



The U.S. Factor in Canada's Middle East Policy

Luka Jintcharadze

Ph.D student in American Studies,
Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University,
Tbilisi. I. Chavchavadze Avenue N1, 0179, Georgia.
+995591508899. luka.jincharadze200@hum.tsu.edu.ge
<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6462-0469>

Abstract

This article examines the influence of the United States on Canadian Middle East policy, focusing on Canada's involvement in campaigns against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria. Canada's policy, including its participation in Operation Impact, humanitarian missions, and contributions to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, underscores its alignment with U.S. strategic interests in the region. Drawing on a range of literature, policy documents, military agreements, and public statements, this study explores how U.S.-Canada relations shape Canadian policy in the Middle East. As the United States anchors the modern international order, NATO, and the global coalition, it has defined the context for Canada's interventions. Maintaining international order and managing alliances provided indirect benefits to Canada, while fostering positive U.S.-Canada relations. Bilateral relations with regional states and their stability also played a role, though these were secondary considerations in Canada's intervention strategy.

Keywords: Canada; USA; Middle East; intervention; Islamic State.

Introduction

Canada is not a superpower and has rarely played a decisive role in the Middle East or global politics. However, the people of the Middle East, unlike the British or Americans, hold a deep respect for Canada, granting the Canadian state a unique opportunity to use diplomacy to foster positive change in the region. Canada's first steps in the Middle East after World War II began in 1947 with its support for the United Nations' plan to partition Palestine. This was followed by contributions to peace efforts during the Suez Crisis (1956) and support for multilateral diplomacy, marking the start of Canada's cautious yet significant involvement in the region. In response to late 20th- and early 21st-century geopolitical shifts, terrorist threats, and international security challenges, Canada adopted a more active political stance in the Middle East, emerging as a key actor in global security efforts in the region today.

Since September 11, the Canadian government has faced the decision of joining at least four U.S.-led military interventions in the Middle East and North Africa: the War in Afghanistan (2001-2021), the Iraq War (2003–2011), the Libya campaign against Muammar Gaddafi's regime (2011), and the ongoing campaign against the Islamic State (2014-present). With the exception of the Iraq War, Canada openly participated in all these interventions. These campaigns were launched with mandates from NATO, the United Nations, or broader international coalitions. Canada's involvement in Afghanistan and Libya was conducted under NATO auspices, while its intervention against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria was part of a diverse international coalition. Despite these conflicts only indirectly affecting Canadian security, both Liberal and Conservative governments found com-

elling reasons-ranging from alliance commitments to international stability-to engage in these military campaigns.

Two interrelated reasons consistently driving Canada's involvement in all three conflicts were the desire to uphold a rules-based international order and the need to be perceived by like-minded allies as a reliable and cooperative partner. The United States, as the cornerstone of the modern international order, NATO, and global coalitions, played a pivotal role in shaping the context for Canadian participation in these interventions. Maintaining international order and managing alliances were viewed as providing indirect benefits to Canada, including reinforcing strong bilateral relations with the United States (Sabet, 2022: 17). While bilateral relations with regional states and their stability also influenced Canadian decisions, these were secondary considerations compared to alliance commitments and the overarching goal of preserving global security frameworks.

The motivations for Canada's Conservative and Liberal governments to engage in these common causes differed. Stephen Harper's Conservative government was primarily focused on demonstrating Canada's military prowess, as well as combating political Islam and anti-Western authoritarian regimes. In contrast, Justin Trudeau's Liberal government was less driven by these factors, prioritizing a more diplomatic and humanitarian approach in its foreign policy.

As one Canadian official noted, Canada's participation in the coalition against the Islamic State since 2014 exemplifies how the country's political ideology, alongside the foreign relations dynamics shaping its relationship with the United States, plays a significant role in shaping its actions (Sabet, 2022: 19). The Conservative government of Stephen Harper quickly joined the campaign against ISIS, with Canada's primary contribution being six fast, light, and maneuverable multi-role fighter aircraft, the CF-18 Hornets. These were deployed not only for combat but also for supporting missions, including aircraft protection, training, and advisory roles (Russell, 2015).

In his 2015 election platform, Justin Trudeau promised Canadian voters that he would end Canada's military involvement in air combat. True to his word, he fulfilled this commitment upon taking office (Pelletier & Massie, 2017).

Methodology

This article employs a variety of methods commonly used in the humanities, political science, and social sciences, including analysis, induction, primary source analysis, case studies, comparison, and qualitative research. These methods are applied to examine the role of the United States in shaping Canadian policy in the Middle East, particularly in Canada's campaigns against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria. The research draws on primary sources, such as government policy documents and official statements from both Canada and the United States. Additionally, secondary sources, including academic articles, political reports, and media analyses, are used to provide contextual insight into the geopolitical dynamics influencing Canadian actions in the region.

Discussion

As noted, Canada's security interests have been significantly involved in the campaign against the Islamic State, although its contribution has not been decisive for the coalition. Despite this, there was little pressure on the Canadian government during the election campaign to end its combat role in Iraq and Syria. While Justin Trudeau's Liberal government eventually ceased Canada's participation in air combat, Canadian involvement continued and even expanded in other ways. This included increasing the number of military personnel, deploying troops to the front lines, conducting air strikes, and maintaining support aircraft for cover and refueling allied planes. Additionally, Canada provided training for local partner forces, increased the presence of medical personnel to support both Canadian troops and their allies, and offered training for Iraqi security forces. Canada also

ramped up the supply of military equipment to the Kurdish Peshmerga⁹⁷ in northern Iraq (Goody, 2019).

This increase in military efforts was accompanied by a stronger diplomatic approach, reflected in over \$1.1 billion in humanitarian and other assistance provided over three years. This aid included drinking water, food, shelter, healthcare, hygiene, sanitation, education, and financial support to meet the basic needs of refugees. Additionally, Canada focused on repairing and rebuilding infrastructure, promoting employment and economic growth, and encouraging good governance (National Defence, 2023). As such, Justin Trudeau's Liberal government's approach to the campaign against the Islamic State marked a shift from that of its predecessors. Nevertheless, the Trudeau government maintained a strong military presence in the region, balancing both military and diplomatic efforts.

Some experts have suggested that the potential displeasure of the United States played a significant role in Canada's decision to maintain its military involvement in the campaign (Sabet, 2022:23). Additionally, there may have been concerns that a complete withdrawal from the campaign would be perceived as Canada "escaping" its responsibilities, thereby undermining its credibility as an international security partner. While Justin Trudeau's Liberal government honored its campaign promise to end the air campaign, they likely anticipated U.S. discontent with the decision. Ultimately, while the United States set the context for Canada's intervention, American pressure was not the primary factor driving Canada to join the campaign against the Islamic State or to end its participation in the air campaign.

⁹⁷ The Peshmerga is a military group operating under the command of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. The term "Peshmerga" translates to "one who confronts death" or "one who threatens death." The formal leader of the Peshmerga is considered to be the President of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Another notable example of the potential disagreement between Liberal and Conservative governments over military intervention in the region is the decision of the Liberal government of Canada's 20th Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, not to join the campaign to invade Iraq in 2003. Despite American pressure, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien officially stated that there was no UN mandate for the invasion of Iraq (Chrétien, 2003). Stephen Harper, then leader of the opposition and of the Canadian Alliance Party, called for Canada to join the campaign to protect freedom and promote the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. I believe that this disagreement can be explained by different political ideologies and the US factor. For example, in 1998, Jean Chrétien's Liberal government supported the Anglo-American bombing campaign in Iraq without explicit UN Security Council support (Barnes, 2020: 35).

Recent studies have suggested that the Chrétien government's decision was largely influenced by pre-2003 election politics. Chrétien's Liberal government did not want to lose the Quebec electorate, as Quebec is a historically anti-war region. It is worth noting that Quebec is a key constituency for the Liberal government, where the population was not in favor of the war. On the other hand, the province of Alberta, which was a major base for the Alliance/Conservatives, was in favor of intervention. Thus, it seems that the decision of Jean Chrétien's Liberal government not to publicly support the Iraq War was motivated by political ideology and the Liberal Party's electoral coalition.

It is worth considering that Stephen Harper's party, had it been in power in 2003, would have been forced to form a broader coalition and might have taken a similar position to the Liberal government. We should not ignore the US factor. During the course of the war, Canada sent a relatively large military contingent to Afghanistan for several months. This may have been dictated by a show of support for the United States in order to mitigate American discontent with the fact that Canada did not join the coalition in Iraq.

Conclusion

This paper allows us to draw some conclusions about the US factor in Canadian Middle East policy. American diplomatic initiatives, such as nuclear negotiations with Iran and military interventions, such as the campaign against the Islamic State, often create a political environment to which Canada is obliged to respond. Canada generally supports these initiatives and interventions, even if its contribution is not large, especially when its political decision aligns with the broader sentiment of the electorate, as evidenced by the policy during the 2003 Iraq War.

The United States has the power to influence Canadian law, for example, through transnational networks. Moreover, the high level of US-Canadian economic integration and the long list of US extraterritorial sanctions limit Canada's ability to deepen relations with US-sanctioned regimes in the Middle East, such as Iran and Syria. However, as the modern political context has evolved, the United States has rarely been a major factor shaping Canadian policy in the Middle East and has generally not exerted much pressure on Canadian governments. Additionally, Canada does not have strong economic or security interests in the region (Heinbecker, Momani, 2007). This gives Canada relative autonomy and increases the importance of other factors in policymaking, including support for a rules-based international order, alliance management, and bilateral relations with states in the region.

Thus, the ideological alignment between the two countries may indicate the likelihood that Canadian governments will support American policies. Liberal governments in Canada tend to support the policies of the US Democratic Party, while Conservative governments in Canada tend to support the policies of the Republican Party. It can be assumed that if the Conservative government of Stephen Harper had been in power at the beginning of the Iraq War, they might have publicly supported the Bush administration and sent military forces to Iraq. Justin Trudeau's Liberal government did not stop supporting the

JCPOA (the Iran Nuclear Deal) after the Trump administration withdrew from the agreement in May 2018. As conservatives suggest, if they had been in power, Canadian public policy regarding the Iranian nuclear program would have been different (Sabet, 2022: 26).

These assumptions provide an opportunity for further research into Canadian policy in the Middle East and, more generally, its global foreign policy, as well as the asymmetric relationship between the United States and Canada. Investigating how ideological alignments and domestic political dynamics shape Canada's responses to international issues, especially in regions like the Middle East, could offer valuable insights into the broader context of Canadian diplomacy and its positioning relative to US interests.

Reference:

- Barnes, A. (2020). „Getting it right: Canadian intelligence assessments on Iraq, 2002-2003". *Intelligence and National Security*, 925–953.
- Heinbecker, P., Momani, B. (2007). "Canada and the Middle East, In *Theory and Practice*". The Center for International Governance Innovation (cigi) and Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Sabet, F. (2022). *Sleeping beside the Elephant: The United States in Canada's Middle East Policy*. <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/sites/internet/files/2022-05/SABET%2C%20Farzan%20-%20Sleeping%20beside%20the%20elephant.pdf>
- Pelletier L., Massie J. (2017) “Role conflict: Canada’s withdrawal from combat operations against ISIL”. *International Journal*. Vol. 72(3) 298–317. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26414112?seq=1>
- C-SPAN - Jean Chrétien. *Canadian Question Period, 2003*. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?175526-1/canadian-question-period>
- Canada.ca - National Defence “Operation IMPACT”, 2023. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/o>

rations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-impact.html

HillNotes - Canada's Military Role in Iraq, 2019. <https://hillnotes.ca/2019/07/25/canadas-military-role-in-iraq/> Allison Goody, Library of Parliament.

Global News – “Canadian CF-18 jets conduct 1st airstrike against ISIS target in Syria”. Andrew Russell, 8 April, 2015. <https://globalnews.ca/news/1928284/canadian-cf-18-jets-bomb-targets-in-syria-for-first-time/>