

Policy

Brief

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Canada-Gulf Relations: Strengthening Strategic Ties and Promoting Re-Engagement

About the Author



Bukola Solomon is a Ph.D. student in Global Governance at the Balsillie School of International Affairs through the University of Waterloo. She researches gender mainstreaming in security studies, particularly terrorism and counterterrorism studies. She is currently writing her dissertation on the securitization of motherhood in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) policies and practices.

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The development of this policy brief was inspired by the working paper "Canada and the Gulf" written by Dennis Horak.

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Introduction

Canada can no longer continue to sideline the Gulf in its foreign policy priorities as it tends to “force itself on the international agenda”.^[1] The Gulf region is rapidly growing in power and wealth, and it still has many untapped opportunities for Canada’s public and private sectors. Canada needs to strengthen its political engagement in the Gulf to activate these potential benefits. This will help to advance Canada’s interests: to foster mutual economic growth, promote stability, and facilitate the transfer of democratic values. In the absence of a conducive political environment to address Canada-Saudi Arabia tensions in the current moment, the United Arab Emirates (UAE)-centric policy serves as a viable alternative.

While the UAE is important, it cannot substitute Saudi Arabia, the region’s key economic player. Hence, this brief argues that without an enhanced political engagement with the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, it is challenging for Canada to achieve its interests in the region.

Contextualizing Canada’s Footprint in the Gulf Region

Canada’s trade relations with the Arab Gulf states began in the early 1970s. These ties came out of a foreign policy review that highlighted economic growth as a foreign policy priority. Canada has viewed the region as a potential market for its trade diversification goals to reduce its trade dependency on the US. Throughout its 50-year history, trade remained the key driver of Canada-Gulf relationships with Saudi Arabia at the center, given its key position in the region.

Regional political and security issues, such as Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and 9/11, have deepened Canada’s footprint in the region through war, post-war deployments and military exports. However, Canada’s military and political engagement have been primarily driven by Canada’s strong support for multilateral initiatives. Canada’s engagement with the Gulf remains primarily focused on advancing Canada’s commercial priorities and interests.

The events of 9/11 changed the perceptions of the security challenges posed by Saudi Arabia and also highlighted the longstanding concerns of religious fundamentalism and human rights violations. Gradually, Canada started to shift its gaze towards the UAE as the new center of its activities in the region.

However, it was in 2015 when two issues cast a spotlight on the political problem posed by Saudi Arabia, particularly its human rights record: the controversial \$15-billion contract to supply light-armored vehicles (LAVs) and the imprisonment of Saudi blogger, Raif Badawi (whose family lived in Quebec). In 2018, the tweet-offensive over the detention of women’s rights activists, including Samar Badawi (who is the sister of Raif Badawi) solidified the shift towards UAE as the new center of Canada-Gulf relations.

Advancing Canada's Interests in the Gulf

Despite the declining oil revenues, there are still significant lucrative opportunities in the region that can benefit Canada. For instance, the growing Sovereign Wealth Funds, the Gulf's rapidly growing technology and innovation sector and the Gulf's ambitious quest for renewable energy.

- > Even with economic growth being the priority of Canada's engagement with the Gulf, sustained, high-level political engagement with the Gulf is needed to unlock these opportunities. Simply put, Canadian economic activities should be politically supported by senior government officials.
- > Enhanced political engagement includes re-engaging with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is the region's major player and largest market. It cannot be sidelined. The cost of alienation of Saudi Arabia is high. Both Canada and Saudi Arabia have shared security interests being a strong bulwark against Iran's aggression and terrorist organizations. These interests would be better advanced through a return to normal diplomatic engagement. A rapprochement would also position Canada to support Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which seeks to address many of the reforms that Canada has been pushing for in Saudi Arabia, such as improving women's status and addressing religious fundamentalism.

Policy Considerations

Neither UAE nor Saudi Arabia should be at the center of Canada-Gulf relations. Improved relations with both countries should be considered. The government can ease into this new policy direction of re-engaging with Saudi Arabia by:

- > Engaging Saudi Arabia at the 2020 G20 Summit in Riyadh: Canada's initiation of rapprochement discussion at such a high-level gathering can strategically accompany Canada's commitment to human rights. This may induce resentment from many Canadians who would favor the boycotting of both the Summit (due to its location: Riyadh) and Saudi Arabia in general over its human rights abuses. It is also possible that Saudi Arabia will decline or ignore Canada's offer of rapprochement to publicly humiliate Canada once again, following their overreaction to Minister Freeland's tweet. Nonetheless, this is a great start worth considering.
- > Engaging other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and UAE) to help facilitate and mediate the re-engagement discussions at the top government level. The Canada-GCC Strategic Dialogue offers an opportunity for these multilateral discussions at the ministerial level. It should be sustained and enhanced to explore how to deepen cooperation in trade and investment, education, energy, security and human rights.

Sources

Dennis Horak (2020), Canada and the Gulf, working paper, internally circulated within the DSFG.