



By: *Harvey Morris*

UK's Cameron seeks to move the diplomatic dial on Israel-Palestine issue



The foreign secretary and former prime minister David Cameron may be in the process of redeeming a somewhat tarnished political legacy by reasserting Britain's role as a key diplomatic player in the Middle East.

Since his surprise return to frontline politics last November, the now Lord Cameron has pursued a policy of holding Israel to account for its actions in Gaza while reinforcing the UK's commitment to an eventual two-state solution of the conflict with the Palestinians.

As an unelected appointee sitting in the sedate House of Lords, the politician best remembered for opening the way for a UK departure from Europe he himself had opposed has been able to stay aloof from the feverish pre-election divisions afflicting the ruling Conservative party.

His elder statesman status has also allowed him to brush aside criticism from within the party, including the charge that elements of his stance on resolving the Gaza conflict risked rewarding Hamas.

In his latest intervention, he **described a BBC report** of Palestinian medical staff in Gaza being beaten and humiliated by Israeli troops as very disturbing and demanded answers from the Israelis. He had earlier announced sanctions on "extremist" Israeli settlers found to have committed human rights abuses against Palestinians in the West Bank.

A significant shift in UK policy

In his first three months in office, Cameron paid four visits to the Middle East that included meetings with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the West Bank-based Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas.

In between trips, he told a Holocaust Memorial Day reception in London that, more clearly than ever, Britain stood with the Jewish people, the state of Israel and their right to defend themselves.

Cameron told Netanyahu in late January that

the UK supported Israel's efforts to free its hostages in Gaza. But he also underlined the need for a political strategy that must be based on a credible and irreversible pathway to achieve a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Cameron signalled a significant shift in UK policy by suggesting Britain could formally recognise a Palestinian state before the conclusion of a revived peace process

The following week, he signalled a significant shift in UK policy by suggesting Britain could formally recognise a Palestinian state before the conclusion of a revived peace process.

"What we need to do is give the Palestinian people a horizon towards a better future, the future of having a state of their own," **he said during a trip to Lebanon**. Recognition could not come at the start of the process, he said, but that did not mean it had to wait until the end.

Downing Street dodged the question

Cameron subsequently spelled out the strategy to Arab ambassadors in London, while dodging a question in the House of Lords over whether he had run it past the UK's American allies. He insisted that "the UK has a sovereign and independent foreign policy, set by a British prime minister and a British foreign secretary in the British Parliament."

Downing Street meanwhile dodged the question of whether even prime minister Rishi Sunak had been consulted, which suggested the initiative on bringing forward recognition of Palestine might have been Cameron's alone.

One report suggested Cameron's message had not been lost on the Palestinians, at least those who monitor international diplomacy in the current crisis.

The foreign secretary may be hoping to nudge allies in the same direction

Times Radio journalist Manveen Rana **told the broadcaster** that, among Palestinians she spoke to on a recent visit to Jerusalem, Cameron was “suddenly a hero” for his stance on the statehood issue.

“David Cameron is coming out as the only hero because he’s the only one sticking his neck out,” she said.

The foreign secretary may be hoping to nudge allies in the same direction.

How a British foreign secretary could hope to shift the diplomatic dial?

Within weeks of Cameron’s statements, President Emmanuel Macron hinted at a similar shift when he said recognition of a Palestinian state was not a taboo for France. Similar sentiments were subsequently expressed by other political leaders in Europe, from Spain to Germany.

Although there is growing frustration in Washington about Netanyahu’s leadership, expressed in the unprecedented call from Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer that he should go, the US has stuck to a policy of regarding Palestinian statehood as the final goal of a future peace settlement.

With not even Israel’s biggest ally able to dent Netanyahu’s intransigence on either Gaza or a two-state solution, it is hard to see how a British foreign secretary could hope to shift the diplomatic dial.



As prime minister for six years, Cameron built one-on-one relationships with current world leaders that he might hope to exploit to influence the Middle East debate. He was close to the Obama administration in which the current president served

As prime minister for six years, Cameron built one-on-one relationships with current world leaders that he might hope to exploit to influence the Middle East debate. He was close to the Obama administration in which the current president served.

However, domestic political reality dictates that his current term in office may have just a few months to run until an election that is likely to deliver a Labour government.

Andy Coulson, Cameron’s former Downing Street director of communications, **has suggested** somewhat mischievously that Labour’s Keir Starmer might do well to keep him on.

“There’s no doubt that with his sure-footed interventions, Lord Cameron has had a positive impact on our reputation on the foreign stage,” he wrote in the Standard. “His appointment has elevated us in the geopolitical narrative, bringing benefits both strategic and optic.”

Coulson’s tongue-in-cheek proposal may be a non-starter. But that does not rule out a future role for Cameron as a non-partisan Middle East envoy on the national or international level.

Setting aside what many still regard as his gross mishandling of the Brexit issue, his premiership was not notable for its foreign

policy triumphs. That does not rule out a future contribution towards Middle East as an even-handed interlocutor.

If that is not on the cards, or if Cameron is not up for it, he can always retreat back to his garden shed and update his memoirs.