

Notes for a Statement by

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**“Canada and the Arab Awakening: Towards a Sound Policy
Response”**

**Conference Sponsored by the National Council on Canada-
Arab Relations**

November 26-27, 2011

Gatineau

Check Against Delivery

Mr. Comerford,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

David, thank you for inviting me to this very timely conference.

You have asked me to speak this morning on “Canada and the Arab World: Recent Developments and Future Prospects.”

That would have been a difficult assignment a year ago,

given the diversity of the region, and the “light switch” character of the policies of the Canadian government.

Today it is close to “mission impossible”.

So, I am going to focus on Canadian foreign policy towards the region.

The bottom has fallen out of the Arab autocrats’ world.

Ben Ali is gone.

Mubarak is gone.

Gaddafi is gone and is not coming back..

Saleh is going.

And not too far behind them, most hope, will be Assad.

Meanwhile, the Arab kingdoms and sheikdoms face the choice of reforming or following the autocrats into oblivion.

We are witnessing Revolution 2.0-- or perhaps 3.0.

Direct broadcast satellite television means that the state monopoly on information is over.

Last winter, the official Egyptian television coverage of the events in Tahrir square was shown in real time to be ludicrously false by "On TV", Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera and others.

In demonstrations in the city squares right across Egypt and the Middle East,

young people primarily but not so young people as well,

of every class and religion,

used their BlackBerrys and mobile phones,

as well as Facebook and Twitter, to organize and mobilize.

And they did so in such numbers that they overwhelmed the authorities' ability and disposition to control them.

More important than the means, however, has been the end.

The transformation we are witnessing in the Arab world is potentially every bit as significant

as the end of colonialism was in the Fifties

or the collapse of communism was in the Eighties.

In these circumstances, what should Canada do?

To answer this question, I will discuss three separate but related issues.

First, Canada's relationship with the region, and the need for a strategy and coherence..

Second, Canada's policy on the Palestinian-Israeli issue,

which will have a direct and indirect bearing on Canada's overall standing in the region.

And, third, Canada's response to the suspected Iranian nuclear weapon program which,

depending on how it is handled,

could reinforce Canada's purposes in the Middle East
or render them moot.

What Should Canada Do?

Most basically, we should get off the sidelines and get onto the right side of history.

We should engage with our Arab friends and partners to try to influence the outcome, rather than to wait and see what happens.

While not ignoring the security interests of the Israelis, we should not look at the "Awakening" primarily through the prism of Israeli security.

Hundreds of millions of Arabs are throwing off the dead hands of autocracy and privilege.

We will be remembered for what we do to help them—and we will also be remembered if we don't help them.

Democracy had to start sometime in the Middle East.

It has started now,

and the Harper Government should embrace it,
not just sit in judgment of it,

It is in Canada's interest that "the Awakening" continue and that it open the way to democratic government,

in Egypt above all

but in the other Arab states, as well.

The Harper government should develop a strategy towards the Middle East that re-sets Canada's relations with the countries of the region.

The central organizing principle of that strategy should be to support the democratizing impulse in each country.

Support, not direct.

Framing an effective strategy starts with the Canadian government acknowledging how important this relationship is

to the hundreds of thousands of Canadians of Arab descent,

to the many thousands of other Canadians whose livelihoods are affected by the business done with the region

and to all Canadians whose security is affected by what happens there.

As just one piece of evidence to corroborate the significance of the region to Canada,

merchandise trade between Canada and the Gulf Cooperation Council states alone is greater than merchandise trade with India or Brazil, two rising stars.

All Canadians have a stake in the success of “the Arab Awakening”.

The more democratic,

the more pluralistic,

the more representative,

the more responsible,

the more modern the governments in the region,

the better for all concerned, including Canada.

That outcome is admittedly more of an aspiration than an accomplishment, for now.

Which is not surprising: Canadian democracy has been three centuries in the making.

The roots of Canadian democracy go all the way back to the Magna Carta.

Autocracy, as some wag said, is about straight roads.

Democracy is about curves, switch-backs, zig-zags, detours and even dead-ends.

So we need to keep a sense of perspective as the Arabs build their own versions of democracy.

And we need to remember that attempts at democracy have failed before, sometimes catastrophically, notably in Nazi Germany and Communist Russia.

But, we need also to remember that democracy has succeeded more than it has failed—

115 member countries of the UN have been classed as democracies by Freedom House*, the US democracy NGO.

Turkey is one of those democracies, and its reconciliation of religious observance and secular governance may hold some lessons for Arab democrats.

* Freedom House was founded in 1941; Wendell Willkie and Eleanor Roosevelt served as its first honorary chairs

Further, while we are right to be wary of Islamism, we should remember that the term covers a considerable spectrum of belief from the merely observant to the fanatical.

We should also be wary of Christianity, which itself covers a range of beliefs.

At their extremes, neither phenomenon is generous and tolerant and both can distort and undermine the democratic process.

In these circumstances, what the international community must not do,

And what Canada must not do,
is to confuse stagnation and stability.

We have done that for sixty years,

and it has produced societies susceptible to religious extremism,

It has also generated political pressure sufficient to blow the lids off Arab governments.

Prime Minister Netanyahu might prefer otherwise,

as he is reported to have said yesterday,

but the status quo ante was not sustainable

and, in my view at least, it is not retrievable, either.

A Canadian strategy should incorporate all the foreign policy instruments--
diplomacy, military, trade and investment, and aid

—as well as perspective and patience.

Militarily, the Canadian government has acquitted itself well in Libya, and
in doing so has reinforced the UN's new norm, the Responsibility to
Protect.

For all the debate about NATO exceeding its UN mandate, failure to
remove Gaddafi would have been a much worse outcome.

What to do about Syria is the new burning question, literally.

In my judgment, military intervention to stop the slaughter there,

while presenting a much more complex and difficult challenge than
was the case in Libya,

must remain an option if Assad continues to use the army to
slaughter his own people.

The job of assisting the Arab peoples has scarcely begun.

The West, including Canada, has been more about promise than about performance.

At Deauville this Spring, the G8 promised in excess of \$20 billion.

So far, it has delivered few of the goods.

Beyond money, a Canadian strategy would include working with the Canadian business community to facilitate business investment in the region.

It would also promote trade, including by encouraging imports into Canada,

Both would help create the jobs and the dignity that are in such short supply for the youth of the Arab world.

A Canadian strategy would also support the development of democratic institutions, including political parties and provide advice on the writing of the constitution.

It would support for human rights, especially women's rights, and would

invest in education, especially girls' education, and in educational exchanges

For a new Canadian strategy to be effective, the government's policies will have to be to be coherent.

Canada, the Palestine deadlock and the Arab Awakening

The Arab Awakening has been fundamentally about intolerable domestic conditions in Arab countries,

especially about injustice and indignity and lack of economic prospects.

But it is evident that that sense of injustice, indignity and inequity extends as well to include the plight of the Palestinians.

And that more representative Arab governments are going to have to be more responsive to public opinion on this score than the autocrats were.

An effective Canadian strategy, one that delivers dividends in the region and for Canada, will have to take that new reality into account including regarding the Palestinian-Israeli deadlock.

At the UN in September, Foreign Minister Baird renewed Canada's commitment to the founding principles of the United Nations,

including the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples

the maintenance of international law

and the fulfillment of the obligations inherent in the Charter.

He underlined that it is the duty of member states to "pull [those principles] from the printed page,

to breathe life into them,

and to practice them every day."

Mr. Baird stressed that Canada stands for “what is principled and just, regardless of whether it is popular, or convenient, or expedient....

Canada does not just ‘go along in order to get along’.”

To avoid charges of hypocrisy and double standards, the government will need to approach the issues raised by the Palestine and Israel conflict in the same principled way.

To give practical effect to Mr. Baird’s self-assessment, and to align its policies with these principles, what should the government do?

In the first place, we should continue to reaffirm the fundamentals of Canadian policy,

including maintaining our strong support for Israel’s right to exist,

to live in peace and security with its neighbours

and to defend itself within the limits of the law.

We should also make clear our strong support for the establishment of a viable and secure Palestinian state,

whose borders should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps,

We should also declare our support for a just solution to the Palestinian refugee issue.

Second, we should start exercising our judgment on developments and policies again, and let the chips fall where they may.

This means neither supporting Israel right-or-wrong

nor Palestine right-or-wrong,

nor presuming that either Israel or Palestine can do no wrong.

We should be fair-minded and clear-spoken on human rights violations by both sides.

This means giving neither democratic governments nor sentimental underdogs a general dispensation from scrutiny.

History is replete with examples of resistance movements and democracies violating human rights laws and norms.

The excesses of Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and Bagram,

to say nothing of the “rendition” of Canadians to torture abroad,

were perpetrated by the self-proclaimed world’s greatest democracy.

Third, we should anchor our positions in international law, including international humanitarian law.

At times, our doing so would not be welcomed by one party to the conflict or the other, or by their respective supporters in Canada.

Nevertheless, the law is a rock on which to stand in the turbulent flow of Middle East politics.

Basing our judgments on the law would also be the surest way to remain “principled and just,” in practice, as well as in rhetoric.

At the same time, we should remind ourselves that innocent people on both sides are bearing the brunt of this confrontation;

basic human compassion and empathy should also inform our policy judgments.

Fourth, out of considerations of fairness, the government should explain to Canadians why it has adopted a one-sided policy on this issue.

It should explain its rationale for condemning as unilateral the Palestinian approach to the UN to achieve recognition as a state,

but turning a blind eye to Israel's building of settlements,

its transfer of population into occupied territory,

its annexation of East Jerusalem,

and its erection of a security barrier on Palestinian land,

all of which are unilateral-- and illegal.

Fifth, Canadian governments should never, ever, play domestic political games with this volatile issue.

The public peace in our country is not an gift from Providence but the product of fair and circumspect policies by our governments.

We presume on its indestructibility at our peril.

Canada, Iran, Israel and the Arab Awakening

The UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has issued a report that provides considerable circumstantial evidence that Iran is developing a nuclear weapon capability.

In their reactions to the report, some observers are inserting exclamation points where question marks would be more appropriate, as was the case in the build-up to the US attack on Iraq.

Iran does not yet have a nuclear weapon.

It is not clear whether the Iranians intend to cross the nuclear weapon threshold,

or rather to position themselves to do so relatively quickly after they might eventually decide to go nuclear.

Either way, the Iranian effort raises potentially grave, albeit differentiated, issues for the international community, including Canada.

Israeli newspapers have been reporting efforts by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defence Minister Ehud Barak to muster support among senior ministers for an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Minister Barak told CNN November 20 that if the Iranian nuclear program were not stopped in the next months, not years, the growing redundancies in Iranian facilities would render an attack ineffectual.

Barak asserted that a nuclear-armed Iran would use its nuclear umbrella to intimidate Gulf countries and to sponsor terror with impunity.

He also warned of Iran's triggering of a Middle East nuclear arms race involving Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt,

undermining the nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty,

a major Canadian interest.

Meanwhile, the Israeli cabinet appears to remain divided as apparently are Israeli officials.

Meir Dagan, the recently retired head of Mossad, Israel's external spy agency, warned that an attack against Iran was "the stupidest idea [he'd] ever heard."

US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta has been publicly at pains to warn the Israelis against unilateral action.

In a recent visit to Israel, according to the Sunday Telegraph of November 13, Panetta also privately, asked Israel for a guarantee that it would not carry out a unilateral military strike against Iran without Washington's clearance.

The Telegraph reported, citing sources on both sides, that he did not get it.

At a security conference in Halifax over the past weekend, Panetta warned again publicly that a military strike could have severe economic consequences around the world.

He repeated the US administration's preference to focus on sanctions to curb Iran's suspected nuclear weapons ambitions.

The US, the UK and Canada imposed further sanctions on Monday, and the Europeans are expected to follow suit.

Assuming that sanctions will not in the near term stop Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapons option, nonetheless, the essential question boils down to

which is worse, the Bomb or the bombing of Iran?

In the former case, post facto deterrence would be relied on to prevent the bomb's use, as was and remains the case regarding the US, Russia, China, the UK, France, India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel,

In the latter case, Iran would be attacked

–by the US or Israel or both–

to destroy its nuclear program or at least delay its nuclear breakthrough.

An attack on Iran would likely not be the simple affair that the Israeli raid was on a suspected Syrian nuclear facility in the summer of 2007.

Unless such an attack were authorized by the UN Security Council,
and even if it were,
a distant prospect at best,
it would near certainly plunge the Middle East into war,
roil western relations with the Muslim world,
refuel Islamist extremism around the world,
damage the international oil market and boost oil prices,
and weaken the international economy when it is already in a
precarious state.

An attack on Iran could even derail the Arab awakening, if consequent
fighting enabled Arab leaders to call on protesters to rally round the flag.

Major Canadian strategic interests are thus potentially at risk, as is the
safety of friends and kin in the region,

What is Canada's pro-Israeli government planning to do?

On Question Period this weekend, when talking of Syria, National Defence Minister Peter Mackay recalled the centrality of the UN Security Council to intervention.

He has also said that the Libya template cannot simply be transposed to the Syrian or Iranian cases.

As regards Iran, he described the military option as “the least preferable”.

This past week, Foreign Minister Baird, for his part, was clear that Canada would act but less clear about how, saying

“Canada will continue to work with its like-minded allies to take the necessary action for Iran to abandon its nuclear program.

It is not a question of if,

but to what extent,

we will act in response to this report.”

Prime Minister Harper has repeatedly portrayed Israel as an ally, and the two countries are reported to be working on some sort of mutual defence agreement.

The government should think long and hard about involving itself in any Israeli or American attack on Iran.

To quote Winston Churchill, “the statesman who yields to war fever must realize that once the signal is given,

he is no longer the master of policy

but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events.”

Were there to be a pre-emptive attack on Iran, the impact on the Arab Spring would likely be “unforeseeable and uncontrollable”, to paraphrase Churchill..

But the impact on Canada's reputation would be all too predictable, and negative .

Canada needs to develop a strategy to support the Arab Awakening, one of the most promising developments of our times.

Canada also needs to adopt policies on the Palestine-Israel deadlock that are fair-minded and constructive, and that restore our damaged reputation in the Middle East.

Canada does not need to rush into war with Iran to stop its nuclear program.

Deterrence is a saner, and safer, option.

Canadians for a sound Middle East policy should speak up now.

Thank you