

Beyond Recognition: Research Insights to Address Future Challenges in Palestine and Israel

POLICY BRIEF

Nils Mallock

March 2026

Dr Nils Mallock is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Department of War Studies and Centre for Statecraft and National Security at King's College London, a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Psychology and Behavioural Science at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a researcher within the XCEPT programme. His work examines the psychological drivers of violent and peaceful political behaviour, drawing on extensive fieldwork in Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine. He specialises in quantitative testing of psychological mechanisms, complemented by in-depth interviews with activists and members of armed groups. His research has appeared in peer-reviewed journals, public media, documentaries, and government briefings.

This publication is issued by the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, the intersection of climate stresses and conflict, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace.

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the UK government.

This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) should be credited, with the date of the publication and reference to XCEPT. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material in this document, the author(s) will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this document.

Author Contact

Contact for this research: Nils Mallock, King's College London, nils.u.mallock@kcl.ac.uk

CONTACT DETAILS

For questions and queries, please contact:

Centre for Statecraft and National Security
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
United Kingdom

mail@csns.uk

Like all other CSNS publications, this report can be downloaded free of charge at www.csns.uk.

© CSNS 2025

Cover: Palestinians return to their homes destroyed by the Israeli army. Southern Gaza Strip (February 11, 2025).

Anas-Mohammed / Shutterstock.com

Background

Amid catastrophic levels of violence, displacement and destruction, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has found itself in a new critical phase since October 2023. The West Bank faces spiralling instability driven by confrontations between growing settler communities, Israeli military forces and Palestinians. Gaza is largely in ruins after two years of war. Even though major powers have moved to formally recognise Palestinian statehood, key questions remain regarding territorial control, unified leadership and the conflict going forward.

This briefing note summarises evidence from field research and large-scale studies by the author, while also drawing on wider research and regional policy insights. It highlights three thematic areas for urgent attention:

1. The West Bank, with a focus on territorial fragmentation and psychological dynamics of political violence
2. Gaza, with a focus on post-war reconstruction and governance scenarios
3. Broader challenges for Palestinian statehood and constructive engagement from the UK and the international community.

The primary data supporting this research was collected between 2022 and 2025 across the West Bank, Israel and Gaza by the author in collaboration with various local research institutes and academic collaborators.

The West Bank and Gaza today represent not just sites of humanitarian emergency, but a critical test for global diplomacy and development. Formal recognition of a Palestinian state is challenged by the realities of ongoing settlement expansion, unresolved grievances and psychological divides on the ground. Efforts to promote conflict resolution and stable governance must reflect these issues and be forward-looking in their engagement with key actors. This briefing note presents research insights to inform such engagement and regional developments.

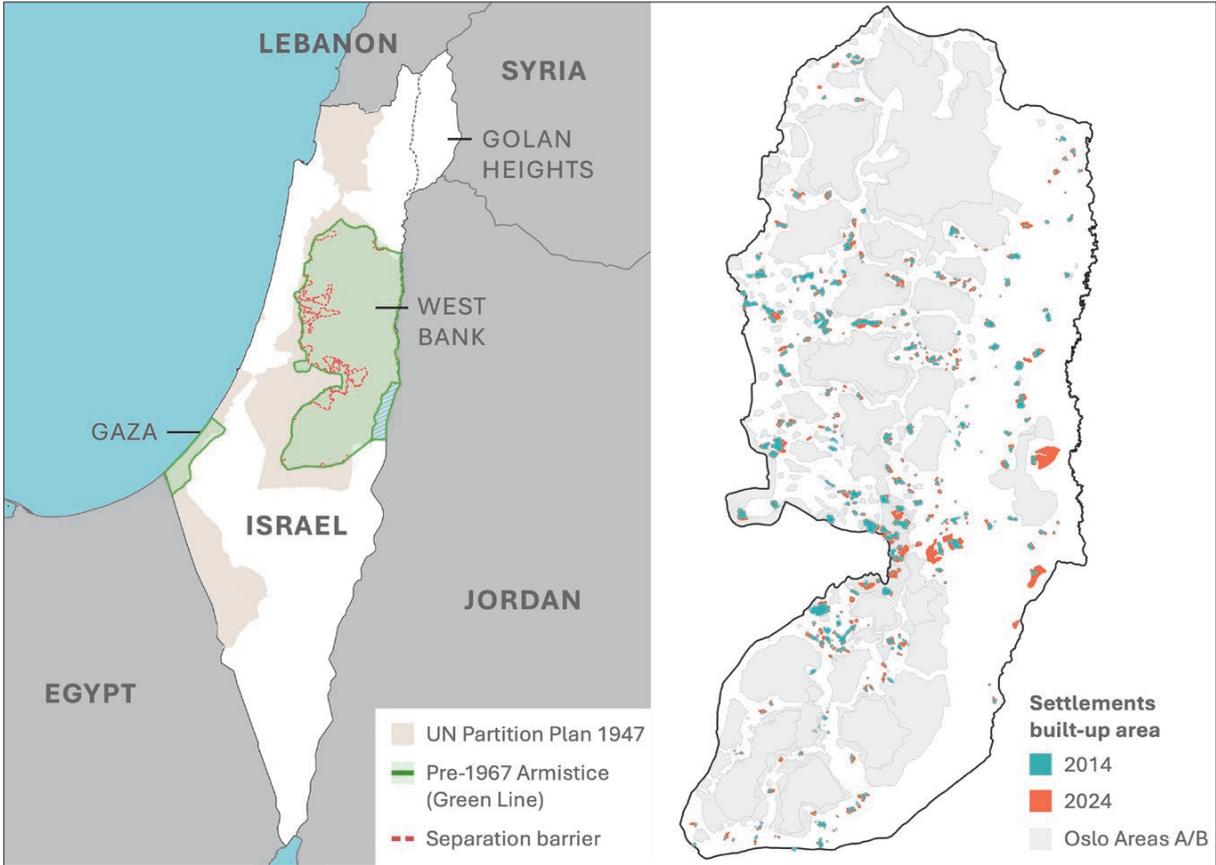


Israeli soldiers patrol
streets of old town Hebron,
West Bank (November 7, 2010)
dom zara / Shutterstock.com

Key Findings

- **Settlement expansion in the West Bank fuels escalations in political violence.** Real-time satellite tracking quantifies the growth of Israeli settlements as +72% over the last decade, with an acceleration since October 2023. This dynamic increases settler aggression, but also nearly doubles the likelihood of Palestinians engaging in confrontations while participation in peaceful protest forms declines sharply.
- **Gaza's political vacuum threatens the ceasefire and post-war recovery.** Despite a dramatic loss of support (-50%) for Hamas over the course of the devastating war, no alternative leadership has emerged that Palestinians feel represents their interests, according to research data. This leaves Gaza vulnerable to spoilers and renewed fighting amid stalling phase two ceasefire negotiations.
- **Psychological divides may prove as difficult to bridge as political ones.** Evidence shows that both Israelis and Palestinians attribute their own group's violence to defensive motives but that of the other side to hatred – a cognitive attribution tendency which entrenches dehumanising narratives and support for indiscriminate violence, not just among leaders but also the broader public.
- **Key criteria for statehood and long-term governance remain elusive.** Geographical fragmentation aside, Palestinian leadership faces existential legitimacy crises both across and within the territories. The international community can play a supportive role in reforming key institutions and protecting the viability of a two-state solution.

Figure 1: The shrinking map of Palestine



Left: historical borders. Right: settlement expansion in the West Bank.
Source: *The Conversation*¹

¹ Nils Mallock, "Geography and Politics Stand in the Way of an Independent Palestinian State," *The Conversation*, September 25, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/geography-and-politics-stand-in-the-way-of-an-independent-palestinian-state-265114>.

How Settlement Expansion Fuels Cycles of Political Violence in the West Bank

Unprecedented growth of settlement activity in the West Bank continues to erode the viability of a two-state solution. For the first time, satellite imagery and psychological research show precisely how the settlements reshape the geographical and political landscape over time, threatening the long-term security interests and stability of both Israel and Palestine.

Settlement expansion has reached unprecedented levels since the October 2023 escalation

Real-time satellite tracking² of more than 360 settlements and outposts³ over the past decade reveals the precise scale of their growth in the occupied territory: since 2014, built-up areas have expanded by 72% (from 88 km² to 151 km²), with a dramatic acceleration taking place since the October 7 attacks and war in Gaza (see Figure 1). Administrative data confirm this trend, with 28,872 additional housing units advanced through government planning in 2024 and 2025, numbers that exceed previous annual records,⁴ while legal processes for land appropriation and construction are being streamlined.⁵ Today, the settler population in the West Bank exceeds 737,000, compared to around 500,000 in 2011.⁶

Territory and economic activity in the West Bank are increasingly fragmented

The legacy of the Oslo Accords (1993–95) is one of administrative division. Settlement construction is concentrated in Area C – comprising 60% of the West Bank territory and most contiguous land – which remains under full Israeli control. In addition, strategically placed physical infrastructure (exclusive bypass roads, checkpoints, separation barriers and energy networks) and military presence afford a variety of privileges to Israeli settler communities, while isolating Palestinian movement and economic activities in disconnected enclaves.⁷ The recently approved E1 settlement exemplifies these efforts: if built, it would effectively bisect the West Bank entirely, severing north-south contiguity and isolating East Jerusalem from the rest of the territory.

2 Nils Mallock et al., "Proximity to Settlements in the West Bank Shifts Protest Behavior Toward Higher-Risk Actions and Increases Perceived Collective Injustice," *Political Psychology*, 00 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.70068>.

3 *Settlements* are formally authorised, government-planned Israeli communities in the West Bank, while *outposts* are smaller sites built without official approval and technically illegal under Israeli law. In addition, a number of designated *economic zones* have been established with links to settlements. Unless specified, this briefing note refers to *settlements* collectively.

4 EEAS, *Report on Israeli Settlements in the Occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem Reporting Period – January – December 2024* (Office of the European Union Representative [West Bank and Gaza Strip, UNRWA], 2025), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/palestine-occupied-palestinian-territory-west-bank-and-gaza-strip/report-israeli-settlements-occupied-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem-reporting-period-january_en.

5 "Settlement Planning Monitor: Updated List of Approved Plans," *Peace Now*, March 20, 2025, <https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlement-planning-monitor>.

6 "The Humanitarian Impact of Israeli Settlement Policies Update December 2012," *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – Occupied Palestinian Territory*, 2012.

7 *Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including East Jerusalem, and the Occupied Syrian Golan* (United Nations General Assembly, 2024) [Report A/79/347], <https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/n2426451.pdf>.

Settlements fuel cycles of violence both directly and through their psychological impact

Attacks and harassment by extremist settlers have been documented for years, but are met with limited pushback and at times even support from Israeli authorities,⁸ including the broad issuance of weapons during army reservist mobilisation since October 2023. Since then, lethal violence, vandalising of property and intimidation of Palestinians have all escalated to record levels, with the UN warning that communities across Area C face a severe risk of forced displacement.⁹ Meanwhile, our studies of more than 8,000 Palestinians¹⁰ show that even after accounting for direct exposure to settler aggression, mere geographical proximity to settlements triggers psychological responses of moral outrage and increased perceptions of injustice. This cognitive state is associated with a near-doubling (+82%) of the likelihood of Palestinians engaging in high-risk political action, including violent attacks against IDF and civilian Israeli targets, while peaceful protest behaviour has dropped significantly near settlements (down by 30–36%). In a tragic confirmation of this dynamic, two Palestinian gunmen opened fire inside a bus in East Jerusalem on 8 September 2025, weeks after the nearby E1 settlement construction was announced. The continued expansion of settlements will likely prompt further local escalations between armed groups of Israeli settlers and Palestinians.

The reality of settlements directly challenges existing narratives and offers scope for intervention

There is broad consensus in the international community that Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and settlement activity violate international law, as repeatedly affirmed by the UN, International Court of Justice, and various other national and international bodies.^{11, 12} The Israeli public is approximately evenly split on the issue, with those in favour of settlements thinking they contribute to the security of Israel and Jewish Israelis¹³ – a claim that is central to the justification of supporting the settler movement by Israel's government and far-right advocates.¹⁴ However, multi-year empirical evidence¹⁵ challenges this assertion, demonstrating that settlements directly increase political violence – including attacks against Israeli civilians in both the West Bank and Israel itself. This may open avenues for evidence-based counter-narratives that frame settlement restraint not as a concession to Palestinians but as aligned with Israeli security interests, especially among constituencies outside far-right or religiously motivated support for settlement and annexation plans of the West Bank. However, practical challenges remain, as decades of settler mobilisation and armament have diminished government control over settlement communities.

8 Ronen Bergman and Mark Mazzetti, "The Unpunished: How Extremists Took Over Israel," *New York Times*, May 16, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/16/magazine/israel-west-bank-settler-violence-impunity.html>.

9 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Humanitarian Situation Update #358", February 19, 2026, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-358-west-bank>.

10 Mallock et al., "Proximity to Settlements."

11 *Legal Consequences Arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem* (International Court of Justice, 2024).

12 United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2334* (United Nations Security Council, 2016), <https://www.un.org/webcast/pdfs/SRES2334-2016.pdf>.

13 Laura Silver and Maria Smerkovich, *Settlements and Violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem* (Pew Research, 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/06/20/settlements-and-violence-in-the-west-bank-and-east-jerusalem/>.

14 Reuters, "Israel Approves Settlement Plan to Erase Idea of Palestinian State," *Reuters*, August 25, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-approves-settlement-plan-erase-idea-palestinian-state-2025-08-20/>.

15 Mallock et al., "Proximity to Settlements."

Gaza After the Ceasefire: Governance and Grievances

Gaza remains in humanitarian collapse despite a fragile ceasefire, with major questions unresolved regarding governance, reconstruction and long-term security. Humanitarian conditions remain catastrophic amid a confirmed famine,¹⁶ violations of the ceasefire¹⁷ and near-total destruction, requiring investment upwards of £50 billion.¹⁸ While public sentiment has been shifting against Hamas, no clear political alternative has managed to garner broad support to date. Stabilisation efforts will require trusted local leadership and international backing to prevent renewed conflict.

A fundamental cognitive bias entrenches hostilities in Israel and Gaza

Nationally representative studies¹⁹ of Palestinians in Gaza and Jewish Israelis conducted in 2025 found evidence consistent with a meaningful cognitive tendency: when asked what motivated violent attacks in the current war, both groups attributed their own side's attacks to 'ingroup love' (concern and protection for their own people) more than to 'outgroup hate' (a desire to harm the other side). However, both groups believed that the other side was motivated more by hatred. This perception gap matters profoundly, as it contributes to key aspects of narratives that dehumanise the other side,²⁰ emphasise competitive victimhood²¹ and morally justify extreme political violence.²² The bias demonstrated in this research explains strong support for violence against civilians and maximalist political goals in the conflict. Efforts to secure a longer-lasting ceasefire between Israel and Gaza must account for these entrenched perceptions and will likely face challenges with mainstream adoption among key demographics on both sides. However, experimental research in the Israeli–Palestinian context²³ points to potential interventions – for example, directly correcting overestimations of outgroup hostility – that may create the psychological conditions for sustainable peace.

16 *Famine Confirmed in Gaza Governorate, Projected to Expand | 1 July – 30 September 2025* (IPC Global Initiative, 2025), https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Gaza_Strip_Acute_Food_Insecurity_Malnutrition_July_Sept2025_Special_Snapshot.pdf.

17 United Nations Human Rights, "UN Experts Urge States to Act as Israeli Violations Threaten Fragile Gaza Ceasefire," November 24, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/11/un-experts-urge-states-act-israeli-violations-threaten-fragile-gaza>.

18 "Gaza: \$70 Billion Needed to Rebuild Shattered Enclave, Says UN," *United Nations*, October 14, 2025, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/unog-press-briefing-14oct25/>.

19 Nils Mallock et al., "A Fundamental Cognitive Bias Increases Support for Violence against Civilians in Gaza and Israel," [Preprint], *Research Square* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-6831061/v1>.

20 A. Bandura, "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities," *Personality & Social Psychological Review* 3 (1999): 193–209.

21 Nafees Hamid, "Psychology Explains Why the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict Is so Intractable," *CNN*, January 16, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/16/opinions/opinion-psychology-of-israeli-palestinian-conflict-hamid>.

22 Nils Mallock and Jeremy Ginges, "We Interviewed Hundreds of Israelis and Gazans – Here's Why We Fear for the Ceasefire," *The Conversation*, February 12, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/we-interviewed-hundreds-of-israelis-and-gazans-heres-why-we-fear-for-the-ceasefire-249522>.

23 Nimrod Nir et al., "Kill or Be Killed: Can Correcting Misperceptions of Out-Group Hostility De-escalate a Violent Inter-Group Outbreak?" *European Journal of Social Psychology* 53, no. 5 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2949>.

Hamas is politically weakened, yet credible alternatives struggle to fill the vacuum

Militarily diminished and increasingly criticised by Palestinians for its handling of the war, Hamas has seen its support decline sharply from 42% shortly after the October 7 attacks in 2023 to only 21% today, according to representative polling and research data collected in 2025.²⁴ This is good news for the prospects of peace negotiations, which have explicitly excluded the group from a future role in governing Gaza.²⁵ Yet paradoxically, Hamas would likely still perform well in potential elections due to a sheer lack of alternatives: according to our study data, the 32% of Palestinians who feel their interests are entirely unrepresented now form the largest constituency in Gaza.²⁶ In the near future, four scenarios are imaginable:

1. The US-backed Board of Peace proposal,²⁷ involving a technocratic Palestinian committee, currently rejected by both Hamas and Israel
2. The Palestinian Authority (PA) returning to Gaza, which in addition to Israeli opposition faces capacity constraints
3. Hamas's survival and resurgence, as the group is reportedly already redeploying several thousand 'security personnel' to reassert control in key areas of the Gaza Strip²⁸ – yet this would preclude most outside engagement and serious reconstruction efforts while making renewed fighting more likely
4. The de-facto partition of territory, with Israel controlling buffer zones and local leadership governing fragmented population centres, which would ultimately satisfy neither side's central objectives.

While each scenario faces existential challenges, effective diplomatic engagement can steer this process constructively by focusing on reconstruction, stable short-term governance and the disarmament of Hamas in Gaza. These opportunities are briefly outlined in the following section.

24 Nils Mallock, "We Asked the People of Gaza How They Saw Their Future – This Is What We Found," *The Guardian*, February 21, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/feb/21/people-gaza-future-hamas-poll>.

25 "Read Trump's 20-Point Proposal to End the War in Gaza," *PBS News*, September 29, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/read-trumps-20-point-proposal-to-end-the-war-in-gaza>.

26 Bandura, "Moral Disengagement."

27 Hamid, "Psychology Explains."

28 Alexandra Sharp, "New Uncertainty Shadows Gaza's Cease-Fire Deal," *Foreign Policy*, November 11, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/11/11/gaza-cease-fire-deal-phase-two-trump-peace-talks-israel-hamas-security/>.

Conclusion: Statehood, Recognition and International Engagement

Recent recognition of Palestinian statehood marks a diplomatic achievement, but will require further engagement to effect meaningful changes on the ground. The absence of a legitimate, unified Palestinian leadership – along with deep public mistrust of existing institutions – poses serious barriers. How can the presented research insights support constructive international engagement?

Territorial fragmentation, a central challenge to statehood, remains a central issue to address

In the West Bank, settlement expansion and infrastructure are systematically undermining the delineation of a contiguous state territory. In Gaza, the fragile ceasefire similarly risks fragmentation into a disjointed archipelago of Palestinian territory (see also scenario 4 in the previous section). Conditional recognition of Palestine by the UK and France, alongside other major powers,²⁹ have already exerted diplomatic influence. Yet to continue playing a leading role in constructive peace efforts requires further E3 coordination and targeted sanctions against settlement activity and political actors who have openly called for annexation and forcible population transfer policies.³⁰ As detailed in this briefing note, efforts may also be directed to applied social interventions, informed by related work,^{31,32} for example aiming to reduce popular support for violence against civilians and further escalations, or to better understand relevant psychological drivers.

The PA faces an existential legitimacy crisis that compounds political instability

President Abbas's democratic mandate expired 16 years ago, and public support for his government by decree has collapsed to critical levels: polls show 80% of Palestinians want his resignation,³³ and two-thirds now view the PA – established during the Oslo peace process – as a burden rather than an asset. A unified government is another key criterion for statehood. Yet it is not yet met in either the West Bank – where succession plans within the Fatah party remain unclear and various executive appointments have failed to inspire popular support – or in Gaza, where phase two ceasefire

29 In total, around 150 nations recognise Palestinian statehood today. See "France Leads Wave of New Recognitions of Palestine at United Nations Summit," *United Nations*, September 22, 2025, <https://press.un.org/en/2025/pal2251.doc.htm>.

30 Sam Sokol, "Smotrich Proposes Annexing 82% of West Bank in Bid to Prevent Palestinian State," *Times of Israel*, September 3, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/smotrich-proposes-annexing-82-of-west-bank-in-bid-to-prevent-palestinian-state/>.

31 Mallock and Ginges, "We Interviewed Hundreds."

32 Nir et al., "Kill or Be Killed."

33 "A Dual Crisis – Palestinian Public Opinion Amidst Occupation and a Leadership Vacuum," *People's Company for Polls and Survey Research (PCPSR)*, October 28, 2025, <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/1000>.

negotiations have stalled over disputes around Hamas's disarmament and reconstruction timelines.³⁴ The last legislative elections in 2006 were won by Hamas and, if held today, would again risk a destabilising outcome.

However, the governance vacuum also presents an opportunity for constructive reform

As relative majorities among Palestinians turn away from current leaders in both the West Bank and Gaza, momentum appears to be emerging for fundamental reforms in PA institutions and unification around shared interests of Palestinians across the territories. There is growing support for international engagement in this process;³⁵ moreover, the international community is well-positioned to coordinate structural reform amid reconstruction efforts in Gaza. The presented data and research suggest that such efforts must move beyond symbolic gestures of recognition, and overcome both material and psychological obstacles to peace.

34 Brian Michael Jenkins, "Historical Parallels Highlight the Challenges of Implementing Phase II of the Gaza Peace Plan," *RAND Corporation Commentary*, October 29, 2025, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/10/historical-parallels-highlight-the-challenges-of-implementing.html>.

35 PCPSR, "Dual Crisis – Palestinian Public Opinion Amidst Occupation and a Leadership Vacuum."



CENTRE FOR STATECRAFT & NATIONAL SECURITY

KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

CONTACT DETAILS

For questions and queries, please contact:

Centre for Statecraft and National Security
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
United Kingdom

mail@csns.uk

Like all other CSNS publications, this report can be downloaded free of charge at www.csns.uk.

© CSNS 2025