

## British attitudes towards Israel at war: Key issues in the immediate aftermath of the October 7 Hamas attacks

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### / Introduction

At the time of writing, the war in Israel and Gaza that was prompted by the barbaric attack on Israel by Hamas on 7 October 2023, is still ongoing. This paper does not seek to investigate any of the details of that war, but rather to explore how the British public has initially reacted to it using data generated by major polling agencies in the UK. The reaction is particularly important to Jews living in Britain – antisemitic incident data and considerable anecdotal evidence indicate high levels of fear and anxiety across the Jewish community at this time – so assessing the mood of the British public during this period in order to contextualise and understand that is essential. The data discussed below come from two polling agencies – YouGov and Ipsos – and draw on a number of surveys conducted by them in the few weeks immediately following the October 7 attacks, as well as historic data on related issues. We consider several issues, including:

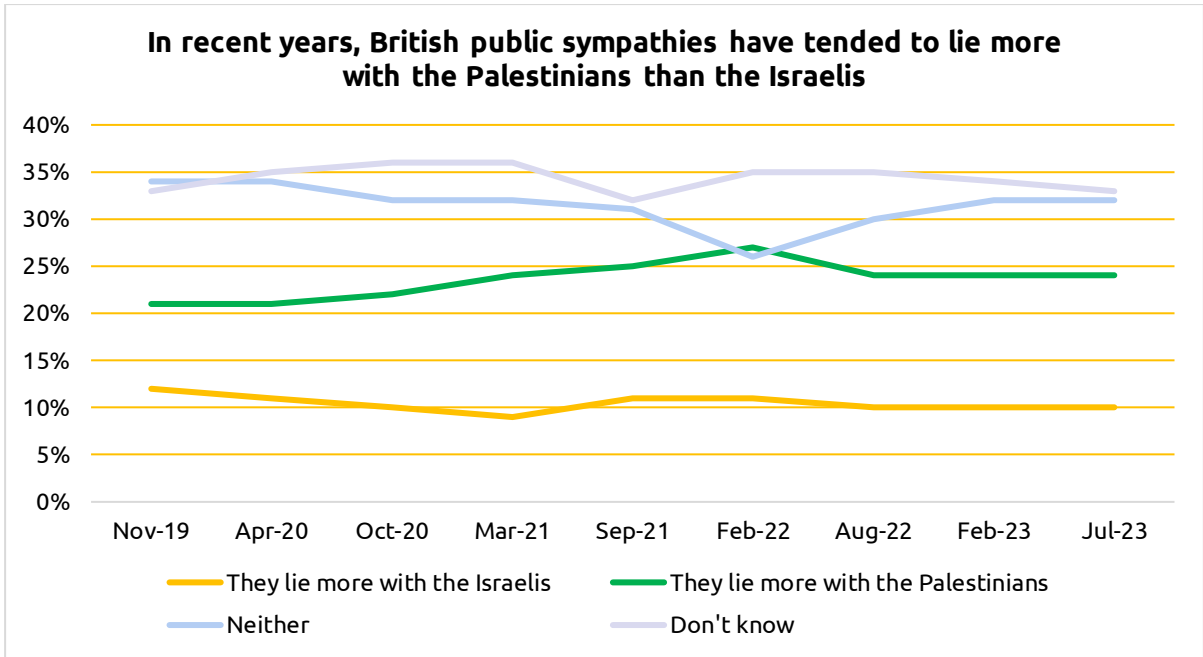
- the levels of sympathy for the Palestinian and Israeli sides that existed prior to the war and subsequently;
- whether the British public thinks that the UK should be more supportive or critical of Israel;
- how the British public feels that the police are managing public demonstrations at this time, and whether they should be making more arrests, particularly with regard to people who openly support Hamas;
- whether the British public thinks the UK should be pushing Israel for a ceasefire, full or temporary;
- the extent to which people across Britain are engaged in these issues at all.

The situation is evolving of course, so the trends shown and conclusions drawn will inevitably need to be revisited in the months and years to come as circumstances around the war, and the conflict as a whole, develop.

### / Where do sympathies lie?

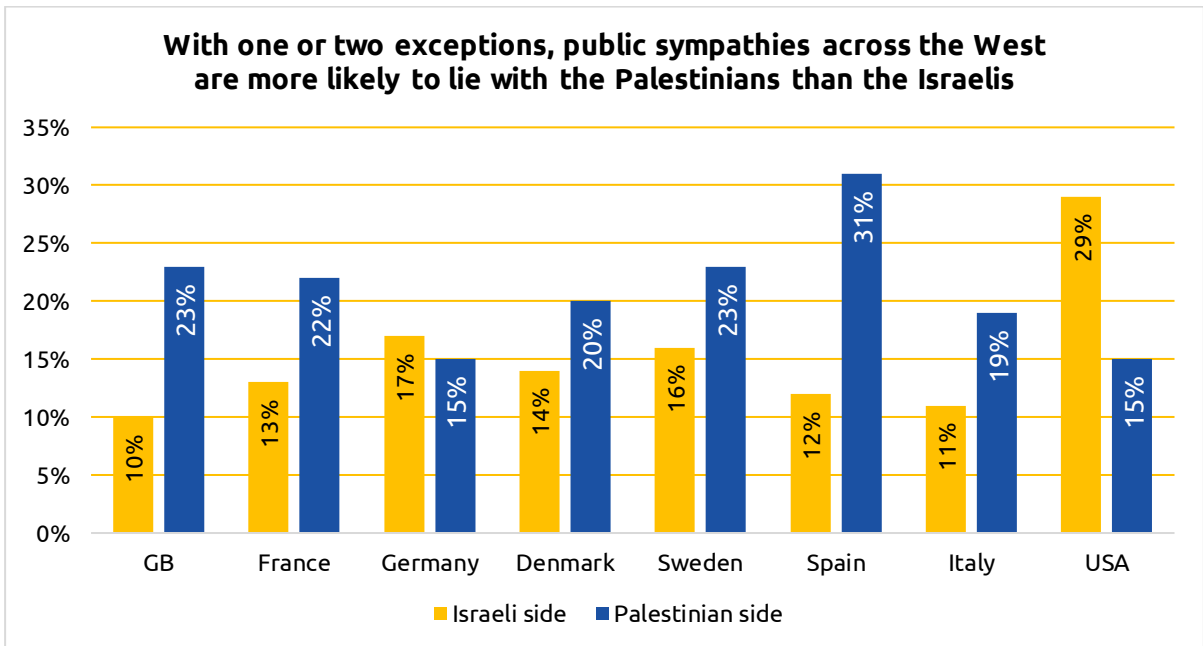
We begin by exploring the issue of people's fundamental sympathies, and whether they lie with the Israelis, the Palestinians or neither. There are YouGov data on this issue going back several years, both from the population of Great Britain and internationally.

Over the past few years, data gathered by YouGov suggest that the population of Great Britain is considerably more likely to sympathise with the Palestinians than with the Israelis in the ongoing conflict. On average, between 2019 and 2023, about one in four of all British adults (24%) have said their sympathies lie more with the Palestinians, compared to about one in ten (10%) who have said their sympathies lie more with the Israelis. Expressed slightly differently, for every five British adults sympathising predominantly with the Palestinians, there have been two sympathising predominantly with the Israelis. At the same time, it is important to note that most people (65%) either don't know with whom they sympathise, or report 'neither.'



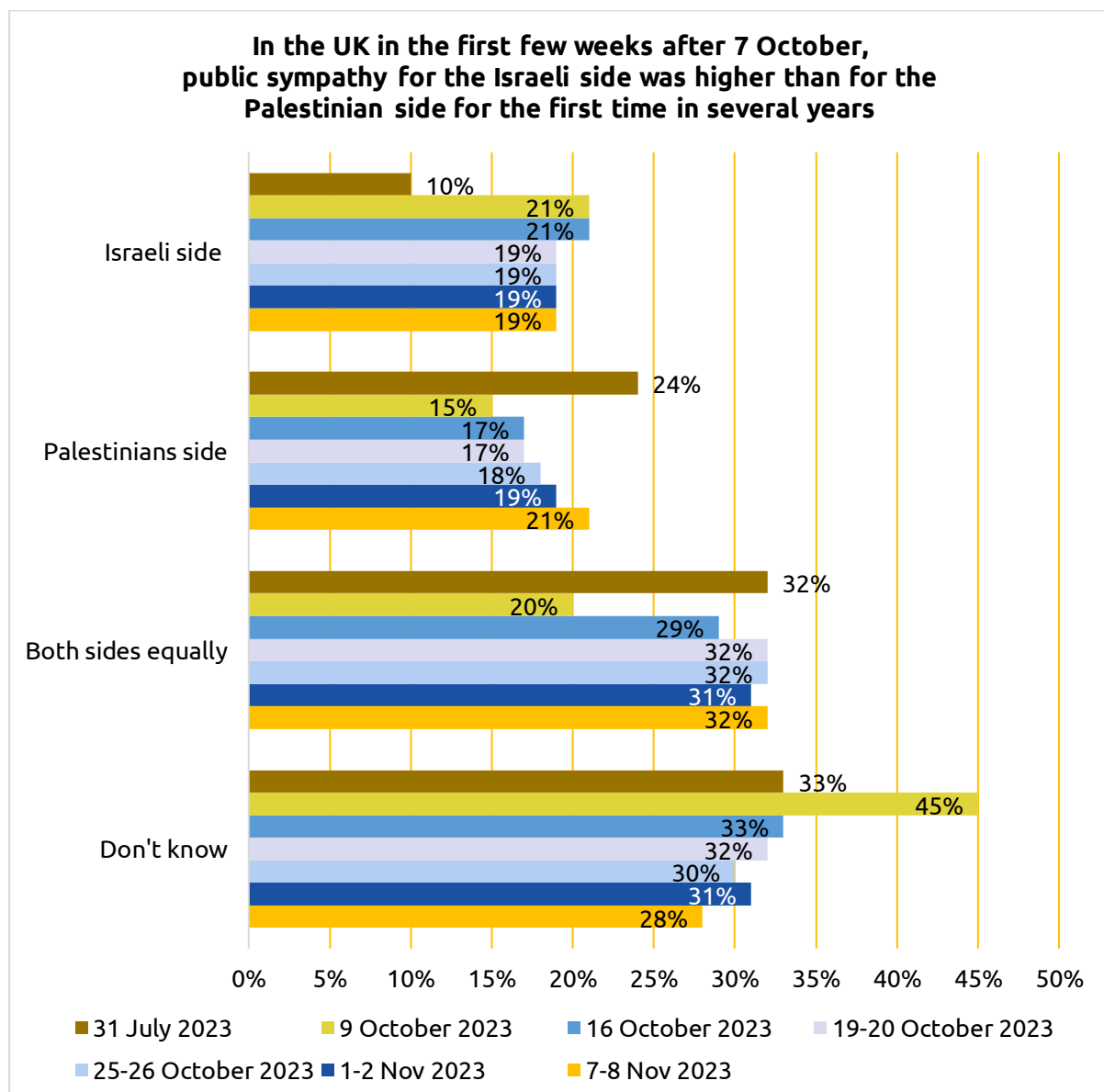
Question: Thinking only of the continuing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, do your own sympathies lie more with the Israelis or more with the Palestinians? Biannual tracker question (YouGov): n=1664–1768 GB adults per wave.

This picture of greater sympathy for the Palestinians than for the Israelis can be seen in much of the international data too. The figures below, gathered in mid-May 2023 (i.e. several months before the October 7 attacks), indicate that with the exception of the United States and, to a lesser extent, Germany, most Western publics look quite similar to the UK in this respect. While the figures differ from country to country, fundamentally, there are higher levels of sympathy for the Palestinians than for the Israelis. At the same time, the proportions reporting 'don't know' or 'neither' (not shown) again constitute the majority, ranging from 55% and 70% of the whole depending on the country observed.



Question: Which side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict do you sympathize with more? YouGov data, 10-23 May 2023; ns = 2037 (GB); 1004 (France); 2056 (Germany); 1022 (Denmark); 1008 (Sweden); 1019 (Spain); 1018 (Italy); 1000 (USA).

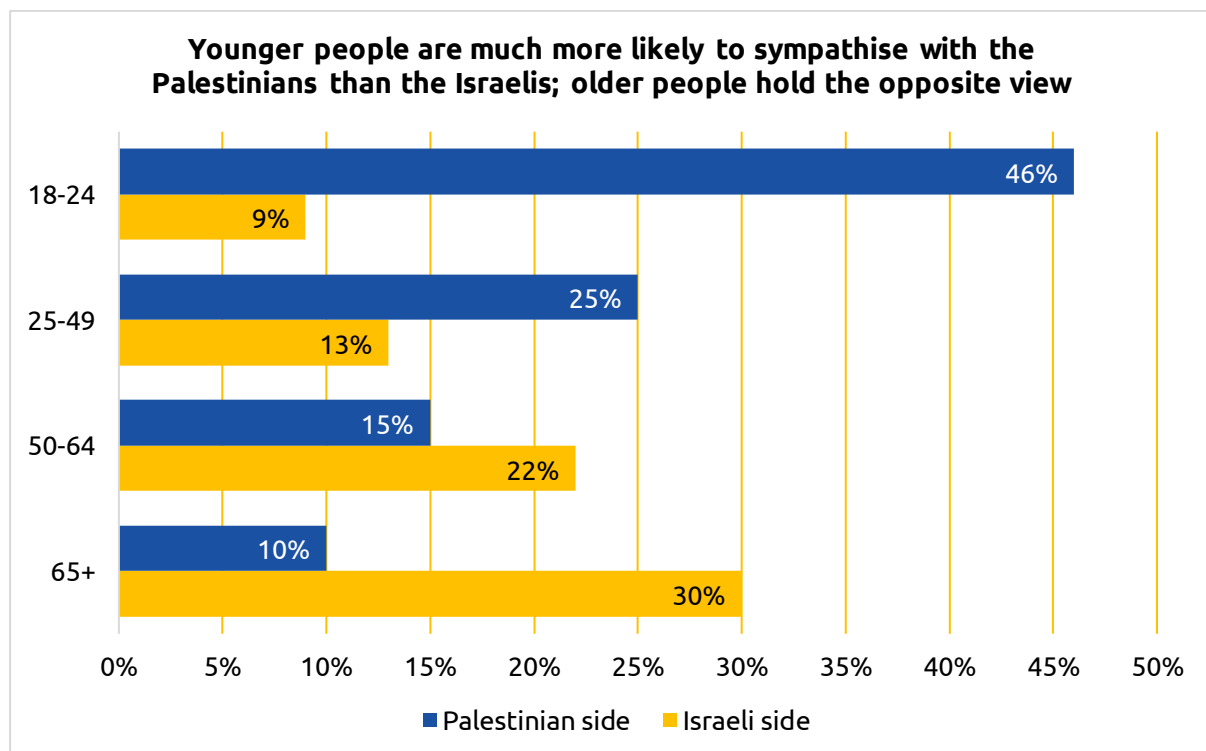
However, it is striking to note that in data gathered by YouGov in a handful of surveys conducted in the weeks immediately after the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel, sympathies appear to have shifted quite significantly, at least among the adult population of Great Britain. Sympathy for the Israeli side climbed to around the 20% mark (i.e. about twice as high as it was when measured over the previous few years), whereas sympathy for the Palestinian side fell by a few percentage points to around 15%-21%. Writing now, just over a month after the attacks, it is too early to say whether a fundamental shift has occurred – only time will tell whether recent events will prompt a long-lasting change – but this does constitute some early evidence that Hamas’s brutal attack on October 7 may have backfired somewhat in the court of British public opinion, at least in the short-term. Where opinion previously leaned heavily towards the Palestinians, the data suggest that the population has become far more split on the issue. Nevertheless, we may also be seeing a gradual reversion to pre-October 7 positions. While we should be cautious about reading too much into small differences in the findings across the surveys shown below, sympathy for the Palestinian side does appear to be climbing back towards its pre-October 7 position over time, whereas sympathy for the Israeli side may be showing signs of falling back down.



Question: Which side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict do you sympathize with more? Data gathered by YouGov. Ns = 2046 GB adults (9 Oct); 2574 (16 Oct); 2052 (19-20 Oct); 2064 (25-26 Oct); 2045 (1-2 Nov); 2080 (7-8 Nov).

Two other points are noteworthy. First, it is striking to see the high proportion that responded ‘don’t know’ on October 9: close to half felt this way in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, compared to a normal rate of about one-third. This suggests quite widespread initial confusion, and significant movement both from those whose sympathies lay with the Palestinian side and those who previously would have responded ‘both sides equally.’ At the same time, it is worth noting that the data also suggest that there is a hard core of support for the Palestinians within British society that retained its fundamental sympathies, even in the immediate light of the extraordinary brutality of the October 7 massacre, at a level of about one in six or seven of all British adults.

In addition, and very importantly, further analysis of these data by age band demonstrates significant distinctions in this regard. The younger people are, the more likely they are to sympathise with the Palestinian side, and vice versa. While the general trends shown in the previous chart are reflected across different age bands, by the time of the November 7-8 survey, we can see that 18-24-year-olds were much more likely to sympathise with the Palestinians than with the Israelis (by 46% to 9%), whereas those aged 65+ were the opposite, with 30% showing sympathy for the Israeli side compared to 10% for the Palestinian side.



Question: Which side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict do you sympathise with more? Data gathered by YouGov on 7-8 November 2023; n=2080 GB adults.

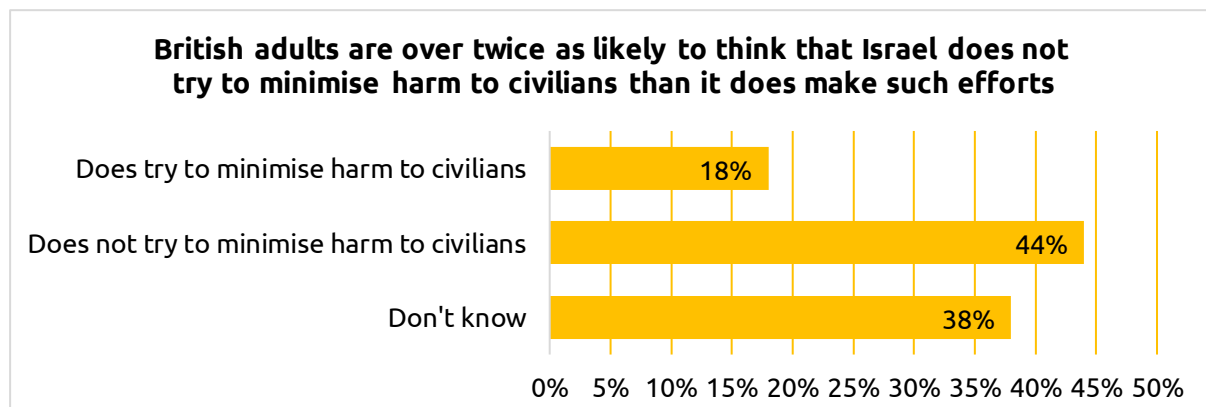
Fundamentally, these types of results raise two key questions for social scientists. First, whether age is genuinely a key factor affecting people’s opinions, or whether the results are, in fact, masking something else – for example, other sociodemographic distinctions such as educational levels, general political leanings or similar. At this point in time, we cannot answer that question – it would require full access to the datasets and more detailed multivariate analysis to determine. And second, assuming age is a significant factor, whether younger people will become more like older people over time, or whether they will carry their existing opinions with them into their adulthood. As ever, only time will tell, but certainly, many of those who lived through the Israel of the 1960s and 1970s are likely to have first formed their opinions at a time when sympathies for Israel’s plight were generally

comparatively high, as the country faced down the existential threats of the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War, and secured a breakthrough peace agreement with Egypt. By contrast, young people today are developing their opinions in an entirely different context – when Palestinians are much more likely to be seen as the vulnerable party, and Israelis as the aggressor. While views may change over time – as can be seen, Palestinian acts of terror do affect opinion, at least in the short term – current data would suggest that we will likely see a continuing shift of sympathy towards the Palestinians and away from Israel in the years to come.

It is striking to note that there are also significant regional distinctions in sympathy. Whereas sympathy for the Israeli side is found to be at a similar level across the country (in the range of 17%-20% according to YouGov data from November 7-8), sympathy for the Palestinian side in the same study was found to be at 34% among Londoners, compared to 19%-22% among those living in the North, Midlands and the rest of the South of England (not shown). Whilst greater geographical granularity would certainly reveal a more complex reality, it is noteworthy that London stands out so starkly, and perhaps offers an additional dimension on why many Jews feel particularly vulnerable at present – about two-thirds of all Jews in the UK live in or around London.

### / Does the Israeli military try to minimise harm to civilians?

Even with the overall indications of a shift in sympathy in favour of Israelis since October 7, there remains considerable scepticism about Israel's military practices. The British public is over twice as likely to think that Israel does *not* try to minimise harm to civilians than to think that it does make such efforts: as of October 13, 44% think it does not, compared to 18% who think it does. This perception gap exists across all age bands – even those aged 65+ are more likely to think badly of Israel in this regard (40%) than to think well of it (24%). There is an age gradient again – the older respondents are, the more likely they are to think that Israel tries to minimise harm, but this is quite clearly a minority view in all cases. This is also the case when the data are examined by political leaning – whilst Conservative voters are more likely than voters for other parties to believe that Israel tries to minimise harm, they are still more likely to think that it does not (35%) than it does (28%). It is worth noting that these data pre-date the explosion at the Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza City – which occurred on October 17 – an incident that was initially assumed to be caused by aerial bombing by the Israeli military, but was subsequently found by American, British and French military intelligence to have been the result of a misfiring rocket the came from inside Gaza itself, most likely fired by Palestinian Islamic Jihad according to the Israel Defence Forces. Further data are required to determine how this episode affected opinion on this matter.

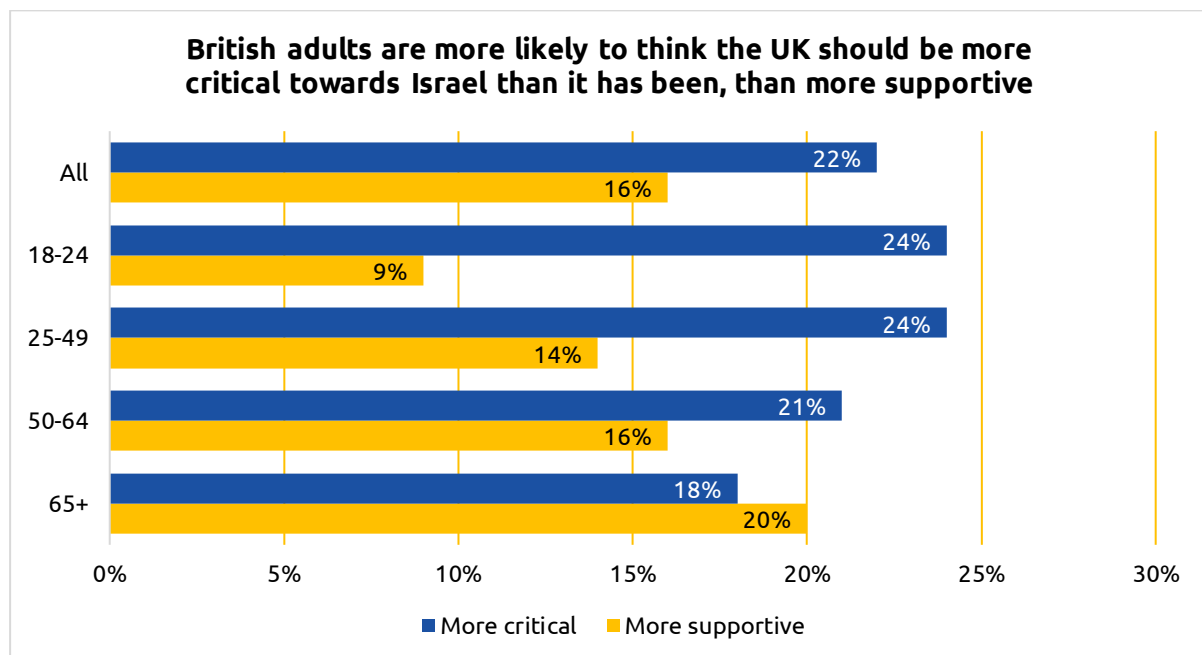


Question: Do you think that Israel does or does not try to minimise harm to civilians when it makes strikes in Gaza? Data gathered on 13 October 2023; n=3848 GB adults.

This paper is not designed to enter into discussion about whether the perceptions of the British public are objectively correct or not – that issue is discussed in numerous papers elsewhere. Suffice it to say here that Israeli sources vehemently contest this view.

### / Should the UK be more supportive of Israel?

Concerning the issue of general UK support for Israel, British adults are more likely to think that the UK should be more critical towards Israel (22%) than more supportive (16%), although 24% believe that it is getting the balance about right. Once again, the previously seen age gradient applies – only those aged 65+ are more likely to say that the UK should be more supportive than critical towards Israel, and even among them, the gap is very small (20% to 18%).

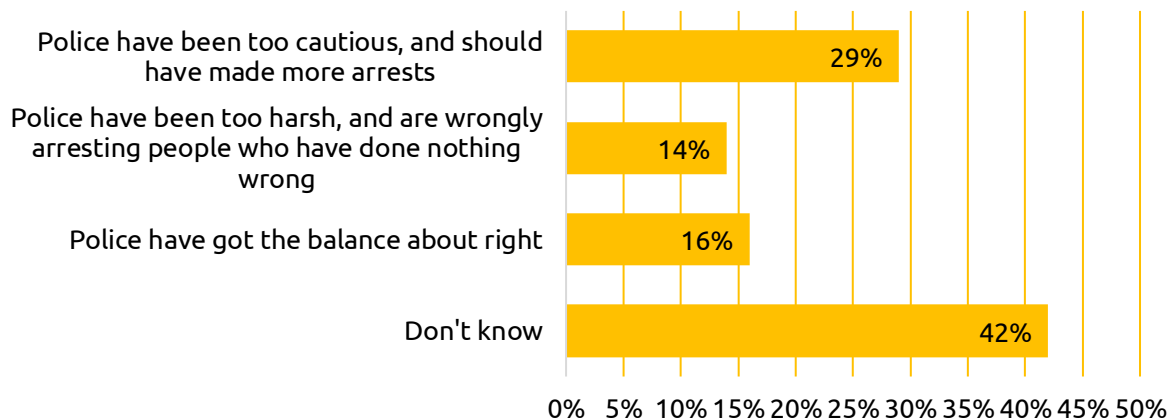


Question: Thinking about the UK's approach to recent events in Israel and Palestine, do you think the UK should be [More supportive to Israel than it has been; More critical towards Israel than it has been; Is getting the balance about right; Don't know]. Data gathered on 13 October 2023; n=3848 GB adults.

### / How are the police managing the demonstrations?

As ever during these major flare-ups, there has been a significant reaction on the streets of cities around the world. Demonstrations, both in support of the Palestinians and Israel, have drawn large crowds. Reaction to pro-Palestinian demonstrations has been notably critical in some circles, with accusations that expressions of antisemitic sentiment and tolerance for terrorism have been present, and calls for more arrests to be made. From a Jewish community perspective, anecdotal evidence suggests that such demonstrations make many Jews feel unsafe, particularly when chants explicitly or implicitly appear to call for the destruction of the State of Israel, or when support for Hamas's actions and beliefs about Jews is explicitly or implicitly endorsed. YouGov data from October 23 investigating how the British public feels the police have handled these demonstrations, indicate that whilst many do not know what they think about the issue, among those who do, the clearest view is largely in line with reported Jewish community sentiment – 29% feel that the police have been too cautious, compared with 14% who feel they have been too harsh and 16% who feel they have got the balance about right.

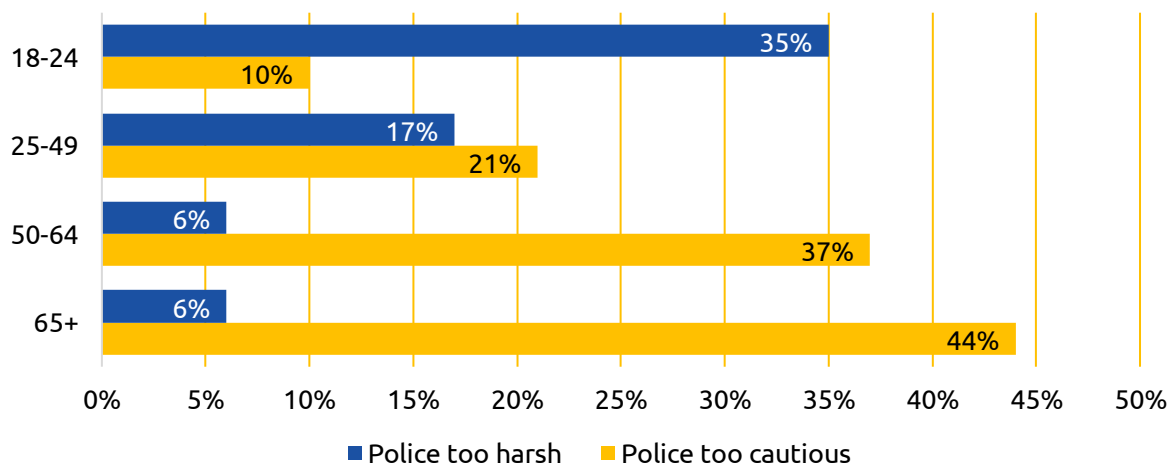
### British adults are twice as likely to think the police should be making more arrests at demonstrations than less



Question: Thinking about how the police have handled protests around the situation in Gaza, which of the following best reflects your view? (YouGov data, 23 October 2023; n=2244).

However, once again, we see huge distinctions on this issue by age. Those aged 18-24 are over three times as likely to think that the police have been too harsh (35%) than too cautious (10%), whereas those aged 65+ are more than seven times as likely to feel the opposite (44% to 6%).

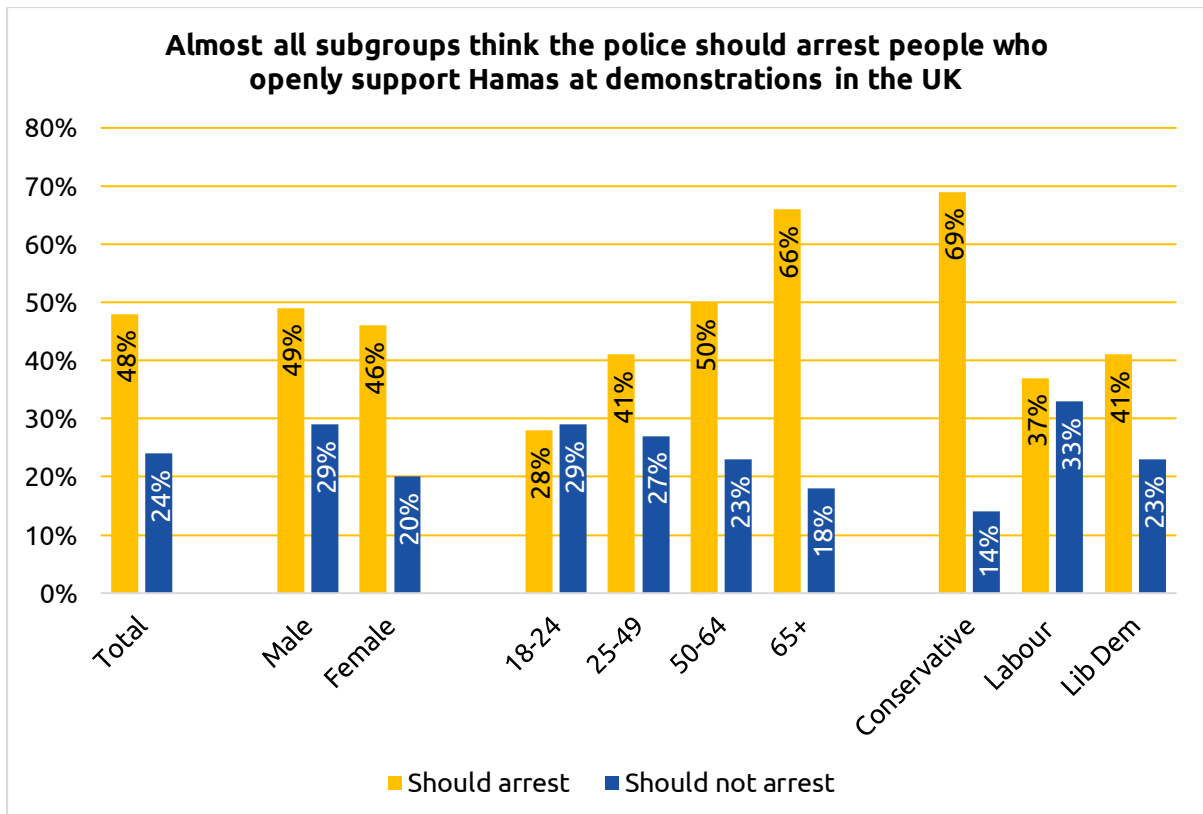
### Enormous generational differences exist on the police's handling of the protests about the situation in Gaza



Question: Thinking about how the police have handled protests around the situation in Gaza, which of the following best reflects your view? (YouGov data, 23 October 2023; n=2244).

At the same time, the British public is far less forgiving of those openly supporting Hamas at demonstrations. 48% of people think police should arrest people doing this, compared to 24% of people who do not, and even among 18-24-year-olds we see far less certainty on the issue than on other ones investigated – they are, in fact, split 28% (who think the police should arrest) versus 29% (who think they should not arrest), with 43% unsure – by far the largest proportion of any age band. In fact, with this one exception of 18-24-year-olds, all subgroups, however the data are analysed (i.e. by gender, age, social grade, geography, party allegiance or voting behaviour), are more likely to favour arrests than not.



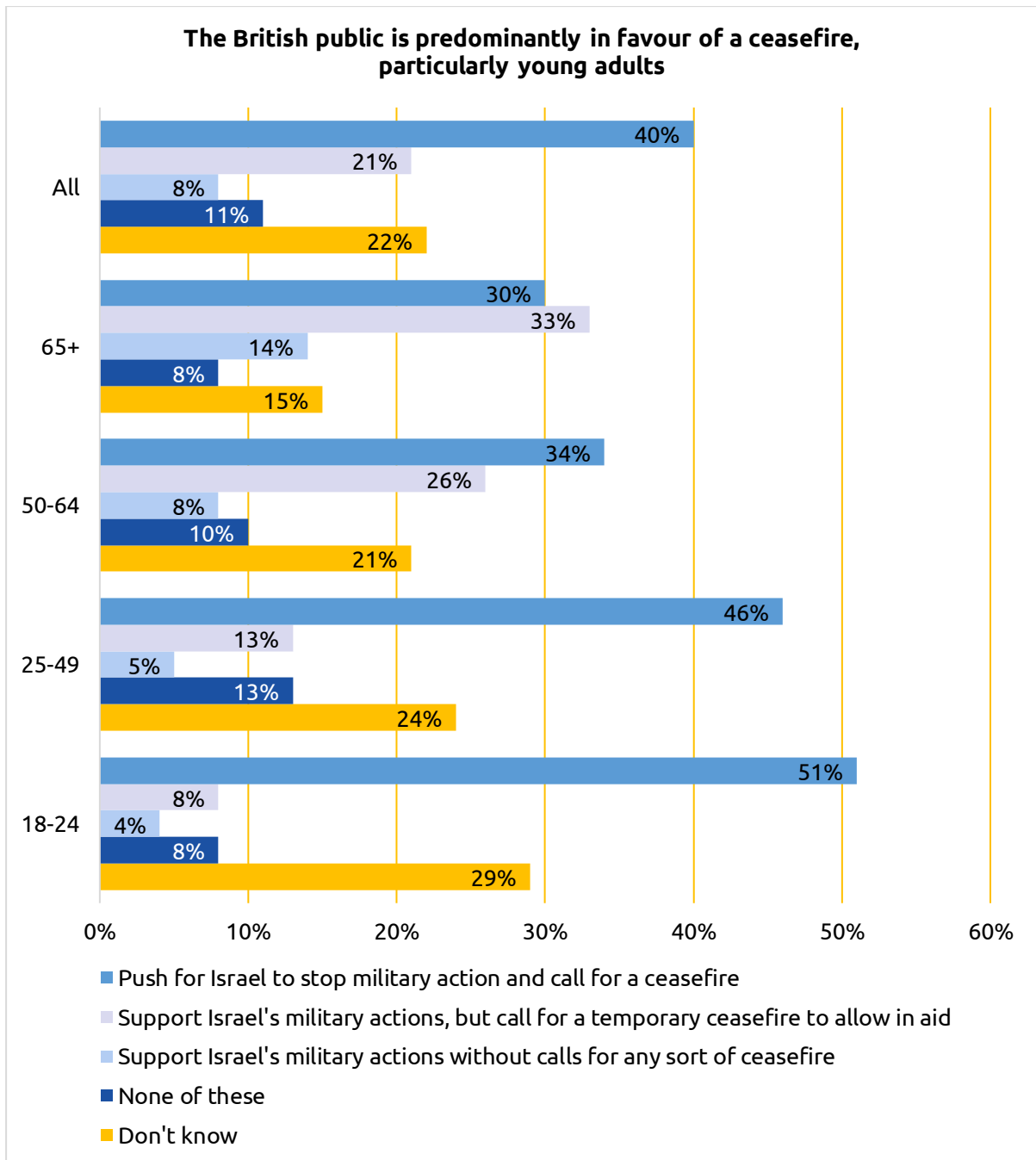


Question: Do you think the police should or should not arrest people who openly support Hamas at demonstrations in the UK? [Should/Should not/Don't know]. YouGov data, 31 October to 1 November 2023; n=2193 GB adults.

### / Should the UK push Israel for a ceasefire?

There have been many calls for a complete Israeli ceasefire since it began its military operation in response to the Hamas attacks. To date, these have not been heeded by the Israeli government – it has maintained that doing so would hand victory to Hamas, and allow it to re-arm and try to inflict similar attacks on Israel in the future which, indeed, Hamas leaders have threatened to do. While it has allowed for humanitarian pauses in the fighting, it has also argued that temporary ceasefires pose serious challenges: they provide time for Hamas to regroup, opportunities for them to redirect or steal aid, and potentially put Israeli soldiers in the area at significantly greater risk, ironically as they try to protect Palestinians seeking to move from northern to southern Gaza. However, British public opinion leans in favour of a complete ceasefire: data from Nov 1-2 show that 40% want the UK to push for Israel to cease its military action completely, and a further 21% support Israel's actions, but would like to see a temporary ceasefire to allow in aid. Again, we see the now standard distinctions by age – over half of 18-24-year-olds want to see a full ceasefire, whereas just 4% hold the opposing view. Only among 65+ year-olds is there a small majority in favour of a different view, but even there, it is for a temporary ceasefire to allow in aid; only 14% do not want to see any calls for a ceasefire at all.

Analysed according to which party people voted for in the 2019 General Election, Labour voters are overwhelmingly in favour of an immediate ceasefire (62%), with a further 14% supporting Israel's military actions but calling for a temporary ceasefire to allow in aid. By contrast, Conservative voters are far more divided: the largest group (32%) want to see a temporary ceasefire, followed by 23% calling for Israel to stop military action, and 16% supporting continued Israeli action without a ceasefire at all (not shown).

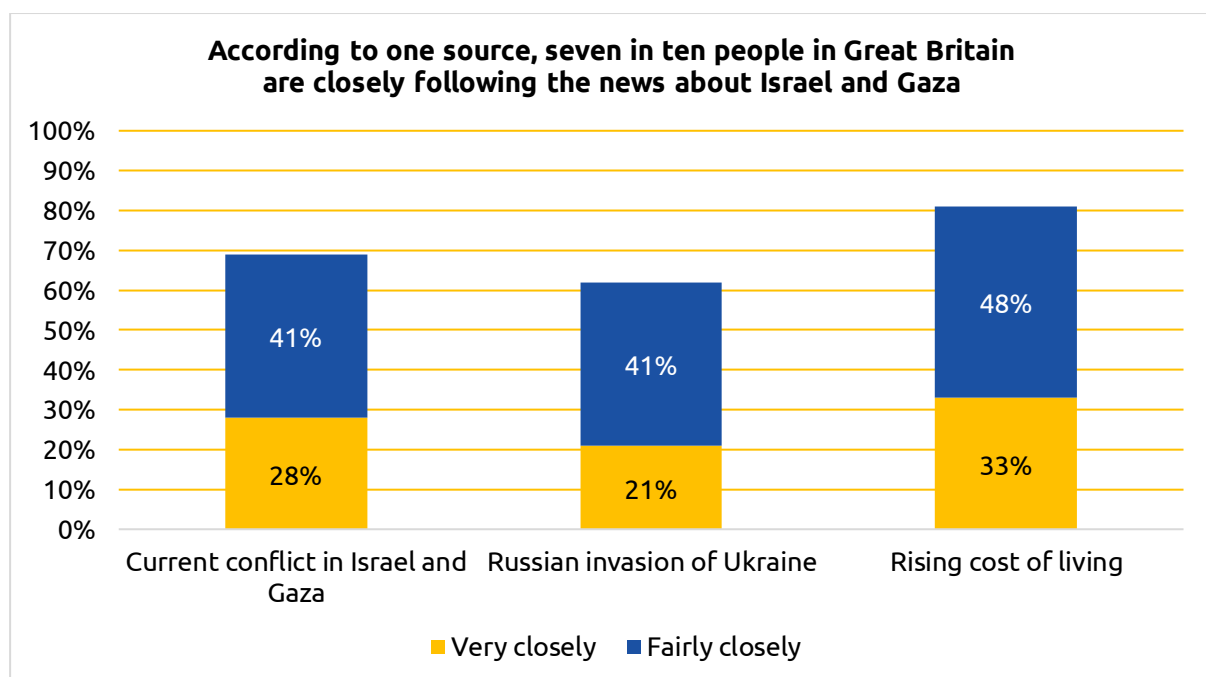


Question: How do you think the UK should respond to Israel's current military action in Gaza? [Response options as shown on chart]. YouGov data, 31 October - 1 November 2023; n=2193 GB adults.

There is some important nuance to note with regard to these results. YouGov asked a very similar question a week later (7-8 November data), but with slightly different wording for the first response option relating to a complete ceasefire. This time the option was “Should oppose Israel’s action and push for them to call a ceasefire” rather than simply “Should push for Israel to stop military action and call for a ceasefire.” With this amended wording – which added the notion of opposition to Israel’s action – support for a complete ceasefire fell to 31%, compared to 40% previously. Further work would be required to understand this more fully, but it suggests that the calls for a complete ceasefire do not necessarily align with opposition to Israel’s military action; in many cases they are likely to be based on a human response to seeing the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza, rather than a more fundamental critique of Israel.

## / Does the British public care at all?

With all this stated, to what extent do people in Great Britain actually care at all about what is going on in Israel and Gaza at present? Does the fact that approximately two-thirds of adults across Great Britain either don't know with which side they sympathise or support both sides equally mean that a significant majority isn't really engaged in the issues at all? Data gathered by Ipsos on October 25 suggest that this is not the case; on the contrary, almost three weeks into the war, about seven in ten said that they were following what was happening either 'very closely' or 'fairly closely,' a higher proportion than that following the war in Ukraine, and only about ten percentage points behind the proportion following the rising cost of living, an issue that directly affects all people across Great Britain. However, YouGov data gathered a week or so earlier (October 19-20; n=2052 – not shown), found rather lower proportions (13% following 'very closely' and 37% 'fairly closely'), suggesting either that interest grew significantly in the week between the two research exercises, or that the data on this issue are currently somewhat unreliable.



Question: How closely, if at all, have you been following stories about...? Data gathered by Ipsos on 25 October 2023; n=1020.

## / Conclusions

Anecdotally, there is a great deal of anxiety across the UK Jewish community at present. The fears are driven in large part by several factors: the scale and barbarity of the October 7 attacks; the close social and familial ties most UK Jews have with Israelis; the dramatic spike in antisemitic incidents that have occurred in the UK in the aftermath; the pro-Palestinian demonstrations that appear to tolerate antisemitic and hate speech; and some of the media reporting about the war which feels insensitive or blind to Jewish concerns and even, on occasion, serves to whip up hatred against Jews elsewhere, whether intentionally or not. Yet more than this, the October 7 attacks have conjured up deeply traumatic memories for Jews everywhere – of the Holocaust, of nineteenth and twentieth-century pogroms in Europe and the Middle East, and of recent terrorist attacks against Jewish targets in Europe and both North and South America. The failures of national authorities to protect Jews in those instances, and Israeli authorities in the case of October 7, leaves many Jews feeling existentially vulnerable – as if even the safe haven of Israel is

no longer equipped to protect Jews from antisemitic assault. One of the most fundamental principles of Zionism is that the State of Israel constitutes the home of the Jewish People – the one place Jews will be guaranteed sanctuary in the face of persecution elsewhere. The Hamas attack, the genocidal ideas that lie behind it, the countries and terrorist forces that support it along with those that tolerate it or turn a blind eye, leave many Jews in the UK and elsewhere feeling vulnerable, isolated and uncertain about their place in the world.

It is in this context that one needs to consider the data in this report. It is not unreasonable to accept that many people do not have a particular view on the current war or the deeper conflict between Israel and the Palestinians; in general, most people do not particularly engage in geopolitical issues that do not affect them directly. However, it is clear that many people across Great Britain are concerned about what is going on in Israel and Gaza, and many hold strong views. From a Jewish communal angle, it is important to understand any shifts in sympathy that may be taking place and to monitor them going forward – both pre- and post-October 7 data provide us with benchmarks against which to compare current and future opinion, and are valuable inputs into determining what factors may influence views over time.

It is similarly important to note the striking generational differences in opinion; there is much greater sympathy for the Palestinians than for the Israelis among 18-24-year-olds compared to their elders, which raises important questions for Israel about why this is the case, and what, if anything ought to be done in response. Not dissimilarly, common scepticism about Israel's claims to do all in its power to minimise harm to Palestinian civilians poses major challenges to the Israeli government, military and those who advocate on behalf of the country. Israel's arguments and evidence to the contrary are clearly falling on deaf ears in many instances, which is particularly striking given the lengths to which the Israeli military goes in this regard, and the strict rules of conduct it follows. At the same time, there is quite widespread antipathy towards Hamas and its supporters in the UK – significant proportions feel that the police should be making more arrests, although once again, 18-24-year-olds stand out as exceptional.

Public opinion on these and related issues ought to be monitored on a continual basis, and we are grateful to YouGov and Ipsos for investigating them over time. Nevertheless, if Jewish community bodies wish to understand opinions on an ongoing basis, a more proactive approach to data-gathering and analysis is required.

## / 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 influence Jewish life positively. Web: [www.jpr.org.uk](http://www.jpr.org.uk).

## / Author

**Dr Jonathan Boyd** is the Executive Director of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and a former Jerusalem Fellow at the Mandel Institute in Israel. A specialist in contemporary Jewry with expertise in the study of Jews in the UK and across Europe, he is a Board member of the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry, and advisor to several trusts and foundations investing in contemporary European Jewish life. He holds a doctorate in education from the University of Nottingham, and an MA and BA in Jewish history from University College London.