

## **Bob Rae meets with UAE leaders, fields air landing complaints**

BILL CURRY (featuring COLIN ROBERTSON)

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Liberal MP Bob Rae is meeting with senior leaders in the United Arab Emirates this week, where he says he's getting an earful over Prime Minister Stephen Harper's increasingly heated rhetoric in the dispute over air landing rights.

But back home, the Prime Minister's Office is questioning Mr. Rae's trip and urging him to side with the Canadian government's position in his meetings.

Mr. Rae, the Liberal foreign affairs critic, said in an e-mail Sunday it's clear from his meetings in Dubai and Abu Dhabi that significant damage has been done to the relationship between the two countries. He cited Mr. Harper's "Give me a break" comment on the weekend, referring to the UAE's hike in visa fees and its decision to stop allowing Canadian military use of its airbase after Canada refused to expand landing rights for their airlines.

It is unusual for Canada to be involved in an escalating tiff like this with a once-friendly foreign nation. It's also rare for the opposition to step in so directly.

"Is this unorthodox? Yes. Is it unprecedented? No," said Colin Robertson, a former senior Canadian diplomat. "It does take place from time to time and it can be helpful."

However, Mr. Harper's spokesman, Dimitri Soudas, questioned Mr. Rae's trip in an e-mail to the Globe.

"Canadians expect that when Canadian MPs travel abroad that they represent Canada and Canadian interests. It would be extremely regrettable if Canadian interests were undermined in any way," he wrote. "What the UAE was asking [for] was not in the best interest of Canadians. We trust Mr. Rae will recognize that during his fact finding visit and we urge him to convey that information to the UAE royals."

Mr. Robertson said the PMO's comments likely serve a notice to the UAE that Mr. Rae is "freelancing" and does not speak for Canada.

Mr. Rae said the harm of Mr. Harper's rhetoric will last even longer than the 10 years Defence Minister Peter MacKay candidly predicted in November – while wearing a "Fly Emirates" baseball cap – in a casual comment overheard by a reporter.

"I have never seen such a ham-fisted and confrontational approach to a friendly and moderate country in my political experience. Repairing the damage to this relationship will take even longer than Peter Mackay said a few weeks ago," he said via e-mail. Mr. Rae said his message to both governments is to sit down and resolve the dispute.

"My sense from my discussions [Sunday] is that if Mr. Harper were to show some flexibility and goodwill, the UAE would reciprocate, and a solution in the best interests of both countries and economies could be found. That is the purpose of my visit here," he said.

In an interview with the QMI Agency published Saturday, Mr. Harper criticized the UAE for connecting the issue of airline landings with the use of the airbase and visas.

"That's just not how you treat allies, and I think tells us you better pick your friends pretty carefully in the future," he was quoted as saying. "I could never see [Canada] treating an ally like that. Could you imagine after 9/11 if the Americans had come to the Canadian government and said, 'We need help on something to do with security' [and we said] 'Well, only if you do something on Buy America.' I mean, give me a break."

The Arab nation, which the UAE government reports is Canada's largest export market in the Middle East and North Africa region, quietly hosted the Canadian Forces at Camp Mirage for over nine years as the main supply route supporting Canada's mission in Afghanistan. Canada was suddenly barred from using the base last year and new visa fees for Canadians took effect this month. The UAE's moves appeared to be solely motivated by Canada's refusal to expand the number of Canadian landings for the UAE's Emirates and Etihad Airways.

Mr. Rae said he's travelling throughout the Middle East with his wife at their own expense on a three week trip, mixing work meetings with personal time. They have already visited Israel and Egypt. In the UAE, he has so far met with the economics minister and minister of state for foreign affairs.

"From here we head to Amman, Ramallah and Jerusalem for further meetings which will focus on the peace process," he said.

Mr. MacKay, the defence minister, is scheduled to visit the Middle East from Jan. 9-13 for meetings with Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian leaders.

With a report from Daniel Leblanc