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Canada's Recognition of a Palestinian State

What Consequences on its Foreign Policy Toward Palestine?

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► Key Takeaways

- **Recognition is Tactical, not Principled:** It is a pragmatic response to domestic pressure and international reputational damage, not a sincere departure from entrenched support for Israel.
- **Legal Consequences:** The act breaks policy orthodoxy and comes with binding legal obligations under international law. The test is whether this compels concrete actions.
- **Risk of Hollow Symbolism:** Without substantive follow-up (i.e., sanctions, arms embargo), recognition risks rehabilitating Israel's image and relieving pressure from Canada for meaningful action, without improving conditions for Palestinians.
- **Irreversible Political Shift:** Public perceptions have been irrevocably altered. Palestinian rights are now a core political issue. This could force future policy shifts.
- **A Bellwether?** Canada's fracture under domestic pressure raises questions about whether this shift signals a broader policy unravelling among Israel's closest Western supporters.

Introduction

On September 21, 2025, Canada became the 148th of 157 countries to recognize Palestine as a state. It did this with the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia, defying the United States (US) and Israeli opposition. The decision responded to widespread popular outrage against an Israeli war on Gaza that experts and the United Nations (UN)¹ describe as a genocide.

On its face, this marks a radical shift. Until 2025, most Western countries did not recognize Palestine, particularly the core countries of the Anglosphere (the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). Canada had long been considered among Israel's closest friends, regularly voting at the UN opposing resolutions supporting Palestinian rights and self-determination.² Furthermore, Canada had long argued that it would only recognize Palestinian statehood with Israel's assent, as part of a final negotiated peace;³ effectively deferring decisions regarding Palestinian fate to Israel. Canada has also adopted policies that reinforce Israel's control over the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT),⁴ such as updating the Canada-Israel Free Trade Agreement (CIFTA) in 2019 to include goods from Israel's illegal settlements, which contradicts long-standing Canadian policy supporting a two-state solution, multiple UN resolutions, and international law.⁵ This entrenched alignment makes the Mark Carney Liberal government's recognition a striking departure, raising questions about its political origins and what impact it will have on Canada's foreign policy toward Palestine.

This *Memo* contends that Canada's recognition was a tactical, pragmatic response to domestic and international pressure. The shift was driven by factors including public opinion,⁶ concern among Western allies about the war's damage to their international standing (and the rules-based international order), and a need to curb a conflict that was causing significant domestic and international instability. A further motivating factor may have been Canada's desire to preserve its long-standing alliance with Israel by attempting to salvage the latter's deteriorating global position. This was not, however, a principled decision grounded in a genuine commitment to Palestinian rights or international law. Consequently, the long-term impact of recognition will hinge on whether Palestine rights advocates and legal obligations can leverage this tactical shift to force substantive policy

1. *Israel Has Committed Genocide in the Gaza Strip, UN Commission Finds*, United Nations, Press releases - Independent investigation, Geneva, 16 September 2025, available at: www.ohchr.org.

2. *UN Dashboard*, Dataset, Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME), available at: www.cjpme.org.

3. M. Vigliotti, "Trudeau Says Canada Abstained on UN Vote Because Recognizing Palestinian Statehood May Happen before Two-State Agreement", iPolitics, May 10, 2024, available at: www.ipolitics.ca.

4. Note, most countries that recognize Palestine do so based on a rough idea that its territory now encompasses the OPT.

5. M. Lynk, "Canada's Updated Trade Agreement with Israel Violates International Law", *The Conversation*, May 29, 2019, available at: <https://theconversation.com>.

6. A. Reid, "Two-in-Three Canadians Call Humanitarian Situation in Gaza a 'Moral Outrage'", Angus Reid Institute, August 7, 2025, available at: <https://angusreid.org>.

changes against Canada's entrenched institutional support for Israel. Left to itself, the Government of Canada is unlikely to undertake further substantive actions.

We argue that the recognition of a Palestinian state was a tactical move by the government of Canada. At the same time, while the Canadian government would prefer not to follow up on its decision with substantive action, it could be forced to by a combination of legal requirements and public pressure. This hypothesis is explored in three parts. The first section addresses Canada's entrenched historical support for Israel, versus the growing sympathies for Palestinians that challenge it. The subsequent section describes how the Carney government reacted with recognition to an unmanageable chasm that emerged between Canadian public opinion and orthodox pro-Israel policy. Last but not least, this paper examines the practical policy implications of this move.

The foundation: entrenched orthodoxy and public dissent

Canada's foreign policy towards Palestine is structured on a pro-Israel orthodoxy. This stance is rooted in prominent Canadians' foundational role in the 1947 UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) partition plan,⁷ widely seen by Arabs as unfair because it offered a majority of the land to a minority Jewish population.⁸ This core alignment with Israel persisted thereafter. Despite Canadian leadership in the creation of the UN Emergency Force (UNEF) to defuse the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis, Canada was perceived in the region as a pro-Israel country. It nearly moved its Embassy to Israel in Jerusalem in 1979, and was the first major industrialized country to offer support to Israel at the start of the First Intifada in 1987.⁹

A critical gap emerged in the 1980s between Ottawa's pro-Israel stance and an increasingly nuanced public opinion.¹⁰ Events like Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the First Intifada (1987-93) drew greater attention to the Palestinian cause, humanizing their struggle to a public that was becoming increasingly diverse ethnically, through official multiculturalism and non-European immigration. Crucially, the growth of Arab and Muslim communities helped ensure Palestine remained a fixture on the domestic political agenda. Under Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien (1993-2003), the gap between government policy and public sympathies narrowed when Ottawa took somewhat more nuanced positions, while investing significant political capital in the Oslo Peace Process. Chrétien even once momentarily diverged from established policy by suggesting

7. H. Husseini, "A 'Middle Power' in Action: Canada and the Partition of Palestine", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2008, p. 51, available at: www.jstor.org.

8. W. Khalidi, "Revisiting the UNGA Partition Resolution", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1997, p. 17, available at: <https://tandfonline.com>.

9. B. Mulroney, *Memoirs: 1939-1993*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007, p. 365.

10. "Attitudes of Canadians toward the Middle East Conflict: Highlights of a National Survey, January 1983", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1983, pp. 292-96, available at: www.jstor.org.

Palestinians could unilaterally declare independence, while he was on a trip to the region in 2000.¹¹ But, the core alignment held and then widened under Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin (2003-2006), before becoming a chasm under Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006-15).

Harper unambiguously aligned Canadian support behind Israel, even while public sympathy for the Palestinians grew in the 2000s, driven by events like the Second Intifada (2000-2006) and Global War on Terror (beginning 2001), and accelerating demographic change. His government became the first after Israel to cut relations with the Palestinian Authority following Hamas' 2006 election win, withdrew funding from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) over the 2008-09 Gaza war, signed various agreements for increased cooperation, consistently voted against UN resolutions supporting the Palestinians, and proclaimed a diplomatic war on the civil society-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Domestically, Harper cracked down on support for the Palestinian cause, treating BDS as a hate crime,¹² shuttering the government-funded organization Rights and Democracy, and interfering in academic grants.¹³

An unsustainable balance: The Carney dilemma and recognition

By the 2010s, Palestinian rights became a defining issue for Canada's left. Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (2015-25) tried to maintain Canada's pro-Israel orientation while

satisfying a voter base that increasingly demanded Palestine's human rights as a priority. This tension was compounded by his party's increasing reliance on large, growing, and politically mobilized Arab and Muslim communities.¹⁴ While reinstating UNRWA funding in 2016 and relaxing pressure against Palestine advocacy, Ottawa's UN voting record did not meaningfully change. Trudeau criticized pro-Palestine students and Church groups for advancing boycotts against Israel's

Trudeau tried to maintain a pro-Israel orientation while satisfying a voter base that demanded Palestine human rights as a priority

occupation,¹⁵ and his government updated CIFTA to facilitate trade with Israel's illegal West Bank settlements. After October 7, 2023, the Trudeau government offered

11. J. Sallot, "Chrétien in Hot Water for Remarks on Palestine", *Globe and Mail*, April 11, 2000, available at: www.theglobeandmail.com.

12. N. Macdonald, "Ottawa Cites Hate Crime Laws When Asked about Its 'Zero Tolerance' for Israel Boycotters", CBC News, May 11, 2015, available at: www.cbc.ca.

13. S. Trew and T. Healy (eds.), *The Harper Record 2008-2015*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2015.

14. É. Grenier, "Liberals Won over Muslims by Huge Margin in 2015, Poll Suggests", CBC News, April 29, 2016, available at: www.cbc.ca.

15. N. Macdonald, "Liberals Denounce and Agree with Tory Motion Condemning Israel Boycotters", CBC News, February 19, 2016, available at: www.cbc.ca.

immediate solidarity with Israel, supported its narrative on the Al-Ahli hospital strike,¹⁶ regularly shielded Israel at the UN,¹⁷ and continued arms sales. Canada was the first country to join the US in withdrawing funding from UNRWA in January 2024.

In response to Israel's and Canada's actions, one of the largest and most sustained protest movements in Canadian history emerged. For two years, weekly national marches, student encampments, public testimonies, and workplace sanctions defined the domestic political landscape. The political cost was direct as the Liberal base began to defect to the centre-left NDP, threatening them with collapse. Token gestures, such as limiting the sale of some arms to Israel and musing about recognizing Palestine, failed to stem the losses.

The Carney-led Liberals' 2025 electoral win capitalized on fears of annexation by the US and the Conservative Party's Trump-aligned leader, Pierre Poilievre; but the Palestinian issue was also crucial. People do not mobilize in their hundreds of thousands for two years at a national level without it having an impact on their electoral preferences. By appearing more open to the cause than his predecessors, even offering an unscripted acknowledgment of Gaza as a "genocide",¹⁸ Carney signaled a shift, providing an opening for voters to return to the Liberals. Many began to see them as the only viable opposition to Trump and to Poilievre's vehemently pro-Israel stance.

Canada's recognition of Palestine as a state is a direct product of this political calculus: a concession to the Liberals' reconstituted base.¹⁹ Its true significance is, however, paradoxical. Tactically, it may change little, given entrenched institutional support in Canada for Israel. Yet, it also represents a potential structural shift with legal and diplomatic consequences.

Canada's recognition of Palestine is a concession to the Liberals' reconstituted base

Policy implications: legal obligations, critical risks, strategic openings

Recognition was also forced by irreconcilable differences in Canadian foreign policy, breaking a pattern of 77 years of strategic non-recognition of Palestine. Israel was visibly dismantling the two-state option upon which Canada's Palestine foreign policy was predicated, through its unrelenting war on Gaza, mass killing of Palestinians, accelerated

16. "Statement from the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces on the Recent Strike at Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza", National Defence, October 21, 2023, available at: www.canada.ca.

17. M. Konečný, "Worth a Watch: Pakistan's Ambassador to the UN Criticising Canada's Amendment to the UNGA Resolution on Gaza, Solely Condemning Hamas", October 27, 2023, available at: <https://x.com>.

18. P. Zimonjic, "Asked to Clarify If He Sees Genocide in Gaza, Carney Says He Didn't Hear That Word", CBC News, April 9, 2025, available at: www.cbc.ca.

19. J. Presser, "Attitudes Toward the Middle East Conflict after 2 Years", Leger, October 10, 2025, available at: <https://leger360.com>.

West Bank settlement expansion, and official rejection of a two-state solution.²⁰ Canada's position on Palestine also created a stark, unsustainable contrast with its robust defence of Ukraine under international law, undermining its foreign policy credibility. Faced with these diplomatic contradictions and domestic pressure, the Carney government was forced to choose between upholding a hollow pro-Israel policy orthodoxy and acting to salvage the credibility of Canada and the rules-based international order.²¹ Its decision to do the latter invites an examination of the practical policy consequences.

Legal obligations

Recognition reinforces Canada's existing requirements towards Palestine under international law.²² By recognizing Palestine, Canada voluntarily accepts binding

obligations to respect Palestine's rights of non-intervention, political independence, territorial integrity, and lawful self-defence. In effect, Canada is affirming Palestine's exclusive sovereignty over its territory, framing Israel's occupation as a violation of those sovereign rights.²³

This could force significant legal changes to Canada's foreign policy. For instance, the

International Court of Justice's (ICJ) 2024 Advisory Opinion that Israel's presence in the OPT is unlawful²⁴ might legally compel Canada to cease all diplomatic, military, and economic support for Israel's illegal occupation. This could include amending CIFTA to exclude Israeli settlement goods and honoring International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrants for Israeli leaders, as Canada can no longer dispute the Court's jurisdiction over Palestine.

Critical risks

Enforcing Canada's legal obligations comes with risk. Israel's policies in the OPT have been underwritten by seemingly unwavering bipartisan United States backing through the Trump and Biden Administrations. Combined with entrenched institutional support for Israel in Canada, this will contribute to policymakers' reluctance to take substantive

20. L. Bronner, "Israel's Near-Unanimous Rejection of the Recognition of Palestine", *Le Monde*, September 22, 2025, available at: www.lemonde.fr/en.

21. E. Dyer, "Angry Claims of Double Standards in International Law Roil the UN", CBC News, September 26, 2024, available at: www.cbc.ca.

22. M. Lynk, "What Are the Diplomatic Impacts of Canada Recognizing Palestinian State?", CTV News, September 22, 2025, available at: www.youtube.com.

23. A. Imseis, "Too Little, Too Late? On the Meaning and Consequences of the Recognition of the State of Palestine", *Opinio Juris*, September 24, 2025, available at: www.opiniojuris.org.

24. "Legal Consequences Arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including East Jerusalem (Advisory Opinion)", International Court of Justice, July 19, 2024, available at: www.icj-cij.org.

measures against Israel, such as sanctions or arms embargoes. Consequently, a core concern that has emerged for some analysts is that recognition could devolve into a hollow symbolic gesture that deflects responsibility from Israel for its actions, while rehabilitating its image to enable further regional normalization.²⁵

Muhammad Shehada, a Gazan writer and political analyst, compares this to a “Potemkin” state, a hollow entity that lacks any real sovereignty, but is recognized by the international community and then used by Israel to maintain and normalize its control over OPT.²⁶ In this way, recognition could be used to forestall the creation of a Palestinian state, amid the ongoing colonization, destruction, starvation, and dispossession of Palestine. Such an outcome would not only be a disaster for Palestinians but also further erode the credibility of international law and Western governments like Canada, through a lack of enforcement to protect Palestinian sovereignty and human rights. This would, though, represent an attempt to return as closely as possible to a policy orthodoxy that dates back to 1947, of trying to maintain a “sustained instability” in the Middle East, which ultimately undermines human rights, peace, development, and global prosperity in the absence of a comprehensive and just peace agreement. Ironically, such a policy directly contradicts the spirit of the recommendations in a 1980 report by Special Envoy to the Middle East, Robert L. Stanfield, produced in the wake of major diplomatic backlash against Canada’s 1979 attempt to move its embassy to Jerusalem.²⁷

Strategic openings

Regardless, recognition constitutes a substantive policy shift, creating a new, critical baseline.²⁸ By rejecting the long-standing practice of treating recognition as a conditional bargaining chip, the Carney government may have provided advocates of Palestinian rights with powerful, legally enforceable levers. The significance of this strategic opening will hinge on substantive follow-through, such as Canada advocating for Palestine’s full UN membership, supporting ICJ and ICC rulings, investigating war crimes domestically in Canada,²⁹ stripping Canadian organizations of their charitable status if they support war crimes or violate international law,³⁰ and amending CIFTA. The ultimate impact of recognition will depend on whether Canada fulfills its legal obligations or defaults to symbolic diplomacy.

25. E. Badarin, “Gaza Genocide: The Urgent Task Is Not Symbolic Recognition but Holding Israel Accountable”, *Middle East Eye*, October 12, 2025, available at: www.middleeasteye.net.

26. A. Imseis et al, “Canada’s Recognition of a State of Palestine, and the Gaza Ceasefire”, HRREC Ottawa, October 29, 2025, available at: www.youtube.com.

27. R. L. Stanfield, “Final Report of the Special Representative of the Government of Canada Respecting the Middle East and North Africa”, Global Affairs Canada Digital Library, 1980, available at: <http://gac.canadiana.ca>.

28. Canada’s Recognition of a State of Palestine, and the Gaza Ceasefire.

29. A. Neve, “Israel/Palestine and Canada’s Empty Support for International Law”, *International Journal*, Vol. 80, No. 2, 2025, pp. 323–36, available at: www.sagepub.com.

30. “Investigating Charities Getting Tax Breaks for Funding Palestinian Displacement”, The Fifth Estate, CBC, October 16, 2025, available at: www.youtube.com.

Conclusion

The Carney government's recognition of Palestine, against the backdrop of Canada's entrenched institutional support for Israel, appears above all to be a tactical manoeuvre designed to mollify public outrage, retain key Liberal voting blocs, relieve pressure on Ottawa from taking more substantive measures against Israel, mitigate the damage being done to the international standing of Israel's Western supporters, and to preserve Canada's relationship with Israel by aiding in the rehabilitation of the latter's image. Like other Western powers, Canada would prefer to return to the pre-October 7, 2023 status quo,³¹ one that sidelined the Palestinian cause while promoting further regional normalization with Israel.³²

Yet a return to that status quo seems unlikely. Two years of the most horrific images from Gaza and the lived experiences of Palestinians cannot be unseen or unlived. The Canadian public's perception of Israel and Palestine has been irrevocably altered. Support for the Palestinian cause has solidified as a core political issue, making it untenable for left and liberal parties in Canada to ignore or apply double standards to Palestinian rights. Recognition may itself be a harbinger of further, unavoidable policy shifts among the Canadian electorate. Moreover, there could be real legal implications for Canadian foreign policy from the act. It provides Palestinians with new legal avenues to assert their rights. Its significance also lies in a close Western supporter leveraging international law counter-hegemonically to pressure Israel, despite the US support for Israel's actions.

Finally, Canada has long been among the most stalwart supporters of Israel and has acted as something of a bellwether of hardline Western policy supportive of Israel. From the 1979 Embassy pledge to the domestic crackdown on Palestine advocacy and the withdrawal of funding from UNRWA, Canada has often been at the vanguard of Western support. The profound pressure now fracturing its pro-Israel foreign orthodoxy raises a critical question: might the changes being forced upon Canada signal the beginning of a broader, significant shift across the West?

31. K. Fung, "Biden Official Bragged Middle East Was "Quieter" Days before Israel Attacks", *Newsweek*, October 9, 2023, available at: www.newsweek.com.

32. "Canada Congratulates Israel, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain on Bilateral Deals", Global Affairs Canada, September 16, 2020, available at: www.canada.ca.

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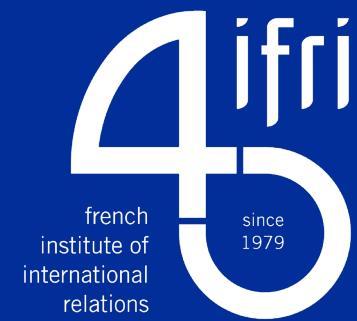
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