



CJPME

Meeting the Challenge

A CJPME Proposal for Canada's Middle East Policy

12. Syria

Prepared by Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East



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Canada's direct involvement with Syria has been relatively modest even after diplomatic relations were established in 1965 and an embassy opened in Damascus in 1985. Nevertheless, Canada has long recognized that Syria is a crucially important Middle East player and will have a central role to play in any comprehensive Middle East peace settlement. Canada's participation in the UN force (UNDOF) set up in 1974 to patrol the disengagement zone between Israel and Syria in the Golan Heights, in part reflected Canada's appreciation of Syria's role in the region and its centrality to peace.

Canada needs to follow in this tradition and find effective ways to be more actively involved in fostering a positive and engaged approach to Syria as a main element of its Middle East policy. Syria is central to stability in Lebanon and Iraq, and could play an important role in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, in mediating the West's interactions with Iran, and in discouraging the rise of fundamentalist extremism in the region.

Beginning in 2004 with UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for the withdrawal of all Syrian troops from Lebanese territory and the disarmament of all militias (an element commonly interpreted as referring mainly to Hezbollah), an isolation policy against Syria was adopted by the US, France and many other Western nations. Despite the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in the wake of the 2005 Hariri assassination, the US and France continue to pressure Syria through a combination of broader political and economic sanctions.

In addition to blaming Syria for Hariri's assassination and for meddling in internal Lebanese politics, the US and France have also criticized Syria on account of its presumed involvement in the Iraq war, its engagement with Iran, and its ties with certain Palestinian factions, most importantly with Hamas, whose leader-in-exile, Khaled Mashaal, resides in Damascus. Syria is also the main channel through which Iran arms Hezbollah.

As a matter of principle CJPME believes that isolation of states is counter-productive; active engagement to positively influence behaviour should be the preferred approach. The visit of French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, to Damascus in September 2008 reflected a renewed appreciation in Europe for Syria's important regional role. With the announcement in May 2008 of revived Turkish-mediated peace talks between Syria and Israel, as well as the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Syria and Lebanon in October 2008, there is the possibility of Canada playing a role in supporting greater international engagement with Syria to the benefit of the entire region.

CJPME believes that Canada should use its influence in international forums and its ties with the US to encourage the new US administration, as well as key European players such as France, to continue to engage with Syria in a more constructive fashion which recognizes and leverages its central role in the region.

Canada should also support the recent renewal of Israel-Syria peace talks, based upon the land-for-peace formula, under which the occupied Golan would be returned to Syria in exchange for full peace with Israel. Peace between Syria and Israel would almost certainly ensure peace between Israel and Lebanon, and while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would remain the major regional challenge, the context for its resolution would have been radically altered. In this respect, however, CJPME cautions that any Israel-

Syria agreement should not serve to undermine efforts at achieving a just and fair peace between Israel and the Palestinians.