

Disgruntled Arab states look to strip Canada of UN agency

May 2, 2013

By Campbell Clark

The Globe and Mail

http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/disgruntled-arab-states-look-to-strip-canada-of-un-agency/article11672346/?utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_source=Globe%20Politics&utm_type=text&utm_content=GlobePolitics&utm_campaign=103857469

Growing discontent among Arab nations over the Harper government's pro-Israel stand is prompting joint talks on retaliation, with some eyeing a campaign to strip Canada of a major UN agency, the ICAO.

The International Civil Aviation Organization, which sets international rules for airplane transportation, has been headquartered in Montreal since 1947, but Qatar is now bidding to relocate it to the Middle East in 2016, trying to muster votes from 115 countries to approve the move at a meeting this fall.

Some Arab nations are now considering backing the bid as a potential focus for combined efforts to strike back at Canada for its stand on Palestinian issues. It would mark a new avenue for Arab countries that have criticized Ottawa before: a campaign that threatens concrete consequences.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's staunch support for Israel and close relationship with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and his vocal campaign last fall against the Palestinian bid for observer-state status at the UN, has long been viewed with dismay by some Arab nations.

The backlash has been fuelled by Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird's April foray into east Jerusalem to meet an Israeli minister – a move many Arab countries viewed as a symbolic acceptance of Israeli control over land it occupied in 1967 in the Six-Day War, an area Palestinians want as the capital of a future state. Mr. Baird's response to the furor appears to have stoked the reaction.

At an April 23 meeting in New York on Palestinian issues, Arab ambassadors to the United Nations devoted a section of their agenda to countering Canada, including mustering allies from other countries to vote against Ottawa in international organizations, according to sources familiar with the meeting.

Since that meeting, Qatar has made its new bid to take ICAO's headquarters away from Montreal, and some Arab countries are eyeing moves to back it by campaigning to win the votes of other states, sources say.

Losing ICAO's Montreal headquarters would be more than the diplomatic embarrassment the Harper Conservatives suffered when Canada lost its 2010 bid for a seat on the UN Security Council.

ICAO has 534 employees and 37 full-time foreign delegations in the city, and a 2012 analysis by consulting firm SECOR reported it brings \$119-million a year to Montreal's economy. Its offices are designated as emergency UN headquarters in the event of attack or disaster. If it is moved, Quebec's Parti Québécois government, critical of the Conservatives' foreign policy, would be expected to blame Ottawa for failing Quebec.

The bid to move it still faces daunting odds – requiring the votes of 60 per cent of ICAO's 191 member nations.

Qatar has made a gold-plated offer that reportedly includes a state-of-the-art facility and subsidies for employees. It has also asked major Arab nations, including Egypt, to put their diplomatic machines behind efforts to muster votes.

Arab nations already looking to deal a blow to Ottawa for its stand on Palestinian issues could wield influence if they united behind the ICAO campaign: The Arab League has 22 members, and a broader group of Muslim countries, the Organization for Islamic Co-operation, has 57.

Ottawa is taking the ICAO threat seriously: Mr. Baird and officials are calling other countries to counter Qatar's bid. A spokesman for Mr. Baird, Joseph Lavoie, said the Foreign Affairs Minister called Qatar's Prime Minister twice in the past week and will "fight tooth and nail" to keep the ICAO in Montreal – and he won't change his tune on his visit to east Jerusalem.

“Canada will not apologize for promoting a principled foreign policy,” Mr. Lavoie said. “Those who choose to focus on where the minister stops for coffee instead of the larger, substantive issues at play do a disservice to the cause of peace.”

But Mr. Baird’s foray into east Jerusalem to meet Israeli Justice Minister Tzipi Livni – ironically, during a Middle East tour aimed in large part at making friends in Arab nations – left bitterness in the region. His response appears to have stoked that feeling.

Mr. Baird had visited east Jerusalem with an Israeli escort last year; former Liberal justice minister Irwin Cotler also visited Israeli officials there, an aide said. But this time, an Israeli government source told the newspaper Haaretz, Mr. Baird was seeking to create a precedent. Mr. Baird insisted the visit didn’t change Canadian policy – but officials of Arab countries complained he didn’t clarify whether Ottawa views east Jerusalem as occupied territory.

And at an April 15 meeting with Arab ambassadors in Ottawa, Mr. Baird had a tetchy exchange with Egyptian ambassador Wael Aboul-Magd, who asked him to clarify Canadian policy, according to sources familiar with the events.

In response, Mr. Baird read comments made by Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi in 2010, when he referred to the “occupiers of Palestine” as the “descendants of apes and pigs.” Mr. Baird called the slur unhelpful to Mideast peace. Mr. Aboul-Magd replied that Mr. Morsi was praised by Western governments for brokering a 2012 ceasefire in Gaza between Hamas and Israel.