

NDP motion on Palestine a step forward, but not nearly enough

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The motion may yet help to change the political status quo on Israel—but it will also be remembered as a missed opportunity

On March 18, the House of Commons passed an opposition day motion put forward by Heather McPherson, the NDP's foreign affairs critic, and endorsed by NDP leader Jagmeet Singh. The non-binding motion called for a reconsideration of Canadian policy toward securing Middle East peace in the midst of Israel's onslaught in the Gaza Strip.

The initial NDP proposal was significantly stronger than the final version—though not nearly as strong as it should have been. The first iteration had called on Canada to join the 139 nations that unequivocally recognize the State of Palestine (72 percent of UN member states), suspend all trade of military goods with Israel, and sanction Israeli officials for inciting genocide.

As Yves Engler [outlines](#), additional demands the NDP could (and should) have made include: cancelling the [Canada-Israel Free Trade Agreement](#), in force since 1997, or at least restricting the import of products from the occupied West Bank; declaring that Canadians fighting in Gaza will be investigated for potential war crimes, and that Israeli efforts to [recruit Canadians to fight in the IDF](#) are illegal under the *Foreign Enlistment Act*; and rescinding the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, which is designed, in part, to [undermine valid criticism of Israel](#).

Even these measures would merely be the [tip of the iceberg](#) in terms of ending Canadian participation and complicity in Israel's violence against Palestinians.

The removal of the motion's most principled provisions followed a backroom deal between the NDP and the Liberals. The parties' agreed [amendments](#) included more anti-Hamas language, removing recognition of Palestinian statehood while endorsing a "negotiated two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians," and replacing the call to suspend all military trade with a [promise](#) to "cease the further authorization and transfer of arms exports to Israel."

In essence, the Liberals only agreed to vote for the motion if its strongest provisions were taken out. The amended motion passed 204 to 117.

While describing the final motion as a "small step forward for ending Canada's complicity in Israel's genocidal war on Gaza," Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME) [expressed deep disappointment](#) over the fact that "much of the language in the amended motion has been watered down or modified in a way that promotes false Israeli narratives and an acquiescence to the horrific status quo."

Far from suspending arms exports to Israel, the amended provisions on military trade leave room for Canada to continue arming the IDF. As *The Maple* [reports](#), Ottawa "won't revoke existing permits

for exports of military goods to Israel.” This is a significant exclusion given that, according to Global Affairs Canada (GAC), there are 315 active permits for Canadian military sales to Israel.

The exclusion of active permits means that despite the motion passing, weapons components, equipment, and other technology including sensors will continue flowing, even as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) found it plausible that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza—and even as the Canadian government itself is being [brought before the ICJ](#) for complicity in that same genocide.

After October 7, the Trudeau government [authorized nearly \\$30 million of new military exports](#) to Israel. As CJPME Vice President Michael Bueckert noted, “It’s almost as if Canada is accelerating its arms export authorization process amid a genocidal campaign.”

Global Affairs Canada has claimed that all military exports to Israel since October 7 have been “non-lethal” goods. The federal government apparently distinguishes between “full weapons systems” and component parts, with the latter arbitrarily falling into the category of “non-lethal,” even though they can be used in a range of military equipment and vehicles including warplanes.

The Liberals have been [accused](#) of deliberately sowing confusion about the nature of Canadian military exports to Israel as a way of deflecting criticism away from its arms export regime. The distinction between “full weapons systems” and “non-lethal” component parts is one such example. Another is the claim by Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly that the cessation of Canadian arms transfers to Israel is “[a real thing](#),” despite the fact that the government is leaving 315 active permits untouched.

Will Ottawa continue approving arms exports to Israel while claiming they are only approving “non-lethal” goods? Will Canadian weapons end up in Israel via third-party countries? With the watered-down language in the motion, these are definite possibilities.

Despite its relative toothlessness, the motion has spurred criticism from pro-Israel politicians and organizations and spawned headlines and enthusiastic reactions about Canada supposedly halting arms sales to Israel. Even US Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, apparently unaware that the government will not revoke existing permits and continue to transfer other military technologies and “non-lethal” goods to Israel, [celebrated the motion](#) on X.

Some see the motion as a small but important step toward changing the political status quo on Israel. Engler notes that, in comparison to former NDP leader Thomas Mulcair’s stridently pro-Israel statements, “[Jagmeet] Singh boasting online about getting tough on Israel is progress.”

The motion has also been taken as evidence that public protest can move the needle on seemingly unquestionable policy positions. In Engler’s words, “This step forward was because hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets, heckled politicians, emailed officials, occupied offices, etc. in recent months. The lesson? We must increase the pressure against a Canadian establishment enabling Israel’s mass slaughter and starvation Gaza.”

At the same time, backroom politicking around the motion shows us that public demands are in constant danger of being coopted or defanged. As CJPME notes: “Tens of thousands of Canadians had petitioned their MP in support of a resolution that suddenly ceased to exist. The watering down of the NDP resolution weakens the significance of Parliament’s vote, even if it was a major concession forced by the Liberal government to ensure its passage.”

The true test of the motion’s significance will be determined by future events. If Ottawa adopts a two-way arms embargo and cuts off Canadian military support for Israel, then the motion will be looked back on as a success. If this fails to materialize, it will likely be remembered as another

missed opportunity.

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