

STATEMENT DISCOURS



SPEECH BY THE
SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,
THE HONOURABLE
ALLAN J. MACEachEN,
TO THE TENTH ANNUAL
CONVENTION OF THE
CANADIAN ARAB FEDERATION,
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I first of all express my pleasure at having been invited to address the Tenth Annual Convention of the Canadian Arab Federation, particularly as I was prevented last year by a previous engagement from fulfilling my intention of speaking at your annual meeting. I recall, Mr. President, that that convention was held in the city of Toronto of which you are the articulate representative on the governing body of your organization. I have learned with interest that this is the first time that your annual sessions are held in a Canadian western city, and I interpret this as a well-deserved homage to the more than 10,000 Canadians of Arab origin who have elected to make Edmonton their place of residence.

I also take it as confirmation of your Federation's aspiration to represent all Canadians of Arab origin; I am therefore delighted to be provided with such an appropriate forum to pay a personal tribute to the tens of thousands of my countrymen of Arab origin or descent who, in their diverse capacities and walks of life, in the academic halls, in the fields of science and technology or in the House of Commons as well as in Provincial Parliaments, have made and are making invaluable contributions to the building of Canada while adding to the rich diversity of our culture, where all our friends and visitors can find something of their homeland.

In this context, the topic you have chosen for this year's convention, that is, "Strengthening Ties between Canadian and Arab Peoples", is most appropriate, as well as being very timely. It is perhaps not sufficiently appreciated by the public that the Government of Canada is fully committed to developing and accelerating that process. Indeed, one of the primary purposes of my visit to the Middle East in January of this year was to reaffirm the ties that already exist between Canada and the Arab states in the area, and to discuss important new agreements and links which hold considerable promise for the expansion of our relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, to name only three of the countries which I was privileged to visit for the first time. My visit also served to demonstrate to the Canadian public the importance the Government attaches to the strengthening of these links.

My itinerary was determined by the kind invitations of my hosts and brought me to the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Republic of Iraq and the State of Israel. I had the privilege of meeting with Heads of State or of Government, and in addition I engaged in extensive discussions with my counterparts and with many other senior Ministers.

A visit to Lebanon was also included in my initial programme and, while planning progressed for my trip, I was following the situation in that unhappy country on a day-to-day basis. Unfortunately, it was clear by the time I left Canada that the conditions prevailing in Lebanon made it impossible to carry out a successful visit there. This was a great disappointment, particularly because it was caused by a tragic and bloody civil war which has been the source of much pain and suffering in that once peaceful and prosperous country. I am hopeful that recent events on the political level indicate a willingness to seek a settlement through negotiations rather than through violence, and that a modus vivendi, respecting the rights of all elements of Lebanese society, can be worked out that will put an end to the strife.

Despite this unavoidable gap in my programme, I consider that my first official visit to the Middle East was an important step in the process of expanding and deepening our relations with the Arab countries in that area. Tonight, I should like to share with you my impressions of the countries I visited and to outline some of the discussions I had with their leaders.

An important purpose in undertaking this tour was to reiterate to my hosts that Canada continues to be deeply concerned by the tragic Middle East conflict and that our policy in this extremely complex dispute aims at balance and objectivity, and, more importantly, rests on principle. I tried to make clear that Canada, while not a party to the dispute, does what it can to make a positive contribution to a possible peaceful solution by its peacekeeping activities in the area. I think our general acceptability as peacekeepers is an indication of the confidence in our impartiality that is placed upon us by the contending parties. I was particularly pleased by King Hussein's comment that "we feel that if there is a description that could be given to nations -- and that would be the peacemakers -- Canada obviously comes at the head of the list..."

Canada presently participates in both the UNEF¹ operation in the Sinai and in UNDOF² on the Golan Heights. We contribute about 850 personnel to the operation in the Sinai theatre and about 150 personnel to UNDOF. Our contribution is in the form of logistics support and we share this role with Poland, a Warsaw Pact country. Of special concern at the moment is the UNDOF peacekeeping operation, since its mandate is due to be renewed, with the consent of the parties concerned, at the end of this month. It is our hope and our expectation that the mandate will be renewed as scheduled since it is our firm belief that UNDOF is contributing in a most significant fashion to the stabilization of tensions in the region and therefore, to prospects for an eventual negotiated solution. It is to be pointed out that UNDOF not only serves stability in the region by the interposition of a UN presence between Syria and Israel, but that its mandate (as the mandate of UNEF) includes arrangements for the observation and inspection of the limited forces zones on each side of the area of separation.

1. United Nations Emergency Force.

During my discussions on the Middle East conflict I addressed myself specifically to the Palestinian problem which has become recognized by the world community, and this unequivocally includes Canada, as an essential element in the search for a just and lasting settlement. Throughout my trip, including in Israel, I stressed this point and confirmed my conviction that unless the legitimate interests of the Palestinians were met, a just and lasting settlement could not be achieved. It has been the Canadian Government's view for some years now that these legitimate interests include the right of the Palestinian Arabs to be heard and to participate in all discussions and negotiations affecting their future. This, I suggest, is fully consistent with the "principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples" as enshrined in the very first article of the U.N. Canada continues to insist, however, that the internationally recognized rights in the area of other peoples and states be equally respected.

Insofar as the PLO itself is concerned, I explained to my hosts in the Middle East that Canada, which was a party neither to the conflict nor to the negotiations, did not consider it appropriate to pronounce itself on whether that organization should or should not be the sole representative of the Palestinian people. It certainly appears, however, that the PLO has emerged as the most prominent spokesman of the Palestinian people at this time. I have, of course, observed with interest the recent municipal elections on the West Bank and will follow with the closest attention the impact which their results may have on clarifying the Palestinian representation question.

While I am fully aware that the PLO has received considerable support within the international community, I find it equally noteworthy that all my Arab hosts who commented on Canada's attitude on the Palestinian representation question expressed full understanding for our position. Indeed one Arab Foreign Minister expressed to me his view which was that our stand on this matter was "a fair policy".

As you know, Canada has announced its candidacy for a seat on the United Nations Security Council for a two-year term beginning January 1, 1977. When we are elected, and there is every reason to believe we will be, we will be more deeply than ever involved in international efforts to grapple with the Middle East conflict, and our policy will come under even closer scrutiny. After my trip to the Middle East, and following my discussions with both Arab and Israeli leaders, I am convinced that our policy, which attempts to come to grips with and reflect the current realities, is able to withstand that scrutiny. While each of the two sides would, of course, welcome greater Canadian support for its own position, I am confident that each side will continue to acknowledge and respect Canada's objective and even-handed approach to the conflict. This is, of course, essential if our endeavours to make a positive contribution to a resolution of the problems are to be credible.

When discussing the Middle East conflict, there is perhaps an inevitable tendency to think in terms of two opposing sides. I cannot, however, ignore the fact that there is considerable diversity among the various Arab countries, and that despite their many similarities, there are among them important historical, cultural and economic differences. In my view it is important to keep in mind the differences, as well as the similarities, in order to arrive at a fuller appreciation of the diverse realities in the Middle East. It is only with such an appreciation that our bilateral relations with each of the countries can be developed in a truly meaningful way.

Thus, I thought it particularly important to establish a personal relationship with Arab leaders and I found this reflection reconfirmed by my visit to Cairo, the first stop on my itinerary. As the most populous of the Arab states, Egypt, which links two continents, occupies a key position in the Eastern Mediterranean; it has played in the last decades a paramount role in the politics of the Middle East and has a considerable influence in the developing world. This confluence of factors gives Egyptian statesmen a unique perspective, and I found my conversations with President Sadat and Foreign Minister Fahmy both stimulating and illuminating.

In bilateral terms, I found in Egypt general agreement that new emphasis must be given to Egypt-Canada relations in fields such as trade, investment, development and technical co-operation, as well as cultural affairs. The Egyptian economy appears on the threshold of a period of encouraging development which should provide the basis for broader economic exchanges. But Egypt remains a country with urgent needs for development assistance. I informed Foreign Minister Fahmy that, within the framework of our new international development strategy, active consideration would be given to providing Egypt with Canadian technical and financial assistance. Equally, development projects could be considered in conjunction with other bilateral or multilateral donors. Additionally, I authorized CIDA¹ to make a contribution of one million dollars to the special account of the UNDP² programme for the reconstruction of the Suez Canal region.

With respect to our bilateral economic activity, I found a receptive audience also in Jeddah, in Amman and in Baghdad and a reciprocal desire for closer relations. The leaders of these countries all expressed to me a keen interest in intensifying and expanding trade and economic co-operation with Canada, which they consider to have the expertise and capacity required to carry out projects in certain vital sectors of their development programmes; moreover, they regard Canada for a variety of other reasons to be an especially suitable partner for industrial co-operation.

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1. Canadian International Development Agency.
 2. United Nations Development Programme.

In Saudi Arabia, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding on economic co-operation, thereby establishing a Canada-Saudi Arabia Joint Economic Committee, which is expected to hold its first meeting in Ottawa early this summer. I was pleased to hear from the Saudi Arabia Foreign Minister, His Royal Highness Prince Saud, of his Government's decision to open a resident Saudi diplomatic mission in Canada in the immediate future; a further confirmation of Saudi Arabia's wish to strengthen our bilateral ties. That my visit to that country was the fifth by a Canadian minister in the past two years demonstrates clearly that we reciprocate that wish.

In Iraq, we also confirmed our mutual will to establish closer trade and economic ties. A Canadian delegation has just returned from Baghdad where it completed negotiations on two agreements -- one covering trade and one dealing with economic and technical co-operation. The latter provided for the establishment of a joint economic commission, whose first meeting is also planned to take place later this year.

In my unfortunately too brief stay in Jordan, I had the opportunity to discuss with His Majesty King Hussein and Crown Prince Hassan their country's new five-year economic plan. I was impressed by the economic progress which is taking place in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. I suggested to the Jordanian authorities that, while bilateral economic exchanges with Jordan were still modest, it would be useful to have experts from our two countries meet in order to explore further opportunities for commercial and economic co-operation. This proposal was readily accepted, and in this context Canada will be officially represented at a symposium to be held on Jordan's new five-year plan in Amman at the end of May. I should say, moreover, how pleased we were to welcome the recent visit to Ottawa of Their Majesties, the King and Queen, as well as Prime Minister Rifa'i. Although the visit was brief and informal in nature, we did have an opportunity to discuss matters of interest to both Canada and Jordan and to further develop our very cordial relations.

In addition to our discussions on bilateral economic activities, I also took the opportunity in the capitals I visited to initiate a frank and continuing dialogue on the key international economic problems of mutual concern, such as energy, financial and monetary issues, matters in which the Arab countries have an increasingly important role. Moreover, I wished to review or define common areas of interest in the fields of aid and development.

In this context, I discussed multilateral trade and monetary questions and the prospects for the ongoing Conference on International Economic Co-operation. I attended one of its sessions immediately following my visit to the Middle East in my capacity as leader of the Canadian Delegation and as Co-chairman of the Conference and, given the fact that three of the countries I visited, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Egypt, are equally members of the Conference, I found a special interest in discussing with the Ministers immediately concerned the work of this Conference in the key fields of energy, raw materials, development and finance.

Still in the international field, I made a point in my talks with my various hosts to stress Canada's belief in and support for the U.N. and its agencies, even if at times we have had serious cause to deplore in the latter for the introduction of political considerations into discussions of a technical nature as occurred at the recent Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) session. In our view, such political discussions distort the aims of the U.N. and its agencies and threaten to undermine their effectiveness in carrying out the specialized tasks for which they were established.

I had not intended, Ladies and Gentlemen, to go into more detail with respect to Canada's role at the United Nations. But I must say that the remarks made by the speaker who preceded me obligate me to clarify Canada's position at the United Nations.

Not so long ago I appeared before an audience made up of members of the Canada/Israel Committee and the speaker who introduced me complained about what he described as the ambiguity of Canada's voting record at the United Nations. And tonight I have the same complaint from the professor who preceded me on the platform, which is probably the best proof that I could ask for that Canada is following an even-handed and objective policy on Middle East questions at the United Nations. Because we attempt to be balanced and objective, we are bound to run into criticism -- tonight from the speaker who preceded me, two weeks ago from the Canada/Israel Committee.

Now, I am going back to the House of Commons tomorrow to resume my seat in the House, and I want to tell you that I was one of the members of the House of Commons who voted unanimously against the adoption at the United Nations of a Resolution that linked Zionism and racism. And I want to tell you that. I was the Minister of Foreign Affairs that issued the instructions to the Delegation at the United Nations that took that position, and I was the Minister that instructed the Delegation last week at the Economic and Social Council to vote against two resolutions because in my view these resolutions carried forward the same link, which is unacceptable to the Government of Canada and which is unacceptable to every member of the Canadian House of Commons. And I say to you in all sincerity, my fellow Canadians, that there is no future for mankind if we continue in these efforts, which in this case makes, in our minds, an unacceptable link between racism and Zionism.

And I regret that I have to comment upon the remarks made by the gentleman who preceded me, but I hope that from the remarks that I have made up to the present time, you will understand that Canada does have a policy and I am delighted that I have had the opportunity to clarify some of the policy aspects which I found had not been clearly indicated in the speech made before I rose.

Speaking still about the United Nations, I want to say that in a more immediate context, I confirmed that as host of the Conference on Human Settlements to take place in Vancouver later this month, we had signed an agreement with the U.N. governing our responsibilities as host country. I expressed confidence that the Governments I visited would participate actively in both its preparation and at the Conference itself and received welcome assurances in this respect. I look forward to renewing contact on the occasion of HABITAT with a number of the Arab leaders I met during my trip.

Naturally, I drew a certain number of conclusions from the impressions and thoughts I brought home with me from the Middle East. Perhaps the most significant of these is my conviction that our long-term bilateral relations with the Arab countries can, and should, be pursued independently of the Middle East conflict, a conflict which may in the past have clouded our perception of the general willingness and the opportunities that exist to expand and strengthen our relations with that part of the world.

I amply confirmed the usefulness of the personal contacts I established with my various hosts, and deeply valued our in-depth discussions, not only on matters of bilateral interest, but also concerning their countries' positions and perceptions on regional and multilateral issues. I am delighted that my counterparts in each of the host capitals accepted my invitation to visit Canada and I look forward to the opportunity to return the gracious hospitality they so warmly extended to me and my officials.

Although I have devoted most of my remarks today to Canada's relations with the four Arab countries I visited in January, I hardly need to remind this audience that Canada's relations with the Arab world are, of course, much broader. For instance, our relationship with the Maghreb states is well established and we hold regular consultations with the three countries of that area.

Furthermore, we have had, for the past ten years at least, programmes of technical and economic co-operation with Tunisia which have become the most important among those we have established in francophone Africa. Also, to promote the full range of political, economic, and cultural relations between our two countries, the Canada/Tunisia Mixed Commission was established in 1968. This intergovernmental consultative mechanism meets once a year, alternately in Ottawa and Tunis, and held its latest annual sessions in Ottawa less than three weeks ago.

We are also co-operating closely with the Algerian Government to seek new forms of economic and industrial co-operation, and prospects for a similar programme of co-operation with the Kingdom of Morocco are good as well. One area we are investigating with these governments is the possibility of tripartite co-operation projects for the development of the natural resources of the Maghreb countries.

Our efforts to develop closer bilateral relations with the Maghreb countries are eased by the fact that we have a language in common, since French is the second language of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Canada is therefore particularly well-placed to provide training programmes in the field of communications for young trainees from Tunisia and Morocco through the facilities of the CBC.

There are other examples I could mention, but perhaps these brief remarks have indicated the importance the Government of Canada attaches to our relations with the Arab world and of our intention to work towards a further expansion of these links. To facilitate this process we have opened two new embassies in the Middle East within the past two years -- one in Saudi Arabia, the other in Iraq -- and, as I mentioned, we hope soon to receive in Ottawa a resident Saudi Arabian Embassy. These important developments reflect the interests we share with the Arab world.

We have a common interest in the re-establishment of peace in the Middle East. There is also a clear complementarity of interest in expanding our political and economic relations with all of the Arab countries. This in itself fosters a broad increase in human contacts and cultural and scientific exchanges. I am convinced the opportunities exist and can be realized if we work together with imagination and goodwill. The Canadian Government has made the initial efforts. It remains for the private citizens of Canada to tap the full potential which exists for co-operation and exchanges, intellectual, cultural, commercial. Only in this way will Canada's interests in the Middle East be fully served and the measure of the Canadian people's willingness to assist in the rapid social, economic and industrial development of the Arab world be fully tested.