Canada and the Middle East Question at the United Nations*

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Dans le domaine politique en général et dans les relations internationals en particulier, l'opinion publique est influencée plutôt par les sentiments et pérceptions qui par les faits. Cet étude éxaminera comment quelques mythes ont influencé la perception du gouvernement canadien vis-à-vis le Moyen-Orient et, en conséquent, comment la politique canadienne envers le Moyen-Orient a été influencé. De plus en plus, la politique extérieure du Canada est subordonnée à l'économie politique. Selon Bauer, cela même le gouvernement à placer les affaires avant les principes.

In the sphere of politics in general and international relations in particular, people are moved as much, if not even more, by feelings, emotions, and perceptions than they are by facts. This phenomenon is not related only to regular citizens but also to decision-makers. Access to more information does not prevent decision-makers from going through the process of classifying this information within intellectual categories. Therefore the perception decision-makers have of the reality is of utmost importance, to the point of superceding reality itself, in their formulation of policy.

This paper will study a specific case of how perception affects policy, of how a few myths have influenced the perception the Canadian government has of the Middle East and therefore have affected Canadian policy towards the Middle East.

*Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Jewish Historical Society Learned Societies' Conference Montreal, June 4, 1985

The two myths

Canadian perception follows two myths. The first one is what we will call the Lawrence of Arabia myth.

According to the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*[1], there is a specific entity, the Arab World, whose heroic Revolt against the Turks, entitles it to dominate certain regions. However this Arab revolt is a relatively minor event and not a turning point in history or even in the First World War. More specifically, the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* has upheld to the level of dogma the myth of the Arab World. This notion is both imperialistic, racist and false. It is a remnant of a time when imperialism and racism were not questioned and where the notions of "Christian World" or "Yellow World" were used. Nowadays only the concept of "Arab World" is still in use. It is a deliberate confusion with various forms of reality, such as Arab culture, Arab language, and Arab civilization.

To speak of the Arab World, is to forget the existence of many minorities who live within the confines of this "World". To name but a few, these minorities, present in most Arab states, run from the Berbers in North Africa to Assyrians in Syria, from Druzes in Lebanon and Syria to Copts in Egypt, from Kurds in Iraq to Circassians in Jordan[2].

Contributing to the complexity of the definition is the frequent confusion between Arab and Moslem. The notion of "Umma", the Arab-Moslem nation, is deeply rooted in Arab philosophy. It is a vision where all the faithful belong to the same religio-ethnic group. Except in the times of Mohammed and in the following years, the "Umma" has not been a political reality. The Arab-Moslem World is not a monolithic entity. Even the Arab League is not a creation from Arab countries but the child of British imperialism[3].

The mere fact that Western public opinion is surprised by inter Arab wars, be it in Yemen, between Algiers and Morocco, or Libya and Egypt . . . show the power of the Lawrence of Arabia myth. History is replete with inter-Christian and inter-European wars and the fact does not shock; why should rivalries between Arabs be treated differently if not for the perception of a mythical "Arab World"?

The myth of "the Arab World", its unity, the ineluctable supremacy of Arabs on the whole of Middle East and North Africa have been and are being expanded by numerous books, articles, conferences, etc.

Another basic myth is the depolitization of political problems, their "technicalisation", as if difficult choices could be avoided and scientific and technical solutions found.

According to Lucien Mehl, the decision making process goes through three

stages: axiology, uncertainty and calculation[4]. The first one is a philosophical choice, a choice between values, the essence of politics. Uncertainty means that decision-makers, influenced by their values, hope that their decision will be the best one but having non guarantee. Only in the last stage can decision-makers calculate the costs and benefits of a decision and the probable consequences of their actions.

Experts know better. This is the case for calculation. It is also the case of uncertainty. The goal of science and technics is to enhance the field of reasoning, of calculation at the expense of uncertainty. The myth appears when experts pretend they can calculate values.

In that vein, the decision-making process avoids the difficult choices, the ones about values,and insists on the possibility of non political, neutral, pseudo-scientific, secure approaches. Philosophy and politics give place to economy, commerce, accounting where politicians feel secure because of their non-controversial character. Civil servants who used to be legal experts are more and more economists, econometrists, accountants and the like, diplomats become salesmen.

The myth of depolitization shuns ideologies, labelled as secondary, old fashioned notions such as law, justice, freedom, democracy in favor of commercial contracts, whatever the conditions and the consequences.

The refusal by the Canadian Government to tackle the issue of the Arab boycott not only against Israel — which is not a Canadian problem - but also against Canadian companies dealing with Israel or Canadian companies with Jewish interests - which are or should be Canadian problems - is a good case of the influence of the myth that business is the supreme value.

Canadian votes at the United Nations: an evaluation

As a country, Canada shares a few basic values with a small group of so-called Western countries, the liberal democracies. Belonging to this group are the United States, Canada, a few Latin American countries, Western Europe, Israel, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and a few countries from Asia. This club prefers democracies to dictatorships, negotiations to wars, international law to aggression. This basic philosophy is the origin of the support provided, in different measures, by democracies to Israel who is under attack from an unholy coalition of rightwing and leftwing dictatorships, for whom force takes precedence over law both in their internal and international policies. Democratic countries have followed a consistent pattern since the November 29, 1947 vote on the partition of Palestine to the 242 and 338 resolutions establishing a

framework for an eventual peace in the Middle East[5].

Amongst democracies, and specifically the United States, the United Kingdom and France, Canada presents an original case. The external policy of Canada is a relatively recent one (after World War II); it follows a liberal philosophy; it stresses its participation with the Western alliance and at the same time wishes to distance itself from its mighty neighbour south of the border. Dealing with Middle Eastern countries, Canada suffers a double handicap: it lacks experienced specialists and good contacts in the area. On the other hand, Canada benefits from its relative inexperience. Contrary to the United States and more so than Great Britain and France, Canada does not have a long tradition à la Foreign Office or à la Quai d'Orsay, with its diplomats selected from a very restricted milieu, its racist tendancies and its arabist lobby.

Canada's votes at the United Nations follow three negative principles: not to condone the resolution linking Zionism and raacism[6], not to condemn the Camp David Accords between Egypt, Israel and the United States, not to attack the resolutions 242 and 338.

Although Canada's votes follow the above principles, they have nevertheless shown an evolution, beginning in 1973 and accelerating recently. This evolution is a mixture of the Lawrence of Arabia myth and the commercial one with the result of restraining the basic values of the Canadian position.

Two manifestations of this evolution have to be distinguished: one is the evolution of a policy parallel to the change in problems. For instance, when Canada recognizes the rights of the Arab Palestinians, it does not display an original position but merely follows a general trend, including the recognition of these rights by Israel in the Camp David Accords. Another kind of evolution is that when faced with the same resolutions in the same context, Canada's votes slip from a no vote to an abstention or even a positive vote. This evolution is taking place as the United Nations resolutions, particularly the General Assembly ones, are becoming more and more delirious and are in total contradiction with the three Canadian principles: they do link Zionism and racism, they do condemn the Camp David Accords and they do violate the resolution 242 and 338. For instance Jerusalem has been completely cut off from Israel and the Jewish People. According to the United Nations, it is not under Israeli sovereignty, including West Jerusalem, and has received, in English, a new name, Jerusalem - Al Kuds, thus emphasizing the exclusive Arab-Moslem character of Jerusalem.

In some cases, Canada maintains its affirmed policy and continues being one of the very few nations voting against anti-Israel resolutions. For instance, every year Canada refuses to vote for a global condemnation of Israel. When a

resolution calls for even more United Nations resources spent for the promotion of the PLO[7], Canada registers a negative vote. When a resolution calls for a solution of the Middle East problems with stringent attacks against Israel[8], Canada votes against.

The shift occurs when the resolutions, albeit anti-Israel, are not using excessively inflammatory terms and neither directly and explicitely refer to the equation between Zionism and racism nor directly and explicitely attack the Camp David Accords and resolutions 242 and 338. An example is the resolution emanating from the Committee for the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People[9] that regularly condemns Israel. Since its inception in 1975, Canada had voted against but switched to abstention in 1980 because "the Committee belongs to the United Nations machinery".

A similar shift appeared towards the resolution dealing with "Assistance to the Palestinian People" in cooperation with the P.L.O.; the Canada position went from a no to abstention and in 1982 to a yes vote.

There are even cases of erratic votes where naiveté seems to be the main explanation. For instance, in 1982, Canada condemned Israel for "plundering the Palestinian cultural heritage", i.e. taking documents and files from the Palestine Research Centre in Beirut, an intellectual and intelligence branch of the P.L.O.. It seems that the word "culture" was enough to attract a positive vote. One year later, when the facts became known and the documents had been returned by Israel, Canada abstained.

In summary, when the same resolution is repeated over and over, every year, and does not quote explicitely the three basic anti-Israel attacks Canada objects to, there is a discernible drift towards acquiescence.

In its perception of the Middle East, Canada is not alone at the United Nations. It shares this view with a few countries who are forming a small unofficial group at the United Nations. These states are all Western, they share a similar philosophy and similar goals, they want to defend democracy without being linked too closely to the United States, they are conscious of their limited status in the world of super-powers and they are influenced by the Lawrence of Arabia and the depolitization myths. This group includes Canada, Australia, New-Zealand, Austria and Scandinavian countries. They try to vote along the same line to be "in good company"[10].

Between a rational policy and a political mood

When confronted with resolutions dealing with the Middle-East situation, the Canadian delegation at the United Nations has only a limited margin of

manoeuvre. It participates in the decision making process but the ultimate responsibility is with the Department of External Affairs and, more broadly, with the Canadian Government. The Canadian delegation is therefore a spokesman for the Canadian Government and not a policy formulator.

The Canadian view of the Middle East presents three dimensions: 1) a respect for peaceful international relations, as embodied in some way by the United Nations; 2) a policy of promoting justice and peace, in the case of the Middle East a rejection of the "Zionism is racism" resolution, an appreciation of the Camp David Accords and a reference to resolutions 242 and 338; 3) a belief in the beneficial economic results for Canada of any shift towards Arab countries' position.

The first element induces Canada to give credit to the United Nations system even when it obviously does not work. Canada is thus torn between its liberal policy and its pro United Nations standing.

The second element should present a logical way to understand Canadian votes: resolutions calling for war or against peace, resolutions violating the letter and the spirit of the United Nations Charter, resolutions violating the letter and the spirit of the United Nations Charter, resolutions discriminating against a member state or a people are usually rejected. But there is a tendency to shift from rejection to abstention when the link with discrimination and anti-peace efforts are not clear cut.

As far as the third element, the preeminence of economic interests, is concerned, it is a rationalization of moves going against the two first elements, Canadian vote becoming an introduction to economic gains.

But underlying the Canadian Government perception of the Middle East is the personality of the Prime Minister who was in office for sixteen years, Pierre-Elliott Trudeau. A liberal, a proponent of a rational way of doing politics, he instigated and embodied change in Canadian policy. From a position of resisting pressure to have Canada toe the line, the anti-Israel line of the United Nations, he went to a kind of sentimentality devoided of analysis. The steadfastness was shown when Canada refused to allow P.L.O. representatives to attend the Habitat Conference in Vancouver, even if that meant cancelling the Conference in Canada. The lack of analysis was apparent in a June 1982 letter to the Prime Minister of Israel, Menahem Begin, written, according to the media, in Madrid, far from civil servants and political councellors. This letter "deplored and condemned as heinous acts terrorism against Israel or any country", proceeded to condemn the Israeli intervention in Lebanon for "feeding violence and hate in the Middle East" and concluded by the affirmation that "terrorist acts should stop". It was a mixture of platitudes, of selective indig-

nation, of lack of any study of the problem in order to find a solution. This sentimentality, uncharacteristic of P.-E. Trudeau, was either genuine or an excuse for a policy of appeasement towards terrorism, a contradiction with the official Government policy.

Another example of lack of rationality was furnished by the Denis Arcand episode. During summer 1982, Arcand, the Canadian Ambassador in Beirut, became a media star by condemning "urbi et orbi" Israel. This behavior was in contradiction to diplomatic rules and the duty of reserve of every civil servant.

The mere fact that Mr. Arcand was not immediately called to order by his superiors, although the system is centralized, leads to serious questions: who is in charge, the Canadian Government or the media, the elected officials of the country or civil servants in search of publicity.

Conclusion

For the Canadian Government, foreign policy is more and more an appendix to economic policy. In the same view, the Middle East is a side-issue in Canadian international relations, the foci of interest being the United States, the Common Market and the Pacific Rim.

The absence of traditions, the weakening of values, and of philosophy, except a mercantile one, lead the Government more and more to place business ahead of principles.

At the United Nations, sounding board for dictatorships (alas, the majority of the members) and spreading well of antisemitism, the situation for the few democratic delegations is not a comfortable one. This makes even more remarkable the courage of a handful of countries, including Canada, who refuse to submit to the lynch atmosphere prevailing at the United Nations when the terms "Israel" or "Jews" are uttered.

During the last few years, we have witnessed a policy of small steps which do not portend a complete reversal on the Middle East issue but an ongoing erosion when confronted with the forces of hate.

This erosion will probably continue as the new Conservative Government is also under the influence of the myths. Moreover the Conservative Government receives a minimal Jewish input. Western Canada has a large amount of Conservative forces who are, to say the least, unsympathetic towards Jewish concerns. Quebec and Ontario, but mostly Quebec, have voted Conservative whereas Jewish voters have kept their support for the Liberal party. Jewish voters have therefore a limited access to the new Government.

The myths influencing the Canadian policy towards the Middle-East will

continue to flourish: the "Arab World", the insatiable Arab market. Reinforcing the myths is sheer ignorance. For many Canadians, including those in influential positions, all immigrants from Arab countries are Arab and therefore anti-Israel (when in fact many immigranats from Lebanon are Christian and many immigrants from Egypt are Copts), Israel is a citrus exporting country (when in fact it is an advanced technological society) . . . These basic facts, and many others, are not presented to Canadian public opinion and are not always taught at University level, therefore preparing new generations of intellectually handicapped persons believing they are experts on Middle-Eastern issues.

For Canadians, dispelling the influence of myths, being aware of facts and disseminating them within the Government decision-making process is the best way to contribute to the forces of peace.

NOTES

1. The *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* was written by T.E. Lawrence from 1919 to 1921, privately published in 1921 and publicly in 1927. The book has brought to its author an instant celebrity. This is the more peculiar when one reads a book full of contradictions, presenting a definition of Arabs according to British imperial interests, containing many surprising assertions.

   In a bold sentence, Lawrence affirms that "the Arab is by nature continent" (p. 30), then lauds homosexuality and later writes about brothels! According to Lawrence "a first difficulty of the Arab movement was to say who the Arabs were"; he then proceeds by giving a definition closely knit to the British imperial interests: "The Arabic-speaking areas of Asia were a rough parallelogram. The northern side ran from Alexandretta on the Mediterranean, across Mesopotamia eastward to the Tigris. The south side was the edge of the Indian Ocean, from Aden to Muscat. On the west it was bounded by the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, and the Red Sea to Aden. On the east by the Tigris, and the Persian Gulf to Muscat. This square of land, formed the homeland of our Semites, in which no foreign race had kept a permanent footing". This map coincides closely with the colonial aspirations of the United Kingdom. Egypt and Sudan, not being in Asia and already under British control are not within the definition. Nor are North African countries, under French or Spanish control. As for the "no foreign race had kept a permanent footing" it is a negation of non-Arab peoples.

   Later on, Lawrence asserts that "Semites had sometimes pushed outside this area, and themselves been drowned in the outer world. Egypt, Algiers, Morocco, Malta, Sicily, Spain, Cilicia and France absorbed and obliterated Semitic colonies". Are we to understand that there is no difference between Morocco and Spain or between Algiers and France?

   No less surprising is the prophetic tone of Lawrence: "One such wave (i.e. spiritual wave against material goods), and not the least, I raised and rolled before the breath of an idea, till it reached its crest, and toppled over and fell at Damascus. The wash of that wave, thrown back by the resistance of vested things, will provide the matter of the following wave, when in fullness of time the sea shall be raised once more" (p. 43).
2. For a partial list of minorities in the Middle-East see "Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria: A Table", in *Middle-East Review*, vol. IX, no. 1, Fall 1976, pp. 60-69.
3. The Arab League was founded in Cairo on March 22, 1945 under the auspices of the British Government.
4. Lucien Mehl, *L'informatique, la connaissance et l'action*, Paris, 1968.

5. Resolution 242, adopted by the Security Council on November 22, 1967, affirms that the "establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle-East" is based on withdrawal of Israeli forces and termination of belligerency, as well as respect for the right of every state in the area "to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries."
6. Resolution 3339, adopted by the General Assembly, on November 10, 1975.
7. 38th General Assembly of the United Nations, Autumn 1983.
8. ibid.
9. Note the terminology used: at the United Nations only Palestinian Arabs have inalienable rights; no other group, including those whose very life is in danger, is entitled to such a United Nations treatment.
10. Pierre Deniger, M.P. and member of the Canadian delegation to the Thirty Eighth Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations.