

Conflict in Israel and Gaza: What do Jews in the UK think?

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/ Introduction

In May 2021, a major conflict took place in and around Gaza between Israel and militants from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Two months later, in July, JPR asked Jewish people in the UK their views about the actions of Israel's government during that conflict, providing us with a view of British Jewish opinion at that time. Respondents were asked whether they approved of the way it had carried out the military action, and the extent to which they believed this action had been motivated by military or political considerations.

A brief summary of the immediate background to conflict is necessary to help contextualise some of our findings and to understand some of the factors survey respondents may have had in mind as they considered the questions. Rising tensions in and around Jerusalem between Israeli Jews and Palestinians during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan (which fell in April and May 2021), alongside a flare-up in a long-running dispute over land ownership in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah, prompted an upsurge of violence, leading ultimately to rocket attacks on Israel by Hamas and PIJ and air strikes in the Gaza Strip by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). The Israeli government was led by Likud Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, a politically divisive figure in the country at that time who was facing formal charges of bribery and fraud, and who, after serving as Prime Minister for the previous twelve years, was ousted from his position just a few weeks after the conflict ended by a coalition led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid. Since that time, that government was voted out, and in November 2022 Netanyahu was re-elected as Prime Minister.

JPR's interest here is not to pass judgment on the parties or leaders involved in the conflict, but rather, to understand what Jews in the UK thought about this conflict as part of our ongoing effort to monitor Jewish attitudes towards Israel. The views of the Jewish population that are reported on here are not objectively 'right' or 'wrong'; they simply reflect perspectives on the questions we posed.

Previous studies of attitudes towards Israel have shown that Jews in the UK want to see Israel living in peace with its neighbours, and also recognise that its security depends on it being able to defend itself militarily.¹ The complex reality on the ground can often make these two desires difficult to reconcile and the May 2021 conflict brought this tension to the fore once again. While we found that a majority of respondents felt that Israel's government handled the conflict appropriately, we also found that almost half were sceptical about the government's motivations for carrying out the action. We further found that the strongest predictor of Jewish people's attitudes, in both cases, was their level of emotional attachment to Israel, followed by their political stance, and in particular, whether or not they supported the British Labour Party.

¹ Graham, D. and Boyd, J. (2010). *Committed, concerned and conciliatory: The attitudes of Jews in Britain towards Israel*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research; Kosmin, B., Lerman, A. and Goldberg, J. (1997). *The attachment of British Jews to Israel*. Report No. 5, November 1997, London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

/ Key findings from the survey

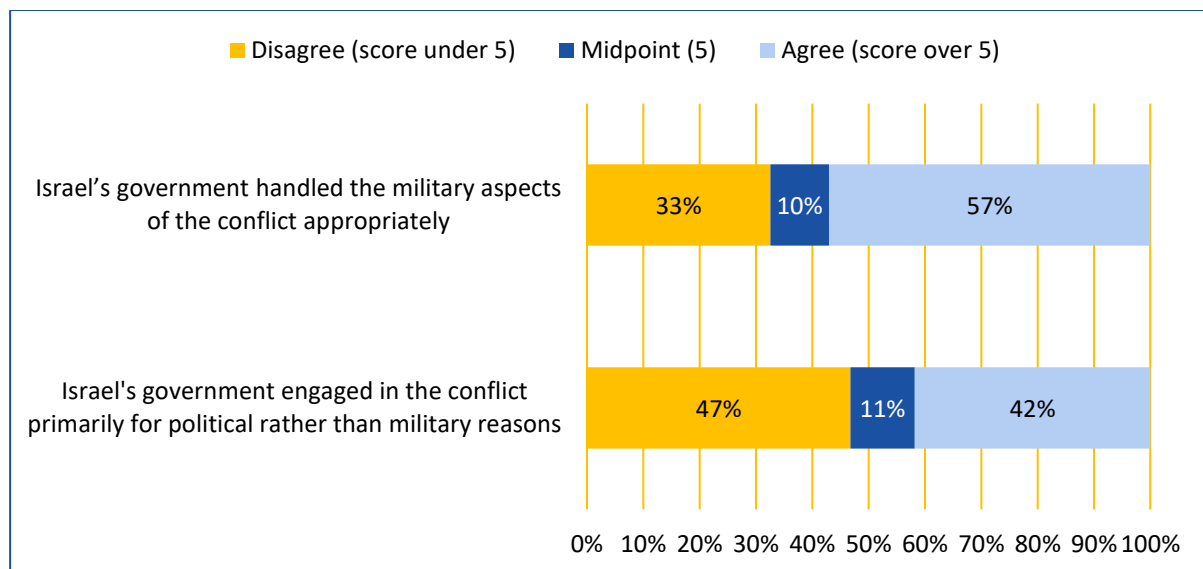
Examining the two statements

Respondents were asked about their attitudes towards the conflict using two questions phrased in the form of statements. Their responses were registered on a scale marked from 0, indicating strong disagreement, to 10, indicating strong agreement. The first statement was “Israel’s government handled the military aspects of the conflict appropriately” with agreement indicating support for Israel’s government. JPR found that overall, more than half (57%) of respondents agreed with this statement, while one in three (33%) disagreed (Fig 1).

The second statement was “Israel’s government engaged in the conflict primarily for political rather than military reasons.” Unlike the first statement, agreement with this statement indicated a degree of scepticism about the motivations of the Israeli government, and at the upper end of the scale, outright criticism of the government. We found that slightly fewer respondents (42%) expressed a sceptical or critical view in this case, compared with those who did not (47%) (Figure 1).

So, on the one hand, a majority of respondents (57%) agreed that Israel’s government handled the conflict appropriately, but on the other, a sizeable minority (42%) was sceptical about the government’s underlying motivations.

Figure 1. The attitudes of Jewish people in the UK regarding the May 2021 conflict in Israel and Gaza (N=4,192)*



* Results exclude ‘Don’t know’ responses.

Question: “In May of this year [2021], conflict broke out between Israel and the Palestinians. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding that conflict by ticking a number between 0 and 10, where 0 is strongly disagree and 10 is strongly agree:” (statements as per the chart).

These are somewhat contradictory results. On the one hand, they indicate quite common approval of the way in which the military operation was handled by Israel’s government, but on the other, some scepticism about the motivations behind the operation in the first place. This suggests that while most Jews in the UK continue to recognise that the State of Israel faces fundamental security threats and that on occasion, this necessitates military action, a considerable proportion of the Jewish population questions whether the motivations underpinning this particular operation were entirely justified.

At the same time, it is important to note that relatively large proportions of respondents reported 'Don't know' to one or both of these statements (not included in Figure 1). 12% said they did not know whether the conflict was handled appropriately, and 17% said they didn't know whether the Israeli government's actions were motivated by political rather than military considerations. This indicates hesitation on the part of some Jewish people to express a clear view on these complex and sensitive issues, as well as a simple lack of understanding about them among others.

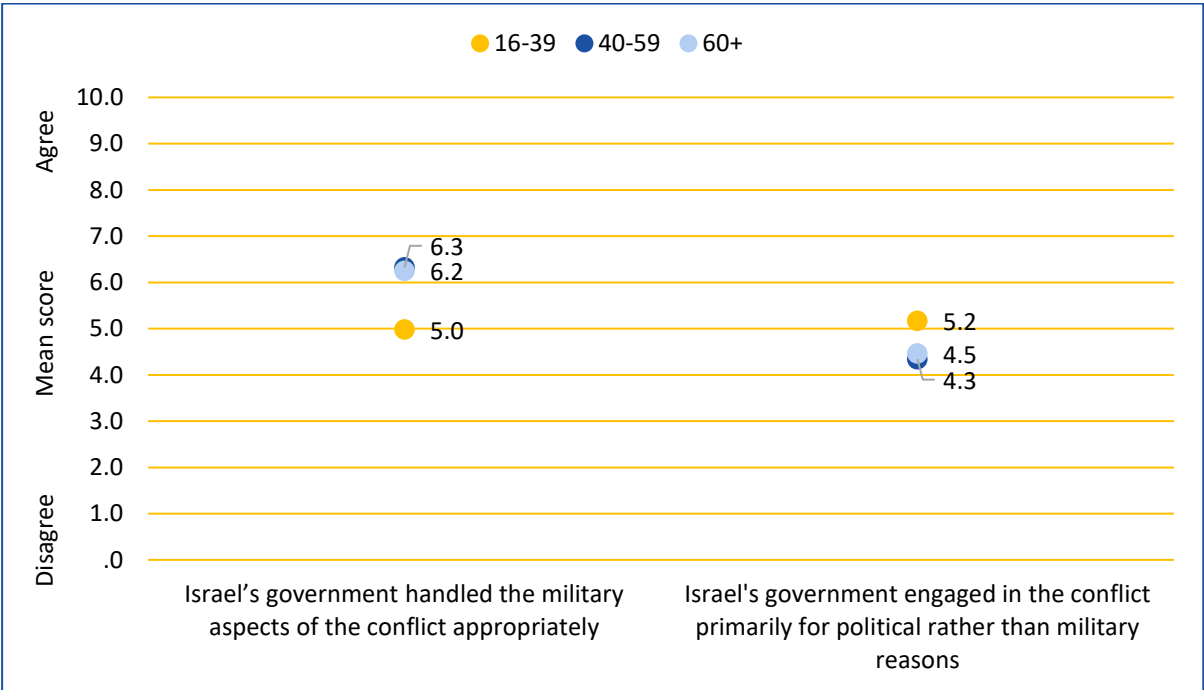
/ Which Jewish people were most and least supportive?

Age, sex, education

A convenient way to assess which subgroups within the Jewish population were the most or least supportive of the Israeli government's actions and motives, is to calculate the mean (or average) score for each of the two 0-10 scales (while excluding 'Don't know' responses). The mean score for whether respondents felt the conflict was handled appropriately was 5.8, i.e. above the midpoint of 5.0, in the direction of agree. The mean score for whether respondents felt the government's motivations were political rather than military was 4.7, i.e. just below the midpoint towards disagree. Using the same approach, we can also compare the mean scores for various Jewish subgroups. A detailed results table is shown in the Appendix on page 10.

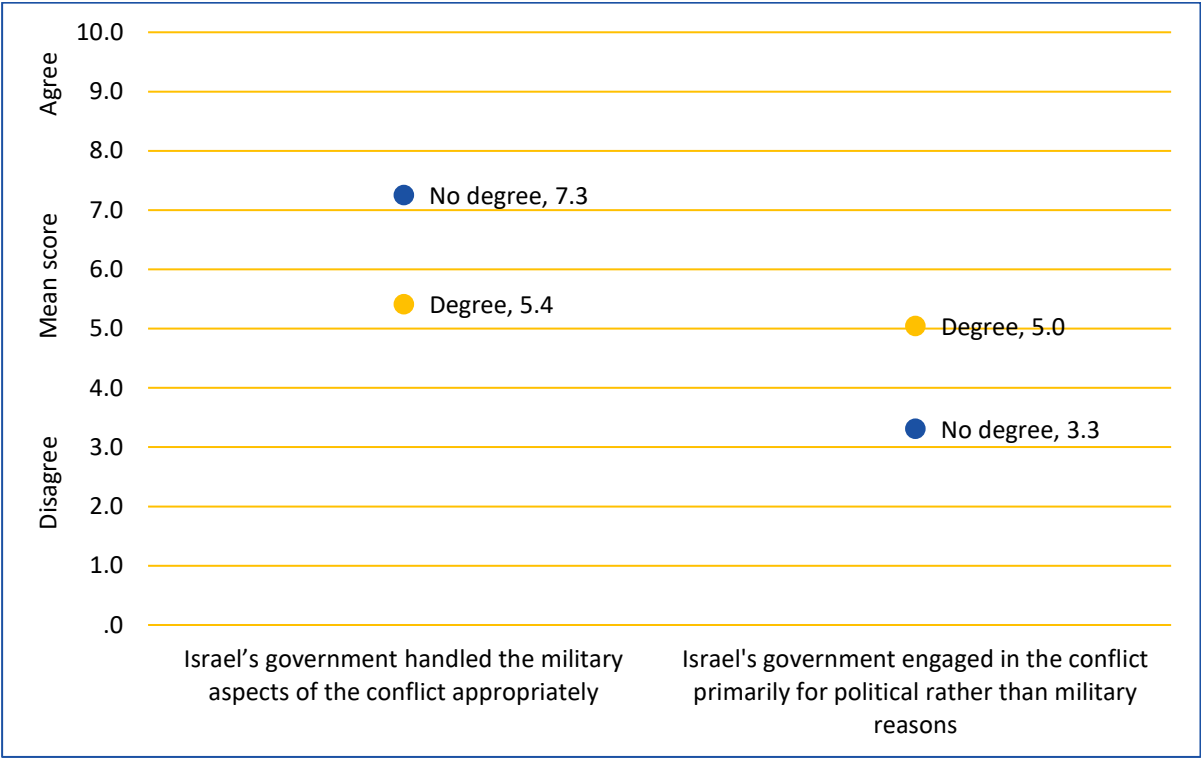
In terms of sex, Jewish men were more likely than Jewish women to feel the military action was handled appropriately, but Jewish women were more likely than Jewish men to believe that Israel's government was motivated by political rather than military reasons. That said, the difference between men and women, while statistically significant, was modest.

Figure 2. The attitudes of Jewish people in the UK regarding the May 2021 conflict in Israel and Gaza by age band



In terms of age, younger respondents aged 16 to 39 years old were less supportive of Israel's government than those aged 40 and above, particularly in terms of the way they felt the conflict was handled. This younger aged cohort displayed a more sceptical and less forgiving attitude about the actions and motivations of Israel's government than older groups (Figure 2).

Figure 3. The attitudes of Jewish people in the UK regarding the May 2021 conflict in Israel and Gaza by qualification level



As previous studies in both the UK and USA have found,² respondents' attitudes towards Israel also differ in terms of level of educational attainment and political stance. For example, Jews educated to a degree level or above were far *less* supportive of Israel's government than those who hadn't attained this level of education (see Figure 3).

Voting intentions and experience of antisemitism

We can also see a very close association between British voting intentions and support for the Israeli government in this instance. Those on the political left, including Labour and Green Party supporters, tend to be less supportive than those on the political right, i.e. Conservative supporters.³ Moreover, there is a very large gap between these two extremes reflecting a wide gap in opinion (Figure 4).

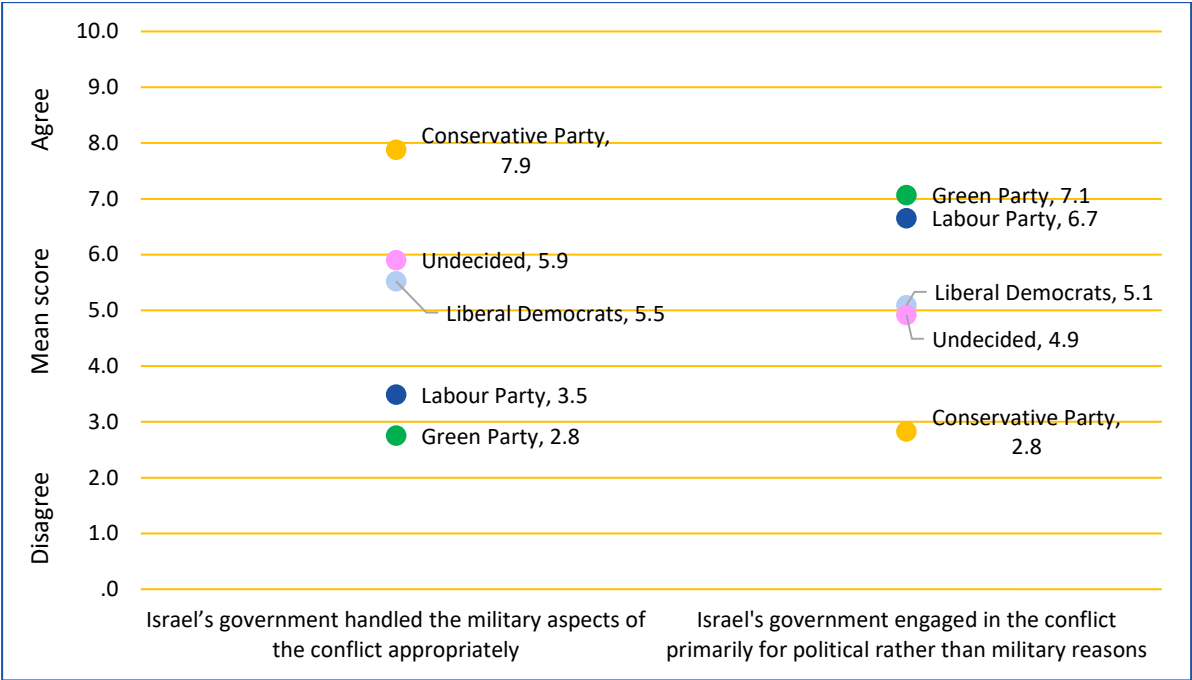
We also found a close association between respondents' support for the Israeli government in this instance, and the extent to which they feel that antisemitism is a problem in the UK. Respondents who felt antisemitism was 'A very big problem' were more inclined to agree the government handled the conflict appropriately and less inclined to agree it was politically motivated (Figure 5). In addition, those who had personally experienced a verbal antisemitic

² Graham & Boyd 2010 op cit.; Pew Research Centre, 2020, [Jewish Americans in 2020](#), Chapter 7.

³ In May 2021 the Labour Party leader was Sir Keir Starmer and the Conservative Party leader was Boris Johnson.

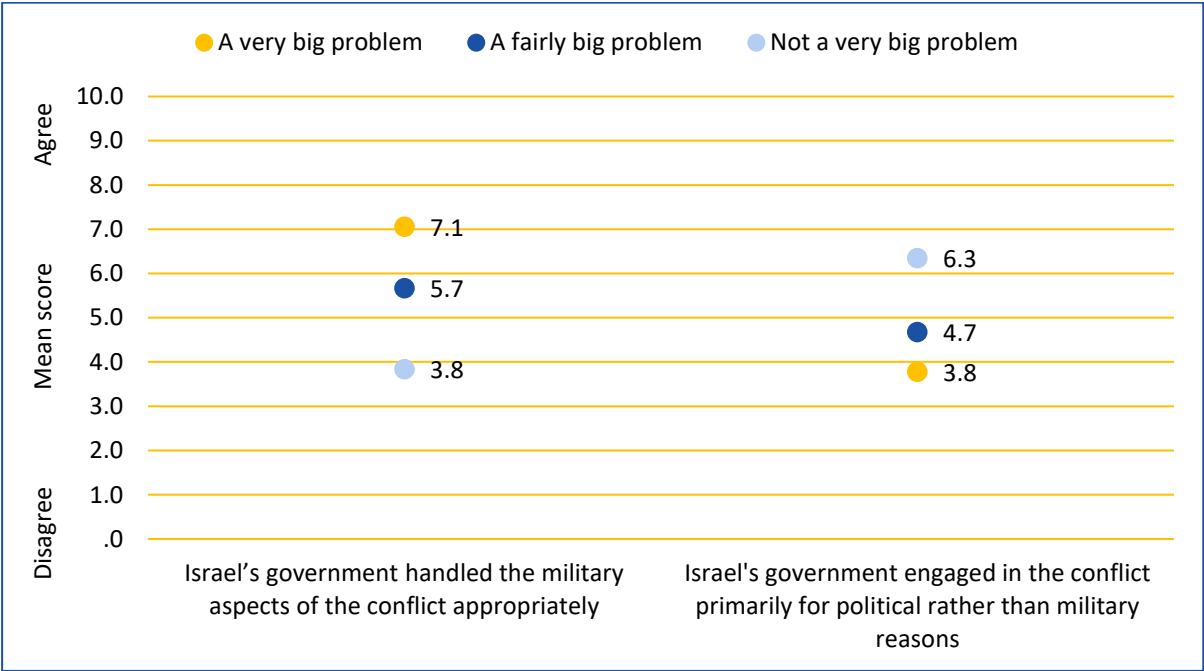
attack in the previous twelve months were also more likely to be supportive of Israel's government than those who had not suffered such an attack (see the Appendix on page 10).

Figure 4. The attitudes of Jewish people in the UK regarding the May 2021 conflict in Israel and Gaza by British voting intention



Question: "If a general election were held tomorrow, how would you vote?"

Figure 5. The attitudes of Jewish people in the UK regarding the May 2021 conflict in Israel and Gaza by concern about the perceived level of antisemitism in the UK*

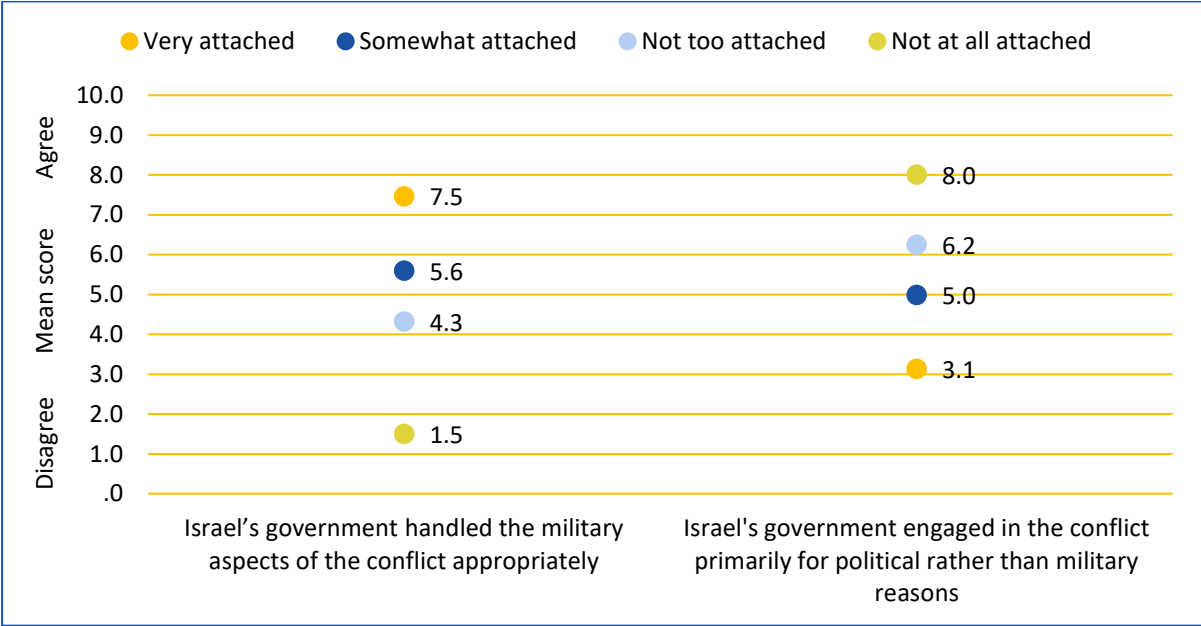


Question: "To what extent do you think the following are problems in the United Kingdom? Antisemitism"
 *Note, too few respondents said it was 'not a problem at all' for statistical significance, so results for that option are not included in the chart.

Attachment to Israel

Respondents' emotional attachment to Israel is also closely associated with their support for Israeli government actions and motives. The stronger their degree of attachment, the *more* likely they were to say that the Israeli government handled the conflict appropriately, and the *less* likely they were to say that it engaged in the conflict primarily for political rather than military reasons (Figure 6).

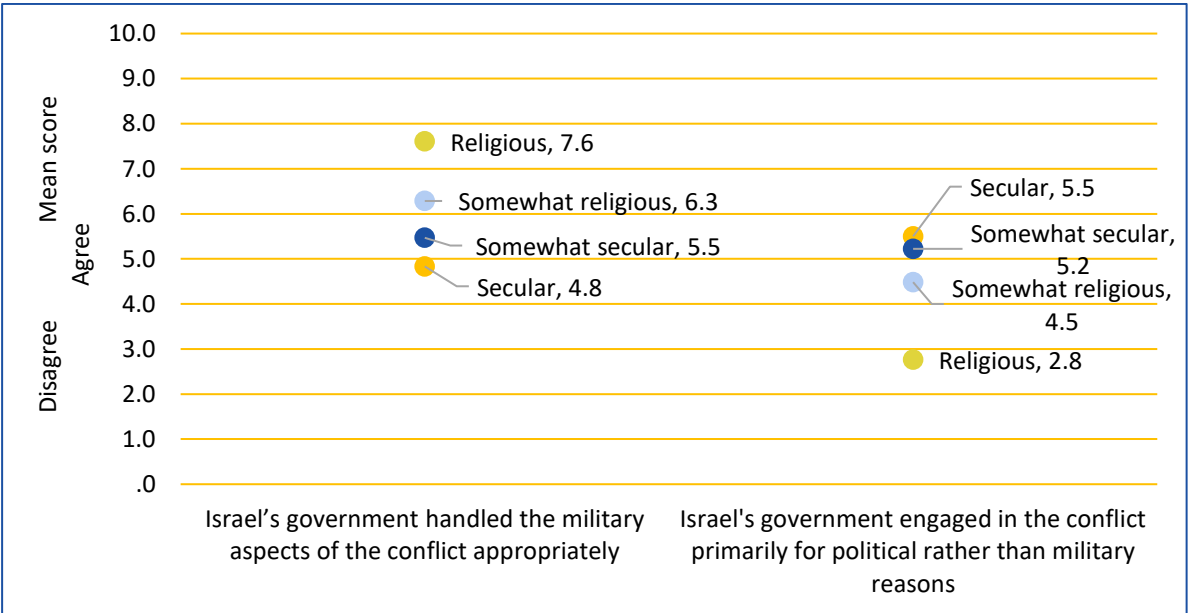
Figure 6. The attitudes of Jewish people in the UK regarding the May 2021 conflict in Israel and Gaza by emotional attachment to Israel



Question: "How emotionally attached are you to Israel?"

Jewish identity

Figure 7. The attitudes of Jewish people in the UK regarding the May 2021 conflict in Israel and Gaza by Jewish outlook



Question: "When it comes to your outlook, how do you regard yourself?"

Respondents were asked to self-identify in terms of their Jewish ‘outlook’, a measure of how religious or secular they consider themselves to be. We found that the more religious respondents were, the more likely they were to say they supported the Israeli government’s handling of the conflict. The response pattern is reversed for the second statement: the more secular respondents were, the more likely they were to say the Israeli government acted inappropriately.

/ The key drivers of attitudes of Jewish people in the UK towards this military conflict in Israel and Gaza

Regression analysis

We have shown that in the UK, Jewish people’s attitudes towards the military actions of the Israeli government in this conflict are strongly associated with several variables. We now explore whether certain variables are more important, or predictive, of attitudes than others. To do so, we have used regression analysis, which helps to statistically isolate independent relationships between input (predictor) and output (attitudes) variables.⁴

Regarding the first statement, whether *Israel’s government handled the military aspects of the conflict appropriately*, the strongest predictor is level of emotional attachment to Israel. This means that independent of other variables measured, such as religiosity or age, the stronger the level of attachment respondents feel towards Israel, the more supportive they are of the way the conflict was handled by the Israeli government and military. After accounting for this variable, the next most important predictor was voting intention, in particular, whether or not respondents supported the UK Conservative or Labour Party, both being equally predictive of attitudes but in opposite directions.

In terms of the second statement, *Israel’s government engaged in the conflict primarily for political rather than military reasons*, emotional attachment to Israel is again the strongest independent predictor of attitudes—with weaker attachment corresponding to stronger agreement—although in statistical terms, Israel attachment is not quite as strong a predictor of attitudes as it is for the first statement. The second key independent predictor is whether or not respondents intended to vote for the UK Labour Party, i.e. their political position *in general* was a less important driver than their intention, or not, to vote for this specific party. Therefore, after accounting for emotional attachment to Israel (i.e. weaker attachment), supporting the Labour Party was found to be the next key independent predictor of agreement that Israel’s government engaged in the conflict primarily for political rather than military reasons, over and above other factors such as age and religiosity.

Finally, having a university degree was the third most important independent predictor for both statements. But it is also the case that, statistically speaking, although the variables we tested were good at predicting attitudes, they were better at doing so for the first statement about the way the conflict was handled than the second statement about the motivations of the Israeli government, reflecting greater uncertainty among respondents on this second statement.⁵

⁴ Regression analysis output is available on request.

⁵ In statistical terms, the variables entered into the regression explained 53% of the variance of the first statement (*Israel’s government handled the military aspects of the conflict appropriately*) and 39% of the variance of the second statement (*Israel’s government engaged in the conflict primarily for political rather than military reasons*). This also highlights the fact that other variables, not measured here, must also play a role in predicting attitudes.

/ Conclusion

By asking Jewish people their views about a specific conflict in Israel—namely, the May 2021 war between Israel and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad—this analysis provides important insights into the relationship between UK Jews and Israel. It finds that overall, Jews support Israel’s right to defend itself militarily but that this support is not uncritical. Moreover, Jews in the UK do not hold uniform views on Israel—opinions differ significantly depending on many factors including age, education, Jewish religiosity and British political stance. In general, respondents who were younger or more secular, or politically leftist or university educated were more likely to hold a more critical stance than those who were older, or more religious, or politically rightist, or non-university educated. But above all, we find that the main predictor of feelings about this conflict and, by extension, the Jewish State, is a person’s level of *emotional attachment to Israel*. Those who are more strongly attached are more likely to be supportive and less critical of Israel, independent of other factors such as their religious, political, social or demographic background.

Ultimately, these and other variables we measured all have a bearing on Jewish people’s attitudes to Israel. So as the Jewish community changes, we would expect attitudes to change as well. For example, if the community becomes more religiously or politically polarised, it is likely attitudes towards Israel will become more polarised too.

Looking forward, JPR will continue to measure these variables and monitor Jewish people’s attitudes towards Israel. In our next report on this topic, we will again explore the May 2021 conflict by asking how responses to it in wider society impacted on Jewish people in the UK.

/ Appendix – Summary of mean scores for each statement

The attitudes of Jewish people in the UK regarding the May 2021 conflict in Israel and Gaza: summary of the mean scores for each statement and N values (unweighted N=4,323)

Variable		Israel's government handled the military aspects of the conflict appropriately	Israel's government engaged in the conflict primarily for political rather than military reasons
Overall mean score		5.8	4.7
Sex	Male	6.1	4.2
	Female	5.4	5.1
Age	16-39	5.0	5.2
	40-59	6.3	4.3
	60+	6.2	4.5
Qualifications	Degree	5.4	5.0
	No degree	7.3	3.3
Antisemitism (To what extent do you think the following are problems in the United Kingdom?)	A very big problem	7.1	3.8
	A fairly big problem	5.7	4.7
	Not a very big problem	3.8	6.3
Experience in 2020 any type of antisemitic incident(s) directed at you because you are Jewish?	A verbal antisemitic attack	7.4	2.8
	No	5.6	4.9
How emotionally attached are you to Israel?	Very attached	7.5	3.1
	Somewhat attached	5.6	5.0
	Not too attached	4.3	6.2
	Not at all attached	1.5	8.0
If a general election were held tomorrow, how would you vote?	Conservative Party	7.9	2.8
	Labour Party	3.5	6.7
	Liberal Democrats	5.5	5.1
	Green Party	2.8	7.1
	Undecided	5.9	4.9
When it comes to your outlook, how do you regard yourself?	Secular	4.8	5.5
	Somewhat secular	5.5	5.2
	Somewhat religious	6.3	4.5
	Religious	7.6	2.8
How would you describe your current level of religiosity?	Very strong	8.0	2.4
	Quite strong	6.5	4.3
	Quite weak	5.6	4.9
	Very weak	4.3	6.0
Synagogue membership	Yes, I am a synagogue member	6.7	3.8
	Although I am not a synagogue member I do belong to/attend a synagogue	5.1	5.7
	No, I am not a synagogue member	5.0	5.4
Synagogue membership type	None	4.8	5.7
	Strictly Orthodox	8.3	2.1
	Central Orthodox	7.0	3.7
	Sephardi	6.0	4.6
	Masorti	6.5	3.8
	Reform	5.2	5.3
	Liberal	3.9	5.8
Other	5.3	5.2	

/ Methodological note

The data for this survey were collected using the JPR research panel. This is a sample of Jewish people from across the United Kingdom who have agreed to participate in JPR surveys as part of an ongoing relationship with JPR. The panel is designed to explore the attitudes and experiences of Jews in the UK on a variety of issues. It is open to anyone living in the UK aged 16 or above and who self-identifies as being Jewish 'in any way at all'. The sample size for this wave was 4,152.

The questionnaire for this wave was developed by JPR. In addition to questions about Israel, it also asked panellists about a range of other issues such as how the COVID-19 pandemic was affecting different aspects of their lives. The survey was programmed in-house using Conformat software and formed part of a wider panel recruitment process. It was completed online, by computer, smartphone or tablet, from 23 July 2021 to 1 September 2021. Respondents were offered an opportunity to win one of five £100 shopping vouchers as an incentive to complete the survey.

The survey data were cleaned and weighted to adjust for the age, sex and Jewish identity of the Jewish population of the UK based on 2011 Census data and synagogue membership data collected separately by JPR. Details of the methodology used in the first round of this survey (summer 2020), which are applicable to the 2021 round, can be found [here](#).

/ Acknowledgments

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We also thank the many people across the UK who give up their time to complete our panel surveys and to support our research. We know their time is precious, so we are particularly grateful to them for sharing their thoughts and experiences.

/ About the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) is a London-based research organisation, consultancy and think-tank. It aims to advance the prospects of Jewish communities in the United Kingdom and across Europe by conducting research and informing policy development in dialogue with those best placed to positively influence Jewish life.

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