

Why Canada is Justified in Selling Arms to the Saudis

The controversy over the sale of light armoured vehicles (LAVs) to Saudi Arabia illustrates the fact that Canada can now decide whether it wants to be one of the world's important powers or not. This does not mean a super power, which is not and will not be on offer for a country of 35 million people. It means a G7 country with the ability to extend its status to be one of world's influential countries beyond economics and including the full range of factors that create a country's stature in the world. This is not the last chance for Canada to make that choice, but is one of the first of such opportunities.

Those who most strenuously oppose the sale to Saudi Arabia include practically all audible elements of the NDP. They rightly see Saudi Arabia as a primitive absolute monarchy that has no respect for human liberty, especially women's rights, is religiously intolerant, and foments militant Wahhabi Islam throughout the Muslim world. This past week, opponents of the sale to Saudi Arabia have been jubilantly circulating news film footage of the Saudis deploying similar equipment, though not supplied by Canada, to break up Shiite demonstrations in Saudi Arabia, and claiming that it could be reasonably inferred that Canadian-supplied LAVs would be similarly deployed.

The opponents of the deal focus especially on the fish-tailing of the federal government as it cites Saudi Arabia as an ally in the fight against Iranian expansion and anti-Western terrorism. The government has assured that this equipment would not be used on Saudi civilians. Tepid supporters of the deal make the point that thousands of Canadian jobs are at stake, and that Canada must not gain a reputation as a fickle and unreliable trading partner.

Of course, the Saudi regime is a nauseating affront to Western values. It has been for decades a joint venture between the House of Saud and the Wahhabi hierarchy, which has long been the principal propagator of militant Islam among Sunni Muslims. Financed by the Saudi royal family, the Wahhabis leave the Saudi regime untroubled, even as they try to destabilize many other governments. Of course, Saudi hypocrisy is distasteful, although it has moderated its support for extremism, under pressure from the United States, and as it has been pushed into the Islamic centre by al-Qaida and ISIL.

Now is the time for Canada to end the role of foreign affairs as a substitute for theology and psychiatry, and to see it as it should be: the means of projecting this country's interests and influence as a benign policy force in the world. Those who strongly favour the LAV contract, including me, emphasize that the manufacturer is a branch-plant of an American company which would decamp elsewhere if this deal is revoked, creating thousands of skilled, durably unemployed Canadians. The Saudis would buy similar vehicles from other suppliers. Canada would then be mocked in the world as a flaky, inconstant, self-righteous, and light-weight country with no vocation to measure the balance between its interests and moral influence in the world. Further, we would be seen, correctly, as subordinating our economic and strategic interest to a moralistic encouragement of a more liberal Saudi state, something we cannot achieve. This view exaggerates and misjudges our moral interest at the expense of the practical interests of Canada and the West.

Saudi Arabia is a powerful regional and sectarian ally against Hezbollah (Lebanon), Hamas (Palestinian territories and Israel), and the Houthi (Yemen), and formidable associate in the struggle against ISIL, which dismisses the Iranian theocrats (and their above-mentioned proxies), and Saudi royals together as pallid infidels. What we have now in the Middle East is a stranger association of powers than was the

West with Stalin's Soviet Union during the Second World War (which Stalin helped start with his Nazi-Soviet Pact with Hitler). But that alliance worked very well, and the West gained or retrieved Germany, France, Italy, and Japan, four of the world's greatest nations, back into the West as prosperous and democratic allies, while Stalin gained only expensive and temporary and brutal occupation of Eastern Europe, having taken over 90 per cent of the casualties in subduing Nazi Germany. This parallel can be overworked, but as I have written here and elsewhere before, Saudi Arabia, in trying to put a rod on the back of Iran by tanking the world oil price, was also so instrumental in afflicting the Russian national treasury that Russian leader Putin almost certainly moderated the pressure he had planned to assert on Ukraine and the Baltic states. Whatever their shortcomings, the Saudis have been the greatest pillar the crumbling Western alliance has had in the last two years.

In applying standards of acceptable moral conduct on other countries, all mature Western nations are compelled to be governed by two factors: whether the co-contracting regime is morally abhorrent and inferior to its local, or sectarian or ideological rivals; and if refusing to treat with such an odious regime would actually lead to its downfall, and would a replacement regime be preferable. Of course, the answer in this case, of Saudi Arabia, is no on both counts. The Saudis are less dangerous and hostile to the West than their Iranian rivals, and the Saudis are effectively combatting Iranian surrogates mentioned above (even allowing for President Obama's spongiform-brained appeasement of Tehran). Any replacement of the Saudi government, mired in infelicities as it is, would be a hideous cocktail of al-Qaida and ISIL. These would make the relatively house-trained Wahhabi grandees seem like the pious elders of the United Church of Canada (who can be very tiresome and self-serving, but persist in the murky cause of Protestant rights in the People's Republic and aren't trying to kill anyone).

Two examples in living memory of those who have imposed trade embargoes on strategic exports are Franklin D. Roosevelt's ending the shipments of oil and iron exports to Japan in 1941, and prime minister Lester Pearson's refusal to sell uranium to France in 1965. Regarding Japan, Roosevelt was correct, morally and practically, and Japan had to attack the United States treacherously, as it did in 1941, or retreat with its tail between its legs from China and Indochina, which it had brutally invaded. Pearson's moral sanctimony opposite France caused General de Gaulle to seek uranium from France's former African colonies, and he responded to Pearson's shabby breach of trust with a call to French Canadians to secede from the Canadian state, wherever they might be. This contributed to decades of turmoil in Quebec-federal relations.

We must start by outgrowing the national mythos expressed by Michael Byers in the Globe and Mail on May 12, and accept that most members of the United Nations pay no attention to the UN Charter or the Universal Declaration on Human Rights; that nobody applies the Geneva Conventions or UN Convention Against Torture to terrorism or counter-terrorism, and that Lester Pearson "won the Nobel prize for peace because he devised a new mechanism – UN peacekeeping – for preventing death and suffering." the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Henry Cabot Lodge, and the State Department, devised it as a face-saving measure for the British and French after the dreadful fiasco at Suez in 1956 and asked Pearson to move it because if the U.S. did, the Soviet Union, which was then busily engaged in suppressing the Hungarian revolution, would veto it. It is time we had a real foreign policy tailored to our potential capabilities, and emerged from our long-spun cocoon as the pure Snow Maiden of the north raising a light to the nations. Our duty and interest in this case is to pursue our economic interest while assisting the least bad of the Middle East blocs against the worse Iranian bloc and the unspeakable theo-terrorists.

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