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Western public opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after October 7

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Just how have Western publics reacted to the Israel-Gaza war over the past seven months? A sizable number of opinion polls allows us to determine how attitudes have changed over the course of this conflict. What does this mean for political leaders who wish to embrace public sentiment? Is there a seismic shift in opinion that could lead to policy changes toward Israel?

This paper examines the state of public opinion in Europe and the US, with a specific focus on Britain as a case study. It will identify the main trends and changes in public opinion indicated by polls.

Assessing public opinion in key Western states regarding the crisis in Gaza since Oct. 7, 2023 reveals a significant discrepancy between the stances of most governments and the sentiments of their populations. Typically, European and North American governments have tended to be more sympathetic toward Israel and less critical of its actions than have their citizens.

In surveying public opinion, this conflict stands out because of the huge global attention it has attracted, a rarity as international affairs have tended to slip down the agendas of electorates across the West. A recent US opinion poll showed that 74 percent claimed to be following what was happening.¹

BACKGROUND

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has always been a fault-line issue. It arouses strong passions and tensions, on occasions even triggering Islamophobic, anti-Arab and antisemitic sentiments. More so than with most conflicts, many people have firm views, as has been the case since the start of the conflict over a century ago.

The size and scale of protests in many Western cities since the Hamas attacks of Oct. 7 are just one indicator of this.

Typically, the media will use the shorthand of “pro-Israeli” or “pro-Palestinian” camps, although this is highly simplistic. There are many shades of opinion. Some will support the Israeli government come what may, some are supportive, but with serious concerns, whereas others will condemn Hamas but be highly supportive of Palestinian national and individual rights. Opinion polls are, by their nature, merely indicators and cannot reveal the granular texture of public feeling.

All parties to the conflict devote considerable resources to winning over public opinion. From the birth of Zionism in the late 19th century, its supporters sought the backing of the major powers of the day — the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain and the US.² Zionism and its desire to establish a State of Israel was frequently portrayed in a positive light. The then Manchester Guardian was, in the early



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days, seen as instrumental in securing public support for the Zionist movement in Britain.³

In the first few decades of its existence, Israel was able to depict itself in the West as the David to the Arab Goliath.⁴ The image was of a small democratic state surrounded by hostile Arab powers determined to eradicate it. The issue of the fate of the Palestinian people themselves did not start to become a major issue in Western discourse until after 1967. Attacks by Palestinian armed groups, including the hijacking of planes and the killing of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, did not help kindle a positive image.⁵

It was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 that shifted public perceptions in the West. Unlike earlier conflicts, this was widely seen as Israel's war of choice.⁶ The Sabra and Shatila massacre in September 1982, in which hundreds of Palestinians and Lebanese were killed by a Christian militia while Israeli troops looked on,⁷ changed perceptions of Israel's conduct. This was later reinforced by the widespread coverage of the first Palestinian Intifada that began in December 1987. The focus changed to questioning the nature of Israel's military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The Oslo peace process in the early 1990s raised expectations in the outside world that this conflict could be resolved⁸ Yet

In response to the September 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon, thousands of people in Paris took to the streets in protest. The massacre saw Lebanese Christian militia forces enter the two largest refugee camps in Lebanon, killing hundreds of Palestinian refugees.
AFP

this was all dashed during the Second Intifada. Israel had some success in portraying suicide bombings inside Israel as part and parcel of the same challenge that the 9/11 attacks presented.

Since 2005, Israel has conducted numerous military operations in Gaza; the current war is the sixth major Israeli assault on the territory since then. The last major war was in 2014, when a poll in July that year showed that 27 percent of the UK population sympathized with the Palestinian people as opposed to 12 percent with Israel.⁹ The same poll determined that in France 18 percent had sympathies for Palestinians, and 11 percent for Israel.

In 2005, as today, the greatest challenge Israel faced on the reputational front was how to explain the scale of the destruction its advanced military had visited upon the captive Palestinian population in Gaza.

The views of what Israel did during those earlier wars has doubtless shaped how many have viewed its activities since October 2023.

How are Israel and Palestine viewed now?

Polls in Britain show that as Israel's war on Gaza has continued, the British public has become increasingly more sympathetic toward the Palestinian cause. In May 2023, support for the Palestinians was at 23 percent. It fell to 15 percent following the Hamas attack on Israel on Oct. 7, but by February



2024 had rallied to 28 percent.

At the same time, support for Israel has declined, dipping from 21 percent in October to 16 percent by February.¹⁰

In the immediate aftermath of Oct. 7, polling showed that few Britons felt the Hamas attack was justified — only 4 percent, according to one poll in February, although 21 percent said they were undecided.

As for Israel's subsequent attack on Gaza, that same February poll showed that while 29 percent felt it was justified, 44 percent believed it was not. This will not have made positive reading for those in charge of Israeli official communications.

What is remarkable, given the scale of bloodshed and atrocities over the past seven months, is that this same poll showed that those who believed a permanent peace deal was possible within 10 years had risen from 27 percent to 32 percent. A majority, however, considered it was unlikely.¹¹

Polls consistently show that, unsurprisingly, the more right-wing parties tend to view Israel's actions more sympathetically. The perception is that concern for the fate of Palestinians is a left-wing issue. Republicans in the US still largely support Israel, even though this is declining. Many Democrats remain pro-Israeli, but increasingly more have sympathetic views toward Palestinians.¹²

In the UK, a poll commissioned in

December 2023 by the Council for Arab-British Understanding and Medical Aid for Palestinians showed that 32 percent of Conservative voters preferred Israel compared with only 6 percent of Labour voters. In the May Caabu-MAP poll, those intending to vote for either Labour or the Liberal Democrats were far more likely to back an immediate ceasefire (86 and 88 percent) than Conservative-inclined voters (66 percent).¹³

Younger people have also tended to view Israel less favorably, as widely found in polls since October 2023.

But while all the events of the past seven months have led to a decline in Israel's image, there has been a similar drop in support for the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. A Gallup poll in February revealed a fall in the favorability rating for Israel among Americans over the past year, from 68 percent to 58 percent. This is Israel's lowest rating since the early months of the Second Intifada in 2001 and 2002. As for the Palestinian Authority, its approval rating has plummeted from 26 to just 18 percent.¹⁴

SUPPORT FOR AN IMMEDIATE CEASEFIRE

One major demand of protests around the world since October has been for an immediate end to hostilities. "Ceasefire Now"

Palestinians react as they inspect the site of an Israeli strike on a house amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip. Reuters

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has been a banner slogan seen all over the world and online, and at times the demand has triggered furious political debate.

In the UK, the December 2023 Caabu-MAP poll showed that 71 percent of the population supported an immediate ceasefire. This reflected similar figures in an earlier poll in October.¹⁵ Conversely, only 12 percent thought there should not be an immediate truce.

In the latest poll commissioned by Caabu and MAP, at the beginning of May, 73 percent backed an immediate ceasefire, but those opposed had dropped to just 8 percent.¹⁶

Polling in other European states is informative. Even in November, a poll in Ireland found that 84 percent wanted an immediate ceasefire.¹⁷

What is remarkable is the consistency of findings. Public opinion can be fickle and dictated by what has been seen, heard or read most recently. On the issue of the ceasefire, from October to May, polls showed that over 70 percent in the UK would support calling for one.^{18 19}

ISRAEL-HAMAS

A significant portion of the British public believes that Israel should engage in talks with Hamas. A February 2024 poll showed that two-thirds backed this, rising to 70 percent in May.²⁰ This is up a full 14 points since November 2023. Once again this goes against the grain of the British government's position.

WAR CRIMES

As for war crimes, a March 2024 poll determined that a majority believes that both Israel and Hamas have committed offenses. This was before the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court had applied for arrest warrants. Overall, 67 percent believed it was likely Israel had committed war crimes, against 10 percent who thought this was unlikely. As for Hamas, 72 percent felt it was likely to have committed war crimes, with 6 percent unlikely. Among those who support the Palestinians, 96 percent believed Israel has committed war crimes.²¹

ARMS EMBARGO

Since the start of 2024, the debate about the transfer of arms has escalated in weapons-producing states that back Israel, notably the US. At times US President Joe Biden has threatened to pause supply of certain munitions to Israel to indicate his displeasure.²² Canada did halt supplies.²³ In Britain, the government was under intense pressure, at least until the Iranian missile salvo



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on April 14, 2024. After that, it argued that British-supplied parts may well have helped Israel to neutralize many of the drones and missiles used in the attack.²⁴

But a series of surveys in the spring showed that most British voters believed it would be right to impose an arms

embargo on Israel. The earliest poll to test this issue, in March, found 56 percent support for an embargo.²⁵ Two months later, in May, a Caabu-MAP poll found that 55 percent would back this, indicating a high degree of consistency. This poll was even conducted after the Iranian missile strikes that had led many politicians to soften their views on the matter.²⁶ A YouGov poll in April, before the Iran attack, showed the figure to be as high as 62 percent, with even 49 percent of Conservative voters backing a ban — the highest level of support yet polled in the UK.²⁷

Perhaps even more telling is the declining proportion of people who oppose an arms ban on Israel. In the May Caabu-MAP poll, this was only 13 percent, the lowest level of opposition of the three polls in the UK to test this.

PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD

Polls in the past have often tested support for the recognition of Palestinian statehood. This issue has sharpened in recent months, with the US vetoing a UN Security Council resolution to make the State of Palestine a UN member, and then the UN General Assembly voting by 143 to nine to back the Palestinian bid for full UN membership.²⁸ In addition, Spain, Ireland and Norway decided to recognize Palestine in May 2024.²⁹

Support for recognition of Palestine has been reasonably strong for some time.

Back in 2017, a YouGov poll commissioned by Arab News and Caabu found that 53 percent backed UK recognition, with only 14 percent against.³⁰

PALESTINIAN MARCHES

While British public opinion has consistently backed a ceasefire, those polled have tended to have a negative view of the pro-Palestinian marches in London. Since October, when Suella Braverman, then home secretary, labelled them “hate marches,” these have been controversial.³¹ Much of the right-wing media made similar assessments.³² A YouGov poll in May 2024 found that 43 percent disapproved of the marches, versus 33 percent who approved.³³

How should this be read? It could suggest simply that those polled might prefer to see fewer marches. These have been frequent in London, and many of those not involved are

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A woman cries among the debris of a house in one of the refugee camps in Sabra, Lebanon. Between 800 and 1500 Palestinian refugees were massacred by the Christian Lebanese Forces between September 14 and 17, 1982 while the Israeli army, positioned around the two camps, did not react. Getty Images

tired of them. It might also be a reflection of the polarized media coverage. Finally, the organizers might need to reconsider how the messages and purposes of the marches are communicated more clearly.

ATTITUDES IN EU STATES

The Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy commissioned a poll last April in five EU states — Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden. In all five, over half backed an arms ban on Israel, with 65 percent of Italian voters in favor of this. Even in Germany, a traditional supporter of Israel, 49 percent backed a ban. Similar levels of support were found for prosecuting Israeli leaders for war crimes, highly relevant given the May 20 decision by the ICC chief prosecutor to seek arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant.^{34 35}

US OPINION

Initial polls found that in the US a slim majority approved of Israeli military actions in Gaza. A Gallup poll in November 2023 found 50 percent approved and 45 percent disapproved. Only 4 percent did not have a view.³⁶

By March 2024, a clear majority of polled Americans disapproved of Israel's actions, with 55 percent against and only 36 percent for.³⁷

On the issue of Palestinian statehood, fewer Americans believe that there should be a Palestinian state. In 2009, a poll found 68 percent supported the creation of a Palestinian state, but by November 2023 this had dropped to just 47 percent.³⁸ It seems that US public opinion is still behind its European counterpart, but may be slowly turning. This will be deeply unnerving to Israeli leaders.

ELECTIONS

Biden will face the US electorate in November. His position in largely backing Israel has already cost him support among traditional Democrat voters,³⁹ and he may need a proper ceasefire more than he admits. Donald Trump will have no hesitation in backing Israel on Gaza, and will use this to depict Biden as weak and indecisive.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has called an election for July 4 in the UK. Gaza will, in contrast to Biden, not damage him at all. The Conservatives have few in their ranks who are angered enough by the situation to reconsider their voting intentions. Most Conservative MPs are extremely supportive of Israel, despite the atrocities in Gaza.

Sunak, unlike Biden, actually wants Gaza to be an election issue because it creates problems and challenges for his opponent.

Like Biden, the Labour leader Keir Starmer

MAP

MEDICAL AID FOR PALESTINIANS

has alienated himself from his voting base with his failure in the early months to call for an immediate ceasefire, and his refusal to condemn Israel's total siege of Gaza.⁴⁰ He has also not backed an arms ban, even though in the May Caabu-MAP poll, 74 percent of Labour voters supported one. Sunak will be hoping that these splits in Labour will widen, and that independent candidates will create difficulties for otherwise safe Labour seats.

CONCLUSION

Israel is losing the battle to win over public opinion in the West, and the longer the atrocities in Gaza continue, the worse this will become. The additional support Israel attracted following the Oct. 7 attack has largely disappeared.

What undermines Israeli propaganda more than anything are the images emanating from Gaza once again. Those who do not follow this conflict in detail see these apocalyptic scenes in news coverage and just cannot reconcile the images of destruction with Israel's protestations that it is fighting a just war and doing all it can to protect civilians.

It remains to be seen what impact the decision by Karim Khan, the ICC chief prosecutor, to seek arrest warrants for Netanyahu and Gallant, as well as three Hamas leaders, will have on perceptions.

Increasingly, more of those polled in states that traditionally back Israel, such as the US, UK and Germany, now favor actions against Israel, including an arms ban and prosecutions for its leaders. Consistently high levels of support are also found for an immediate ceasefire.

This should concern leaderships in these states. Biden, Sunak, and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz are increasingly at odds with public opinion in their countries. Whether these leaders and others start reacting to this and bringing their positions more in line with popular sentiment remains to be seen.

For Palestinians, these shifts in public opinion may be welcome. It could be argued that it is all too little and too late, but at some point, even the most obstinate politicians will be unable to ignore such trends in public opinion entirely. The combination of major legal actions against Israel and these swings in sentiment could presage a far tougher Western position in future unless Israel changes course.

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