

Canada's foreign minister greeted by protests on Mideast tour

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Palestinians angered by Ottawa's full-throated support for Israeli aggression pelted eggs and shoes at Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird's convoy when he visited the West Bank on Sunday.

Baird's trip to Ramallah, the capital of the Palestinian Authority (PA), was part of a four-day tour of the Middle East, which included stopovers in Egypt and Israel. The protesters denounced Baird's presence on Palestinian territory, noting that Canada's Conservative government has openly and explicitly supported Israel's dispossession and abuse of the Palestinian people, with Prime Minister Stephen Harper repeatedly declaring that Canada is Israel's staunchest ally. Members of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah Party held up signs reading "Baird, you are not welcome in Palestine."

Baird met with Palestinian Authority (PA) foreign minister Riad Malki. In diplomatic language, Canada's foreign minister made clear that they had had a frosty encounter, declaring that the meeting was characterized by "candid and frank exchanges on areas where we differ in opinion." Referring to recent PA efforts to pursue war crimes charges through the International Criminal Court (ICC) against Israel, Baird demanded that they "strongly reconsider the consequences of moving forward with any action that may be counterproductive to a negotiated solution with the state of Israel."

After returning to Israel, where he met with far-right Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister Avigdor Lieberman, Baird attacked the ICC's announcement last Friday that it was opening preliminary investigations into Israeli conduct over a period that included last year's invasion of Gaza. The ICC decision was "deeply regrettable," declared Baird. Standing at Baird's side, Lieberman welcomed Ottawa's criticism, adding, "We think it is completely unacceptable that a terrorist organization like Hamas will be able to file a lawsuit against Israel. It's making a mockery of international law, and the opposition of one of the founders of the ICC is very important, maybe crucial."

Canada has a long record of opposing Palestinian attempts

to win international recognition. It was one of the few countries to vote against granting Palestine non-member status at the 2012 UN General Assembly. Recently, Ottawa denounced a resolution, subsequently rejected by the UN Security Council, that would have provided a three-year timetable for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

In line with this, the Conservative government has justified every crime and atrocity committed by Israel against the populations of Gaza and the West Bank, as well as its bloody 2006 invasion of Lebanon. During last summer's weeks-long bombardment of Gaza by Israeli Defense Forces, all of Canada's establishment parties, including the NDP, placed the blame for the violence solely on Hamas. The utter indifference to the human suffering inflicted was summed up by Prime Minister Stephen Harper who, as bombs were raining down on innocent civilians, proclaimed last July, "Solidarity with Israel is the best way of stopping the conflict."

Baird is himself no stranger to provoking controversy by siding with Tel Aviv. In April 2013, he caused an uproar across the Arab world when he effectively endorsed Israel's illegal annexation of East Jerusalem by meeting the former Israeli justice minister, Tzipi Livni, there. Palestinian leaders have long designated East Jerusalem as the prospective capital of a Palestinian state.

Canada's solidarity with Israel is fully in keeping with its aggressive militarist policy throughout the broader region. Ottawa has been one of the most steadfast allies of US imperialism in its drive to secure its geopolitical interests in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia through a series of illegal wars, military incursions, and US-sponsored insurgencies. Following ten years as part of the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan, Canada was one of the leading participants in the 2011 US-led regime change war in Libya that overthrew Muammar Gaddafi. NATO's air war was overseen by a Canadian general.

Since last fall, Canada is again at war in the Middle East, having signed up for the new US-led war in Iraq and Syria. While the initial target of US and Canadian military

operations is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), this war's true target is Syria's Baathist regime, a close ally of Russia and Iran. Moreover, like those that preceded it and out of which it has grown, the war's overriding aim is to reinforce US strategic dominance over what is the world's most important oil-exporting region.

On Monday, the Canadian military revealed that soldiers in Iraq ostensibly to provide training to Kurdish forces had been involved in a battle with ISIS and had provided ground support for allied air strikes. (See: "Canadian Special Forces engage in ground combat in Iraq")

Canada's increasingly aggressive role in the Middle East is driven not by only by the ruling elite's desire to curry favour with Washington, its most important strategic partner. Canadian imperialism is seeking to assert its own presence and interests in Middle East, with a view to securing both immediate economic and diplomatic advantages and ensuring it will be a "player" in the imperialist restructuring of the region now underway.

The first stop on Baird's latest trip was Egypt, where he met with top officials in the government of military dictator Abdel Fatah al-Sisi. Concluding his second visit to Cairo in less than a year, he stated, "Canada believes that a moderate, democratic and prosperous Egypt will be key to the success of the region, especially at a time of growing regional and security challenges."

Baird's previous visit was last May, just weeks after an Egyptian court had sentenced over 500 Muslim Brotherhood members to death in a mass show trial.

Canadian media outlets focused most of their coverage of the Egyptian leg of Baird's tour on the fate of Mohammed Fami, an Egyptian-Canadian journalist who has been jailed for the past 13 months on trumped up terrorism charges after filing reports that pointed to some of the military regime's abuses. Despite mouthing pat phrases about rapidly securing Fami's release, Baird sought to avoid any direct involvement in the case. Fami's lawyer told the media that Baird's office had rejected a meeting with him to discuss steps to win the journalist's release.

Canada's full-throated defence of the region's most reactionary regimes is topped off by its close ties to Saudi Arabia. Riyadh is Canada's largest trading partner in the Middle East, with goods and services valued at C\$4 billion traded in 2013.

A prominent role in Canada's commercial dealings with the Saudi monarchy is played by arms exports. Canada sold over C\$575 million of arms and military vehicles to Saudi Arabia between 2012 and 2013, and last year a Canadian division of General Dynamics signed a C\$13 billion contract to supply light-armored military vehicles to Riyadh over the coming 14 years. Pivotal to the deal was support from

Ottawa's government-to-government contracting organization, the Canadian Commercial Corp.

As part of his visit to the World Economic Forum in Davos later this week, Baird is scheduled to meet with Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal, who served for many years as head of the country's intelligence agency.

Even more revealing than the scale of the arms Canada has sold is the context within which it has emerged as a major arms dealer in the region. Canada's arms exports to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt all rose sharply from 2011 onwards—in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. According to CBC, Canada's sale of arms to the Middle East between 2006 and 2010 was a mere 1.6 percent of its total military exports.

By 2012, military exports to the Middle East as an entire region stood at C\$704 million, three times higher than exports to NATO members. Arms sales to Egypt rose by 83 percent between 2011 and 2012, while Bahrain became a new customer for Canadian weaponry. Ottawa thus sold military equipment to brutal regimes at a time when they were all involved in suppressing popular protests, in the case of Egypt driven by the revolutionary movement that overthrew Hosni Mubarak, and in Bahrain the social protests that were ruthlessly put down with Saudi assistance. When Baird visited Bahrain in 2013, he maintained a studied silence on the Bahraini monarchy's lethal repression.

The supply of military equipment is only one aspect of a vast expansion of Canadian economic activity in the Middle East. Between 2009 and 2012, Ottawa signed expanded economic agreements with several countries, including Jordan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria, Morocco, Qatar and Bahrain.

Ottawa has also exploited opportunities arising from its military operations to expand commercial activity. In early 2012, less than three months after the ouster and murder of Gaddafi by a cabal of NATO armed and supported Islamists, longtime CIA assets and defectors from the Gaddafi regime, International Trade Minister Ed Fast led a trade mission to Libya accompanied by 15 companies seeking investment opportunities.



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