly civilians, which was the case from the first days of the conflict, stated the report.

It was also clear that war crimes were committed in Lebanon. The level of destruction of houses, buildings, businesses (milk factory in North, glass factory in Bekaa and produce distribution centres), the death of civilians, and the large scale bombing of agricultural areas, were committed on purpose. It was a collective punishment campaign. The destruction was immense and could not be compared to previous wars. Every village in Lebanon was affected.



Dahya (Southern Beirut)

Civilians in some villages reported that in the last few days, while a cease fire was being negotiated, the bombing became increasingly aggressive.

Everywhere on the tour of Southern Beirut and South Lebanon we were met by angry civilians. They could not understand how the Canadians were not trying to help. Most of their anger was directed at the US and the Israelis, but they felt that they were left to suffer alone. It was also clear that many people, especially those in areas hardest hit, that Hezbollah was getting more recruits.

The delegation visited the now infamous village of Qana. In that small village we drove in as the town was burying 29 casualties. The people from the village were extremely angry —



Ali lost all of his family members



Man shows MPs photo of family killed



Unexploded Israeli shell

HUMANITARIAN IMPACT (continued from page 2)

half of those killed were children. The scene was too much to bear, especially when we faced Ali (photo on left), a little 8-year-old boy holding the hand of another boy who was refusing to speak. He was shy, but his eyes were full of sadness since he was the sole survivor of his family. We also saw another survivor, a father who lost his whole family, clutching their pictures (also on left).

The olive season which is the livelihood of the villagers was destroyed since Israel bombed fields with cluster bombs. According to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, children and farmers are becoming the casualties of cluster bombs. A Human Rights Watch expert we met in the town of Bint Jbeil told us that the cluster bombs used by Israel were from the Vietnam era. He explained that over 40% of the bombs are left in the fields and homes of people waiting to explode. The UN estimated that about 100,000 bomblets were left in Lebanon, the majority being dropped within the three days before the ceasefire.

The stench of death was overwhelming in the village of Aitaroun. It is where the 11 members of the Al Akhrass family from Montreal were killed. One young man informed me that he pulled three members of the family from the well below the front yard. The Israeli plane had sent a bomb down on the family when they were having



Liberal MP, Borys Wrznesnewsyk talks to a Canadian reporter, surrounded by destroyed homes of Montreal's Al-Akhrass family, during the delegation's tour of Lebanon (Photo: NCCAR).

tea in the afternoon, "they did not know what hit them," he told me. The others were killed as they cowered in another part of the house. There wasn't much left of the house or the one next to it, which belonged to the uncle. We met the uncle's wife who had never left her home before, but had no other choice but to leave for Beirut.

MEETINGS

In most of our meetings there was a clear indication of disappointment in Canada's position. Many were troubled by Prime Minister Harper's unqualified support for Israel. His comment that Israel's response was "measured" drew significant attention. Many questioned it, given that international

bodies, and some Israeli leaders, were uncomfortable with Israel's disproportionate response to the attack by Hezbollah. They were equally shocked that at the Rome Meeting Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs backed the US and Israel.

There were some officials who were very critical of Hezbollah. But the majority were unable to comprehend Israel's reaction, especially since they viewed Lebanon as the one country that Israel would be able to work with when peace is

reached between the two countries. There was also a common point of view on the steps that should be taken to resolve the conflict and render Hezbollah's need for weapons unnecessary.

The pretext for Hezbollah's

armed presence in Lebanon is the continued occupation of the Shebaa Farms. From the perspective of the Lebanese and the Syrians, the Farms are considered Lebanese and should be returned to Lebanon, and Israel agrees that they are occupied. This provides Hezbollah with a rea-



Canadian MPs following a meeting with Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora in Beirut



MPs Maria Mourani and Peggy Nash following a meeting with Arab League Secretary-General Amr Mousa in Cairo (Photo: NCCAR).

son to continue with its presence in Lebanon, most officials explained. The Lebanese government is unable or incapable to convince the Syrians of signing the necessary documents to put an end to this conflict. The Lebanese, who happen to be the weaker

MEETINGS (continued from page 3)

party in this problem, are urging the Israelis and the UN to hand the Farms back to Lebanon. Thus far, no answer has been forthcoming from either side, Israel and the UN.

All those we met pointed to the one and only approach to resolving the conflict between the Arabs and the Israelis, which is the return to a negotiated solution based on the offer from the Arab League that was made at the Beirut Summit of March 2002. In that proposal, Arab states clearly stated that they would consider the conflict terminated if Israel returned to the 1967 armistice lines, found a solution to the Palestinian refugee question, and allowed for the creation of the State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital. This is a very reasonable resolution based on UNSCR 242 and 338.

The Syrians, the Lebanese and the Egyptians in particular were very keen on making this the basis for a future settlement. The Saudis, who generated this consensus originally, are re-submitting this proposal again. The League of Arab States made this proposal the basis of their negotiations at the UNSC, the effort culminated in a workable and acceptable UNSCR 1701.

Officials from three governments we met, mostly in Syria and Egypt, told us they are under tremendous pressure since their citizens are questioning their “no resistance” strategy. Though Egypt has a peace treaty with Israel, the Egyptian street is inflamed and enraged by pictures from Lebanon. The Syrians have seen the same rise in the resistance rhetoric.

Canada’s shift in favour of Israel was highlighted by Mr Saad Hariri, majority leader in the Lebanese Parliament, indicating his country’s disappointment with that shift.

In a meeting held with Prime Minister Siniora, he too was critical of the position taken by Prime Minister Harper as well as by Minister of Foreign Affairs Peter McKay during the Rome meetings.

Finally, members of the delegation met with the League of Arab States Secretary-General, Amr Moussa, who mentioned his concern about the shift from a more balanced Canadian foreign policy to one that clearly favours Israel. Mr. Moussa also indicated his interest in meeting the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs to discuss Canada’s role in the Arab world.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been tabled by NCCAR as a result of the August 2006 MP delegation mission to the Middle East:

- The Arab Peace Offer is the basis of a future resolution to the conflict, as was tabled by the League of Arab States.
- **Canada** is urged to call on Israel to abide by international law in its dealings with Palestinians and Lebanese civilians
- **Canada** needs to maintain a voting pattern at the UN consistent with international and humanitarian law
- **Canada** needs to expand its efforts to rebuild Lebanese towns destroyed by Israeli bombardment
- **Canada** should assist in the de-mining campaign in southern Lebanon by urging Israel to cooperate in providing mine maps
- **Canada’s** government needs to work proactively with Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and other Arab countries to coordinate multilateral negotiations to implement the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.
- As Gavel Holder of the Palestinian Refugee Working Group, **Canada** needs to maintain a fair-minded approach, which is being questioned in the region now with the recent statements made by Prime Minister Harper unequivocally supporting Israel.

“We need to be at the forefront of development assistance in the region and we must find the best way Canadians can help build a stable and lasting peace.”

- Peggy Nash, MP
for Parkdale-High
Park (Ontario)