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Canada and the Middle East

by Thomas Juneau
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Public debate on Canada's Middle East policy tends to pit two contrasting, but equally disconnected, perspectives. On the left, politicians and pundits promote an idealized but unrealistic vision of Canada as a moral power playing the role of honest broker. On the right, conservatives claim that they favour an approach based on principles and values even though in practice, their application has been, and can only be, partial and selective.

There is, as such, a need to think more strategically about Canada's role in the Middle East. What are Canada's interests in the region? How should these translate into policy? The starting point for a sober assessment of Canada's role in the Middle East should be that although the region is and will remain for the foreseeable future wracked by multiple conflicts, Canada's security is not directly threatened by developments there. This has two major implications. First, because of the absence of major direct threats, Canada benefits from a significant margin of manoeuvre in developing its Middle East policies, as poor decisions are unlikely to impose major costs. Second, opportunity, not threat, should guide policy.

CANADA'S INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Canada does not face a direct, major security or military threat emanating from the Middle East. This is the foundation on which Canadian action should be planned. Conflicts in the region threaten some of our allies and partners, in some cases severely, and terrorist safe havens threaten regional and international security. But the many conflicts raging in the Middle East do not directly threaten Canada (for example through massive refugee flows or the spillover of violence). The terrorist threat to Canada is real, but it should not be inflated: only two Canadians have died from terrorist acts on the homeland since the September 2001 attacks. The number of Canadians fighting with terrorist groups abroad is in the range of several dozen: this is not negligible, but is far less than many of Canada's European allies.

Beyond this, Canada has general interests in the Middle East. These are broad outcomes that would benefit Canada, irrespective of its ability to shape them. They should therefore serve as yardsticks steering foreign and defence policy in the region. Canadian general interests would include:

- development of a regional security framework of predictable rules;
- actions to counter terrorism, and work towards the eradication of its root causes;
- prevention of interstate wars;
- containment of intrastate wars;
- continuation of freedom of navigation and the free flow of oil; and
- prevention of the spread of nuclear weapons.

HOW TO TRANSLATE INTERESTS INTO POLICY

As noted, the absence of major threats to Canada emanating from the Middle East has two important consequences: Ottawa benefits from a broad margin of manoeuvre; and opportunity, not threat, should guide policy.



Global Trade Review

Canada is not a major power – its actions on the international stage have, at most, a marginal impact. But paradoxically, Ottawa can choose from a wide range of options since it is unlikely to suffer from the negative consequences of poor choices. Good decisions, at the same time, often bring limited or diffuse benefits. Canadian foreign policy is therefore in the comfortable position of being able to muddle along without having to assess carefully the pros and cons of plausible courses of action. This lack of competitive pressure has often led to a certain nonchalance as there are limited incentives to develop optimal policies.

Ottawa should therefore aim to maximize its limited scope for gains by identifying potentially beneficial opportunities, and then pursuing them with coherent policies. Yet there are many opportunities, while Canada has scarce resources. How to choose where and how to allocate them? The general interests outlined above should serve as broad guidelines. But to be useful, they need to be translated into specific guidance at the regional and bilateral levels.

At the region-wide level, Canada's policies should first and foremost support the development of a stronger regional security framework, as this broad objective encompasses the other interests. The list that follows is not exhaustive, but it proposes examples consistent with this approach. Canada is already involved, to some extent, in most of them; it could, however, ramp up its engagement and better explain their strategic rationale to the public.

- Insist that current and future interventions by external powers obtain as much support as possible from international and regional organizations, granting them more legitimacy.
- Invest diplomatically, and provide aid and capacity-building, in mediation and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Canada should increase its engagement in the Friends of Syria, the informal group of interested external powers. At the same time, Canada should remain cautious in supporting efforts to multilateralize stabilization efforts through ad hoc coalitions since this should not come at the expense of multilateral institutions.



- Support the strengthening of regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League by tilting engagement in their direction. This gives their members incentive to invest more in these groupings. This, in turn, reinforces regional systems of norms and rules and further binds them to the international system.
- Support efforts to strengthen the few existing components of a regional security structure, such as the efforts of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to monitor the deal to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons program, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal).
- Continue participating in maritime security operations as they are essential to protect freedom of navigation and the free flow of oil, and to counter terrorism.
- Encourage regional dialogue, especially between Iran and its Arab neighbours on the Persian Gulf, with the objective of identifying potential initiatives to strengthen regional security.

Canada should be wary of participating in future large-scale military interventions in the Middle East. Not because these automatically run counter to Canadian interests, but because they imply a large investment but a very uncertain outcome. This is not to say that Canada should shut the door on any future intervention but it should be reluctant to commit to the open-ended and extensive use of military power, especially in the promotion of democracy and in the pursuit of nation-building. Participation in such an endeavour should be conditional on a reasonably high confidence that the return would be comparable to the necessarily high investment.

Containment should therefore be the favoured approach to deal with the insecurity caused by regional conflicts. Containment is flawed: it addresses symptoms, not causes. It is, however, less sub-optimal than the two main military alternatives, to do less or to do more. The approach to confront the Islamic State illustrates this. The strategy of the US-led coalition is based on three pillars: to weaken the group using air strikes and measures to choke its finances; to train and equip local partners and rely on them for the bulk of the ground fighting; and to seek a political solution. The third element represents the only way comprehensively to defeat the group. The problem, however, is that the necessary political solutions in Iraq and Syria will not be forthcoming for many years, so in the meantime, airstrikes and support for local partners are the only options to contain the group's expansion.

There is not sufficient space here to go over each of Canada's bilateral relations with individual Middle East states. Instead, it is possible to propose guidelines which should shape Ottawa's approach.

Canada should seek cordial but necessarily limited relations with most states in the Middle East. The objective should be cordial ties because Canada has at most little to gain from shunning states. Canada has limited interests in the region, while each country is different in terms of geography, economic resources, diplomatic assets and geopolitical orientation. This implies that Canada is more likely to identify niche areas of cooperation with many states than it is to benefit from extensive cooperation with few. This includes Iran. Canada gained nothing from shutting itself out of Iran after 2012, and it is now steadily losing ground as European states work to relaunch trade with Iran while the Liberal government tries to figure out how to re-establish relations.



Getty Images

At the same time, Canada is a mid-sized country with limited resources devoted to the international realm, so it cannot realistically expect to have extensive relations with more than a small number of Middle Eastern states. This creates dilemmas: should Canada focus on a few, or spread out its partnerships? There are benefits to both approaches, but ultimately there is more to gain from diversification as it allows Canada to maximize the allocation of its scarce resources. Given its limited regional interests, Canada rapidly obtains diminishing returns when it intensifies ties with specific countries. This is not to say that Canada should uniformly spread its limited attention; the case of Jordan, where Canada has built a large presence in the security, military, aid and humanitarian sectors, illustrates the benefits of greater investments in a specific country.

There are a few areas in which Canada should pursue greater cooperation with regional states. First and foremost, Ottawa should seek to increase trade with the region. Although the potential for expansion is limited, it is real, especially with the petro-monarchies of the Persian Gulf and Iran. Recent free trade deals with Jordan and Israel have been notably positive steps. This would be good for the Canadian economy, while it would also support the broader objective of tying Middle East states to international systems of norms and rules.

There is also scope for enhanced cooperation in defence and security, where there are some common interests notably in materiel acquisition, intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism. The Canadian Armed Forces' operational support hub in Kuwait represents a solid example of niche cooperation in an area of common interest. Canada should also invest more in capacity-building programs which play an essential role in allowing it to support the needs of allies and partners. Initiatives such as the Military Training and Cooperation Program under the Department of National Defence and the Counter-Terrorism Capacity Building Program and the Global Partnership Program under Global Affairs Canada represent highly valuable tools which, for a modest investment, allow Canada to pursue specific interests.



Overall, Canada needs to invest more in modestly boosting its regional presence, keeping in mind its limited interests and resource constraints. High-level visits (of Canadian officials there and Middle Eastern officials to Canada) are rare, which weakens Canada's ability to pursue its interests. Slightly upping the tempo would help. In parallel, greater defence exchanges such as ship visits would increase Canada's leverage. Ottawa also needs to invest more in its diplomatic presence: Canada is the only G7 country without a permanent embassy in Baghdad, while in some capitals, Canadian diplomatic personnel can be counted with less than the fingers of one hand.



CANADIAN PRESS/Sean Kilpatrick

► **About the Author**

Thomas Juneau is an assistant professor at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa and a fellow with the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. His research focuses mostly on the Middle East, in particular on Iran, Yemen, and Syria. He is also interested in Canadian foreign and defence policy and in the nexus between analysis and policy.



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