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## The Canadian / Saudi Arms Deal: More Than Meets the Eye?

By Murray Dobbin  
April 29, 2016

It is difficult to predict what kind of government misstep can seriously tarnish a government's reputation. Some mistakes have legs and others, inexplicably, seem not to. But the stunningly stupid decision to go ahead with a \$15 billion sale of light armoured vehicles (LAVs) to Saudi Arabia has the potential to expose Justin 'Canada is back' Trudeau as a phony. Indeed you could hardly design an issue so perfectly fitted to reveal a government with a progressive public face contradicted by a ruthless disregard for human rights. It begs the question as to whether the spin doctors simply misjudged how widespread the public revulsion would be or whether there is something deeper going on. Is it really just about jobs or is there a hard-nosed commitment, inherited from the Conservatives, to a backward Middle East foreign policy?

Dion has been severely weakened by his performance on the Saudi arms sale file. First he essentially lied about the government's inability to get out of the contract – saying it was legally committed by the Conservative government's actions. He compounded his credibility problem with another misleading gambit – that he was in fact following Canadian law in signing the export permits. Dion attacked the *Globe and Mail* for its accusation of hypocrisy claiming that "...the Foreign Affairs Minister may block the exports permits at any time if there were serious evidence of misuse of the military equipment." That is, presumably, after our LAV's have been used to attack civilians. But in fact the export control guidelines don't refer to "serious misuse" but to whether "...there is no reasonable risk that the goods might be used against the civilian population."

There is no need here to repeat what everyone already knows about the hideous human rights record of Saudi Arabia – it is amongst the worst of the worst. And in fact the Saudi government has used exactly this kind of armoured vehicle against its own dissenting citizens. According to Belkis Wille, Yemen researcher for Human Rights Watch: “The Saudis have used such vehicles to violently suppress peaceful protests in eastern Saudi Arabia in 2011 and 2012.” Is there a “reasonable risk” that it will do so again? Everything we know about the new and far more aggressive regime in Riyadh today says yes. In January the regime executed 47 prisoners (most by beheading) on a single day, many of them for simply demonstrating against the government. The regime executed 151 in 2015 – the most in twenty years. The Saudi government described the executed as “terrorists” but the law defining terrorism casts an enormous net. A terrorist is “...anyone who demands reform, exposes corruption or otherwise engages in dissent or violence against the government.”

While the arms sales guidelines aim to protect the civilian population of the country in question, surely the Trudeau government should consider the use of its exports against civilians anywhere to be a human rights deal-breaker. It is precisely this situation which has prompted Canada’s allies in the European Parliament “...to launch an initiative aimed at imposing an EU arms embargo against Saudi Arabia.” Saudi Arabia’s brutal bombing campaign in Yemen against the Houthi rebels has sparked outrage in most Western capitals. The United Nations Panel of Experts on Yemen “...documented 119 coalition [bombing] sorties relating to violations’ of the laws of war.”

There is little doubt that Stephane Dion and his boss would like us to believe that Saudi Arabia’s total disregard for civilian lives and its targeting of medical facilities in Yemen (a possible war crime) are irrelevant when it comes to signing arms exports permits. But it appears to many governments, international agencies and ngo’s as decisive. In swimming against the international tide Dion’s new foreign policy philosophy – “responsible conviction” – might better be called “conviction when convenient.”

But putting all of this down to a botched political calculation regarding Canadian jobs is not a very convincing explanation. Does this ugly bit of Trudeau policy reveal something more substantive? What does it say about the government’s overall Middle East policy? One of the reasons Dion has given for the arms sale is that Saudi Arabia is an ally in the fight against Islamic extremism. But anyone with knowledge of its roots knows that Saudi Arabia is the motherland when it comes to radical Islam. Right now in the US there is a fierce debate raging about whether or not to release a secret 28-page section of a 2002 congressional report on 9/11, dealing with possible involvement of elements of the Saudi regime in the terror attacks.

While it is still relatively early days in the Trudeau government promises of a significant shift in ME policy are still nowhere to be seen. A 2013 assessment of where Trudeau would go on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict suggested major shifts in balancing the interests of the two sides. But so far Canada’s support for Israel seems unwavering. What stands out is Trudeau’s support of a Conservative resolution that would have the government “condemn” any advocacy for the BDS (boycott, divest, sanction) campaign for Palestinian rights. He also opposes the EU’s new product labelling initiative “...that require products produced in the settlements and sold in the EU to be clearly marked.” And there seems to be little if any movement on Trudeau’s

commitment to re-engage with Iran. In short, so far, Trudeau's ME policy looks disturbingly like Harper's.

While policies supporting both Israel and Saudi Arabia may seem contradictory they are in fact quite consistent. The two countries share a number of common enemies, including Shia Islam, Iran, pan-Arab nationalism, the Assad regime in Syria, and Hizbollah. They are also the most vociferous regional opponents of US and EU efforts at a rapprochement with Iran. If Canada doesn't move on its pledges regarding policy change it will find itself increasingly at odds with the US and EU. At no time in the past three decades has the tension between the US and Israel and Saudi Arabia, its two principal Middle East allies, been greater. One way for Dion to indicate he's not off-side on re-balancing ME policy would be to end his self-righteous posturing on the LAV deal and reverse the export permits.

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Posted By *Murray Dobbin* On April 29, 2016 @ 1:52 am In articles 2015 | Comments Disabled

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