

Canada is a principal partner in the multilateral process. It chairs the Refugee Working Group and is a member of the steering group that oversees the five working groups. It is also a member of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, which co-ordinates international assistance to the Palestinian Authority. Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister visited the region to meet with Arab and Israeli leaders in 1997.

Canada also participates in the Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group. As the facilitator for maritime confidence-building measures, Canada hosted several activities, including a maritime safety colloquium in Nova Scotia in 1997. At the invitation of the Canadian Coast Guard and with the support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), this event brought together search and rescue experts from around the Middle East.

Canada also contributes technical expertise and development assistance to the working groups on water resources and on the environment. Through CIDA, a training program for Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian water data technicians is being designed.

Refugee Working Group

The continuing plight of the Palestinian refugees displaced by the Arab-Israeli conflict is among the most important issues to be addressed by the Mideast peace process. At present there are 3.6 million refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank and Gaza registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. All parties to the peace process acknowledge that finding a just solution to the refugee problem is fundamental to achieving a comprehensive and durable peace in the Middle East.

Chaired by Canada, the Refugee Working Group seeks to reunite families and improve the living conditions of refugees and displaced people without prejudice to their rights and future status. The refugee issue is recognized to be difficult and delicate. Along with the issues of boundaries, settlements, and Jerusalem, it is primarily a matter for negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

The working group operates by consensus, in accordance with rules set by the group as a whole. The main subjects under discussion are databases, human resource development (including manpower training and job creation), family reunification, development of economic and social infrastructure, child welfare and public health. Canada has hosted two of the eight plenary meetings held to date.

Although Lebanon does not participate in the Refugee Working Group, Canada has been working with Lebanon and other concerned countries to mobilize international aid for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and to ensure that the question of their future remains in the international spotlight.