

Canada and the Middle East

Too often, public debate on Canada's role in the Middle East is stuck at one of two extremes. On the left, there is a tendency to promote an idealized narrative of Canada as an honest-broker, a peace-loving nation; this vision is attractive to some but is disconnected from what Canada has done in the past and from what it could realistically accomplish in the future. On the right, many pretend that their preferred policies in the region are guided by values and principles - but at best, they do so in a selective, often hypocritical manner, and they have come to emphasize a moralizing rhetoric at the expense of actual action. In this context, there is a need to look at Canada's choices in the Middle East from a more realist perspective.

The first step is to assess the security environment in the Middle East. There is not enough space here to go through the region country by country. What matters is to clarify the starting point: instability in the region will continue, the war in Syria will last for many years to come, Iran will remain a rival to the US, countries like Lebanon and Yemen will remain unstable and the arena for regional powers to indirectly confront each other, and the future stability of key regional powers, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia, remains very uncertain.

That the Middle East is and will remain unstable should not guide our choices; what matters is that the situation does not pose a direct military threat to Canada. It is true that terrorism represents a threat to international security, but this should be nuanced: more Canadians die in their bath every year than because of terrorist attacks. The return of Canadian foreign fighters is a problem, but a limited one involving only a few dozen, and is better managed by police and intelligence work. Defence has a role to play, but a secondary one.

This assessment should form the starting point of Canada's defence policy in general, and in particular in the Middle East: Canada is an exceptionally secure country. Contrary to the starting points of the defence policies of the Paul Martin and Stephen Harper governments, it is besides the point to start by assessing that the international security environment is more dangerous than it has ever been. What matters is that Canada is secure, not whether the Middle East or East Asia are volatile. This has two implications. First, there is no strategic logic that would justify significantly increasing the defence budget. And second, the pursuit of opportunity, not the defence against threats, should guide Canada's defence policy.

This has consequences for Canada's policy in the Middle East. In terms of our approach to the region as a whole, first, Canada benefits from a wide range of maneuver. Our actions have, at best, a marginal impact, while in the absence of a direct threat and thus of competitive pressures and incentives, the costs and benefits of our potential courses of action are rarely clear; the signals are ambiguous and vague. Canada, for example, typically faces a broad continuum of options when it needs to decide whether, and how, to commit to a possible military intervention, ranging from active participation to inaction. This has traditionally pushed our leaders towards a certain nonchalance, since unwise choices rarely impose costs while the benefits from good choices are most of the time diffuse and limited.

This raises the question of Canada's participation in eventual military interventions in the Middle East, whether in Syria or elsewhere. It is necessary to be skeptical about the necessity of these interventions, and therefore about the need for Canada to contribute. Such a

contribution can imply an important investment, and the return on this investment - what Canada concretely gets out of it - is uncertain, often limited, and sometimes negative. This does not mean that Canada should automatically reject participation, but it should be suspicious, exercise prudence, and strongly hesitate before committing to missions if the objective is poorly defined or not consistent with Canadian interests, if the chances of success are limited, and if the risks of getting bogged down are high. Put differently, the resources that Canada invests should be proportional to the interest.

Two guiding principles should steer thinking about Canadian interests and investments in the Middle East: Canada has limited interests in the region, and it has scarce resources to allocate, both in general and even more so specifically in the region. The analysis behind the decision on whether to contribute to an intervention must thus carefully weigh the trade-offs involved: by committing to a given initiative, Canada reduces its margin of maneuver and may lock itself out from one or more other initiatives.

Of those interests, the most important is - as it is for Canada the world over - to be, and to be perceived as, a reliable ally to the US, and to a lesser extent to NATO. This is true, but this rationale should not be pushed too far: it is a myth that the US will impose more than symbolic reprisals should Canada reject participating in a US-led intervention.

Before committing to intervening in the Middle East, Canada must also think soberly, with a clear head, and with deep knowledge in hand about long term consequences - something which has systematically been lacking in the past. Libya is an obvious case where the long term implications were not well understood. Canada's current support for Iraqi Kurds provides another example. Viewed through a short term lens, it is rational to support them: they represent one of the best partners on the ground to fight the Islamic State. Yet Canada's long term objective is the establishment of a stable and united (and maybe democratic) Iraq; in supporting the Kurds, Canada reinforces an actor seeking autonomy and possibly independence. This buys short term gains in exchange for longer term costs.

To be able to better grasp these long term consequences, Canada needs to better understand the situation on the ground at the time of the intervention - the actors, their intentions, their capabilities, and the rules and norms governing their interactions. Canadian authorities did not have this for Libya or Afghanistan; in these two and other cases, limited knowledge contributed to sub-optimal decision-making. Canada and its allies may be repeating the same mistake with the Kurds.

Moving on to ties to individual countries, Canada's interest is to develop cordial but limited defence relations with the majority of states in the region. Cordial, first, because Canada gains nothing from shunning countries in the region, including Iran. Canada did not benefit from suspending relations with Iran under the Conservative government, and today it is paying the price as it realizes how difficult it is to get back in.

Why limited? Every country in the region is different in terms of its geography, economy, politics, and ideology. Canada has limited interests in the Middle East and scarce resources to invest there. It is thus neither realistic nor necessary to try to do a lot - in general or with one country in particular. The returns on the investment if or when Canada intensifies its relations with one country rapidly diminish and even become negative. The optimal approach for Canada is, therefore, to identify the precise issues on which there is a common interest with individual countries in the region, and then to target efforts and initiatives on the basis of

these niches. The operational support hub in Kuwait is a good example of a successful niche built on a specific common interest: Kuwait wants to diversify its security relationships, and Canada needs a platform to support regional operations.

Defence diplomacy is essential to the pursuit of these niches, but it is the poor child of Canadian defence policy. It receives scant mention in official documents, and few resources are dedicated to it. This is unfortunate, since it is valuable yet underutilized - in the Middle East and more broadly. Capacity building programs represent a critical tool of defence diplomacy to smartly target specific areas of common interests. They include the Military Training and Cooperation Program (MTCP) at DND, as well as comparable ones at Global Affairs Canada, especially the Global Partnership Program (GPP), START, and the Counter-terrorism Capacity Building Program (CTCBP). These bring a great bang for a small buck as they enable Canada to respond quickly, to tailor the Canadian contribution to a specific local need but to do it on the basis of Canadian interests, to get Canadian initiatives noticed and appreciated in allied and partner capitals, and to develop crucial links in the region.

Two cases, Jordan and Lebanon, provide contrasting examples of bilateral defence relations. Jordan, first, is in some ways the success story of Canada's policy in the region. Canada has a strong presence in the country, at the defence, diplomatic, security, development, and humanitarian levels, it has an impact, and most important, this is in line with its interests. Canada supports a vulnerable partner whose security fundamentally affects Israel's eastern front, and where instability seriously concerns the US and other Canadian allies and partners.

In Lebanon, on the other hand, Canada's approach has not been optimal. Canada has greater concrete interests in Lebanon than in most countries in the Middle East. Few events in the region can materially affect Canada more than the collapse of Lebanon, since it would probably lead to the evacuation of thousands of dual citizens. A similar experience in 2006 demonstrated how complex logistically, politically, and diplomatically this is. The repeat of this scenario is not far-fetched, moreover, since the war in Syria is putting tremendous pressure on Lebanon. But Ottawa, unlike the US, France, and Great Britain, and despite repeated demands from Israel, voluntarily limits its relations with Beirut, including with its armed forces, officially because of the presence of Hezbollah in the government. This amounts to shooting itself in the foot: Canada has a strong interest in developing its presence in Lebanon, but it voluntarily constrains itself from doing so.