

# Rethinking Canada's Middle East Engagement in the Age of Trump's Return

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## **Introduction**

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In 2022, we published a co-edited volume on Canada's foreign and defence policies toward the Middle East (Juneau and Momani 2022), the first book on this topic in fifteen years. One of the key themes throughout the book was how, largely as a result of its sheltered geographic position in North America, Canada's interests in the Middle East have been limited and mostly discretionary. When, for example, Ottawa decides on its participation in multinational coalitions intervening militarily in the region – as in Iraq in 2003, in Libya in 2011, or against the Islamic State after 2014 – the criteria that guided its decisions were not an immediate threat to its security. Rather, Canada has long been able to afford the luxury of being guided by a combination of other diplomatic priorities (especially managing its most important diplomatic relationship with the United States), domestic political considerations, as well as the ideology of the prime minister and party in power at the time.

Since the publication of the 2022 book, much has changed in the Middle East. The balance of regional power has been upended in the wake of Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and of the wars that have followed. The Islamic Republic of Iran has been weakened and its only state ally, the Assad regime in Syria, has collapsed, while two of its main non-state partners, both Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, have been severely weakened. A resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appears as distant as before. Perhaps most importantly for Canada, the return of Donald Trump in January 2025 to the presidency in the United States has forced a rethink of Canada's foreign, defence, trade, and security policies.

To take stock of what these seismic changes mean for Canada, we organized a workshop on 14 May 2025 on Canada and the Middle East at the University of Ottawa, hosted by the Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS). The workshop featured speakers including the seven authors in this special section as well as several other experts from the United States, Europe, and the Middle East and was funded by a Targeted Engagement Grant from the Department of National Defence's Mobilizing Insights in National Defence and Security (MINDS). The invitation-only event brought together dozens of graduate students, academics, retired practitioners, as well as civilian and military officials from throughout the Canadian government. It offered participants the opportunity to hold frank and off-the-record discussions on the future of Canadian engagement in the Middle East.

In this introductory piece, we start by offering an overview of shifts in key regional trends in the Middle East. We then zoom in on how the election of Donald Trump will affect Canada's regional policies. Next, we discuss the evolving domestic context of Canada's foreign policy in the Middle East and what it means for its approach to the region. Finally, we offer a brief overview of the seven articles in this report.



## **Overview of regional political trends**

Since 2022, there have been significant changes in the Middle East that no one could have anticipated. Broadly speaking, the two most important political changes are highly intertwined. First, the igniting of a global movement and support for Palestinian statehood after Hamas' terror attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, with the ensuing charges of genocide committed by the Israeli government upon Gaza. Second, the overall weakening of Iran's regional influence with both the fall of Syria's Assad regime and weakening of Hezbollah as key nodes in the Iran-led 'axis of resistance'. The latter was also preceded by the rise of regional powers Turkey and Saudi Arabia extending their political and diplomatic influence throughout the region. While there are of course many events and issues that arose throughout this time, these two broad and interlinked political trends will have long lasting impact on the region, reshaping Canadian foreign and defence policy into the medium term.

While it would be simplistic to see Hamas' terror attack on Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, as the inflection point for these seismic changes, it also cannot be ignored as a monumental date that changed the region. Whether Hamas' decision to commit the terror attack on Israel was because of the hardship of the occupation in Gaza, the opportunity provided by the failure of Israeli intelligence and redeployment of troops to the West Bank, or an attempt to reorient the diplomatic focus away from the expansion of the Abraham Accords and to both the cause of Palestinian self-determination and stalling of the two-state solution, the terror attacks and the military pounding and humanitarian crises of Gaza have forever changed both Israeli and Palestinian society.

Israel's hard right government was already supporting violence against Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem before October 7<sup>th</sup>, but the will of the hard right to annihilate the Palestinian cause for self-determination has accelerated with ferocity. The ensuing death and destruction in Gaza cannot be seen as solely a military operation to retrieve the hundred or so Israeli civilians kidnapped and taken into Gaza - even if the issue of returning hundreds of hostages and annihilating Hamas are imperative to almost all Israelis - but must also be understood as Israel's attempt to make permanent facts on the ground by making Gaza uninhabitable and to force the mass displacement of Palestinians from their homes in Gaza. Israel's fragile domestic political coalition needs to appease hard right parties to keep Prime Minister Netanyahu in power and allow him to avoid prosecution for corruption; this must be a factor in explaining the prolonging of the war by Israel. The International Criminal Court's determination of whether this constitutes a genocide is pending, but the human toll and suffering of Palestinians in Gaza are undisputable. Motivated in part by this suffering, a global people's movement in support of Palestinian self-determination has taken hold and many governments, including Western ones such as Canada, are more sympathetic to the need for realizing a Palestinian state to bring an end to the decades long conflict. Canada and other Western allies, excluding the US, are likely to recognize Palestine at the 80th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2025.

Under Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israel has consistently highlighted Iran as the key backer of Hamas in Gaza and has directly blamed Iran for October 7<sup>th</sup>. Regardless of Israel's reasoning, be it in reaction to October 7<sup>th</sup> or taking an opportunity to pressure a weakened Iran, the Twelve

Day war of June 2025 between the regional rivals has significantly decimated Iran's key military and nuclear assets and further opened room for other regional powers, namely Turkey and Saudi Arabia, to assert influence in once strongholds of Iranian power, especially Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria.

There are many different views about when the decline of Iran's regional influence began. Certainly, the Trump administration would like to take credit for this, arguing that Iran's decline started Washington's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, in 2018 and its subsequent assassination of the commander of the Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, in January 2020, who had significant influence over Iran's regional strategy.

The regional influence of Iran further waned after Israel's September 2024 assassination of Hezbollah's secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, Israel's subsequent invasion and re-occupation of Southern Lebanon in October 2024, and even more so with the end of Syria's Assad regime in December 2024. While it may be too early to signal the death of the axis of resistance, particularly because Yemen's Houthis remain active in their war with Israel and Iraq's Islamic Resistance have continued targeting American troops. Nevertheless, Iran does not pose the same threat it posed just a few years ago to Western interests in the region.

The decline of Iran's regional influence was also aided by the numerous direct Israeli military attacks on Iran after October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 and with significant US military and political support. While the 40-year proxy war between Iran and Israel is noteworthy, it was the last two years of direct confrontations between the two countries that have significantly weakened Iran's military prowess to a skeleton of its former self. The June 2025 Twelve Day war raised regional and global concerns of the war enflaming the Middle East further and finally ended with significant regional diplomacy. The region is, however, far from calm. The Israeli occupation of Palestine has returned to the diplomatic fore in 2025 and will have significant impact on Canada's foreign and defence policies toward the Middle East.

### **What developments in the United States mean for Canada's policies in the Middle East**

As we noted in our 2022 book on Canada and the Middle East, Canadian foreign and defence policy toward the region has often been shaped by our alliance commitments. This invariably means reflecting on actions toward the region by our key ally, the United States. Since the Trump administration took office in January 2025, however, this has become more complicated. As Trump has ratcheted up his offensive rhetoric on annexing Canada, the sentiment of political and diplomatic interdependence and our role in the bilateral defence alliance has taken a soured turn.

While Canada has and always will, in our view, be committed to its role in NATO, or NORAD for that matter, seeing the Middle East through how it impacts our bilateral relationship with the US is less prioritized today. Instead, in the short months that Trump has been in power, Canada has tended to work with other like-minded allies on coordinating Middle East policy. For example, on Gaza and Israel, the Canadian government issued at least three joint prime-ministerial statements with Australia and New Zealand and two joint statements with France, including one most recently in May 2025 with the United Kingdom as well. Recognizing

the State of Palestine on September 21, 2025 on the same day as the UK and Australia, once again reinforces the argument of Canada working with like-minded allies. Importantly, all these joint statements have excluded the US and departed quite distinctly from American messaging.

Canada's joint statements with other allies that exclude the US is a clear shift toward allying with like-minded states on Middle East issues. While Canada's hawkish stance on Iran is one that remains strongly shared with Washington, we do see a slight, potentially rising, rift on Israel/Palestine with the United States, which has been generally supportive of Israel in its war on Gaza. What happens in Washington is still pertinent to analyzing Canada's foreign and defence policy decision-making, but we are now coordinating more closely with other like-minded Western allies instead. In August 2025, Trump explicitly linked Canada's diverging approach to Israel/Palestine as a factor impeding concessions in bilateral trade talks. The more Canada diverges from the Trump administration on Israel/Palestine, an issue that will likely dominate the rest of 2025 in the region, Canada will be continuously reassessing its foreign and defence policy stance to balance its interests in its own backyard with that of the world.

### **Canada and the Middle East today**

Under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (2015-2025), foreign and defence policy in general, with some exceptions, were not a major priority for Canada (see Hillmer and Lagassé 2018; Hillmer, Lagassé, and Rigby 2024). Within the limited bandwidth that Ottawa committed to foreign policy, the Middle East was even less of a priority; instead, Ottawa prioritized its relations with the United States and with its traditional allies in NATO and in Europe. Canada also released its 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy that pledged an increased presence in that region. There were, for example, relatively few ministerial visits to the Middle East under Trudeau's leadership, while trade with regional partners remained at a low level. In the later years of Trudeau's time as prime minister, the steady downsizing of Canada's military contributions to the Global Coalition against the Islamic State, which took centre stage for much of the second half of the 2010s, as well as the continued perception that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was on the backburner, had allowed Canada to continue deprioritizing the Middle East.

Mark Carney became leader of the Liberal Party of Canada and then won an election in April 2025. What will be the factors shaping his government's Middle East policies? Perhaps most importantly, he faces a very full plate when it comes to both foreign and domestic policy. At the domestic level, like his predecessor from 2019 to 2025, he leads a minority government, constraining his margin of maneuver in general. He comes to power with an ambitious agenda, but also starts with important fiscal deficits, economic headwinds, and the trade war with the United States, further constraining his ability to pursue new initiatives.

It is essential, moreover, to situate the Middle East in the bigger picture of Canada's foreign and defence policy priorities. By far the most important priority for Prime Minister Carney will be to manage Canada's most important bilateral relationship, that with the United States. This is a constant reality, and will be even more the case given the challenges posed by Donald Trump's global decimation of the rules-based order and his trade revisionism. What will come second, and arguably a distant second, in terms of Prime Minister Carney's foreign policy priorities? The challenges posed by Donald Trump are pushing the Carney government to prioritize the

diversification of Canada's trade and security partnerships. This will primarily go through Canada's traditional alliances and partnerships, in Europe, NATO, and the Five Eyes, as witnessed by Carney's first foreign diplomatic trips. The next geographic priority is arguably the Indo-Pacific, where Canada's presence is still lagging relative to where it should be and where vast economic and diplomatic opportunities lie.

Which region comes after prioritizing the Indo-Pacific, among the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, or Africa? In practice, it is hard to say; the government has not published a formal foreign policy review since 2005, meaning that its actual priorities are hard to discern beyond the top one being managing its relations with Washington. What is clear, however, is that relations with the Middle East, Latin American and the Caribbean, and Africa will be limited to the limited remaining diplomatic bandwidth. Individual analysts may make a theoretically strong case that Canada should invest more in these regions, but in practice there is no plausible scenario for the foreseeable future whereby Ottawa has both the resources and the political will to increase more than marginally its presence in any one of these three regions (let alone all three).

In this context, it is likely that the three core characteristics of Canadian policy in the Middle East will remain constant: Canada's presence in the region will remain limited; its foreign policy there will remain largely discretionary (that is, the product of choice, and not of necessity); and it will continue to be primarily driven by the alliance management considerations, especially the management of its increasingly difficult relations with the United States as well as its efforts to work more closely with European allies. As has long been the case, when Ottawa will assess its options in the region, one of the, if not the key variable in the equation is likely to remain, before the situation on the ground, its perception of American interests: what will Washington do? What does it expect of its allies? How will it react if Ottawa takes this or that course of action? What are the possible gains or losses in bilateral relations?

Beyond these three core features, other themes identified in our earlier collective book will certainly remain central to Canadian policy in the Middle East. Trade is and will remain limited; even if there is potential scope for Canada to seek to boost trade with the region's new financial capitals in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, in practice there is limited appetite on either side. Some of Canada's more successful policies in the region have traditionally focused on niche assets or contributions, an approach likely to endure. Canadian military trainers, for example, are highly experienced, and allies and partners value their contributions. Third, migration remains central to Canada's relations with the Middle East, as recently seen by the tens of thousands of Syrians who fled to Canada to escape the country's brutal civil war. Successive waves of migration from the region have profoundly shaped Canada's social fabric. This has implications for the country's foreign policy, as witnessed by the importance for successive governments of diaspora politics. It also affects Canadian national security, with several regional governments – most visibly, that of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but others as well, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria – actively engaged in efforts to suppress activists and dissidents based in Canada.

## **Overview of the contributions**

For this special section in *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, we chose to focus on one particular sub-region within the Middle East: the Levant. The articles that follow focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and on developments in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, as well as on the implications for Canada. We chose to focus on this sub-region of the Middle East given the prevalence in public debates of the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 and the wars that followed, including in Lebanon.

In the first article, Tahani Mustafa argues that Hamas' October 7, 2023 attack and Israel's devastating military response in Gaza and the West Bank have exposed the deep flaws and double standards in Western – and specifically Canadian – policy toward the conflict. Western governments, including Canada, continue to rhetorically support a two-state solution under the Oslo framework, but have failed to hold Israel accountable for settlement expansion, land annexation, and systemic violence. Canada has contributed humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people, but its policy remains constrained by outdated assumptions, inconsistent standards, and domestic political pressures. Palestinian Authority is seen as illegitimate and fractured, and efforts to isolate Hamas risk radicalizing the group further. Mustafa urges a strategic overhaul of Canadian and Western policy that includes suspending arms transfers to Israel, enforcing international legal rulings, increasing humanitarian aid, conditioning support to the Palestinian Authority on reform, and allowing space for Hamas to be integrated into a renewed political process. Only through sustained pressure, political realism, and a commitment to international law and justice can Western states like Canada contribute meaningfully to peace and ensure both Israeli security and Palestinian self-determination.

Next Michael Horowitz explains how popular attitudes in Israel have hardened and moved further away from supporting peace with the Palestinians. He traces this evolution to what many in Israel perceive as the failed disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005 which, according to a predominant narrative, led directly to the 7 October 2023 attack. As such, Horowitz argues that if Canada and other friends of Israel fail to recognize this reality, their approach to peacebuilding will fail. Instead, they should work with Israel as it is while supporting the peace camp in the country, however weakened it has become.

In the next two articles, Dan Shapiro and Mira Sucharov propose two completely different approaches to trying to resolve the impasse in which the peace process has been stuck for decades. Shapiro maintains that the two-state solution remains the best possible outcome. Hamas' continued presence in the Gaza Strip, however, represents an enduring obstacle. As such, he proposes an international effort to facilitate the removal of the group's leadership and fighters from Gaza and their relocation in other countries. Acknowledging that this would be extremely ambitious, Shapiro argues that it is a necessary step on the way to peace – and one in which allies and partners of the United States, including Canada, could play a key supporting and facilitating role.

Sucharov takes a different path. In a very personal way, she explains how she has evolved, over the years, from supporting the two-state solution to advocating today for a one-state, confederal solution. She explains in her article why, on moral and practical grounds, she now believes this



to be the most desirable and feasible outcome. She then explains how this position, even if it seems like a marked departure, would in fact be broadly consistent with Canada's traditional approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Randa Slim's article outlines the challenges and opportunities for promoting stability in Lebanon following a series of domestic crises and regional conflicts, particularly after the October 2024 war between Hezbollah and Israel. There are some opportunities for Lebanon's stability: economic reform, disarmament of non-state armed groups (notably Hezbollah and Palestinian factions), and the return of Syrian refugees. Slim recommends Canada expand its support for economic reforms, digital public infrastructure, local reconstruction in southern Lebanon, border security, and programs enabling the return of Syrian refugees, especially given major U.S. aid cuts under the Trump administration. Canada's contributions should be coordinated with G7 and international partners to pressure both Israel and Iran to de-escalate, while reinforcing Lebanese sovereignty and long-term resilience.

Kareem Shaheen's article argues that the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime has created a unique opportunity for democratic transition in Syria, marked by openness, civil society engagement, and willingness to collaborate with Western allies. However, this transition is threatened by major challenges including Israeli territorial encroachment, unresolved sectarian tensions, collapsing infrastructure, and debilitating sanctions originally aimed at the former regime. Canada is uniquely positioned to support Syria's recovery due to its positive reputation standing firm on the Assad regime, history of welcoming Syrian refugees, and ties to Syrian civil society figures. While Canada may have limited influence on broader geopolitical issues like Israeli actions or sanctions alone, it can play a significant role by supporting Syrian civil society organizations, engaging in technical partnerships with Syrian ministries, and helping to develop infrastructure and services through foreign aid and diaspora networks. Timely, targeted Canadian support could yield high-impact results during this fleeting window of opportunity.

Finally, in the last article, Hamdi Malik explains how Iran-aligned militias in Iraq have been forced by a convergence of regional setbacks, international scrutiny, and shifting Iranian strategy to recalibrate their policies. The major setbacks suffered by the "Axis of Resistance" triggered a profound sense of existential threat among its Iraqi factions. In response, these militias have adopted a posture of conditional military restraint while doubling down on efforts to consolidate power through Iraq's formal political structures. Malik's article examines how the militias are adjusting their tactics across multiple domains and outlines concrete steps Canada and its allies can take to disrupt their entrenchment and support a more accountable Iraqi state.

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## **Toward a Viable Israel/Palestine Peace: Challenges and Opportunities for Canada**

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Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, and Israel's subsequent onslaught in Gaza and its escalation in the West Bank, have polarised politics in Canada and among many other U.S. allies in Europe, leaving politicians struggling to formulate viable policy responses. The war has posed a major challenge to several Western states' balancing act on the Israel/Palestine conflict. Many capitals have maintained their close political, commercial and military relationships with Israel while still espousing their longstanding position on Palestinian statehood, generally supporting the two-state solution proposed under the now effectively defunct 1993-1995 Oslo Accords. Policymaking uncertainty is further heightened by the fact that the new U.S. administration seems determined to actively undermine the post-World War II rules-based international order.

This article summarises the implications of the state of the Israel/Palestine conflict for Western policymakers and makes recommendations on the way toward a viable and durable resolution of this intractable situation.

### **Overview: The Situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories**

While 7 October was a massive miscalculation on Hamas' part, it is clear it was also an act of desperation and frustration at an intolerable and steadily deteriorating status quo for Palestinians in the occupied territories (Macaron 2023). Three decades on from Oslo, Palestinians have seen Israeli settlements constantly expand in the West Bank, taking land from what was supposed to be a future Palestinian state and turning the land under Palestinian control into a cluster of Bantustans with no territorial contiguity, even as the brutality of Israel's occupation ramped up. The Palestinian Authority (PA), established under Oslo to serve as the precursor to the government of an independent Palestinian state, now effectively prioritises Israeli security over Palestinian interests and is widely seen by Palestinians as corrupt, inefficient, morally compromised and lacking any legitimacy, its electoral mandate having expired a decade and a half ago (International Crisis Group 2023a). With no political horizon offering at least the promise of a better future and no prospect of a more representative and assertive leadership to challenge the status quo, Palestinians have become increasingly desperate. In the West Bank, this desperation has given rise to waves of random and apparently impromptu lone wolf attacks on Israeli settlers, civilians and soldiers and the emergence of a new generation of armed groups (International Crisis Group 2023b).

Hamas' miscalculation on 7 October was another expression of this desperation. In the two decades since Israel's withdrawal from the Strip in 2005, Gaza has suffered repeated and devastating attacks – which Israeli defence and political elites have dismissively termed 'mowing the grass' (Høvring 2018) – while being under a crippling siege that severely restricted the entry of essential supplies including food and reconstruction materials (Cohen 2023). Hamas' attempts to reconcile with the PA were unsuccessful and its attempts to negotiate with Israel were

rebuffed, notably in 2012 when Israel assassinated its chief negotiator, reportedly on the verge of a breakthrough in negotiations (Hasson 2012).<sup>1</sup>

It is fair to say that for Palestinians, the promise of Oslo has proven hollow.

The 7 October attacks have also empowered the most right-wing and extremist government in Israel's history to pursue its maximalist objectives in both Gaza and the West Bank. Its campaign in Gaza has caused a humanitarian crisis of the gravest proportions that has been described by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as plausibly amounting to genocide (ICJ 2024). Further, the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation, set up in February 2025 to deliver aid to Gaza and supported by the U.S. and Israel, has delivered woefully insufficient amounts of aid while hundreds of Palestinians have been killed queuing near its handful of distribution points. Palestinians in the West Bank – who had nothing whatsoever to do with the 7 October attacks – have been under lockdown, suffering from a surge in settler violence and a brutal military campaign apparently aimed at pre-empting resistance that has caused extensive destruction and mass displacement. Israeli politicians and occasionally even the U.S. administration of Donald Trump now speak openly of removing the Palestinian population from Gaza, and Palestinians fear the West Bank will be next (Keath 2025).

### **Implications of the Israel/Palestine Crisis for Canada and Western States**

The developing situation in Gaza and the West Bank has already had repercussions for Canada and other Western states, and these are likely to become increasingly serious as Israel's campaigns in the occupied Palestinian territories continue. Direct repercussions are and are likely to remain easily manageable: the direct security impact is likely to be minimal, though the potential for lone wolf attacks such as the May 2025 killing of two Israeli embassy staff in Washington (Al Jazeera 2025) will persist. Canada and Western states are unlikely to take in large numbers of displaced Palestinians, and outside of the U.S. and Germany, Western military exports to Israel are relatively small.<sup>2</sup>

One potentially significant impact of the crisis for Canada and other Western states is the financial burden of humanitarian and reconstruction aid that Israel's campaigns in Gaza and the West Bank will incur. In March 2025, Canada committed an additional 100 million CAD\$ to support the provision of aid to the Palestinian territories bringing its total aid commitment to 240 million CAD\$ (GAC 2024). The long-term humanitarian and reconstruction needs are likely to be far higher than current commitments (United Nations Palestine 2025). These shortfalls are further heightened by the reduction in Western aid budgets in favour of military assistance to Ukraine and the swingeing cuts in USAID under the current Trump administration. However, even if a further ceasefire could bring more temporary relief to the humanitarian crisis, only a full and lasting cessation of hostilities and some form of normalisation of border controls will fully relieve it.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2008, Shin Bet director Yuval Diskin and former Mossad director Efraim Halevy indicated that Israel was aware of Hamas's willingness to reach a compromise based on a two-state solution. See Hari (2008).

<sup>2</sup> “Between 2014–18 and 2019–23... (the) USA accounted for 69 per cent and Germany for 30 per cent of Israeli arms imports”; see SIPRI (2024).



Other indirect reputational, legal, and electoral consequences have also been significant. Popular revulsion over the mass killing of Palestinians and the systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure in Gaza has diminished public support for incumbent Western governments (O'Shea 2024), contributing to Donald Trump's victory in last year's U.S. presidential election (Farooq 2025). Arms exports to Israel and pressure to try Western citizens serving in the Israeli army could also become political lightning rods as the conflict grinds on. These issues could also have implications for the international standing of Canada and other Western states given their unwillingness to pressure Israel or hold it to account for its violation of the international norms Western nations claim as their own and helped to establish.

The situation in the occupied territories also poses a conundrum for the foreign policies of Canada and other Western states. Several assumptions underpinning their policies on the Israel/Palestine conflict were out of date even before 7 October, but events since have made this disconnect glaringly obvious.

The first is that while Canada and other Western states rightly condemn Hamas for terrorism and support Israel's right to self-defence, they have not held Israel accountable for its long and brutal occupation, including practices that Palestinians describe as terrorism, and its illegal colonisation of what is recognised under international law as Palestinian land (Amnesty International 2029). Canada and other Western governments' move to sanction Israeli Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir and Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich in June 2025 for their incitements of violence against Palestinian communities proved to be damp squibs (GAC 2025).<sup>3</sup> The travel bans and asset freezes imposed on Ben-Gvir and Smotrich have been described as having "practically no impact" and these governments have not taken any further measures to impose real costs on the Israeli government or on Israeli officials (Shehada 2025). Rare momentum for collective action at the European Union was squandered when the bloc deferred the opportunity to suspend favourable trade terms with Israel at its June Foreign Affairs Council meeting, despite the EU itself finding indications that Israel had breached a notable human rights clause in the agreement governing the EU's trade relationship with Israel (Office of the European Union Special Representative for Human Rights 2025).<sup>4</sup> Palestinians see this as an egregious double standard especially in light of the Oslo Accords' failure to deliver on its commitments to them.

Second, some notable Western states also did not follow through on their promises to recognize Palestinian statehood in what proved to be a short-lived effort to reinvigorate the two-state solution. A UN conference on the two-state solution spearheaded by France and Saudi Arabia and planned for mid-June 2025 was postponed after Israel launched attacks on Iran days before the summit's commencement in New York. Even before the postponement, France and the United Kingdom had shelved their plans to recognize a Palestinian state at the conference following pressure from the U.S. and Israel. They would have been the first members of the influential G7 to do so (Wintour 2025). Many of the same Western states also implicitly do not recognise that Palestinians have the right to resist occupation, peacefully or violently, and some

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<sup>3</sup> The previous month, Canada, the UK, and France had threatened to impose targeted sanctions in response to Israel's military operations in Gaza, the lack of flow humanitarian aid into the strip and the expanding settlements in the West Bank; see PMO (2025).

<sup>4</sup> This followed a move by 17 of the EU's 27 member states to request a review regarding whether Israel's actions in Gaza and the West Bank had constituted a breach of Article 2 of the EU-Israel Association Agreement which stipulates that relations between the EU and Israel "shall be based on respect for human rights."

are now mimicking the Trump administration's policies of deporting pro-Palestinian protesters (Al-Kassab 2025).

Third, Western support for the Oslo framework has prioritised Israeli over Palestinian security but in doing so have failed to secure either. At the March 2025 G7 meeting of foreign ministers, it was reiterated that Hamas must never again be a threat to Israel – but made no mention of the arguably far greater threat Israel and the practices of the Israeli occupation pose to Palestinians (G7 2025). Hamas is a resistance organisation that will continue pursuing violence against Israel in response to the occupation. Even Israel's stated goal of eliminating Hamas – remote as that outcome remains – would not alleviate its security concerns given the potential emergence of other armed groups likely even more determined to pursue violent resistance.

Canada and Western states have also failed to appreciate that the two-state solution on which the Oslo Accords was predicated has not been viable for several decades. Their rhetorical support for this solution has not been matched by any policies preventing Israel imposing a new status quo on the ground in terms of a new demographic reality along with roads, settlements, and economic and security infrastructure that are antithetical to the future establishment of a Palestinian state. Recognition of Palestinian statehood by Western governments would amount to little when these same governments have not historically held Israel to account for undermining a future Palestinian state's entire territorial and economic basis.

### **Policy Options for a Way Forward**

There are several measures Canada and other Western states can take in the short, medium, and long term to address these policy shortcomings.

On the Israeli side, they should prioritise pressuring Israel to rein in its operations in Gaza and the West Bank and mitigating the dire consequences on the ground. On Gaza, Western states should complement the diplomatic efforts of Egypt and Qatar by leveraging their bilateral relations with Israel to pressure the Benjamin Netanyahu government to reinstate a ceasefire and resume humanitarian aid flows into the strip. This should include suspending arms transfers to Israel. Several countries including Canada – which is one of eight countries supplying Israel with parts for its F-35 jets – have announced decisions to prohibit some weapons sales but have not followed through on these already limited commitments (Gallagher 2025). They should also expand existing sanctions to disincentivise senior Israeli officials and financial institutions enabling settlement expansion in the West Bank (International Crisis Group 2025). They should also threaten to partially or fully suspend trade and favourable economic cooperation agreements with Israel. The EU holds particular leverage through its EU-Israel Association Agreement, which includes a human rights clause that could justify suspension of assistance (International Crisis Group 2024).

Western governments should also bring further pressure to bear on Israel by complying with and implementing the International Criminal Court's (ICC) arrest warrants against Netanyahu and former Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant, thereby demonstrating their commitment to

international justice.<sup>5</sup> These governments should also reject the U.S. administration's policy pronouncements on the forcible depopulation of Gaza and Israeli annexation of the West Bank. They should counteract Washington's crackdowns on pro-Palestinian protests on college campuses by safeguarding the right to protest for diaspora communities in their countries and by providing scholarships to students from the occupied territories and of Palestinian origin.

On the Palestinian side, these capitals should recognise the stark funding shortfalls for reconstruction in Gaza and increase their budgetary commitments to help restore essential services, rebuild critical infrastructure and address the challenges of governance that could otherwise keep the strip mired in instability and insecurity. Canada and other Western states should proactively support their Arab partners spearheading discussions on day after planning for Gaza by ensuring that the region's proposals are adequately funded. They should also leverage their development assistance to the PA to advocate for reform and renewal efforts aimed at restoring its credibility and legitimacy. Palestinian political renewal is a key prerequisite for effective negotiations with Israel as only a democratically elected and representative government accountable to its own people will put their interests first, speak with authority on the international stage and secure support among Palestinians for what it agrees to. Western governments should follow the EU's lead by linking disbursements of direct assistance to the PA to progress on reforms aimed at fiscally sustainable and democratic governance. These governments – which are rightly critical of Hamas' 7 October attacks – should nonetheless recognise the political and security pitfalls of the group's total exclusion from the future administration of Gaza and argue for its buy-in for any transitional arrangements given its continued capacity to play spoiler. Further the isolation of Hamas has only served to radicalise the movement.

Hamas has demonstrated in the past that it can be pragmatic. It participated in elections in 2006 on a moderate platform, engaged in peace talks with Israel and reconciliation talks with the PA. It also announced in 2020 that it wanted to relinquish governance over Gaza and return to being just a resistance movement – peaceful resistance, if such an option was viable, violent if it was not. The movement has made it clear that moving forward it wants a role in the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), the internationally-recognised representative body of the Palestinian people charged with securing their self-determination, but is not seeking to frontline any of its members in key leadership posts in either the PA or PLO, so this should not violate Canada or other Western states' no contact policies (International Crisis Group 2023a).

Israel is likely to continue escalating the pressure it is putting on Palestinians, in Gaza and the West Bank, for the foreseeable future. It has already pushed Palestinians in Gaza on to death ground – leaving them with no alternative but to resist or die – and if it pursues its maximalist territorial ambitions in the West Bank, it risks doing the same there. Twenty-one months after 7 October, it is clear that the only realistic avenue for a peaceful resolution of the Israel-Palestine

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<sup>5</sup> The ICC issued arrest warrants against Netanyahu, Gallant and Hamas commander Mohammed Deif in November 2024 for war crimes and crimes against humanity. However, several Western states have either been non-committal or critiqued the ruling and refused to comply; see Ingber (2025).

conflict in which the security of Israel and Israelis are guaranteed is still a negotiated settlement that allows Palestinians to enjoy the same security.

In the longer term, Western assessments must reflect the reality that the Israeli government's current policies in Gaza and the West Bank are worsening rather than easing Israeli security concerns even as they massively impact Palestinians and their security. They should make clear to Israeli interlocutors that a viable political track towards Palestinian self-determination is the only pathway towards ensuring the long-term security of Israel.

## **Conclusion**

Twenty-one months into a devastating assault on Gaza and increasingly brutal operations in the West Bank have highlighted the futility of longstanding Western policies on the Israel/Palestine conflict. These dynamics have been further exacerbated by the new U.S. administration's haphazard approach to the conflict, which has only heightened the need for Canada and other Western states to seriously reconsider their own policies. The crisis warrants a mixture of Western pressure, sanctions, accountability, aid conditionality and a more politically astute strategy to ensure long term stability and provide a viable pathway to a solution that can credibly ensure Israeli security and Palestinian self-determination.

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## **Iron Walls and Open Wounds: Canada's Role in Preserving Israel's Path to Peace**

*Michael Horowitz*

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In 2015, ahead of elections for parliament, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released a political ad that neatly distilled the central argument he has (successfully) used to convince unconvinced voters to support his party. The ad portrays all other political leaders in Israel as bickering children, unable to agree on anything and vying for “seats” in a game of musical chairs, whereas Netanyahu (quite literally the only adult in the room) offers a way out of the “kindergarten” with a strong and stable government (Ha’aretz 2015). The ad was later banned over its use of children younger than 15, but an undeterred Bibi, as Netanyahu is commonly known, released a new version (meet the “Bibi” sitter) similarly casting himself as the only adult in the room (Netanyahu 2015). Another 2020 ad, though not hitting the same “adult in the room” narrative, similarly cast Netanyahu as the only one with a vision, as opposed to the alternatives (Netanyahu 2019).

The message is simple but revealing: most Israelis may not like Bibi, they may even think the Israeli leader to be corrupt or divisive, but he presents himself successfully as the only one with the vision and strength to guide Israel out of troubled water. The argument has resonated and still does: though Netanyahu’s party cratered in the polls after the October 7, 2023 attacks by Hamas, when asked who would make a “better” Prime Minister, Israelis have consistently picked him as a more fitting choice when pegged against other potential leaders – the only exception being former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett (Cohen 2025).

The conflict with Iran that followed may serve to strengthen this perception: members of the Israeli government are implying that Netanyahu already had a vision of “victory” – the defeat of Hezbollah, Iran, and soon Hamas – as early as October 2023. In the wake of the Israel-Iran war, Aryeh Deri, a key religious ally of Benjamin Netanyahu, went as far as to claim that the October 7 attack had in fact “saved the nation of Israel” as it pushed Israel to defeat its main enemies in the region (Times of Israel 2025). “Victory” is the new concept the Israeli Prime Minister is brandishing to rally lost supporters, and cast opponents as defeatists at best, traitors at worst. It is no coincidence that the word “victory” is one the Israeli Prime Minister has repeated incessantly – more than 650 times between October 2023 and September 2024 alone (Ynet 2025).

This perception is not just a quirk of electoral politics; it cuts across broader questions of national policy, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While decades of efforts have been made towards resolving the conflict, a small but growing segment of Israeli society, led by the Prime Minister, is now confident the conflict can be won. Israelis may not necessarily adhere to the vision proposed by Netanyahu, but this vision has gone unchallenged. Even the government that preceded that of Netanyahu, led by prime ministers Naftali Bennett and then Yair Lapid, deliberately chose to avoid taking any decision that would remotely relate to the conflict, understanding how divisive the question had become.



This absence of a credible or coherent alternative has consequences beyond Israel's borders. The vacuum in Israel means that any attempt by outside powers to push Israel back towards a peace track is spun as a foreign "diktat" – one that can easily be rejected by Israel's government. This is made even worse by the perception by a segment of Israelis that attempts at peace have cost lives, be it during the wave of bombings that followed the Oslo Agreement, the Second Intifada, and even the October 7 attacks – which some in Israel view as the conclusion of a story that started with Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005.

This often puts friends of Israel in an awkward position. A few years ago, I sat across from the Canadian Ambassador in Israel at the time, as she was asked by a member of Israel's peace camp to "put pressure" on Israel to nudge it back towards negotiations. Nothing best exemplifies the complete domestic collapse of the peace camp in Israel than this desperate appeal for foreign pressure, to win a fight the peace camp lost years ago. To put it more simply: this is a mistake, and one friend of Israel such as Canada will need to avoid in the future. Pressure from the outside risks turning the idea of peace into a foreign one, and feeds into the view that Israelis can only count on themselves (despite evidence to the contrary).

To navigate a very perilous period for Israelis and Palestinians, Canada will have to pay close attention to the changes shaping Israeli society after October 7. If Ottawa is to act efficiently as a true friend of Israelis and Palestinians, stirring both sides away from another spiral of violence, it needs to pay closer attention not only to the rhetoric coming from Israel's government but also to the intensifying forces shaping Israel's future.

This necessity is made even more pressing by the fact that the conflict has once again proven not to solely affect Israelis and Palestinians. The cascading impact of October 7 drew Israel and Iran into a 12-day war in June 2025 that could easily have impacted the Persian Gulf and a key maritime route in the Red Sea. Beyond that, the conflict stirred anti-Western sentiment, offering new opportunities for the West and Canada's adversaries to build inroads in the Global South and advance their own visions of a global order, fueled a new wave of antisemitism, and added a new layer of polarization within domestic audiences in several Western countries including Canada.

## **Two Paths Ahead**

Though the conflict is complex, the central question that will determine its course is simple. A year and a half after the attacks of October 2023, Israelis and Palestinians face two paths ahead. One leads down a road of escalating cycles of violence, justified by the horrors both sides have suffered – a path all too familiar. The other involves breaking this cycle, and embracing a peace process that has long been neglected.

The latter prospect certainly seems more remote than ever. According to Pew Research Center data, only 26% of Israelis now believe that a way can be found for Israel and an independent Palestinian state to coexist peacefully, down from 35% before the war and roughly half the percentage when polling began in 2013. Another Pew poll found that the overall level plummeted again to 21% believing that a peaceful coexistence between Israel and a future Palestinian state is possible, the lowest since tracking began. This touches upon the core of the issue, namely that the struggle for peace is no longer about *how* peace should be achieved but

*whether* peace is desirable and possible to begin with. Ethereal debates about whether the solution to the conflict should be a two-state solution, a binational state, a federal state, etc. – all miss the point that Israelis and Palestinians need to be convinced the conflict can be solved to begin with.

To be sure, it would be wrong to think that opinions cannot change. In 1973, Israel and Egypt fought a bitter conflict that saw Egyptian troops attack Israel during one of Judaism's holiest of days, Yom Kippur. Four years later, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat visited the Israeli Knesset (parliament). In 1987, a spontaneous movement began in Palestinian territories, later dubbed the First Intifada. Six years later, Israel and the Palestinians signed the Oslo Agreements.

### **Drawing Lessons**

One key question that will shape Israelis' attitudes in the longer-term pertains to the lessons learned from the Hamas massacre, namely whether the lesson Israelis will draw is (1) that they need bigger fences or (2) that fences do not work.

While the answer may seem simple from afar – Israel needs to re-engage in peace talks to move away from a deadly cycle of violence – for some Israelis October 7 proved just the opposite: the massacre was a glimpse at a future without a fence. Many Israelis view October 7 as the tragic conclusion that follows the decision taken in 2005 to disengage unilaterally from the Gaza Strip. Segments of the Israeli public view the next 20 years as an experiment, one that proves that two states cannot coexist and that a Palestinian State, encompassing not only Gaza but also the West Bank, would be even more dangerous than the statelet maintained by Hamas on October 7. If this becomes the dominant narrative, namely that this is a zero sum-game (either Israel exists, or Palestine does) no amount of pressure, sanctions, or threats will help.

Of course, the lesson from the 2005 withdrawal and the two decades that followed should be different, namely that Israel cannot simply separate from Palestinians without engaging with its leadership, yet the impact of this 2005-October 7 narrative cannot be dismissed.

Netanyahu's deliberate effort not to allow any inquiry into October 7 compounds this issue. The Israeli Prime Minister is not simply worried about the possibility that tactical mistakes will come to light; he knows an investigation would also damage his own vision of Israel as an "Iron Wall" that can forever withstand pressure and outlast the Palestinians. Any serious commission of enquiry would not limit itself to an examination of the intelligence and military failures that led to October 7 but would also certainly investigate the decade-long policy of purposefully ignoring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and playing into Palestinian divisions that preceded the catastrophe.

### **The Iron Wall**

October 7 is the product of a systemic failure: the Israeli security apparatus failed to see the signs of an upcoming attack because it stood by the assessment that Hamas was deterred. Yet the view of Netanyahu's government is that it was purely a tactical failure and that the strategy is still sound. This strategy views Hamas and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as issues that can be

managed rather than resolved. The alternative view is that even the “tactical” failure stemmed from a strategic mistake by successive Israeli governments, one of constantly de-emphasizing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Netanyahu’s vision when it comes to the conflict is one of steadfastness: hold your ground, manage the conflict, do not be dragged into a resolution, because each day that passes is one that tips the scale in Israel’s favor. It is a mistake to assume that this is some form of short-sightedness focused solely on tactics: the tactics are the strategy. Netanyahu’s vision comes from the thinking of Ze’ev Jabotinsky, who advocated the building of a metaphorical Iron Wall that would force Arabs to recognize Israel simply will not be erased from the map.

This tactical vision may seem flawed to many outside Israel, but it is now effectively unchallenged inside the country: few leaders within the mainstream opposition dare talk about any other. The idea of a two-state solution was barely mentioned before, and has now become taboo after October 7. Before October 7, the conflict with Palestinians had stopped being an issue of political debate in the many elections Israel held over the past decade. Even speaking about a possible Palestinian state or a two-state solution has become an amateur’s mistake in Israeli politics.

Yair Lapid, who publicly backed the two-state solution at a UN speech during his short tenure as Prime Minister in 2022 (Reuters 2022), told a Saudi magazine that a Palestinian state was delayed significantly but not dead (Maher 2023) – and this may be the closest an Israeli leader with a realistic path to becoming prime minister will get to backing the two-state solution. Even Yair Golan, a former Israeli Defense Forces general and rising star of the left-wing Democrats party prefers to talk about “separation” with the Palestinians rather than a two state solution. Even as he has not been shy on other topics (Call Me Back Podcast with Dan Senor 2025).

### **A realistic approach to the conflict**

The scope of the crisis, the absence of a peace camp, and the sheer scale of the damage on both sides (material and psychological) means that outside partners need to be realistic about what they can achieve and to be aware that they may well do more damage than good. Trying to ram the idea of a Palestinian state without any sort of preparation or awareness of the potential domestic impact in Israel could have the opposite effect, casting the idea of a two-state solution as foreign and reinforcing the perception that Hamas’s October 7 bet paid off.

Any proposal that includes a Palestinian state as the eventual solution to the conflict needs to also be accompanied with clear and short-term consequences for Hamas. In recent talks, the key point of contention has been Israel’s insistence that Hamas disarm, a demand that the Gaza branch of the group categorically rejects. Hamas aims to return to its roots as an insurgent group – relinquishing civilian control of Gaza, while preserving its military capabilities. In essence, what Hamas wants is the Hezbollah model: having a fig leaf state that handles civilian affairs (and receives the brunt of discontent) yet the freedom to operate as it pleases. This is a recipe for future disasters. Clear international calls on the group to disarm are the prerequisite needed to advance peace and to also make sure voices from outside Israel are heard and not dismissed outright.

The main goal, for partners and longstanding friends of Israel such as Canada, should be two-fold: ensuring that space is left for a peace camp to form again in Israel, and making sure that the possibility of peace is preserved. The first requires engagement with Israeli society. The future political elite of the country is likely to be drawn not only from the current political parties, but also from the leadership of the protest movement. A similar political renewal happened at the local level after the “Social Justice” protests of 2011.

At the time, leaders of the protest movement failed to climb the ladder, but the leaders who have emerged from years of demonstrations may have a better chance of remaining relevant after. The demonstrations against the judicial reform before October 7 and against the perceived abandonment of the hostages after the attacks have awoken segments of Israeli society that had largely focused on individualistic pursuits. Yet those are also the segments upon which Israel has come to increasingly rely to form the backbone of its military reserve and its economy. The fact that this previously muted segment of the Israeli public is now finding its voice could be a major turning point for the country.

Friends outside of Israel and the Palestinian Territories are also needed to help climb the widening mental and physical wall that separates Israelis and Palestinians. On both sides, there are civil society activists who have made renewed calls for peace yet find it increasingly difficult to see and meet each other because of how poisonous the debate has become – sometimes just as much outside of the region than within it.

With regards to the conflict itself, pragmatism and realistic objectives need to be the guiding principles of a policy aimed at reviving and preserving the idea of peace. One critical issue will be the governance of Gaza. The Israeli government has refused to consider any realistic Palestinian alternative to Hamas, and most of the Israeli public is skeptical that one exists. They need to be proven wrong to break the “2005-to-October 7” narrative. The issue of Gaza’s future governance goes beyond the already high stakes of preventing another crisis: It will determine whether the vicious cycle of escalations can be broken or not. If chaos remains, those preaching “conflict management” rather than conflict resolution will have the final say.

Finally, in the West Bank, escalating settler violence and Palestinian terrorism, fueled in part by outside actors, particularly Iran, have created fertile ground for future violence. The Israeli far-right sees the aftermath of October 7 as a historic opportunity to advance a plan to legalize hundreds of wildcat outposts that would kill the possibility of a Palestinian state for good. It may have become fashionable in some circles to declare the two-state solution dead, yet for the Israeli far-right the two-state solution is not dead enough. Here, surgical pressure on specific leaders can have an impact, including by coordinating with other regional actors who view these moves as a direct threat to their domestic security.

Israel is at a turning point where it needs to choose between an isolated “Judea” that fully retreats onto a narrow Jewish identity, and “Israel”, a multi-faceted democracy capable of preserving a path towards peace and engagement with the region. Friends of Israel need to both highlight the consequences of one, and the opportunities of the other, and do so not solely through conventional but also public diplomacy and dialogue with Israeli society.



A mistake would be to solely focus on declarative “feel-good” measures such as recognizing a Palestinian state and waving the threat of sanctions or implementing them as a main tool of influence. The conflict has reached a point where friends of both Israelis and Palestinians are required to act in a sustained, pragmatic, and humble way, acknowledging that, while the conditions for peace may not exist today, the task of friends of Israel such as Canada is to prevent them from disappearing altogether – and maintaining the space for them to emerge again.

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## **Canada and a Confederal Approach to Israel-Palestine**

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With the situation between Israelis and Palestinians at its lowest point since the Nakba during Israel's founding in 1948, is there hope for peace? And does Canada's existing policy stance, foregrounding a commitment to a two-state solution, help or hinder such prospects? In this short essay, I aim to help introduce an Israeli-Palestinian confederal solution into the Canadian policy conversation. I will show how such an approach is commensurate with Canada's longtime stance regarding the region.

Having spent decades advocating for other solutions, I will trace my own path towards embracing a confederal approach. Highlighting the values, principles, and emotions at stake in my own case, the case of a sort of insider-outsider, can shed light on some of the key dynamics at stake for relevant stakeholders. From this, I will address questions around how different audiences – Canadian Jews, Canadian Palestinians, and Israelis and Palestinians in the region – require different assurances. This reality poses a challenge for peace advocates and policymakers. Here, I will accordingly attempt to provide insights into what is needed from a country like Canada.

### **A Modified Two-State Solution: Can Canada Sign On?**

The international community has long favored what has become known as the two-state solution, meaning the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza alongside the State of Israel. At root, this would entail Israel having to give up its claims to the entire West Bank (what the Israeli government and right-wing Israelis prefer to call Judea and Samaria, in reference to the Hebrew Bible), and Palestinians having to settle for 22% of historic Palestine.

Over the decades of the Middle East peace process, various versions of the conventional two-state model have been advanced. Most share the following features: the border would be set along the 1967 lines, also known as the 1949 armistice line or the "Green Line"; settlements in the so-called settlement blocs would be annexed to Israel, with the remaining settlers relocated; Palestinian refugees would be able to return, most likely only to a Palestinian state; and Jerusalem would likely be a shared capital.

In recent years, though, many observers have been declaring the two-state solution dead (Lustick 2024; Munayyer 2019). Decades of intensive Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank, the ongoing destruction of Gaza in the context of the current war and genocide,<sup>6</sup> and no clear sense that Palestinians would be willing to forego the right to return to all of historic Palestine all undermine hope for such an arrangement.

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<sup>6</sup> Realizing that the term genocide is contested in this context, I draw on the assessments of groups like Amnesty International (2024), individuals like Francesca Albanese, the United Nations special rapporteur on the situation in Palestine (Dowling 2024), and scholars of genocide (Segal 2023; Bar-Tov 2024). For an overview, see Al Jazeera (2024).

On the flip side are two poles. First, there are those, mainly among the right-wing in Israel and their supporters abroad, who are content to keep the status quo or even annex the West Bank, but without granting Palestinians citizenship. Many of these advocates do not even consider the West Bank to be occupied (Sucharov 2017). At the other pole are those, including some Palestinians and some grass-roots Palestine solidarity supporters, who promote a democratic “one-state solution.” (Abunimah 2007; Tilley 2010). Those who advocate for this latter approach are motivated by one or both of the following impulses: either they believe the two-state idea is now impossible to achieve, and/or they believe that the only just solution is allowing Palestinians to return to live throughout the land, while dismantling the Jewish State.

Enter an array of academics and other thinkers, both Palestinian and Israeli, who, in recent years, have come to promote a confederal approach (Dajani and Yehuda 2024; Beilin and Hussein 2022; Scham 2022; Scheindlin 2020; Rahman 2020). This might be understood as a compromise between the conventional two-state solution and the democratic one-state solution, or it might be understood as a “two-state solution that can work” (Dajani and Yehuda 2024) or the “two-state solution 2.0” (Scham 2022).

In the version advanced by the most prominent organization currently advocating this, called A Land for All: Two States, One Homeland, there would be two states, divided by the 1967 lines, but with a crucial difference: citizenship and residency would be decoupled, and there would be freedom of movement and residence across the border. This means that settlers could stay – as permanent residents of Palestine and as citizens of Israel. For their part, Palestinian refugees could return to their towns and cities inside Israel, while living as permanent residents of Israel and as citizens of Palestine. While Israeli settlers would not have voting rights in Palestine, they could participate in local elections. The same goes for Palestinian refugees who opt to return to what is now Israel. Jerusalem would be a shared capital. The two states under a confederal model would engage in deep coordination along an array of issue-areas: security, climate, natural resources, economic matters, and so on. (Other proposals with some differences include the Holy Land Confederation, authored by Yossi Beilin and Hiba Hussein plus a team of Israeli and Palestinian experts.)

Can Canada sign on to a confederal approach without fundamentally changing its existing policy orientation? Canada's official position has long been to support a two-state solution. The Global Affairs website states that “Canada is committed to the goal of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East, including the creation of a Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel.” On Jerusalem, Canada's policy is that “the status of Jerusalem can be resolved only as part of a general settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli dispute,” and that “Canada does not recognize Israel's unilateral annexation of East Jerusalem.” On Palestinian refugees, Canada says that a solution should be negotiated in a way that “respect[s] the rights of the refugees, in accordance with international law.” On the occupation and Israeli settlements: “Canada does not recognize permanent Israeli control over territories occupied in 1967 (the Golan Heights, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip),” and Canada asserts that “Israeli settlements in the occupied territories are a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention” (Government of Canada, website).

I contend that a confederal approach is not only compatible with Canada's existing position, but would enable Canada to fulfill more deeply the promise inherent in it. It is true that the settlements are a violation of international law. But under a confederal approach, settlers could stay as individual residents, with their settlements presumably no longer enjoying the kind of supremacist status that the Israeli occupation has afforded them. Accordingly, those communities would need to open themselves to Palestinians as well. The fact that settlements have shelters and secure rooms whereas Palestinian areas in the West Bank do not became frightfully clear during the Iran-Israel hostilities in June 2025.

On refugees, Canada's official position is that the solution must respect international law. Return is not, in Canada's official statements, mentioned specifically.<sup>7</sup> But a closer look at existing legal doctrine points to the importance of honoring the right of return (ICRC, undated). A confederal approach would respect refugee return – in a creative way that would see Palestinian refugees live as residents of Israel and vote as citizens of a Palestinian state, thus respecting Israel's desire to maintain Israeli-Jewish self-determination.

Finally, the Jerusalem vision in a confederal approach is easily compatible with Canada's official policy.

### **My Journey to a Confederal Approach**

I did not always believe in a confederal approach. For decades, from the time I became aware of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (around the First Intifada, when I was a teenager), I was a dedicated two-stater. As a public Diaspora Jewish blogger – writing most frequently in *The Daily Beast*, in *Haaretz*, and in a few Canadian Jewish outlets – I debated those to my “left” who advocated refugee return and a one-state solution and to my “right”, those who opposed territorial withdrawal and those who denied that an occupation even existed (Green 2017). It was around 2015, when the Israeli elections proved painfully disappointing to those who had hoped for a shift to the left, that I began to reconsider my commitments. “One country, one vote” began to feel like the most urgent and just position. Encounters with particular colleagues helped cement my views over the next couple of years and by 2017 I was advocating for a democratic one-state solution.

In 2021, I met Palestinian-American law professor Omar Dajani, and we began a series of creative collaborations all while developing a close friendship. He was a public proponent of a confederal approach. One night, a year or so later, I was watching a YouTube talk he had given many months earlier to an international law society. (The fact that it was on YouTube helped, I think; I was unable to react, debate, or argue. I had to just *be*.) As I listened to him explain the values underpinning the confederal approach, something shifted in me. Hearing a Palestinian acknowledge the validity of the Israeli-Jewish attachment to the land, while emphasizing the importance of self-determination *for both peoples* simply moved me. There was something about

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<sup>7</sup> An unofficial 1999 Canadian Core Group paper came close, stating that “in recognition of the Palestinian demand to exercise the right of return to historic Palestine, both parties agree that: a) this shall primarily be achieved through the voluntary repatriation of Palestinians to the Palestinian state; b) Israel shall admit a number of Palestinians who will live peacefully with their neighbors, whether as citizens of Israel, dual citizens, or as Israeli permanent residents” (El-Rifai 2019).

the “other” seeing *my people* in this way that allowed me to experience something I had been suppressing: a sharp current of ethnic allegiance. Over the next few months, I began to embrace a confederal approach. This approach, I have now come to believe, captures justice, fairness, and pragmatism, all while acknowledging the affective dimensions of the entire conflict.

### **Different Audiences, Different Needs**

In this time of utter devastation in the region, with Israelis traumatized by the brutal Hamas-led massacre of October 7 along with the ongoing hostage crisis, with Palestinians in the throes of unbelievable fear and grief over the unfolding Israeli genocide in Gaza, and with everyone across Israel and the West Bank taking cover from Iranian missiles in the wake of Israel's surprise attack on Iran, peacemaking organizations must walk a tightrope when crafting their messages. Acknowledge too heavily Israeli fears, and Palestinians may recoil. Articulate too strongly Palestinian concerns, and Israelis will shut their ears. Insofar as Canada under Prime Minister Mark Carney may seek to help revive peacemaking efforts, Canadian officials also have multiple audiences to which to respond.

I contend that adopting public support for a confederal approach can help Canada appeal to the core identity and security needs of these communities' co-ethnics in the region, and adhere to, even more strongly than it has, its existing core policy commitments. The latter point I discussed above.

As to the former point – appealing to the desires, needs, and identities of Canada's Palestinian and Jewish communities, Canada can, and should, emphasize the following. To Jewish communities, Canada can say that a confederal approach will provide the kind of security Israel needs and deserves, while honoring the desire for Israeli-Jewish self-determination. A confederal approach also honors the Biblical connection to all of the land to which many Israelis, and many Jews – especially those who are more religiously inclined – here, cling. The government's message to Canadian Jews on Israeli Independence Day can thus be said with a new tenor: we see you now and in the future in a way that embodies mutual self-determination, mutual humanity, coordination, cooperation, and mutual attachment to the land.<sup>8</sup>

To Palestinians and their supporters, Canada can say that a confederal approach enables refugee return in a way no other two-state solution thus far has. Certainly, allowing Israeli settlers to stay, even as residents of the West Bank, might feel like a violation of international law has been rewarded. But Canada can emphasize that the occupation can, will, and must end. The genocide must end. And that it is not only Israelis who deserve security, but of course Palestinians as well. The security discourse has so often and so powerfully been grabbed by the horns by Israel and its supporters that Canada can take the lead in acknowledging that deep precarity in which Palestinians in the West Bank and of course in Gaza have lived since the occupation began. And that this precarity must end.

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<sup>8</sup> The 2024 statement by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Israel's Independence Day is here: <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/statements/2024/05/13/statement-prime-minister-israel-independence-day>.



And to *all* Canadians, the government can acknowledge the powerful point made by so many current confederal-solution proponents, namely that this is a two-state solution that just might work.

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## **Pursuing the Negotiated Departure of Hamas from Gaza**

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A key element has been missing from U.S. diplomacy surrounding the war in Gaza launched by Hamas' brutal attack on Israel on October 7, 2023: a strategy to ensure Hamas is definitively removed from power in Gaza.

From the earliest days after the start of the war, it was clear to anyone with an accurate understanding of the trauma Israelis were experiencing that no political leader – not Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, nor any potential alternative – would have the legitimacy to tell the Israeli public that the war was ending with Hamas still in control.

That is a different question than the prioritization of the release of hostages that currently motivates the majority of the Israeli public. Israelis who hold that view by and large also maintain that the war will eventually need to continue in some fashion until Hamas no longer rules Gaza. An end point like that following previous rounds of conflict – in which a battered and bruised Hamas hangs on and gradually begins to rebuild and rearm for another round, or an arrangement like Hezbollah's former status in Lebanon as the most powerful armed element behind a nominal governing authority – is wholly unacceptable to most Israelis.

But it is not only Israeli fears of a renewed Hamas attack that requires Hamas' removal. There are practical considerations as well. None of the goals associated with post-conflict arrangements in Gaza – an Arab stabilizing force, reconstruction funds provided by the international community, Palestinian Authority governance, Israeli openness to discussing some pathway to Palestinian statehood – can occur while Hamas maintains effective control of Gaza. Unless Hamas is defeated or removed, there is no post-conflict phase, just a new phase of the current conflict.

### **The Challenge of Removing Hamas from Power**

For 20 months, the IDF has proven unable to remove Hamas from power by military force. Even if it is able to defeat Hamas in an expanded operation – rather than the more likely outcome of being pulled into a prolonged occupation and facing a perpetual insurgency – there is little chance that it would find partners to step in and relieve it of the burdens of controlling Gaza. It would also require a terrible price in the lives of hostages, Israeli soldiers, and Palestinian civilians, with further damage to Israel's international reputation.

There is an alternative, extremely difficult, but as yet untested: the negotiated departure of Hamas leaders and fighters from Gaza. We have a historical model for this approach. In 1982, when the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) were surrounding Beirut in Lebanon as they battled the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which had been conducting terrorist attacks on northern Israel, U.S. diplomats, led by Philip Habib, conducted intense diplomacy to enable the

peaceful departure of some 14,000 PLO leaders and fighters. PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and his leadership cohort departed for Tunis, while groups of fighters were transferred on planes, ships, and buses to camps in Iraq, Algeria, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere. A much bloodier standoff was avoided.

To state the obvious, there are significant challenges with applying this model to the Gaza case. Conceivably, there will be no takers within Hamas. Jihadists who are prepared to die in tunnels in their homeland may not make the same choices as secular and Marxist revolutionaries trading one exile for another. Hamas cares little for the well-being of Palestinian civilians, so that motivation will not help. Having hung on for 20 months of war, Hamas may believe it can wait out the fighting and survive, while Israel is pressured to achieve a final hostage deal.

However, the advantages of a negotiated departure of Hamas should not be underestimated. More than any other arrangement, it would enable moving on to the post-conflict stage, with initiatives to provide security, governance, reconstruction, and a political pathway. None of these are possible with Hamas in power. Hamas' removal – in a real, but also in a symbolic sense – would also enable Israelis and Palestinians to credibly claim that the war had come to an end. It would mark an end to active fighting, and thereby save more lives, than any alternative. And, importantly, it would demonstrate that Hamas had paid a definitive price for the October 7 attack, which would serve as deterrence for others considering launching attacks against Israel.

Regrettably, the Biden Administration did not prioritize efforts to negotiate the departure of Hamas in the early period of the war. There were understandable reasons for this choice: the emergency requirement of getting the first group of hostages released (primarily women, children, elderly, and injured) was the initial priority. After the first ceasefire and hostage release in late November 2023, U.S., Israeli, and other regional leaders focused their efforts on additional ceasefires and hostage releases. Ultimately, it took more than a year, and a transition of U.S. administrations, to arrange a subsequent deal.

It was almost certainly not viable to execute a negotiated departure of Hamas during the early months of the war. Hamas leaders like Yahya Sinwar and Muhammad Deif likely understood when they launched the October 7 attack that they would not live to see the end of the war. Their commitment to their cause, and ability to keep other members of their movement in line, were an obstacle.

But with that layer, and more recently additional layers, of leadership eliminated, a new path to exile the next tier of Hamas leaders and a critical mass of fighters may be open. While the IDF has pressed its campaign and conveyed its willingness to go even further, it is plausible that doubt can be raised among more junior members of Hamas, or newer recruits brought in to replace those who have been killed, about the wisdom of fighting to the death.

In addition, a crucial element has emerged since the end of the January-March 2025 ceasefire and the renewal of fighting: protests by Palestinians in Gaza against Hamas rule. At great personal risk, hundreds, if not thousands of Palestinians have taken to the streets on numerous occasions, chastising Hamas for dragging them into the war, and calling on them to give up power and leave. This phenomenon, scarcely seen in Gaza even before the war, likely represents

a wider swath of public opinion in the territory, and it is a crucial building block in convincing Hamas leaders and fighters that they must go.

### **What Would Be Needed to Make a Negotiated Departure of Hamas Possible?**

In the first instance, it could only be plausible if the United States declared it a primary goal, and launched a vigorous and sustained diplomatic effort, with the support of other allies in Europe, Canada, and Asia, to get key governments to agree to pursue it.

Resistance from any number of key regional players is to be expected, as they would be called upon to take hard decisions. But as President Donald Trump demonstrated during his visit to the Middle East in May 2025, he commands considerable influence and could plausibly use a combination of persuasion and transactionalism to get some countries to agree. A senior envoy with access to, and the ability to speak for, the President would have to prioritize the departure of Hamas in his or her discussions with regional players. Special Envoy for the Middle East Steve Witkoff would be well-positioned to fold discussion of a negotiated departure into his talks on a ceasefire and hostage release deal, and broaden the circle of countries he raised it with.

The U.S. and allied diplomatic effort should aim to win vocal and active support from Arab states. It should start with Arab states clearly stating that Hamas cannot remain in power in Gaza at the end of this war. Furthermore, it requires convincing these states to embark on a sustained campaign to delegitimize Hamas, using their public diplomacy and media outlets. Hamas should be consistently described as the cause of Palestinian suffering in Gaza (which does not mean one cannot criticize some Israeli military operations) and the obstacle to a better future of Palestinians.

Hamas is not immune to concern for its reputation among Arab publics, which is why this as yet untested method has promise. It requires particular focus from Qatar and Egypt, the two Arab countries with the most influence over Hamas' ability to function. Egypt and Qatar should be encouraged to improve upon the Egyptian-led Arab plan for Gaza that was hastily assembled in February and March 2025 to counter Trump's proposal for a U.S. takeover of Gaza, expulsion of Palestinians, and building a Gaza Riviera. The plan largely ignored Hamas, and pointed toward previously unsuccessful – and unacceptable to Israel – proposals for Hamas to remain intact and armed but behind the scenes as a new technical committee assumed governing responsibility for Gaza, what is often described as the Hezbollah model.

Drawing Turkey into this effort would dramatically strengthen its effect, given President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's longstanding sympathy for Hamas. Again, the opportunity for President Trump to leverage his own relationship with Erdogan makes what might seem unlikely, possible.

Israel, too, would need to offer clarity that it supports the exile of Hamas leaders and fighters from Gaza, and that their departure, along with the release of all hostages, would signify the end of the war. For Arab states to consider the hard steps they will be asked to take, they must have assurance that Hamas' departure would not simply facilitate an Israeli reoccupation and resettlement of Gaza, as advocated by far-right ministers in the Israeli government. Here,



President Trump could be extremely helpful by formally withdrawing his misguided Gaza Riviera proposal.

The negotiating channels with Hamas already exist. Qatar and Egypt regularly act as intermediaries between Hamas leaders and Israel and U.S. negotiators on hostage and ceasefire proposals, so they are positioned to include the departure of Hamas leaders and fighters from Gaza in these talks.

Among the key issues to be decided are the locations Hamas leaders and fighters will depart to. They must be at some distance from Israel to limit the concern of renewed cross-border terrorism, and they should be located in countries that can provide them with adequate housing facilities for them and their families. Qatar, Algeria, Malaysia, Iran, Turkey, and Russia are all countries that maintain some form of relationship with Hamas and could step up to host exiled Hamas leaders and fighters, with promises to supervise their activities so they do not return to terrorism, as part of a coordinated diplomatic effort to end the war.

The transport and housing of these Hamas exiles requires financing, which Gulf states like Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait are in a position to provide. Additional monies for, say, a transportation fund could be raised from European governments and the European Union, Canada, and Japan. Egypt would also have to agree to facilitate the departure of these Hamas elements from Gaza through the Rafah border crossing, with onward transportation to their ultimate destinations. The United States would have to provide waivers of sanctions against material support for terrorist organizations.

Enlisting Arab states' participation in this negotiated departure scheme would almost certainly require Israel to demonstrate greater flexibility than it has heretofore on post-conflict arrangements in the Gaza Strip. During the Biden Administration, the United States led discussions with Arab states on the creation and deployment of an Arab stabilization force deploying in Gaza, with U.S. support, to secure the delivery of humanitarian aid and provide basic law and order. But these talks foundered on Arab states' insistence that the effort be tied to a political horizon for the creation of a Palestinian state and practical steps to begin the insertion of Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces in Gaza to participate in post-conflict security as a beachhead of the eventual return of PA governance. Israel, under its current government led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was not prepared to make any gestures in that direction. To secure Arab state participation in the exile of Hamas leaders and fighters from Gaza and post-conflict security arrangements, President Trump will need to lean heavily on Jerusalem to revisit that position, tying it to efforts to reform the Palestinian Authority and, perhaps, the appointment of a consensus PA prime minister.

Coordinating all the moving parts of this proposed arrangement would be extraordinarily complicated. Only the United States can lead the diplomatic effort, with a focused, senior diplomatic team, drawing on Trump's influence and regional standing. To assist in building regional consensus for this approach, the United States should enlist its European, Canadian, and Asian allies and partners to reinforce it in their own diplomatic engagements, and consider an ultimate endorsement from the U.N. Security Council.

No one should dismiss the difficulty of pulling off the negotiated departure of Hamas elements from Gaza as part of conflict-ending arrangements. But neither should the benefits be underestimated. The channels and players exist to pursue this course. What is required is a policy decision in Washington, and a commitment to pursue it with sufficient diplomatic resources.

## **Challenges and Opportunities for Promoting Stability in Lebanon**

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Since 2000, when Israeli troops unilaterally withdrew from south Lebanon, Lebanon has not had opportunities to address the array of challenges it has been facing for a very long time. A combination of domestic and geopolitical dynamics created severe challenges along the way.

On January 9, 2025, Joseph Aoun was elected president, ending a two-year presidential vacuum. Following this, Nawaf Salam was appointed to lead the next government. Now Lebanon has a capable leadership both at the presidential and cabinet levels, presenting new political opportunities.

Lebanon's economy has been on a downward trajectory in recent years, experiencing a triple crisis affecting its banking sector, economy, and currency. While the initial economic decline was prompted by a proposed tax on WhatsApp calls in 2019, this was precipitated by decades of government mismanagement, corruption, and rising income inequality. The situation worsened with Lebanon's sovereign debt default in March 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic struck, followed by the devastating Beirut port explosion in August 2020.

Over the years, Hezbollah's sub-state military infrastructure had propped up a dysfunctional and highly corrupt governance system and contributed to overall state fragility. Hezbollah's decisions to engage in regional wars, both the Syrian civil war in 2012 and attacking Israel on October 8, 2023, in support of Gaza, have contributed to further instability in Lebanon. This latest war was brought to an end by Israel decimating Hezbollah's senior political and military leadership and invading Lebanon yet again on October 1, 2024.

On November 27, 2024, a ceasefire agreement was signed by Israel, Lebanon, and five mediating countries, including the United States. The agreement comprises 13 points and involves Israel withdrawing from southern Lebanon, enabling civilians on both sides of the border to return to their homes.

The ceasefire agreement included the establishment of a U.S.-led International Monitoring and Implementation Mechanism (IMIM) with the participation of Israel, Lebanon, France, and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). During a sixty-day implementation period, both Israel and Hezbollah were to gradually withdraw from southern Lebanon, and the Lebanese Armed Forces would then deploy throughout the area with UNIFIL's support to dismantle Hezbollah's arms there.

However, Israel has reportedly violated the agreement hundreds of times since it was signed. According to the ceasefire terms, Israel was supposed to withdraw its troops from south Lebanon within 60 days of November 27, 2024, and then first be replaced by UNIFIL troops, followed by the Lebanese army. However, Israel claimed that Hezbollah's extensive weapons in the south and

their efforts to rebuild led them to “reconsider” the timeline for withdrawal and Israel recently announced that they will maintain their presence in five strategic outposts inside Lebanon.

On the Lebanese side, the Lebanese armed forces have been making significant progress fulfilling 12 American metrics including dismantling all underground Hezbollah facilities, establishing checkpoints south of the Litani river area, clearing and blocking Hezbollah tunnels, and confiscating all Hezbollah weapons and arms. So far, there has been a total of 6,000 troops in the south with 4,000 more still being recruited. They have been gradually increasing their deployment to the south of the Litani river at the rate of 1,500 soldiers every three months. Nevertheless, the Lebanese Armed Forces face severe challenges in recruitment, materiel, and financing.

On September 5, the Lebanese cabinet approved a plan put forward by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to take control of all weapons held by non-state actors. The plan consists of five phases with the first consisting of the LAF taking possession of all military weapons of all militias south of the Litani river within 1-3 months. The other four phases consist of a progressive disarmament process between the Awali and Litani rivers (Phase 2), Beirut (phase 3), in the Bekaa valley northeast of Beirut (Phase 4), and in the remaining parts of Lebanon (Phase 5). No timeline is attached to these four phases. The disarmament process in phase 1 will be carried out unilaterally by the Lebanese government and will not be conditioned on withdrawal by Israeli forces from south Lebanon. Post-phase one, actions by both Israel and the United States to implement the ceasefire terms agreed last November will help speed up the completion of phases 2-5

## **Opportunity Areas**

Three opportunity areas will greatly help move Lebanon away from decades of conflict toward a stable growth trajectory and diminishing its reliance on international assistance: economic reforms, disarmament of all non-state armed groups operating on Lebanese territory including Hezbollah and Palestinian factions, and enabling the dignified and safe return of Syrian refugees.

### *Economic reforms*

The Lebanese government faces significant challenges in resolving its financial, monetary, and banking crises, as well as confronting the deeply entrenched interests within Lebanon's financial and political systems that have previously obstructed reforms. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Lebanese government has made some progress on monetary and fiscal reforms by phasing out monetary financing of the budget, implementing tight fiscal policy, and unifying exchange rates. The most serious issue hampering economic growth is the weak progress made so far on finding a solution to the banking crisis. On 24 April 2025, the Lebanese parliament finally passed a new banking secrecy law that allows regulatory bodies, including auditors and the central bank, to access banking information without needing to specify a particular objective. This law was a key loan condition from the IMF. On April 12 2025, the Lebanese cabinet had approved a draft law to reform and restructure the country's banking sector. This is one of two laws required by the IMF as a sign of progress by the Lebanese government, the other being the revision of the banking secrecy law. The bank restructuring law

was approved by the Lebanese parliament. Still pending is the financial gap law to resolve how to unlock depositors' frozen funds. It is likely to be pushed back past the May 2026 parliamentary elections due to its political sensitivity.

### *Disarmament*

The Lebanese president has said publicly that the decision to disarm all non-state armed actors operating on Lebanese territory, including Hezbollah, was made as part of the government's broader effort to assert state control over all armed groups in the country and in line with the requirements of both UN Security Council Resolution 1701 and the November 2024 ceasefire agreement between Lebanon and Israel. He argued that former Hezbollah members could join the Lebanese army through "absorption courses" but would not be allowed to function as a distinct unit. A similar decision was made to confiscate the weapons from all Palestinian organizations in Lebanon, a move backed by the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The plan is for Abbas to set up a security committee tasked with organizing and overseeing the disarmament process and setting a clear timetable for the surrender of weapons.

Hezbollah has conditioned further talks on the future of its weapons on the Israeli withdrawal from the five strategic outposts they still hold in south Lebanon and on the cessation of Israeli aggression on Lebanese territory, particularly Israel's targeting of Hezbollah cadres. While they still maintain a public position opposing disarmament, Hezbollah's negotiating position on this issue is not strong. After all, the reconstruction of many of its supporters' communities, including their homes and businesses, is conditioned on the Lebanese government accessing foreign aid which is conditioned on Hezbollah disarmament.

Regarding the Palestinian factions, the Lebanese army took control last December of three bases in eastern Lebanon that were held by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) and Fatah al-Intifada, both of these Palestinian factions having close ties to the former Syrian government. Working with the new interim authorities in Damascus, the Lebanese government has also been taking control of dozens of informal crossings with Syria, which were key channels for transporting weapons and people to Syria over the years. Those crossings were mostly held by PFLP-GC militants. The LAF have also begun to take control of Palestinian weapons in several refugee camps, in Beirut and southern Lebanon.

While the disarmament of Hezbollah was once considered impossible, it now appears closer to reality; the process, however, remains fraught with severe political challenges.

There are several international experiences with disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes which can be helpful in providing lessons that could apply to Hezbollah's disarmament. Hezbollah's nature as both a military and political entity with significant social service infrastructure, strong ideological commitments, and regional backing create a complex scenario unlike many previous DDR contexts.

### *Return of Syrian refugees*



Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world. Out of a Lebanese population estimated at 5.3 million, 1.5 million are refugees with the great majority of them coming from Syria. Nine out of 10 Syrian families in Lebanon are living in extreme poverty, while poverty levels have also risen substantially for Lebanese families. According to Lebanese official estimates, 100,000 new Syrian refugees hailing from minority communities had fled to Lebanon following the inter-communal violence on Syria's coastal areas and in southern Syria that occurred after the fall of the Assad regime.

This refugee population has added enormous stress on every service sector in the country, exacerbating an already dire situation in the provision of electricity, water, sanitation, education, and health. Furthermore, Lebanon's historical experience with Palestinian refugee communities being involved in intra-Lebanese civil strife has added serious concerns about the potential harm Syrian refugees could contribute to peace and stability in the country.

With the political situation in Syria stabilizing following the demise of the Assad regime which constituted the principal obstacle to Syrian refugee returning home, there is increasing pressure on the Lebanese government to find a solution that enable the safe and dignified return of Syrian refugees to their country.

Syrian interim authorities have expressed in several off-the-record conversations that their short-term priority is focused on internally displaced persons and not the refugees residing in neighboring countries. Given the cuts in US Agency for International Development (USAID) funding, the scale of the response needed for humanitarian assistance in Lebanon including assistance to Syrian refugees has increasingly become a challenge.

The return of Syrian refugees has been a key focus area in recent discussions between Lebanese officials and Syrian interim authorities. According to UNHCR, the government of Lebanon, working with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian agencies, is working to help repatriate an estimated 400,000 Syrians return home. According to UN officials, over 200,000 Syrian refugees have returned from Lebanon since the start of 2025. The principal obstacles to refugee returns are the lack of jobs in Syria and the widespread destruction of the infrastructure and services in communities around the country including water, electricity, health and educational centers.

## **Priorities for International Assistance to Lebanon**

### *US policy*

The Biden administration had developed a bifurcated policy approach toward Lebanon: one focused on preventing a "failed state" and another aimed at countering the influence of Hezbollah. This separation recognized that these are mostly separate policy objectives and that Lebanon's economic crisis required attention independent of efforts to counter Hezbollah. Humanitarian assistance remained a consistent element of U.S. policy, with substantial funding directed toward addressing Lebanon's economic crisis and the needs of vulnerable populations affected by conflict.

Following Israel's pager attacks on Hezbollah, U.S. policy toward Lebanon evolved significantly, first shifting from promoting ceasefire efforts to supporting Israeli operations against Hezbollah, and then brokering a ceasefire agreement that involves increased security assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces.

The Trump administration's approach has focused on two objectives: resolving outstanding issues between Lebanon and Israel following the November 2024 ceasefire agreement that include facilitating the full deployment of Lebanese Armed Forces and UN peacekeepers in southern Lebanon to prevent Hezbollah from reestablishing itself, disarming of Hezbollah over all Lebanese territory per UNSCR 1701, and pressuring Lebanese officials to enact necessary economic reforms with parliament passing two crucial bills amending the banking secrecy law and the banking resolution law. American policy priorities toward Lebanon include ensuring the ceasefire agreement does not unravel as the agreement is seen as supporting Trump's broader Middle East strategy centered on securing a nuclear deal with Iran and curbing its regional influence.

While U.S. military assistance to the LAF continues in terms of training and funding additional troop recruitment, no US funding is being provided to LAF livelihood assistance. American administration cuts to USAID funding and other multilateral agencies have impacted humanitarian assistance programs impacting large swathes of Lebanese people as well as Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Currently under the Trump administration, there is no whole-of-Middle East strategy. While there is a commitment to stability in Lebanon, there is also a shortsighted vision about what it takes to ensure such stability. The U.S. administration's focus is on disarming Hezbollah as the most secure way to such stability. However, there is no appreciation of the fact that the objective of stabilizing Lebanon is tied to the stabilization of the Syrian economy, which will enable the return of Syrian refugees who constitute a stress on Lebanese economic stability and security.

#### *How can Canada contribute to Lebanese stability*

Since 2016, Canada has committed over CDN\$475 million in funding to support Lebanon's stability and resilience as it coped with various crises, including the Syrian conflict and the 2020 Beirut port explosion. Canada's assistance to Lebanon should focus on five main strategic objectives. In line with past Canadian humanitarian and development assistance in Lebanon, the following are areas where Canada can make significant contributions to Lebanon's stability.

First, make economic reforms a key plank in Canada's engagement with the government of Lebanon. This can encompass sustaining its dialogue with Lebanese officials and coordinating with the IMF about loan conditions to be undertaken to push economic reforms forward.

Second, promote public goods through the development of generative AI and digital public infrastructure to streamline the delivery of public services. In a positive move, the Lebanese government is working on putting in place a national digital ID system and digital public payments and data exchange platforms that will transform how citizens access services from

government and the public sector. This would introduce a high level of transparency and accountability to how international assistance is being disbursed and spent.

Third, work with the international community, particularly Europe and the GCC, to pressure Israel and Iran to respect the sovereignty of Lebanon by ending Israeli strikes on Lebanese territory and Iranian support of non-state armed groups including Hezbollah. As Israeli violations of the ceasefire continue, it will be increasingly difficult for the government to proceed with their disarmament agenda. Hezbollah has linked disarmament to reconstruction of large swathes of areas in southern Lebanon. A small grants program, say \$20-30 million, could help to assist villages in south Lebanon with simple reconstruction projects, such as repairing water infrastructure, restoring electricity, and other small reconstruction projects. This assistance could be first delivered through community organizations that work at the village level and whenever possible with local municipalities.

Fourth, strengthen border security assistance (which Canada has already been providing) along the Lebanese-Syrian border by strengthening the capacity of Lebanese border patrols and work with their Syrian counterparts to prevent the transborder smuggling of weapons, fighters, and drugs.

Lastly, given the cuts in USAID funding, there is an increased need for other donors to step in and provide humanitarian and development assistance, especially programs that create economic opportunities for women. Moreover, early recovery assistance programs in Syria focusing on enabling Syrian refugees to return home, would be another useful Canadian support.

## **Canada Is Part of the Solution in Syria**

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The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria ushered in an era of extraordinary possibility for openness in Syria, a country that had long been hampered by the trappings of a police state that sought to control all the means of production, income, influence, and foreign collaboration.

Yet despite the opportunities presented by the overthrow of a long-standing tyrannical regime by a coalition of rebels led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, a former al-Qaeda affiliate turned nationalist rebel group, severe challenges abound that could threaten a transition to democracy – from territorial encroachment by Israel, to unresolved sectarian tensions emanating from the dynamics of implicit sectarian rule over the past half-century, the debate over methods of transitional justice, the prospects of democratic and constitutional reform, and the debilitated infrastructure in the health system as well as the provision of electricity and water to the long-suffering population, which are exacerbated by sanctions meant to punish the former regime.

These myriad challenges threaten to undermine the nascent project of state renewal and nation building taking shape, whose fate will have great impact on regional stability, regional peace with Israel, sectarianism in the region, the outflow of refugees and migrants, and long-running historical conflicts. Canada is well-positioned to play a key role in advancing the cause of promoting and advancing democracy in Syria, particularly in supporting civil society and encouraging collaboration with Syrian businesses, ministries, and companies to develop the country's capabilities, while also exerting pressure to lift sanctions and promote understanding.

### **The Canadian Context**

Canada is largely viewed as a force for good in the Syrian context. Canada did not normalize relations with the Assad regime even as some Syrian neighbors and European countries did so.<sup>9</sup> It remained a haven for Syrian activists including a portion of the leadership of the White Helmets, which directed their foreign diplomatic operations from Canada. It was the home base of the group's chief, Raed al-Saleh, who is now the Minister of Disaster management and emergency response in the new Syrian government, providing a useful point of contact.

In addition, Canada's primary military involvement in Syria has been in support of the campaign against the Islamic State (beginning in late 2014 and conducting airstrikes in both Syria and Iraq until 2016; Government of Canada), and its intake of over 100,000 Syrian refugees since 2015 (Government of Canada 2024) was not accompanied by the virulent anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment that has swept through Europe, with few calls to return refugees to Syria even after the fall of the regime.

These factors indicate that Canada has the potential to play a constructive role in Syria's rebuilding efforts given the generally positive sentiment towards Ottawa and its principled and

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<sup>9</sup> The Arab League reinstated Syria and invited Assad to successive summits in 2023 and 2024 (Al Jazeera 2023), and Italy reopened its embassy shortly before the regime's fall (Reuters 2024)

human rights-oriented policies over the course of the war. In order to assess how Canada can play a role in Syria's transformation, I will focus on broader challenges that Ottawa can help address as part of coalition efforts, and narrower instances of support that align with Canada's priorities.

### **Big Picture Needs**

The two key international priorities for the new Syrian government are getting more countries to lift past sanctions and limiting Israeli encroachment on Syrian territory beyond the demilitarization zone near the Golan Heights.

The logic for lifting sanctions is straightforward, and it simply is this: the sanctions were intended to punish the Assad regime for its crimes, and that regime is now gone. The lifting of sanctions is essential because despite the relative stabilization of the Syrian currency in the wake of the regime's fall, the needs in terms of basic services are still dire. Restrictions on currency circulation that had been enforced by the regime were lifted, with the US dollar flooding the market amid the return of Syrian expats and the arrival of foreign delegations and media personnel. The Syrian pound (SYP) strengthened sharply: while 1 US\$ was around 30,000 SYP when the government collapsed in December 2024, in February 2025 it reached 8,000 SYP. This was bolstered by the sudden openness of trade and the availability of goods from both abroad and other provinces in the country that had been closed off due to the war. Yet the gains of the government risk being lost due to the fact that electricity availability is as low as one hour a day in certain areas, which has a knock-on effect of reducing the availability of clean water due to the reliance on local generators. The transfer of money remains largely restricted as is the importing of necessary materiel.

Some important initial steps have taken place on this front. President Donald Trump revoked most sanctions imposed on Syria by executive order in June (BBC News 2025a). The EU has also lifted many of its sanctions (European Council 2025). Canada issued a temporary, six-month general permit to allow financial transactions and humanitarian and reconstruction aid, but has stopped short of reopening its mission (Government of Canada 2025).

The second priority of the new Syrian government has to do with Israel's territorial encroachment. In the aftermath of Assad's fall, Israel carried out military operations inside Syria and took control of territory beyond the demilitarized zone bordering the Golan Heights that had been delineated after a truce in the aftermath of the 1967 and 1973 wars (BBC News 2025b).

Israel's opportunistic conquest of land beyond the demilitarized zone bordering the Golan Heights and its subsequent decision not to leave that territory under the guise of maintaining security has had several knock-on effects. It has undermined the authority of the new government in Damascus, fueling a desire for retribution among local communities affected by Israel's invasion, and Israel's control over local water resources that has limited the ability of local farmers to water and harvest their crops (Montag 2025).

In addition, Israel's actions have given a propaganda win to anti-government militias and pro-Iran militants, who see Israel's actions as confirmation of their longstanding *raison d'être*.



Israel has further exacerbated sectarian cleavages with local Druze communities while claiming the right to protect them from attack (a claim the Druze community has largely rejected). Moreover, at least some of the disinformation on tensions within and against the Druze community has sparked suspicions that Israel is behind the instigation of internal conflict, further contributing to the belief that Israel wants to ensure that Syria is a weak and decentralized state (Biller 2025).

These two key priorities are ones that Canada is unlikely to have a strong impact in influencing outside of banding together with friendly international powers in pressuring Israel and finding ways to alleviate the worst impacts of the sanctions. But Canada's contributions here can also have a positive influence on the areas where it is more likely to have a direct and outsized impact.

For example, the U.S. government is rumored to be interested in pursuing a normalization deal between Israel and Syria. While the prospects of such a deal appear remote, particularly given the transitional nature of the current Syrian government and continuing Israeli occupation of Syrian territory, Canada is well-placed to support such a negotiation or to act as a mediator if asked to do so.

### **Syrian Civil Society and the New Government**

Syrian civil society continued to flourish even in the course of the debilitating 14-year civil war. In addition to well-known initiatives like the White Helmets, various organisations popped up inside the country and in neighboring countries of refuge in an effort to prepare for the day after the end of conflict. These civil society groups exist in fields like conflict journalism, constitutional law, previous UN-backed negotiations, documenting war crimes, working with families of the disappeared, fact-checking and combating disinformation, open-source technology, women's education, and others. This has made Syrian civil society uniquely capable (compared to other countries in the region) of navigating the post-conflict transition, even compared to countries like Egypt that have had a longer uninterrupted tradition of civil society activism. Organisations like Verify Sy and the Syrian Network for Human Rights, as well as the White Helmets, have already proven themselves adept at handling disinformation and verifying explosive news stories, supporting post-war aid and humanitarian efforts, and documenting the victims of the war.

Part of the reason these organisations have continued to thrive even in the worst moments of the war is that they garnered funding that ebbed and flowed from various European and international institutions over the course of the conflict, particularly countries that sought to avoid wading into the military side of the war, such as Norway, Finland, and Sweden.

In addition, the current moment in Syria is featuring an unprecedented level of openness to collaboration by members of the new Syrian administration. The change is quite the marked transformation from the years of the Assad regime, where the intelligence and security apparatus regulated the involvement of foreign actors in order to maximize corrupt officials' share of the pie.

This openness can be seen in the frequent meetings of ministers in the new government with foreign delegations, particularly from Europe. These conversations usually revolve around technical issues, rather than political ones – how to collaborate with experts, private sector companies, and naturalized Syrians in order to improve know-how and modernize Syrian business, technology, and infrastructure in areas like healthcare.

This is particularly useful for a country like Canada with built-in expertise in developing education systems, telecoms networks, industrial bases, natural resource exploitation, technology, and healthcare, both through the government and private sector, and with a large Syrian-Canadian diaspora that can act as interlocutors with the new administration.

In essence, people interested in collaborating with specific ministries in Syria today are able to do so by reaching out directly to the relevant ministers, who are empowered enough to make decisions on such collaborations. This period of openness is ultimately likely to recede as government officials consolidate power.

At a recent meeting with a colleague, the Saudi ambassador to Syria said that while his country was ready to pour virtually unlimited resources into Syria, in particular to support energy production, with 24-hour electricity provision a priority, they were hampered by the collapse of basic infrastructure.

The key opportunity for Canadian businesses lies in assisting Syrians with scaling up initial capabilities as a band-aid solution for the country's years of infrastructure destruction during the war. The Ministry of Communications recently announced a collaboration with the developer of an app to mark road problems, and Mr. Saleh said his ministry was working on developing an app for people to report emergencies and ask for help directly from the government.

This suggests an opportunity for Canadian government officials and private businesses to assist Syrians with scaling up the capabilities that are the bread and butter of municipal departments to improve living conditions for the population.

These partnerships will be made easier through the support of Syrian civil society organisations, which despite the end of the war are likely to feel the bite of the retreat of foreign capital and aid institutions amid the economic uncertainty caused by the new American administration. As one of the more developed arms of Syrian society, civil society institutions are well-positioned to play a key role with high leverage in aiding the transition, and Canadian financial support is likely to make a bigger difference and give the country a positive influential role in Syria's future.

Finally, Canada is well-placed to provide assistance that can build up a capital of goodwill through supporting Syrian institutions grappling with natural disasters and climate change-related crises, such as the recent forest fires (July 2025) that have swept through large swathes of Latakia near the coast, threatening natural reserves and harvests in a country still reeling from record-low rainfall in 2025. Canada's experience with fighting wildfires can offer a needed reprieve and improve Canada's image with the new government.

## Conclusion

Canada is perceived positively as a force for good in Syria and should capitalize on this image to build up a rapport with key ministries and civil society groups. This will allow Canada to propose areas of collaboration with Canadian institutions, government departments, municipal departments, businesses, and private individuals to help Syrians scale up their capabilities to address infrastructure shortcomings, while also aiding civil society organisations in managing the transition through targeted, high return-on-investment cash injections. In addition, Canada can play a supporting role in addressing key foreign policy challenges such as Israel's incursions into Syrian territory and the lifting of sanctions as part of a broader coalition of nations interested in Syria's recovery.

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## **Between Rockets and Ballots: How Iraqi Militias Are Recalibrating to Secure Their Future**

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Facing a convergence of regional setbacks, international scrutiny, and shifting Iranian strategy, Iraq's Iran-aligned militias are recalibrating their approach in ways that reveal both short-term vulnerabilities and long-term political intent. After escalating dramatically against Israel and the U.S.-led coalition in the wake of October 7, 2023, the "Axis of Resistance" suffered strategic and operational blows that triggered a profound sense of existential threat among its Iraqi factions. In response, these militias have adopted a posture of conditional military restraint while doubling down on efforts to consolidate power through Iraq's formal political structures – most notably the November 2025 parliamentary elections. This article examines how the militias are adjusting their tactics across multiple domains – military, political, and economic – and outlines concrete steps Canada and its allies can take to disrupt their entrenchment and support a more accountable Iraqi state.

### **The Strategic Fallout of October 7**

In the aftermath of October 7, the operational strategy of Iraq's Iran-aligned militias was characterised by a pronounced emphasis on kinetic activity. This period marked a shift toward intensified direct-action operations targeting U.S. and Israeli interests across multiple theatres. According to information compiled by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, from October 18, 2023, to December 3, 2024, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI) – a collective front used to claim attacks by established militias such as Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), Harakat al-Nujaba, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and Ansar Allah al-Awfiya – conducted more than 220 rocket, missile, and drone strikes against U.S. forces in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan, and claimed over 340 attacks against Israeli targets (Knights, al-Kaabi, and Malik 2024).<sup>10</sup> Among these operations, a particularly consequential event occurred on January 28, 2024, when a KH one-way UAV targeted a U.S. military outpost in Jordan, resulting in the fatalities of three American service members and wounding more than forty others (U.S. Department of Defense 2024) – marking the most lethal attack on U.S. forces in the region since the end of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan in 2021.

The U.S. military responded with targeted decapitation strikes against senior leadership figures from KH (U.S. Central Command 2024), diminishing command-and-control capabilities and compelling the militias to halt operations against U.S. assets (Knights and Malik 2024). Attacks against Israeli targets, however, continued – and even escalated. In October 2024, IRI tripled its number of claimed strikes against Israeli interests (Knights, al-Kaabi, and Smith (2024), indicating a deliberate increase in operational tempo and messaging.

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<sup>10</sup> The Institute expresses high confidence in its reporting on attacks against U.S. targets and moderate confidence regarding the accuracy of reported attacks on Israeli targets. These numbers represent claims; many of the claims include multiple attacks, suggesting the actual strike count or claims of strikes is likely significantly higher.

Then came major strategic setbacks suffered by the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance” in Gaza and Lebanon, and after a direct November 18, 2024 warning from Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa’ar – delivered to the Iraqi government via the UN Security Council – urging it to “take immediate action to halt and prevent these attacks” and warning that Israel would “take all necessary actions” if they continued (The Times of Israel 2024). Thereafter, the pace of Iraqi militia attacks against Israeli targets dropped off almost entirely (al-Kaabi, Knights, and Mail 2024).

This dramatic shift in posture was likely driven by the collapse of deterrence by key “Axis of Resistance” factions, notably Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. These setbacks provided Israel with increased freedom of manoeuvre to conduct high-impact precision strikes against Iraqi militia leadership and infrastructure with reduced risk of regional escalation. Adding to the concern among Iraqi groups was a growing awareness of Israel’s successful infiltration of key command structures within the Axis, which significantly undermined operational security. The return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency following his electoral victory in November 2024 further intensified this threat perception, as he is widely regarded within the Axis as an unpredictable actor with a demonstrated willingness to employ direct and forceful measures. The sudden collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in early December 2024 dealt an additional blow to the Axis’ strategic depth – depriving it of a key logistical and territorial hub and reinforcing the militias’ adoption of a posture centred on military restraint.

### **Holding Fire, Not Standing Down**

As Iran moved toward negotiations with the Trump administration and its strategic posture toward the United States became more defined, Iraqi militias began to adopt increasingly de-escalatory rhetoric. In early April 2025, “six local commanders of four major militias” reportedly told Reuters they were prepared to “disarm” as part of an effort to “defuse tensions,” following what they described as “repeated warnings issued privately by U.S. officials to the Iraqi government” (Reuters 2025).

Kata’ib Hezbollah swiftly issued a denial, rejecting reports that any of its members had engaged with the media regarding disarmament (Amwaj Media 2025). This repudiation, however, did not preclude the group’s Secretary General, Ahmad Mohsen Faraj al-Hamidawi (also known as Abu Hussein), from publicly urging militia fighters to exercise continued restraint (Smith and Malik 2025) – remarks that, while not explicitly referencing U.S.-Iran negotiations, appeared calibrated to align with the diplomatic context and ongoing talks.

This is unlikely to represent a genuine departure from armed struggle. Rather, the militias’ current posture appears to be a calculated manoeuvre designed to reduce international scrutiny and deter potential pre-emptive strikes – particularly from Israel or the United States – while preserving the integrity and readiness of their armed networks during a period of heightened strategic vulnerability. Although the emphasis for now is on strategic restraint, this position remains highly conditional. Should Iran come under direct and sustained military attack – such as a full-scale bombing campaign – the discipline observed by groups like Kata’ib Hezbollah and Harakat al-Nujaba would likely collapse, triggering renewed kinetic operations against U.S. and Israeli targets and potentially expanding to include strikes on Jordan and Gulf states viewed as

complicit. The plausibility of such escalation was underscored by Sadr al-Din al-Qubbanji, a senior cleric with ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force, who warned in a Friday sermon that American bases in Iraq are within range of both Iranian and Iraqi militia artillery and would be destroyed immediately if Iran were attacked, adding that Iraqi fighters would not stay silent and could not be restrained (Smith and Malik 2025).

### **Elections: Militia Strategy for Survival**

Having scaled back their military activity in response to mounting pressure, Iraq's Iran-aligned militias are now redirecting their efforts toward political consolidation. Central to this recalibrated strategy is a focused campaign to dominate the November 2025 parliamentary elections – an opportunity they view as essential to preserving their influence, shielding their armed structures, and securing long-term survival. For groups like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr Organization, and Kata'ib Hezbollah, electoral power is not just a political goal; it is the linchpin of a broader strategy to legitimize their armed presence, shield themselves from accountability, and embed their influence across the Iraqi state. Reflecting this urgency, KH's Secretary General has called on supporters to actively participate in the elections, framing it as a “step that should not be overlooked or neglected” (Smith and Malik 2025).

This strategic turn toward electoral dominance is driven by the wide-ranging advantages political control affords across military, legal, financial, and institutional domains.

First, political dominance enables the preservation and expansion of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella organisation dominated by Iran-affiliated groups. Electoral leverage allows militia-aligned politicians to block reform efforts aimed at bringing the PMF under government control – such as integrating its units into the regular armed forces, curbing its budget, or limiting the political activity of its members. It also enables them to resist disarmament initiatives intended to dismantle parallel chains of command and impose accountability for unauthorized military actions.

Second, political power ensures a degree of legal protection. PMF-affiliated groups benefit from de facto immunity: their facilities are exempt from government inspection, while judicial oversight is often neutralized through political influence. By dominating parliament and key government positions, militias ensure that laws either serve their interests—or are simply not enforced.

Third, elections offer continued access to substantial financial resources. The PMF's budget (now over \$3.4 billion annually; Malik and Knights 2025) supports dozens of militias and tens of thousands of fighters, including “ghost fighters” who exist only on paper to siphon salaries and benefits. Beyond this, militia-aligned officials exploit ministries and procurement systems to divert public funds. Groups such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah have been implicated in oil theft, the resale of subsidized fuel, and laundering Iranian oil as Iraqi crude – generating billions in illicit revenue and helping Tehran circumvent international sanctions (Knights 2025).



Fourth, political legitimacy provides a shield of institutional credibility. By participating in elections, these groups position themselves as defenders of national interests rather than agents of foreign influence. This helps deflect international pressure and makes it harder to isolate or delegitimize them. Just as importantly, holding political office gives them access to policymaking coalitions, state resources, and diplomatic channels – tools they use to marginalize reformists and entrench their control.

Ultimately, political entrenchment gives these groups strategic insulation: as armed activity becomes riskier and international scrutiny intensifies, formal power offers a fallback, allowing them to sustain influence, evade accountability, and preserve the hybrid system of coercion and institutional control they have spent years constructing.

The November 2025 elections represent a rare inflection point. While Iran-aligned militias already wield significant power, the upcoming vote will determine whether that power is further entrenched or begins to erode. Under the right conditions, the elections could mark the start of a broader effort to weaken militia dominance, strengthen Iraqi institutions, and open space for reformist forces. For Tehran – facing mounting regional setbacks and deepening economic pressure – Iraq has become a critical stronghold. Its proxies' control over Iraqi institutions provides vital financial lifelines, enables sanctions evasion, and anchors Iran's regional influence. Preserving militia dominance in Baghdad is no longer just a strategic priority for the Islamic Republic – it is a necessity for regime survival (Knights and Malik 2025).

### **Policy Recommendations: A Role for Canada**

Addressing this challenge will require a concerted international effort. The growing reliance of Iraqi militias on formal political power – particularly through elections and institutional capture – demands that Canada, working in concert with key allies, recalibrate its approach. While the militias' intent remains unchanged, recent battlefield losses and increased scrutiny have pushed them to shift tactics. Canada should therefore focus not only on military deterrence, but on dismantling the financial, legal, and political mechanisms that sustain militia entrenchment within the Iraqi state. This requires coordinated action across multiple fronts, including transparency, institutional reform, and electoral integrity.

#### *1. Support financial transparency and accountability*

Canada should assist independent Iraqi actors in systematically investigating and exposing the illicit financial activities that sustain militia operations and facilitate Iran's evasion of international sanctions. This work can largely rely on the collection and analysis of open-source, commercially available, and public financial data, without the need for classified intelligence. Findings should be grounded in verifiable evidence rather than general allegations. Where appropriate, evidence concerning illicit financial networks should be shared with Iraqi and U.S. authorities to take necessary actions; in other cases, making such information public can increase pressure on malign actors and encourage behavioural change. Enhanced financial transparency would deprive militia groups – who remain among the principal beneficiaries of illicit economic activity – of critical resources and diminish their operational freedom.

## 2. *Promote reform of the Popular Mobilization Forces*

Canada should join the United States and other international partners in supporting meaningful reform of the PMF. Sustained pressure on Iran's network in Iraq remains essential, and Canada should back efforts to impose new sanctions on the PMF's economic arm, the Muhandis General Company, which facilitates illicit financial flows and entrenches militia power. Ottawa should also support initiatives to push for leadership changes within the PMF, ensuring that future commanders are committed to the principle of bringing all armed groups under full Iraqi state control. As a member of NATO, Canada should help ensure that no designated terrorists or human rights abusers are given access to professional military education via the NATO Training Mission Iraq (Knights and al-Kaabi 2023). Finally, Canada should encourage and assist efforts to clearly define the PMF's lawful role within Iraq's security sector in order to reduce duplication, improve accountability, and reinforce the Iraqi government's monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

## 3. *Strengthen Iraq's electoral integrity*

Canada should expand its support for rights-based civil society organisations in Iraq, particularly those advocating for political reform, transparency, and democratic values. Despite intense pressure from militia groups following the Tishreen protests, independent civil society remains resilient and enjoys public credibility. Carefully targeted assistance – focused on genuine reformist actors rather than groups co-opted by militias – could play a critical role in mobilising disillusioned voters ahead of the November 2025 elections. Strengthening civil society's ability to encourage voter turnout for non-militia and non-militia-aligned candidates is essential to loosening the militias' grip over Iraq's political space and creating opportunities for more accountable, representative governance.

Canada, alongside its allies, should also send a clear message to Iraq's judiciary emphasising the importance of impartiality in the upcoming electoral process. During past elections, judicial interpretations of electoral laws have often favoured militia-aligned political actors. Canada should underscore that credible, unbiased judicial conduct will be a key benchmark for maintaining strong bilateral relations and sustaining international support for Iraq's democratic development.

Finally, given the high stakes of the 2025 elections, Canada should advocate for robust international election monitoring and support domestic Iraqi efforts to detect and deter electoral fraud. Enhanced scrutiny and transparency will be critical to reducing militia manipulation of the electoral process and ensuring that election results reflect the will of the Iraqi people.

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