

**6 October 2021, 5:00-7:00pm**  
MESG Ambassador Forum  
[Ambassador Jon Allen \(MESG\)](#)  
*The Role of Canada in the Middle East*  
Chair: Professor Raphael Cohen-Almagor

I want to begin by thanking Raphael for inviting me to say a few words about Canada and the Middle East and to his right and left hands, Emma Webster and Ahmed Zaky for their technical and all other support and to thank all of you for joining today.

I'm going to focus first on Canada's post WWII role when it was a player in international relations and had a connection to activities in the Middle East, and, in particular, to issues related to Israel-Palestine.

Canada's involvement in the region, although at a reduced level, continued through to the 1992 Madrid Peace Conference and its follow up.

Although Canada had bursts of foreign policy activity under both the Brian Mulroney (1984-1993) and Jean Chretien (1993-2003) governments, the focus was not the Middle East. Mulroney is perhaps best known for his criticism of Apartheid, his support of Nelson Mandela and his opposition to Margaret Thatcher's efforts to thwart sanctions against South Africa. Chretien's Foreign Minister, Lloyd

Axworthy, was instrumental in the creation of the International Criminal Court, the Anti-personnel land mines treaty and the now unfortunately discredited concept of the Responsibility to Protect.

Yes, we are members of many clubs including NATO, the G-7, the G-20 which was our then Finance Minister, Paul Martin's creation, the Commonwealth, and the Francophonie as well as APEC, NAFTA and the so-called 5 eyes intelligence sharing arrangement with the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand. But while membership does come with privileges, it also comes with responsibilities. My take is that recently we have come up somewhat short on the latter.

Finally, I suggest that over the course of the last 15 years spanning the governments of Stephen Harper and now Justin Trudeau, Canada has been largely absent from the field of foreign affairs. Its relations with the Middle East have been governed largely by domestic politics and in the case of Mr. Harper, by the personal views of the leader.

To set the stage for any discussion of Canada's role in the Middle East it's important to note that Canada was not one of the colonial powers that divided up the region post WWI. Indeed, Canada did not take full control over its foreign policy decision making from Britain until 1931.

In addition, we have never been dependent on Middle East oil.

Immediately following WW II, however, given the devastation in Europe and Asia, Canada became a relatively significant world player. It was one of only 51 members of the UN, a founding member of NATO and it possessed the fourth and fifth largest air force and navy worldwide. The Department of External Affairs was considered, along with Finance, a major player in Ottawa and was run by some of the country's most able and influential bureaucrats, including Lester Pearson who would become Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister in 1963.

Turning specifically to the Middle East, Canada played a significant role in the UN's decision to partition the area we now call Israel and Palestine (or the West Bank and Gaza depending on your political persuasion). The same Lester Pearson chaired the UN's First Committee in 1947 which established, at Britain's request, the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to end Britain's mandate and recommend a path forward. That Committee first refused efforts by the Arab world to simply declare Palestine an independent country and then approved UNSCOP's recommendation to partition mandated Palestine into two entities, one Zionist and the second Arab. A Canadian, the then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Ivan Rand, sat

on UNSCOP and was one of 8 representatives to vote in favour of partition.

When the Arab states then protested the partition plan and demanded that the International Court of Justice be asked for its opinion on whether the UN had the jurisdiction “to forcibly execute” such a resolution, Canada voted no. Canada’s opposition was significant, as only a single vote prevented this issue from being taken to the court.

It has been argued that both Ivan Rand’s and Pearson’s support for Israel were rooted in a form of Christian Zionism. In his memoirs, Pearson referred to Israel as the “land of my Sunday School lessons,” where he was taught that “Jews belonged in Palestine.”

Ironically this was also, in part, the basis for Stephen Harper’s strong support for Israel some 60 years later which I’ll return to in a few minutes.

The Suez Canal Crisis was the next period of significant Canadian involvement, and it is often touted as a turning point in Canadian diplomatic history - the moment when the country came of age on the global stage. Canadian soldiers, from that point until the early 2000’s, became synonymous with UN peacekeeping.

In 1956, American condemnation of the British, French, and Israeli invasion of Egypt during the [Suez Crisis](#) threatened to rip NATO apart. To enforce an armistice and terminate the conflict, Canadian foreign minister [Lester Pearson](#) proposed an international [peacekeeping](#) force to separate the opponents with minimum loss of face for either side. Ottawa contributed 1,000 troops to support the enterprise. A Canadian General took command of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) that monitored the ceasefire. Lester Pearson was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to mitigate the conflict.

Since then, Canada has participated in peacekeeping missions to separate Greek and Turkish Cypriots, on the Israeli-Lebanon and Israeli Syrian borders and it continues to participate in the US brokered peacekeeping mission in the Sinai that supports the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement.

Our next involvement in the region was as Gavel Holder of the Refugee Working Group, one of 5 groups formed following the 1992 Madrid Peace Conference and the Oslo Accords aimed at bringing an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Working Group's activities involved research, multiple visits to the region and participation by Israelis, Palestinians, the US, and others on one of the most sensitive "final status" issues. It ended officially with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin

in 1995. Canada continued its efforts independently of the larger process for five years after Rabin's death but by the time of the 2002 Second Intifada, the funding and regional and international interest had dried up.

Our final foray into Middle East peacemaking was a little known but, in my view, important exercise that was spearheaded by a couple of Canadian diplomats named Michael Bell and Mike Malloy. Bell was our Ambassador in Egypt, Jordan and twice in Israel. Malloy was Ambassador in Jordan and was the Gavel or lead on the just mentioned Refugee Working Group. He had been a senior bureaucrat in our immigration department and an expert on refugee issues. They, along with an experienced group of Palestinians, Israelis and Americans, produced something called the Jerusalem Old City Initiative which was an in-depth effort to describe precisely how the Old City could be governed if and when a two state solution has been achieved. If we ever do see an end to the conflict, I hope this excellent document is not forgotten.

Before moving to Canada's more recent involvement in the wider Middle East, let me say that what Canadians and others have considered for decades as a positive role in the region is now viewed by

some in the academy and by some practitioners through a far more critical post-colonial lens. Those of you in the academy surely know what I mean and I'm happy to discuss these trends in the Q and A.

Turning now to other parts of the region, Canada participated in the UN-authorized and US-led invasion of Iraq in the [First Gulf War in 1990-91](#). The Jean Chretien Government, however, refused to join the US and its allies in the Second Gulf war. As a result, Canada faced the wrath of the Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld "You're either with us or agin us" doctrine. We refused to participate because there was no UN backing for the effort and because our government was not convinced of the evidence of WMD. I remember being at the table at the Department of Foreign Affairs in Ottawa when a senior US team composed of State Department, CIA and Pentagon folks came to Ottawa to brief us. After the presentation, my then boss and I looked at each other wondering if that was all there was.

Canada was then shunned in Washington for almost 2 years. I was then Political Minister at our Embassy in Washington and felt the effects of the US' cold shoulder, especially at the Pentagon. Of course, the Prime Minister and others were eventually proven correct, and the US

invasion and its horrific aftermath are unfortunately still being felt in the region today.

Subsequently Canada did fully engage in the efforts to counter ISIS investing manpower and over \$3.5B to address, in particular, the impact of these threats on Lebanon and Jordan.

Moving on to other relationships, Canada's relations with Iran deteriorated after the so-called Canadian caper when our Embassy in Tehran provided safe haven and then facilitated the escape of 6 US hostages following the overthrow of the Shah. Our Ambassador at the time, Ken Taylor became a hero in the US.

Following the death in custody of a Canadian Iranian journalist, Canada took the lead on an annual resolution at the UN General Assembly on human rights abuses in Iran. The Harper Government refused to support US led efforts to negotiate a nuclear agreement with Iran (the JCPOA). In 2012 Canada listed Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism and broke relations with the country. To its credit, the Trudeau government has lifted many Iran sanctions and now supports the current round of JCPOA negotiations.



Our relations with the Gulf are primarily focused on education - Gulf students studying in Canada - and the health field with Canadian hospitals establishing operations in several Gulf countries.

The Harper government entered into a contract with Saudi Arabia for the sale of \$12B worth of Canadian manufactured light armoured vehicles. There has been criticism in Canada and by the UN of the sale while the Saudis remain involved in Yemen. Criticism of the Saudi's treatment of women and its human rights record more generally in 2019 by our then foreign minister led to a series of retaliatory measures being imposed by the Kingdom.

On the economic front, Canada has free trade agreements with only Israel and Jordan in the region and the level of bilateral trade and investment is relatively small. That said, some of the Gulf Sovereign Wealth funds have been exploring significant investments in Canada as of late and our huge pension funds have found some profitable investments in the region.

As mentioned, my view is that the foreign policies of our most recent Prime Ministers, Stephen Harper, and Justin Trudeau, both with respect to the region and more generally, have been driven largely by domestic

interests and influenced by local lobbies more than any broad foreign policy principles.

Mr. Harper largely eschewed multilateralism and was best known for his unswerving support for Israel and his opposition towards Iran. He and a number of his Cabinet ministers are Evangelical Christians which likely impacted his policies as did his staunch anti-terrorism view.

For his part, Mr. Trudeau boldly announced that “Canada was back” after being elected in 2015, but other than a focus on the US, (understandable given the Trump presidency) there has been little evidence of any serious interest in foreign policy on the part of his government. A point to note here is that Canada-US relations, being as dominant and all-encompassing as they are in Canada, are rarely considered as purely foreign in nature. Rather we tend to describe them as “intermestic”.

Indeed, to give you a taste for how important foreign policy is in Canada right now, it was not even a topic in three of the four leaders’ debates leading up our most recent election and was not discussed in the only English language debate. Other indications of the lack of serious attention being paid to foreign policy are the fact that Canada lost both its recent efforts to win a non-permanent seat at the UNSC and the fact that we have had 14 foreign ministers since the year 2000.

By contrast the US has had 7 secretaries of state and Germany has had four foreign ministers during the same period.

Canada does, however, have large and diverse populations of Canadians from all parts of the Middle East and a large Jewish population that is active in its support of Israel.

For example, Canada's Lebanese population is approx. 250,000 and mostly Christian. During the last war in Lebanon, Canada repatriated more than 14,000 dual Lebanese Canadians sparking a debate in Canada about the criteria for dual citizenship. Talking about chutzpa, I was told by a colleague that one lady who was evacuated on an Air Canada plane asked whether she might be able to claim her Air Canada travel points for the flight.

Our Iranian Canadian population is now approximately 220,000 with the vast majority living in Toronto. It was seriously impacted when Iran shot down a Ukrainian domestic flight with many Iranian Canadians on board.

Overall, our Arab population exceeds 700,000 and the Muslim community is approximately 1 million. Canada's Jewish population

(approx. 390,000) is the fourth largest world-wide. The Jewish population has deeper roots in Canada and a far more sophisticated political presence than our Arab and Muslim groups who are more recent, more diverse, and more divided in their political views.

The very effective and well-funded Jewish lobby, together with the Harper government's pro-Israel stance, resulted in a de facto shift in Canada's position on the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Although our de jure position on the settlements, the occupation and support for the two-state solution are quite clear, relatively progressive and haven't changed in over 15 years, the practice, tone, and emphasis shifted under Harper. As with many other Western countries, the Canadian positions on settlements, for example, which states that they are illegal under international law, rarely translates into public criticism of Israel or moves to restrain settlement expansion.

There are progressive Jewish organizations in Canada such as J Space (our J Street equivalent), the New Israel Fund and Canadians for Peace Now but they are not nearly as well funded or as politically effective as the more conservative groups.

There are unfortunately no significant organized and effective Arab or Muslim groups acting in the political arena.

I think I should stop here and hopefully you might have a few questions on which we can engage. I'm sorry to have been so parochial but Raphael asked me to speak on Canadian foreign policy in the Middle East and I always follow orders!

Thank you