

Canadian arms ban on Israel: Step in the right direction but no silver bullet

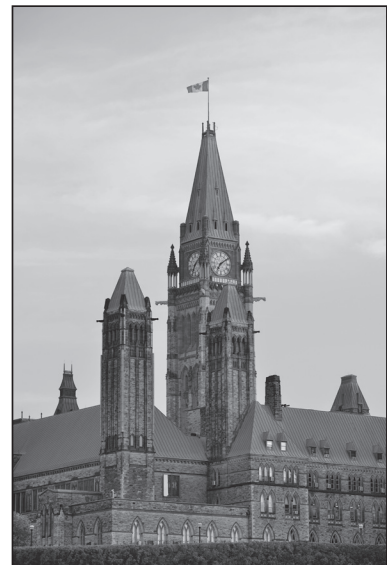
By Kelsey Gallagher

On March 18, Canada's House of Commons passed a [non-binding motion](#) that officially called on the Government of Canada to "cease the further authorization and transfer of arms exports to Israel." The motion was in response to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, which has resulted in [thousands of civilian deaths](#), the widespread [destruction of the Gaza Strip](#), and a [deepening humanitarian crisis](#).

The motion reflects Canada's binding obligations at the national and international level to deny the transfer of weapons systems if there is a substantial risk that they could be used in serious [human rights violations](#). The House of Commons came to the correct conclusion that this risk was present and evident, thereby resolving to halt the further provision of arms to Israel.

While Global Affairs Canada (GAC) has yet to officially publish details, Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly has gone [on the record](#) to say that the new directive would indeed become policy.

However, since the passing of the motion, it has been reported that this policy has been significantly [watered down](#). To ensure that Canadian arms do not contribute to the humanitarian [crisis](#) in Gaza, Canadian officials must enforce this policy to its full extent.



The motion as passed

During debate, the language of the original motion was heavily amended. The [original text](#) called on the Government of Canada to

“suspend all trade in military goods and technology with Israel and increase efforts to stop the illegal trade of arms, including to Hamas.”

If this text had been adopted, the House of Commons would have endorsed a de facto two-way [arms embargo](#) between Canada and Israel as a feature of Canadian policy—a very strong directive.

The adopted text, as amended, reads:

“cease the further authorization and transfer of arms exports to Israel to ensure compliance with Canada’s arms export regime and increase efforts to stop the illegal trade of arms, including to Hamas.”

Focusing on exports, the amended text introduces comprehensive safeguards to stop the flow of Canadian armaments to Israel, as can be seen in the following:

1 The motion calls on the Canadian government to cease the **“further authorization”** of arms to Israel.

With some [notable exceptions](#), the export of Canadian military goods requires case-by-case authorization by officials with the Export Controls Division of GAC. Authorized exports are issued an export permit. In effect, the motion’s call means that no future exports of military goods to Israel can be approved, until the policy is changed.

2 Perhaps most importantly, the motion calls for Canada to cease the **“transfer of arms exports to Israel.”**

This segment of the motion explicitly refers to weapons transfers—actual exports—meaning arms shipments that have not yet occurred but have been *previously authorized* by GAC. The clear implication is that previously approved arms export permits with Israel listed as the end-user will be revoked by Canadian officials, introducing an absolute ban on the provision of Canadian arms to Israel.

3 The motion explicitly ties the cessation of military exports to Israel to Canadian **“compliance with Canada’s arms export regime.”**

As a majority of Members of Parliament, including the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, voted in favour of the motion, it is reasonable to conclude that they consider the continued supplying of weapons to Israel a violation of Canada’s export control system. Although the motion is non-binding and would not constitute an official risk assessment performed by Canadian officials, it is worth noting that 2018’s [Bill C-47](#) introduced stringent obligations on the Minister of Foreign Affairs to strike down proposed arms exports if they contravene Canada’s export control system.

Significant weakening

On March 20, Reuters reported that the government of Canada had walked back its initially staunch backing of the motion. According to official spokespersons, the new policy would only apply to hypothetical, not-yet-approved export permits; export authorizations worth tens of millions of dollars, which had already been issued, would “[remain in effect](#).”

This position is [much weaker](#) than that outlined in the adopted motion, and that which should be enforced by Global Affairs Canada in light of the extreme risk posed by the continued export of arms to Israel.

Prior arms exports get the green light

Four days before the motion was adopted, the [Toronto Star](#) reported that Canada had “stopped approving exports of non-lethal military goods and technology to Israel” on January 8 because of the “extremely fluid” situation in Gaza. [CBC](#) made a similar report.

The permits which had not yet been issued were not denied but left “pending.” In effect, these proposed exports could be approved at any time and without prior notice to the public.

According to documents released via Access to Information requests and published by *The Maple*, in the roughly two-month period following the onset of Israel’s military operation in Gaza, Global Affairs Canada [approved](#) more than \$28 million in military exports to Israel. Although descriptions of the technology authorized for export were redacted in these filings, the goods were broadly classified under several military export categories on Canada’s Export Control List, including electronics and technology used in spacecraft; military aircraft and aerospace subsystems; and bombs and associated components.

The value of these export authorizations are significant, as they rival the *total* annual value of Canada’s arms exports to Israel at their peak in 1987 at \$28.7 million,* followed closely by \$27.8 million in 2021.

These permit authorizations must be added to any permits approved prior to the onset of Israel’s operation in Gaza but which have not yet been exported against. At any given time, there can be a significant number of export permits destined for end-users abroad that have been approved but not yet utilized, as permits can have a validity period of up to [five years](#).

Since permit approval data was first published by GAC in 2019, an average of 226.25 permits have been issued annually for Canadian military exports to Israel (2019 being a high point with [311](#), and 2021 a low with [148](#)). In fact, Israel is [one of the largest](#) recipients of export permit approvals on an annual basis. Questions remain about how many such permits are still active and could be utilized.

The backpedaling involved in the interpretation and implementation of the March 18 motion means that all the export permits approved between October and December 2023 can be used to transfer further military goods to Israel, as can all the permits approved prior to this period. Taken together, the resulting annual value of Canada’s military exports to Israel could soon reach new highs.

A nonexistent distinction

The media have paid significant attention to Canada's arming of Israel since Israel began its military operation in Gaza in response to the October 7 Hamas attacks. Serious and credible allegations of human rights violations by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have raised concerns that Canadian-made weapons could be used in those abuses.

Canadian officials have responded that Canada has [never exported](#) "lethal" military goods to Israel and that Canada has only exported "non-lethal" equipment to Israeli security forces. However, Canada's export controls make [no distinction](#) between lethal and non-lethal military goods and, indeed, do not define either term. As well, the international Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), to which Canada is a State Party, does not distinguish between "lethal" and "non-lethal" military goods.

An examination of public statements by Canadian authorities and official export records suggests that the distinction between lethal and non-lethal military equipment is more accurately a distinction between full systems (e.g., tanks or combat aircraft) and parts and components (e.g., fire control computers or circuitry used in aircraft cockpits).

[Article 4](#) ("Parts and Components") of the ATT requires States Parties to assess the risk posed by the transfer of parts and components and has only one risk benchmark for both subsystems and full systems because full systems rely on the subsystems that comprise them to be operational.

With the exception of Canada's transfer to Israel in 2019 of 90 [rifles or carbines](#) – obviously lethal weapons – Canada typically exports only parts and components to Israel. In fact, a large portion of Canada's total arms exports are parts and components, including such key items as combat trainers, airstrike targeting gear, aircraft engines, parts of artillery rounds, and aerospace components used in the [F-35 Lighting II aircraft](#), including those that are [eventually transferred to Israel](#) via the United States.

Less than principled stand

The language adopted in the March 18 motion explicitly calls for a cessation of both previously approved and future authorizations of arms exports to Israel. Anything less would fail to address the obvious conclusion that the risk posed by prospective transfers also applies to transfers still awaiting shipment.

Canadian officials have taken principled stands before, revoking previously approved export permits when the risk of misuse was well established. For example, permits for the export of military goods to Türkiye were revoked in [2021](#) and for Russia in [2022](#). In these two cases, with a few exceptions, none of Canada's military transfers have consisted of full systems.

Addressing past export authorizations must be more than a matter of optics. In 2018, the Government of Canada announced that it was reviewing export permits worth billions of dollars for the transfer of light armoured vehicles (LAVs) to Saudi Arabia due to the risk that the LAVs could be used in the war in Yemen and following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. However, while new export permit authorizations were [frozen](#) during the review, extant

permits were [not revoked](#). As a result, the actual value of Canada's LAV transfers to Saudi Arabia was more than [double that](#) for the prior comparable period. All permits frozen during the review were [also later approved](#). Clearly, a different approach is needed with Canada's exporting of arms to Israel.

Canada's international arms control obligations also suggest a change of course. Under [Article 7\(7\)](#) of the ATT, States Parties are encouraged to reassess previously approved arms exports when new information emerges after the initial authorization of an export permit. "New information" has been [interpreted](#) to include, inter alia, indications of "widespread" or "systematic" violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. Whereas Israel has long been [accused](#) of systematic human rights violations, the humanitarian cost of the IDF's ongoing operation in Gaza should only reinforce the need for Canadian officials to reassess the appropriateness of previously authorized arms exports to Israel.

A need for full implementation

While the announced suspension of new export permit approvals is no small win for the [many](#) Canadian civil society organizations that have urged Canada to halt the further export of weapon systems to Israel, the true value of the motion of March 18 can only be realized if it is fully implemented.

A majority of Parliamentarians have recognized the serious human-rights risk of continuing to export weapons to Israel. Therefore, the Government of Canada should apply the recommendations under the March 18 motion to their full extent, including both permits that have already been approved and those that could be authorized in the future.

*All values are expressed in constant Canadian dollars.



Project Ploughshares is a Canadian peace research institute with a focus on disarmament efforts and international security, specifically related to the arms trade, emerging military and security technologies, nuclear weapons, and outer space.

For more information please visit: www.ploughshares.ca.