

Canada's Role in the Middle East – Event Summary

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Presented by the Carleton Initiative for Parliamentary and Diplomatic Engagement
in association with the Arab Ambassadors

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Welcome:

His Excellency Khaled Bahah

Ambassador of Yemen and Vice Dean of the Arab Group

- Opens with a comment that the art of effective communication requires more than just talking
- Quote from Winston Churchill, who observed “courage is what it takes to stand up and speak, but also to sit down and listen”
- Effective communication means listening to the ideas of others to develop understanding and compassion for one another
- Three renowned intellectuals on the panel will now demonstrate this power

Panel Moderator

Dr. Farhang Rajaee

Professor of Political Science and Humanities and Director of the College of the Humanities, Carleton University

- Welcomes the panelists – “just looking at the expertise and experiences they have brought makes me intimidated”
- This is not just a gathering for three papers to be presented, but an opportunity for conversation and discussion
- The panelists will offer broad theoretical and practical insight into Canada's role in the Middle East followed by an open conversation.

Panelists

His Excellency Said Hamad

Chief Representative of the Palestinian Delegation

- Addresses two issues
 - 1) Canada's relationship with the Arab world
 - 2) the role of Canada in the Middle East
- There are a lot of similarities with Canada and the Middle East, as citizens have multiple identities in both regions. There are local attachments, local symbols and sense of belonging, but also bonds that transcend the local. These bonds are a product of common languages, as well as empires, common feelings as well as fealties, common cultures as well as convictions
- There are currents of both harmony and singularity flowing through the Arab peoples and so the "Canadian-Arab relationship" is a nuanced one
- Canada has to manage its day-to-day bilateral relationships with Arab states as well as more multifaceted relations with the Arab world
- In some areas and ways, Canada's Arab foreign policy is excelling; in others, Canadian leadership is found to be somewhat lacking. There are places where Canada champions human rights, and others where it remains silent
- Building economic ties with the Arab world and the Middle East at large is one area where Canada has loved to play an active role
- But there is a particular area, a particular hinge, upon which the fate of the region hangs. It is the focal point where Arab interests are most organically interwoven. It is the pang, if you will, in the Arab conscience. And that place is Palestine. And it is here where we would most like to see Canada play a greater role. It is here where Canada can do the most to improve its relations with the Arab world. And it is of the Palestinian dimension of the Canadian-Arab relationship that I would like to dedicate most of my time today
- After the Second World War, Canada played a significant role in the Palestinian narrative
- In 1947, when William Lyon Mackenzie King was Prime Minister, Canada, through its role in the United Nations, helped form a plan known as the 1947 partition plan which mandated the creation of a Jewish and an Arab state in Palestine
- Canada's diplomacy relating to the UN partition plan reflect an attempt to manage competing pressures. Historically, Canada has tried to balance opposing interests in the Israeli-Palestine conflict

- Many Canadian governments have gravitated towards the middle road approach in Israel and Palestine
- The Palestinians would like to see Canada play an active role in bringing about an equitable end to the occupation. We would like Canada to build on its contributions to the Palestinian justice and security sectors by remaining engaged, and to bring its considerable expertise in the health, education, and economic sectors to bear
- We would like Canada to understand that its friendship with Israel need not come at our expense, nor friendship with us come at theirs
- We know that if Canada takes a historically-informed and evidence-based approach to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, then it would find its reputation and influence greatly enhanced among the Arab states and in the Middle East at large
- The rewards for doing the right thing have never been greater, and neither has the need for Canada's constructive presence in the region

Dr. Bessma Momani

Senior Fellow at The Centre for International Governance Innovation and Brookings Institution, and associate professor of political science at the University of Waterloo and the Balsillie School of International Affairs

- We can see Canada's relationship with the Middle East as a glass half empty, but there is a glass half full too. There is lots of opportunity for Canada to engage on the economic front
- We can propose more ideas to support the Canada-Middle East relationship
- If you have seen the events of the past few years, look at the region through the lens of conflict, but also look at it as an entrepreneurial opportunity
- Canada's economic interest is to pursue contact with the Middle East
- Imports have increased by 200%
- We should pursue the Middle East as a market. Even without this though, we have seen an explosion of trade in a great way
- The GCC alone is just as significant as Brazil and India. You would be hard pressed to find someone who wouldn't say India and Brazil aren't valuable opportunities
- Much of our trade is with the United States, but this is why we should be searching out other markets. We should not be only investing in the United States

- This is where the opportunity rises: The Middle East is growing and the United States is not
- We can bring value-added to trade by investing in the Middle East. In every sector there is something for us to grow in
- The Middle East offers a trade where they want what we have and we want what they have
- We need a viable economy for Canada, and this is something in the long term we will not be getting from the United States
- Construction services, architectural, urban planning, this is where the growth is
- These are all sectors where we have the advantage and the knowledge. Those who wish to pursue these things are in the Middle East
- This is a source for development. We have an aging population and we need to be a destination for foreign investment
- We have done nothing to help trade with the Middle East, we need to encourage foreign investment
- It is in our interest and the Middle East's interest to join together for future growth
- Look at Australia. They are similar to us but we are not doing as well and we should be. Australia today has a surplus with the Middle East and we do not
- We need to make more trips to the Middle East and we need a prime minister who will be active in the Middle East

Ferry de Kerckhove

Distinguished Research Fellow at the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute and former Canadian Ambassador to Egypt

- We cannot forget the human approach to fostering relationships with the Middle East
- Cited the example of the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa and suggested it would also be useful in the Middle East
- Region needs to be partly rebuilt bottom up, from the grassroots of citizenry, to create, a healthy civil society, which in turn is a necessary element of democratic governance

- Problem is that in the process of nation building, too much focus has been put on homogeneity and top-down imposition of will
- Fear of diversity and refusal to recognize that diversity enriches rather than weakens societies
- But no richness without engagement with plurality of people
- Tolerance great but not enough. Tolerance towards difference is the root but pluralism entails the active seeking of understanding and sharing respect across lines of difference
- Not much of that happening in the MENA region
- Not much recognition of the right to be equal and different at the same time
- Pluralism calls for the following
 - A legal framework to enable citizen participation
 - Political stability and security – security for the people, that is !
 - Political will to provide space for diversity
 - Economic means
 - Recognition of social cultural norms to facilitate effective participation mechanisms
 - Identifying or supporting existing social dynamics – at least not ignore them (e.g. importance of faith in political discourse)
 - Empowering local people and developing capabilities at local level
 - Ensuring total community inclusion
 - Strengthening the institutional environment
 - Ensuring transparency of decision-making and accountability of implementation
- None of that can happen without tolerance, engagement and openness

Dr. Farhang Rajaee

Professor of Political Science and Humanities and Director of the College of the Humanities, Carleton University.

- We heard three challenges that the Canada-Arab relationship faces – we must consider the political dimension, the economic dimension and the human dimension
- The first challenge that we are faced with is a political problem, mainly the Palestinian issue
- The question is asking us: How truthful are we to our own principles?
- Are we following the middle of the road? It is true the principle might be the middle of the road, but on the ground it may be a different story
- In reality what we do in the Middle East may be violating our own principles. We should simply be loyal to our principles that our founding fathers have made for us to follow in Canada
- Maybe the challenge is economics, so we must pay attention to this
- If we do not see the Middle East as a giant economic system with its own strength and possibilities, we will miss a huge opportunity for Canada
- Politics and economics aside, the Middle East is a human network. The question of security should be human security, not state security
- Tolerance, engagement, openness: three words that we must remember.

Audience Questions

What are the pitfalls of Canada pursuing an economic strategy in the absence of Canadian values of justice and equality?

Dr. Bessma Momani: Which one do you wait for first? Does Canada engage economically with a government who is not observant of the rule of law? When we pursue economic trade we pursue the standard of living, and I think we create a more viable public that push governments towards the kind of rule of law we see. Once someone pursues that kind of political engagement in these countries it makes a difference for the better. We have to remember the Arab Spring showed us the people have a desire for political liberalization, accountability, and a stronger voice.

Arab Canadians have not played their part here in Canada. The onus is on us to organize, but we have not joined political parties, committees, we have done absolutely nothing. We who consider ourselves Canadians of Arab origin are full citizens, and we need to exert more influence and organize and communicate.

His Excellency Said Hamad: Arabs physically live here, but in their minds they think of back home. They need to start believing they are fully Canadian citizens to start making a difference, but unfortunately this is not always the case.

Dr. Bessma Momani: There are two main reasons for this. First, the Arab Canadian community is a young community. There are roots for more than one hundred years, but the biggest influx took place in the 1990s. They are now going through the university system, and things will get better. Secondly, the Middle East has divisive politics. It's not easy to find a consensus among Arab Canadians, which makes things more difficult to organize. One of the challenges has been defining Arab Canadian – many do not think of themselves beyond the identity of the nation state they came from.

Canada has always been deeply committed to human rights. How can we get Canadians to understand the occupation of Palestine in human rights terms? Many people don't look at the human security of Palestinians.

His Excellency Said Hamad: Palestinians in occupied territory have been suffering. It is the international community's responsibility to solve the Palestinian problem. The United Nations should take the responsibility of reinforcing a solution as they did in other countries in the Middle East. This is really an international issue that needs to be solved for once and for all.

Canada's role in the Middle East is very complicated. I see that there is some generalization and version of the real. There is something missing, the real obstacles. There is great potential between Canada and Middle East relations, but can you pinpoint the obstacles and give us ideas on how to engage?

Dr. Bessma Momani:

- The truth is that many Canadians don't care about foreign affairs, unfortunately.
- It is important to demonstrate to people in Canada that our engagement with the Middle East becomes a domestic issue and it is very important.
- We are a community that is incorporating more Arabs.
- What happens outside Canada matters for inside Canada, we need to reiterate this.
- It is very easy for people to ignore what is going on in the Middle East.

Ferry de Kerckhove:

- During the Arab league conference, it was mentioned that the Canadian-Arab community was not doing its share in informing the Canadian public.
- One thing that has to be developed is initiatives to educate people.
- If there is no vote for foreign policy why would we bother? We have to get people to vote.

- Today, the Arab League has been improving its capacity. We should interest ourselves in foreign policy.

When money is involved, it seems as though everyone loves everyone. It is good that they addressed the open door policy of trade. Traditionally Canada has opened its arms to underdogs. We have always taken the stance of strength, but it is time to show that we are not as strong as we think we are and we need to show the rest of the world who we are.

Ferry de Kerckhove:

- Sometimes people forget or discard their roots, but not always.
- Islam is a natural thing and it is normal. There is a default position that doesn't look at Islam as a normal thing, although it is the fastest growing religion in the country. This frightens people.
- Faith is the most fundamental element that needs tolerance.

Dr. Bessma Momani:

- If one wanted to take the moral high ground: Legitimate and honorable
- Short term: Money and the economic interest

Dr. Farhang Rajaei:

- The money will not get us there. The Middle East, past and present, has been hostage mentally and physically, by India in the past.
- The Middle East became hostage to India first. Then it became hostage to the Soviet Union. This continues to Israeli and so on.
- I am aware of state-centric security, and I disagree. This idea of tolerance and agreement are real issues. Unless you engage, you will not get anywhere. You will not be able to be tolerant if you do not have confidence.
- Unless we fight imperialistic mentality and timidity, we will not get anywhere.

Please comment on the situation in Syria. Is there a way to actively engage?

Dr. Bessma Momani:

- We have an enormous role in Syria. As humanitarians, we have a role. It is affecting Syria and its partners. Both Lebanon and Jordan have taken in an influx of people.
- It is deeply on the minds of many regional governments, but there continues to be lots of pain and suffering.
- We can do more in terms of humanitarian aid and we can get to know the situation better by talking to Syrian-Canadians.
- There are more than 70,000 dead that we know of, most likely more. And this weighs heavily on us.

Ferry de Kerckhove:

- Do Canadians know what a beautiful country Syria was?
- There are practical issues that have been left beside on purpose.
- Any real intervention will be rejected by the Security Council.
- It is easy to say it is too difficult, but any way we can reduce damage and lives taken is a plus.
- The more we wait the more people that will pass away, we should look at an alternative solution.
- The no fly zone could have prevented serious damage today.

Closing Remarks:

Dr. André Plourde

Dean of the Faculty of Public Affairs, Carleton University

- We want to provide a safe space to challenge each other's views in a way that is respectful to others.
- We have had an excellent example of this this afternoon. We have been invited to see the world in different lenses. We saw the Middle East through a lens of national security. It is time to look at it through a lens of human security.
- Is it sufficient to bring about the investment that people have talked about?
- From the government's perspective, we worry there is no capacity to understand the Middle East.
- What better place to address this than our research institutions such as Carleton University.

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