

Canada's Middle East tilt

by Peyton Lyon

That domestic interests should determine external policies was elevated to a central principle in the Trudeau Doctrine of 1970. Nowhere has the principle been more rigorously honored, or has it accomplished more harm, than in the Middle East. Once the locale of Canada's proudest achievement in global diplomacy, the region has become the source of considerable embarrassment, and not merely to Joe Clark. Although professing to be balanced, in accordance with its peacekeeping vocation, Canada's approach has in fact long tilted in favor of Israel. This has reduced our capacity to promote peace, tarnished our reputation for objectivity, independence and common sense, and limited our trade. The tilt has been caused mainly by the ignorance of Canadian politicians and their eagerness to retain or gain the support of an ethnic community modest in numbers but weighty in influence.

Outside observers have always categorized Canada as one of Israel's most predictable supporters. The bias in its UN voting record has been exceeded only by the United States and Costa Rica. Since the election in 1976 of the Begin government, Canadian spokesmen have more frequently criticized Israeli expansionism, violence and denial of civil rights; they have, for example, spoken out against the bombing of Iraq's nuclear installation, the extension of jurisdiction over the Golan Heights and the brutal invasion of Lebanon. They have also become more emphatic and precise in speaking of Palestinian rights to a homeland in the West Bank and Gaza. Most other countries, however, including all Canada's allies apart from the United States, have been more severe in their condemnation, more objective in the UN voting, and more realistic in their treatment of the Palestine Liberation Organization as a legitimate and inescapable participant in the Middle East peace process. Arab governments have commended the improvement in Canada's words, but, along with the United States, we are more isolated than ever in our pro-Israel voting stance. Some UN insiders argue that words count for more than votes; others stress that voting statistics are likely to be cited long after the words are forgotten.

Who represents Palestinians?

Another touchstone of friendship for the Arab world is a nation's willingness to deal with the PLO as the authentic voice of the Palestinian nation. This need not mean, of course, approval of terrorist acts any more than dealing with Israel means approving the terrorism of Menachem Begin and his associates in the establishment of Israel, or

its subsequent expansion. Unlike Washington, Ottawa has never made rejection of the PLO a matter of principle and its officials have for years been permitted to meet PLO representatives informally. Privately no one in Ottawa pretends that any other group could now speak for the Palestinian community, but our official position remains a firm rejection of the PLO's claim to be the sole legitimate spokesman for the Palestinians. PLO representatives are denied access to government offices and Canadian officials are far more cautious in their informal contacts than their counterparts from such allies as Britain, France and Germany.

Canada's support for the Camp David peace process has not won favor with most Arab governments but is in step with the policies of most of our allies. More damaging to Canada's image in Arab eyes was the way the Trudeau cabinet, pushed by the governments of Ontario and Toronto, reneged on its offer to host the 1975 UN Conference on Crime on the grounds that the UN insisted that PLO observers be permitted to attend, as in New York and other UN centres.

While the Clark government backed off from its electoral pledge to move the Canadian embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the incident was widely noted and did little to persuade Arabs that Canadians have mastered the ABC's of Middle East politics. Arabs with long memories recall that Canadian representatives, notably Justice Ivan Rand and Lester Pearson, played a decisive role in the creation of the state of Israel, and frequently betrayed an anti-Arab bias.

This did not exclude a constructive contribution to conflict containment in the Middle East. Pearson earned his Nobel prize; a few Canadians continue to serve as UN peacekeepers in the area, and Canada supports refugee relief. Uncharacteristically, we failed to become a permanent part of the UN operation in the Lebanon, but declining to supply troops for the non-UN presence in Sinai is one of Ottawa's few decisions that have pleased most Arab governments. So too has the increase in the number of Canadian embassies in the area, and the visits by Trudeau and other ministers.

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