



CANADA

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

INFORMATION DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
OTTAWA - CANADA

No. 69/20

VISIT TO THE MIDDLE EAST

The Secretary of State for External Affairs, the Honorable Mitchell Sharp, in the House of Commons, November 19, 1969.

I rise to report upon my visit to the Middle East, which took place last week.

Canada has been closely concerned in Middle Eastern affairs since we participated in the activities of the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine, which drew up the Palestine partition plan of 1947. We voted for the United Nations resolution setting up the state of Israel in 1948. Recognition of the right of the state of Israel to exist remains an essential feature of our Middle Eastern policy. At the same time, we try to maintain an objective approach to the current problems of the area. Our essential objective is that all states there should be enabled to live in peace and security, free from threats of war or territorial encroachment.

For two decades, Canada has had military personnel in United Nations peacekeeping operations in the area. Canada is also the third largest contributor to the United Nations agency working for the relief of the Arab refugees.

Our Middle Eastern policy has largely found expression through the United Nations in New York. It was there that we took part in the steps which led to the birth of the state of Israel; it was there that the United Nations Emergency Force was established. More recently, as a member of the Security Council, it was there that we took part in drafting Resolution 242 of November 1967, the resolution that we feel offers the best available framework for progress toward peace in the area.

My visits were a reflection of our long involvement in the affairs of the Middle East, in response to invitations from the Foreign Ministers of Iran, Israel and the United Arab Republic, and in return for visits paid to Canada by the Shah of Iran, the President, the late Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Israel, and the Foreign Minister of the United Arab Republic. More particularly, I wished to learn at first hand the attitudes and policies of the governments concerned with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

I return from my visit both saddened and discouraged. Prime Minister Meir and President Nasser both told me that they seek a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is very hard to see how useful negotiations can begin when the preoccupations of the parties are in direct confrontation. Israel is preoccupied with the security of its boundaries and its insistence upon direct negotiations with its neighbors. The United Arab Republic is preoccupied with the withdrawal of Israel to its pre-1967 boundaries and the fate of the Arab refugees. I can see no immediate resolution of this confrontation.

When I went to the Middle East, I had no solution to offer and no proposals to make; I went to inform myself on the situation as seen by Iran, a nation which does not take sides, and by the two main protagonists. In every country visited we were received with great courtesy by the head of state, the principal minister and the foreign minister. In each country the heads of state and their ministers devoted many hours to concentrated conversations. The views I expressed in outlining Canadian policy were given thoughtful consideration and the questions I asked answered fully and forthrightly. Wherever I went I found a manifest wish to have Canada understand the positions taken. This reminds us of Canada's special standing as a peace-seeking and peacemaking nation and is evidence, perhaps, of the need for understanding on the part of the nations in conflict.

My first visit was to Iran, where I saw a nation preoccupied with the advancement of its economy and the improvement of the conditions of life of its people. Its geographical location requires Iran to be intimately involved in the problems of the Middle East. I found a nation some 6,000 miles from Canada, in the heart of the Middle East, pursuing a Middle Eastern policy closely parallel to our own. In my subsequent visits, I found my discussions in Tehran most useful both for the information I drew from them and for the political attitudes expressed.

In Israel I was moved, as anyone must be, by the sense of pride in nationhood that characterizes that country, and deeply impressed by what has been achieved in nation-building in 20 years. In Egypt I saw a nation where the evidences of ancient glory are very much present, contrasting cruelly with the present-day struggle to evolve a better standard of living for its people.

The situation in the Middle East today is tragic. There is so much to be done in that part of the world and the will and technology are there. The tragedy is that in so many of the countries the resources needed for development are tied up in an arid confrontation which threatens to burst into violent conflict.

I left the Middle East with a profound sense of disquiet. Effective negotiation is not an immediate prospect. Escalation of the conflict is an immediate danger. In these circumstances, perhaps the best role for Canada to play in the foreseeable future is that of an understanding, compassionate and objective observer, ready to assist if and when there is a specific task for us to undertake at the instance of both sides.

Let us hope that, notwithstanding the present difficulties, counsels of moderation will prevail, and that someday, somehow, peace will come to the Middle East.

It would not be appropriate in a statement on motions to review in detail the bilateral discussions we had in each capital. There are great trading opportunities, particularly with Iran and Israel, and some important possibilities with the United Arab Republic. All three countries are eager for increasing contact with us. Perhaps one of the ways we can help is to be more of a presence in the Middle East, a part of the world that needs friends and cherishes friendship.

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