

Statement

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**NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS BY
THE HONOURABLE ANDRÉ OUELLET,
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
ON THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE LIBANAISE SYRIENNE
DU QUÉBEC**

**MONTREAL, Quebec
October 22, 1994**



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Mr. Chairman of the organizing committee for the 75th anniversary of the foundation of the Association Canadienne Libanaise Syrienne du Québec, Mr. President of the Association, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I am pleased to join you tonight in celebration of the 75th anniversary of your association. It is the living expression of the very first ties that developed between Canada and the Middle East in the early 1900s, ties that have become stronger in recent decades with the influx of Lebanese who have found in Canada a refuge from the troubles that have afflicted their beautiful country. The contribution that the members of your community have made to our cultural, business, religious and political life is valuable to all Canadians. There is no area of Canadian life that does not benefit considerably from the energetic and creative activities of your members.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to take the opportunity that I have been given tonight to provide a quick overview of the role that Canada has played and will continue to play in the Middle East, especially in the peace process and the gradual stability that is being established in Lebanon.

Bilateral and Multilateral Components - Canada's Role

Canada participates in the five working groups created in the wake of the Madrid Conference of 1991, which marked the launch of the Middle East peace process. One of the Government of Canada's future priorities will be, among other things, to support as part of the peace process, future security arrangements on the border between Syria, Lebanon and Israel by applying Security Council Resolution 242 on the Golan Heights and Resolution 425 on southern Lebanon.

I think Canada is well prepared to play a role in these countries as a result of its traditional contribution to United Nations peacekeeping operations in the Middle East and other corners of the world. Canada has been active in Lebanon since 1954 to supervise the truce in Israel, and contributed to the force in southern Lebanon in 1978. Moreover, Canada has contributed to the United Nations force on the Golan Heights in Syria since 1974.

Meanwhile, we will continue to support the efforts of our Israeli, Syrian and Lebanese friends to achieve a just, comprehensive and lasting peace. My latest contacts at the UN with my counterparts in the region strengthened my conviction that they would achieve this goal. There is widespread awareness in the Middle East that peace and individual interests have become inseparable.

The role assigned to Canada by the international community involves the Working Group on Refugees, which has been chaired by my Assistant Deputy Minister for Africa and the Middle East since

1992. Since the issue of refugees lies at the very heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict, I can assure you that we take our role in chairing this working group very seriously.

There are more than 650 000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria alone. Many of them fled their homes over 45 years ago. If we really wish to create a "new" Middle East, one that is at peace, with prosperity and security for all of its people, we must achieve a fair and equitable settlement of the refugee question. Refugees must reap their own peace dividends, the possibility of living with dignity and a recognized identity, and of playing a full and active role in this new Middle East to which we aspire and for which we are working as energetically as possible.

The Working Group on Refugees offers encouraging prospects. In addition to hosting two of its six meetings, Canada led an international mission this year to refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, and contributed \$1.3 million to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) program to construct emergency shelters for the homeless in the Beirut area, and an added \$2.3 million for other projects in camps in these countries and in Syria.

While taking part in the other four working groups, Canada brought together senior naval officers of 10 Middle Eastern countries last month in Nova Scotia. In February 1994, it hosted the multilateral steering group.

I am confident that progress on the issue of the Golan and southern Lebanon will soon allow Syria and Lebanon to join in this multilateral task of historical significance. Their involvement is essential in seeking acceptable solutions to issues such as that of refugees. It is their future that is at stake, and the international community needs the active collaboration of Damascus and Beirut.

Canadian Assistance to the Peace Process - The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)

CIDA's assistance program is another tangible expression of Canada's active role in the peace process. Among other things, CIDA has established a \$2.5-million Canadian fund for experts and services to mobilize Canadian expertise in the service of peacebuilding.

A \$2.1-million Canadian fund for dialogue and development also allows the organization of workshops and seminars to bring together representatives of communities that have historically been enemies to discuss development issues. Several meetings have been held in Lebanon. These contributions are in addition to \$55-million commitments to the West Bank and Gaza over a

five-year period, and our strengthened support for the peace program of UNRWA for its activities in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

Regional Economic Conference in Casablanca

The progress of the peace process is changing the trade picture in the Middle East. Our businesses must keep an eye on these changes. To do business in this region, it is increasingly necessary to be able to form partnerships with local firms that are familiar with markets and can monitor the rapid development of local economies.

At the end of next week, in Casablanca, I will have the opportunity to attend the first conference devoted to the economy of the Middle East and North Africa. The objective of this summit conference, which will be hosted by King Hassan of Morocco, is to consolidate the peace process in the Middle East by strengthening economic co-operation and development.

I have asked the Canadian business leaders who will accompany me to take part in the various technical workshops on the region's economic future, and to report to me on this region's potential for Canadian businesses. Their report will enable us to better target our trade activities and to better advise businesses on the most promising sectors.

Relations with Syria

Canada's Syrian community, with several thousand members who are proud of their country of adoption, is also a decisive factor in the promising future of our relations with Syria.

In June 1994, I had the pleasure of granting the request by Syrian authorities to appoint Mr. Fares Attar as Honourary Consul General of Syria in Montreal. I am sure that this appointment will make it easier for Canadians wishing to travel to Syria for personal, family or official reasons, or for tourism and trade.

Visits by Canadian missions have identified encouraging prospects for trade with Syria. These contacts allow the development of closer relations between Canada and its partners in the Middle East.

There have been promising developments in our relations with Syria in recent years. In the context of the realignment caused by the breakup of the former Soviet Union and the invasion of Kuwait, it is highly significant that a contingent of Canadian armed forces found itself alongside those of Syria during the Gulf crisis in 1991. As mentioned earlier, Canada has been active in Syria since 1974 by contributing to the UN forces on the Golan Heights.

In this context, my colleague the Minister of National Defence, the Honourable David Collette, visited the region last June. Furthermore, at the conclusion of the peace process, Canada would be willing to consider participating in further peacekeeping missions in the Golan region.

With regard to trade, a few developments are worth mentioning. The Minister of Transport of Quebec, Mr. Elkas, headed a trade mission to Syria in 1993; the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs of Quebec, Mr. Ciaccia, did likewise in May of this year. On the Syrian side, the Syrian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Allouch, came to Ottawa on an official visit in July 1994, a first for Canada at this level. During his visit, he informed us of Syria's wish to open an embassy in Ottawa in the near future.

I am confident that these contacts will lead to the desired results. I repeat that we will continue to encourage Canada's private sector to go ahead and develop our bilateral relations with Syria.

Development Assistance to Lebanon

The development of Lebanon depends not only on the material reconstruction of its assets but also on the re-establishment of public institutions. Recognizing the positive development of the situation, I recently approved the launching of an initial bilateral project funded by CIDA, for a total of some \$770 000. Implemented jointly with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the project aims to reform public administration in co-operation with the Lebanese Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs, under the theme of good governance.

CIDA is planning another project to support training for managers and administrators of Lebanese non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Finally, a third project could focus on the development and modernization of the taxation department of the Lebanese Ministry of Finance.

Reconstruction Program - Trade

Lebanon also offers a great number of opportunities for Canada's private sector. Please allow me to give you a brief overview.

The Beirut reconstruction program launched by Prime Minister Hariri's government, a project totalling some \$12 billion over a 10-year period, offers numerous business opportunities for Canadian exporters wishing to take part in this reconstruction effort.

After having collapsed during the civil war, our trade with Lebanon is now experiencing an encouraging recovery, largely due

to the entrepreneurship of the Lebanese community in Canada. Our exports increased from less than \$8 million in 1990 to nearly \$44 million in 1993. I wish to note here in Montréal that Quebec alone accounts for 63 per cent of all Canadian exports to Lebanon.

We support efforts to ensure Canada's presence in Lebanon. A trade mission (the first in 17 years) was conducted in November 1993. The eight members of Canada's private sector and representatives of my department received a warm welcome from President Hraoui, Prime Minister Hariri, and Lebanese business people.

In January 1994, business people sponsored by the Canada-Arab Business Council went to Lebanon. In May, Minister for International Trade Roy MacLaren's parliamentary secretary, Mac Harb, made his second visit to Lebanon with one of our directors of trade development. A few weeks ago, another trade mission in the telecommunications sector visited Lebanon and Syria. At the same time, other Canadian firms took part in the "Rebuild Lebanon" exhibition in Beirut. These exchanges help to make Canadian business people more visible on the Lebanese market, where a good dozen Canadian companies are currently implementing projects.

At the same time, I am well aware that these reconstruction projects, and the trade opportunities they offer, will require us to make an effort to assist the poorest in Lebanon, who are still suffering from the trauma of war and must now face inflation.

CIDA will continue to provide assistance through Canadian or Lebanese NGOs active in Lebanon, and multilateral organizations involved in humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees and Lebanese displaced within their own country. Not counting our contribution to UNRWA, CIDA allocated \$2 million for Lebanon in 1994.

Canadian-Lebanese Relations - The Human Factor

I began my presentation by talking about the importance of the human factor in our relations with Lebanon. Indeed, I do not need to tell you that there are over 250 000 Canadians of Lebanese descent. Thus, there are few families in Lebanon that do not have a relative in Canada. Many Canadians, including several members of Parliament and senators, in addition to business people of Lebanese origin, naturally follow current developments in Lebanon with keen interest.

I am thinking, for example, of Senator De Bané's attendance at the first world conference of parliamentarians of Lebanese origin in Lebanon in November 1993; Senator Hébert's attendance at the launching of the Association of Lebanese Graduates in Canada in

September; and former Minister Ciaccia's spearheading of the largest mission to Lebanon by a Canadian province. Finally, I could not overlook the activities of the Canada-Lebanon Chamber of Commerce and Industry, with its dynamic president, Georges Homsy. With the gradual resumption of a more normal life in Lebanon, these ties between Lebanese and Lebanese Canadians can now yield results for the benefit of all concerned.

Ladies and gentlemen, real and tangible progress has been made in the Middle East in recent years within the framework of the peace process and the restoration of a degree of stability in Lebanon. These developments are a source of genuine satisfaction for all those who care about establishing a just peace in the region and a renewed future for Lebanon.

A new page has finally been turned in Lebanon after so many years of war. We must build together on the progress I have just outlined. To do so, we must continue to develop human ties between our two countries, we must strengthen our business ties, we must multiply our political ties. Thus, I have decided to proceed with the reopening of the Canadian Embassy in Beirut in the beginning of the new year.

Caution is still in order, of course, but I am confident that the objectives that we are setting with our partners in the region can be achieved.

In closing, I wish to tell you once again how pleased I am to be among you tonight. I wish to thank the leaders of your association for giving me the opportunity to express my views on Canada's role in the Middle East, Lebanon and Syria.

Thank you.