The Middle East and Canada’s loss of International Stature

In October, 2010, Canada lost its bid for a place on the UN Security Council (UNSC). This is the first time in six decades that Canada has sought a seat on the Security Council and failed to win it. Furthermore, Canada lost its bid to Portugal, a country with one third Canada’s population, half the number of embassies and delegations around the world and a much smaller cash contributor to the UN.

Canada’s lost bid for a UNSC seat is a reflection of its diminishing international stature. While several possible explanations for Canada’s lost bid were put forth (e.g. Canada’s regression on climate change, Canada’s changed attitudes toward aid in Africa, Canada’s changed relationship with certain African countries, etc.), it’s lopsided positions vis-à-vis Israel / Palestine and the Middle East more generally seem to have most negatively impacted perceptions among its international peers.

Canada must change its approach to Middle East policy or it will be increasingly marginalized at the UN. Notably:

A. Canada must re-commit to objective principles – especially international law – as the basis for its Middle East Policy. The explanations provided for Canada’s recent Middle East positions lack a coherent underlying basis of principle. There is talk of “balance,” and “usefulness” and other rhetoric, but it is wrapped around positions which reflect no definable principle. Canada’s Middle East policy should be reconstructed on the foundation of international law. It should also be meticulously egalitarian in its condemnation – and encouragement – of the behaviour of players in the Middle East. Finally, Canada should condemn all forms of violence.

B. Canada must seek to be impartial in its interventions in the Middle East. Canada must develop ways to positively intervene in the Middle East without aligning itself with sectarian interests. Working towards a loosening of the economic stranglehold of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, condemning illegal colonization (so-called settlements) and investing in Palestinian civil institutions will provide the most promising long-term results.

C. Canada must restore good will and common sense to its Middle East policy. Canada must not encourage or tacitly accept military action. The Middle East has been the victim of frequent foreign interference and subterfuge in the past, and is wary of polices which condone such intervention. Canada’s choice to stay out of the Second Gulf War (Invadon of Iraq?) was wise, and Canada should seek to be a voice for peace and diplomatic solutions achieved through multilateral fora.

D. Canada must critically analyze its reasons for being the lone voice on so many issues related to the Middle East. Canada is often either a) the lone voice on an international issue, or b) finds itself grouped with other highly-partisan Middle East actors (e.g. the US). This should be cause for reflection in Canada. As reflected in its lost UN Security Council bid, many of Canada’s international peers would disagree with Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon when he says that Canada lost its bid because of its attachment to “democratic and human rights principles.”

A: Canada must re-assert international law as the basis for its policy

1. Support for international law must replace Canada’s uncritical support of Israel. As evidenced by its press releases, UN voting record, and official statements, since 2004 Canada’s approach to the Middle East has been to uncritically support Israel. International law provides an objective standard by which to evaluate both state and non-state behaviour, and an international legal framework to bring violators to justice. Canada should condemn violations of international law committed by all parties - e.g. Hamas, Hizbollah, Israel, etc. - and support international frameworks for enforcement.

2. Canada must apply a single standard to all actors in the Middle East. It is very disappointing to observe Canada applying a double-standard to various parties in the region. For example, Canada will cite violations of international law by Hamas or other militant groups, but will ignore those
committed by Israel; or alternatively, Canada vigorously opposes Iranian nuclear intents, but ignores Israel’s existing nuclear arsenal.

3. Canada must move away from subjective rhetoric which excuses inaction and tacitly acquiesces to belligerent behaviour, e.g.:
   a. The “balance” argument. In international fora, Canada sometimes argues that the wording of resolutions is imbalanced against Israel, and justifies abstaining or opposing such resolutions. Yet Israel consistently engages in asymmetric conflicts, where her adversaries suffer physical destruction and human casualties at rates hundreds of times that of Israel.
   b. The “unhelpful” or “not useful” arguments. Canada also argues that the wording of resolutions is not helpful or not useful in the overall context of negotiations. Nevertheless, principles should be independent of progress in negotiations, and an increased emphasis on principles by the international community may in fact accelerate progress in negotiations.
   c. The “outdated” or “redundant” arguments. Canada has sometimes argued that international resolutions reflect old realities, or are redundant with one another. While there may be ways to be more efficient in international forums, attempts to dismiss long-ignored grievances are insensitive and cater to the belligerent.
   d. The “core problem” or “core solution” approach. Especially during times of open conflict, Canada’s rhetoric focuses on Israel’s adversary, rather than calling all parties to account, e.g. when Canada argues that rocket attacks from Gaza are the root problem in Israel’s dispute with Gaza. This ignores the effects of cyclical violence on the conflict and positions Canada in a one-sided role in the conflict.

B: Canada must be impartial in its interventions in the Middle East

1. Canada must avoid military investment in the Middle East, as it inevitably aligns Canada with a particular side in morally ambiguous situations. Canada’s aid to Palestinians has recently shifted in a large way from humanitarian aid, to military aid. Under operation PROTEUS, Canada is one of the primary supporters of the “Dayton mission” to the Palestinian Authority, Canada’s “second largest deployment after Afghanistan” according to Minister of State Peter Kent. There are two key issues with this:
   a. Such aid aligns Canada with Fatah, against Hamas. Among Palestinians, neither Hamas nor Fatah holds the moral high ground. Canadian Ambassador to Israel Jon Allen explained that PROTEUS was needed “to ensure that the Palestinian Authority maintains control of the West Bank against Hamas.” Yet Fatah was voted out of power in 2006 by Palestinians who decried the corruption and ineptitude of the regime at that time. Dayton’s forces also precipitated the sectarian conflict in 2007 which led to open violence between Hamas and Fatah, and ultimately triggered the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip.
   b. Such aid entrenches the impression that Canada prioritizes Israel’s interests over those of the Palestinians. The PROTEUS initiative is intended to “create a sense of confidence and get rid of any apprehensions that Israel might have with a Palestinian state next door,” according to head of the operation (Colonel Fred Lewis) and other sources. PROTEUS/Dayton involves Palestinian forces to coordinate with Israeli operations in the West Bank and is seen by many Palestinians as a form of “collaboration.”

2. Aid and institution building should take precedence over military investment. Aid and institution building can improve the lives of many, and positively influence attitudes across sectarian lines. In December, 2007, Canada pledged $300 million in aid to the Palestinians – a move coordinated with the relaunch of negotiations in Annapolis. Regrettably, in March, 2008, a Public Safety Canada press release indicated that “a significant component” of the $300 million was now going to be redirected to security, policing and other PROTEUS-related objectives.
3. Canada should address the impoverishment of the Palestinians, while respecting Israeli concerns, by negotiating an economic loosening of the Israeli occupation. Leveraging its relations with both Israel and Palestinians, Canada could intervene positively in a number of ways to boost the Palestinian economy, stimulate greater self-sufficiency and improve the standard of living.

**C: Canada must restore good will to its Middle East policy**

1. Canada must immediately call for a ceasefire when open conflict breaks out. During Israel’s War on Lebanon (2006), and Israel’s War on Gaza (2008-2009), the Canadian government gave lip service to “calm” and “a durable ceasefire,” but there was little on the diplomatic front to indicate that the government was serious about pushing for a ceasefire. In the 2006 War on Lebanon, the Harper government refused to push for a ceasefire even after the Foreign Affairs Committee voted to have it do so. Not only does this constitute a negative development for Canadian democracy and foreign-policy formulation, but a ceasefire is meaningless if it is imposed only after one party has brought its violent enterprise to fulfillment. In the case of Gaza and the West Bank, until there is a just resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict – one which addresses the legitimate grievances of both sides – any ceasefire can only be temporary.

2. Canada must contextualize any statement on the conflict regarding “self defence.” All peoples have the right to self-defence and “security.” By any objective measure, the people of Gaza and Lebanon had a much more pressing need to defend themselves in the conflicts of recent years than did the Israelis, as casualty rates and destruction was hundreds of times more severe than that for the Israelis. One must also point out that Israel launched the ground invasion of both Lebanon and Gaza, and not the other way around. Finally, Article 51 of the UN charter stipulates that self-defence only applies “until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security.” Thus, according to UN principles, the right to self-defence is short lived, and limited in scope. Israel consistently abrogates this principle and pursues violent action until it achieves its predetermined political objectives – a situation which Canada supports in both word and deed.

3. Canada must avoid highly partisan statements or assertions. Early in 2010, Minister of State Peter Kent stated that the Prime Minister “has made it quite clear for some time now and has regularly stated that an attack on Israel would be considered an attack on Canada.” Such statements undermine Canadian good will in the region, muddy Canada’s reputation, and are detached from any policy principles or treaties in place between Canada and Israel.

**D: Canada must critically analyze the reasons it’s a lone voice**

1. Canada’s positions on the Middle East do not reflect support for human rights and democratic principles. Despite assertions to the contrary by ministers and their representatives, Canada’s positions in the Middle East do not prioritize Canadian values of human rights, international law, peace, and diplomacy. As described above, Canada justifies its policy on subjective ideas like “balance,” “emphasis,” and “usefulness”.

2. Canada has begun to adopt a “good and evil” rhetoric concerning Middle East positions. In a speech late in 2010 concerning anti-Semitism and the UN, Prime Minister Harper announced “This is the paradox of freedom. That awesome power, that grave responsibility — to choose between good and evil.” While there are inflammatory statements made by all sides in the UN, such black and white assertions by the Harper government reflect a frightening moral certitude, unnecessarily polarize the debate, and replace diplomacy with dogma. The government often boasts that it has no contact with “terrorist organizations,” but such labels are frequently politically motivated, and ultimately stall progress with name-calling. In fact, in the 1980s, when the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was considered a terror organization, Canada maintained relations with the organization – ties that were ultimately useful in enabling the PLO to become a negotiations partner. The Conservative party also has contact with the Jewish Defense League – an organization included on the US and Israeli lists of terrorist groups.

3. Canada must ensure that religious beliefs about Israel do not cloud its Middle East policy making. In 2009, Conservative MP Jeff Watson was quoted in a speech saying, “The creation of the state of
Israel fulfills God’s promise in Deuteronomy to gather the Jewish people from all corners of the world.” Watson also expressed satisfaction that Canada “has not buckled to global criticism” in its “unshakable commitment to Israel.” With such assertions from members of the government, it is no wonder that there is increasing concern that Canada’s Middle East policy is being influenced according to religious perspectives.

**For more Information...**

For more information, please consult CJPME Website (www.cjpme.org) or call CJPME at 438-380-5410.

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1 Contrary to assertions by the Harper government, journalists were unable to find evidence that Ignatieff’s comments about Canada’s UNSC bid had any bearing on the outcome of the vote at the UN. Many international reps had never heard of Ignatieff.