Growth in economic relations of Canada and the Arab world

By L. A. Delvoie

For some 20 years following the end of the Second World War, Canada's relations with the Arab world were to a large extent a by-product of Canadian interest in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Successive Canadian Governments considered that the dispute, and its periodic eruptions into open warfare, represented a serious threat to world peace and constituted a source of instability and suffering for the countries and peoples of the Middle East. Canada sought, within the limits of its capabilities and resources, to help attenuate the threat and mitigate the suffering. Canada's first significant contacts with Arab countries thus took place within the framework of United Nations efforts to maintain peace and bring humanitarian relief to the victims of the Middle Eastern conflict.

From 1949 onward, Canadian military officers served in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt as members of the United Nations Truce Supervisory Organization (UNTSO). From 1956 to 1967, several thousand Canadian military personnel served in Egypt and the Gaza Strip as part of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), in the establishment of which Canada had played a leading role following the Suez crisis of 1956. In support of the humanitarian endeavours of the UN in the area, Canada became, from 1950 onward, one of the major contributors of money and food to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA).

Outside the UN framework, however, Canada's official presence in the Arab world was very modest. Embassies were established in Cairo and Beirut during the 1950s, but they existed less for the purpose of fostering bilateral relations than of monitoring developments in the Arab-Israeli dispute and making known Canadian views concerning these developments to the five Arab governments to which they were accredited (Egypt, the Sudan, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan).

The Canadian Government continues, of course, to maintain a high degree of interest in international efforts to help resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, as is shown by Canadian military participation in UN peacekeeping operations along the Syrian-Israeli and Egyptian-Israeli cease-fire lines since the war of 1973, as well as by Canada's continuing support for UNRWA ($3.2 million in 1975-76). Within the past decade, however, Canada has begun to add a new dimension to its relations with a number of Arab countries, a bilateral dimension that is becoming increasingly evident in the economic domain.

Policy decisions

This development has occurred within a broad framework of policy decisions taken by the Canadian Government and of new realities affecting many Arab countries. In the mid 1960s, the Canadian Government came to the conclusion that Canada's international development-assistance programs should, among other things, provide "an outward-looking expression of the bilingual character of Canada" and help "contribute to our sense of internal unity and purpose". Since Canada's bilateral economic-assistance efforts had until that time been concentrated almost exclusively in Commonwealth countries, the practical effect of this policy decision was the initiation of aid programs in several French-speaking countries in Africa. It was within this context that Canada established its first substantive bilateral relations with three Arab countries: Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

A review of Canada's relations with the United States, undertaken in 1972, led the Canadian Government to adopt a policy whose basic aim "would be, over time, to lessen the vulnerability of the

Recognition of realities now affecting Arab countries

Mr. Delvoie is counsellor at the Canadian Embassy, Belgium. A large part of his career in External Affairs has been spent dealing with the Middle East both in Ottawa and abroad, where he has served in Lebanon, Egypt and Algeria. The views expressed here are those of the author.