



Canadian public opinion about conflict in the Middle East

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FINAL REPORT

**Environics
Institute**
For Survey Research

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CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL
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The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established in 2006 as an independent non-profit organization to promote relevant and original public opinion and social research on important issues of public policy and social change. It is through such research that organizations and individuals can better understand Canada today, how it has been changing, and where it may be heading. www.EnvironicsInstitute.org

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The CIC's mission is to provide a platform for all Canadians to engage in global affairs. Since 1928, as a non-partisan, charitable organization, the CIC has provided a platform for citizens to help shape Canada's place in the world. Indeed, at our 18 branches located across Canada, our volunteers host numerous in-person and online speaker events year-round for our members and the general public. <https://thecic.org/>

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Background

Israel and its Arab neighbours have been locked in conflict for a very long time, but the past year has witnessed the most intense violence and suffering in this region in more than 50 years. The horrendous Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 was met with an all-out invasion of Gaza by Israeli forces that has become a protracted war of attrition, with devastating destruction visited on the Gazan population. This conflict has had repercussions in Canada, reflected in a jump in the number of hate-motivated incidents directed at Jews, Muslims and Arabs, and sustained student protests on university campuses. War in the Middle East, and the underlying politics behind it, appear to be creating divisions among some Canadians in a way that has never been seen before.

How do Canadians as a whole view the current war between Israel and Hamas? How has their perspective about conflict in the region changed over time? These questions were addressed through a national survey conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, in partnership with the Canadian International Council (CIC). This survey is part of the Institute's ongoing Focus Canada research program, which was launched in 1976 to measure Canadian public opinion on important issues over time as a matter of public record.

This survey included four questions to provide a current snapshot of public opinion, three of which were repeated from previous Focus Canada surveys dating back to the early 1980s that reveal how opinions have changed over time. This latest survey was based on telephone interviews conducted (via landline and cellphones) with a representative sample of 2,000 Canadians (ages 18 and over), between June 3 and 16, 2024. A sample of this size drawn from the population produces results accurate to within plus or minus 2.2 percentage points in 19 out of 20 samples. All results are expressed as percentages.

Executive Summary

The outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza has had an unprecedented impact on Canada. Since last fall, the country has witnessed rising levels of hate-motivated actions against Jews, Muslims and Arabs, sustained protests on university campuses, and heated rhetoric from public figures over what should be done. Conflict in the Middle East, and the underlying politics behind it, have created divisions among some Canadians and groups in a way that has never been seen before.

This latest survey reveals that the conflict has captured the attention of Canadians writ large, but has not divided the population *as a whole* more substantially than in previous decades. Comparisons with Focus Canada surveys stretching back four decades shows that most Canadians continue to adopt a neutral position rather than express sympathies for either side in the conflict. At the same time, the public is now less sure than in past years about the Canadian government's foreign policy in this region, perhaps due in part to the complexity of the conflict and the heavy toll on civilians on both sides. Key findings from the survey include the following:

- One in four (24%) Canadians have been closely following the current conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, with another four in ten (42%) following it somewhat, and one-third (35%) not following it much or not at all. This level of attention being paid to the region is broadly similar to what Canadians reported in the 1970s and early 1980s. In 2024, it is Ontarians, Canadians ages 60 plus and those with a university degree who are most likely to be following this conflict closely.
- Apart from how closely the conflict is being followed, most (83%) Canadians report having experienced an emotional reaction to it. This is most likely to take the form of sadness (56%), but also anger (30%), worry (28%), fear (14%) or hope (9%). Few say the Middle East conflict has evoked indifference (11%) or no feelings at all (6%).
- A majority of Canadians do not take sides in this current conflict, expressing either neutrality (50%) or no opinion (10%). The remainder are evenly divided between those who have pro-Palestinian sympathies (21%) and those who favour the Israelis (18%). Compared to 2006, fewer take a neutral position (down 14 percentage points) as increasing numbers adopt either a pro-Palestinian position (up 8) or offer no opinion (up 8). Younger Canadians are more likely to be pro-Palestinian, but the modest rise in this sentiment is evident across entire the population.
- Just over one in four (27%) now believe Canada's Middle East policy strikes the right balance, reflecting a sharp decline from opinions expressed between 2001 and 2011. A plurality (41%) now offers no opinion on this question, reflecting uncertainty and possibly mixed feelings about their government's position on this conflict. There is much less change since 2006 in the proportions who believe Canada's foreign policy is either too pro-Israeli (24%, up 1) or too pro-Palestinian (9%, up 6).

Following the conflict in Gaza

One in four Canadians are closely following the current conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, not dissimilar to the level of attention given to the region in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The war in Gaza has received widespread media coverage since last October, but the story competes for attention with other issues and events of interest and concern to Canadians, especially pertaining to the current economic conditions and the cost of living.

The survey asked Canadians how closely they have been following the current conflict between Israel and Hamas over the past few months. One in four (24%) say they have been following this conflict closely, with another four in ten (40%) indicating they are following it somewhat. One-third of Canadians say they are following this conflict not much (20%) or not at all (15%).

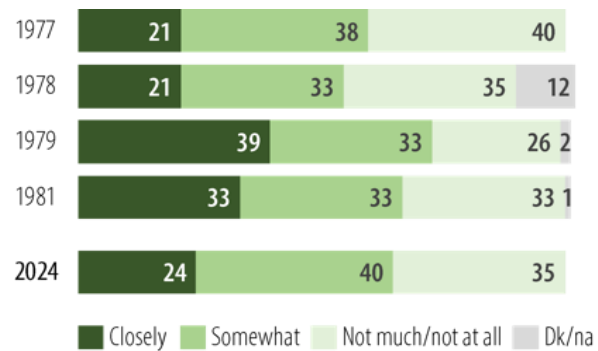
How does this compare to the attention paid to events in the Middle East in past decades?

Results from Focus Canada surveys conducted between 1977 and 1981 reveal that Canadians' focus on this region at that time was not significantly different from what it is today.¹ Over this earlier period, between 21 and 39 percent of Canadians reported to be closely following relations between Israel and the Arab countries, compared to between 26 and 40 percent who were paying little or no attention.

In 2024, close attention to the Israel-Hamas conflict is most widely reported by Ontarians (32%) and least so by Quebecers (11%). Interest in this issue also increases along with educational attainment and age. It is Canadians ages 60 plus (33%) and those with a university degree (30%) who are most likely to be closely following this conflict.

How closely are you following the current conflict in the Middle East

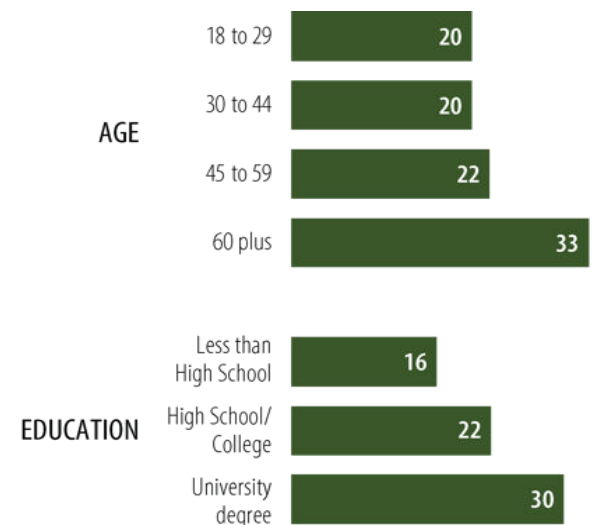
1977 – 2024



Q.1 I would like to ask about the current conflict between Israel and Hamas that has been underway in Gaza since last fall. Have you been following this conflict closely, somewhat, not much, or not at all?

Closely following the current conflict in the Middle East

2024 By age and education



¹ In the previous surveys, the question asked about relations between Israel and the Arab countries.

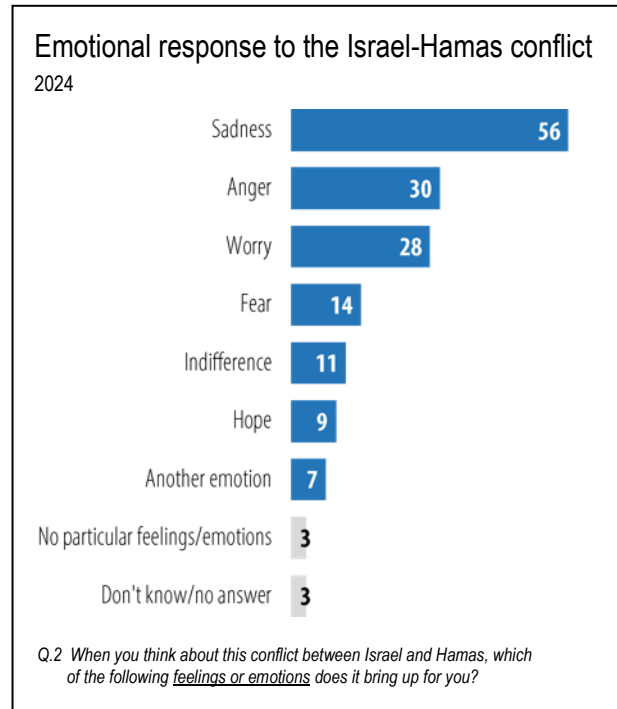
Emotional response to the conflict

More than eight in ten Canadians report having experienced an emotional response to the Israel-Hamas conflict, the most common being sadness. Significant minorities say the conflict has evoked feelings of anger or worry, with fewer experiencing fear, hope or indifference.

This conflict has deeply affected Canadians in the Jewish, Arab and Muslim communities, especially those with personal ties to the region. What impact has the conflict had on the broader Canadian population in terms of emotions and feelings it may be evoking? Survey participants were asked whether they experienced any of six feelings or emotions as a result of this ongoing conflict.

Almost all Canadians identify one or more of the six emotional reactions presented, with a majority (56%) saying they experienced sadness due to this conflict. Three in ten say they felt anger (30%) or worry (28%), while smaller proportions experienced fear (14%), indifference (11%) or hope (9%). Survey participants were also given the opportunity to volunteer other feelings not presented in the question, and a small percentage (7%) did so (identifying such emotions as disappointment, frustration, confusion or disgust).

Notably, very few Canadians did not identify any emotional response to the Israel-Hamas conflict (3%) or otherwise did not offer a response to the question (3%).



The emotional response to the Israel-Hamas conflict is broadly similar across the population; there are few notable differences across regions or demographic sub-groups, or by how closely people have been following the issue. Sadness is most likely to be mentioned by women and Canadians with a university degree, while anger is most prominent among those who have been closely following the conflict. Among those who are not following the conflict much if at all, two-thirds (66%) still identify an emotional reaction other than indifference.

Middle East sympathies

A majority of Canadians do not take sides in the Israel-Hama conflict, with the rest evenly split between those expressing pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli sympathies. This reflects a shift since 2006 when a larger proportion was neutral and fewer sympathized with the Palestinians.

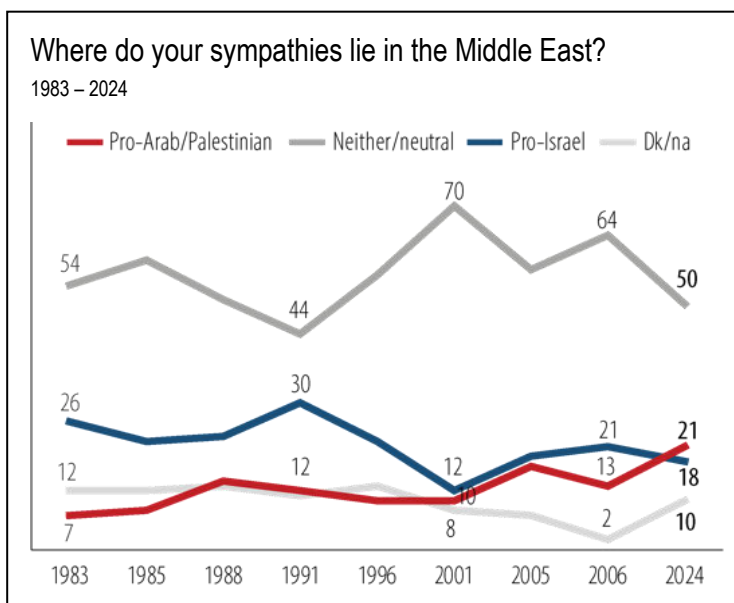
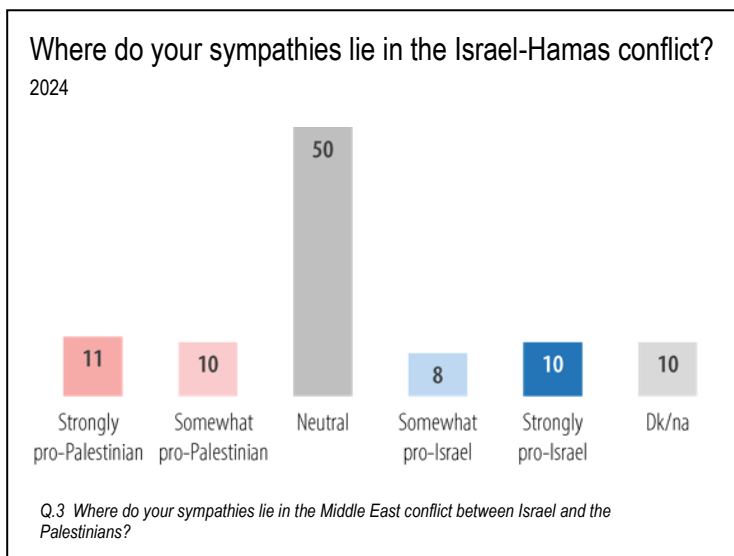
With most Canadians following the Israel-Hamas war and experiencing an emotional response, how do they view the two populations in this conflict? Half (50%) of Canadians do not sympathize with either side and say they are neutral. Most of the remainder are evenly split between those who are pro-Palestinian (21%) and those who are pro-Israeli (18%), with another 10 percent who did not offer an opinion on this question.

Pro-Palestinian sympathies are most evident among younger Canadians, especially those 18 to 29 (30%), as well as among those with a university degree (27%) and those living in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (29%).²

Pro-Israeli sentiments are most likely to be expressed by Canadians ages 60 plus (24%) and Albertans (29%).

Not surprisingly, Canadians who take a side in this conflict are more likely to be paying attention (it is being closely followed by 35% of who are pro-Palestinian, and 32% who are pro-Israeli). Those who sympathize with either side are also among the most likely to experience anger in response to the conflict.

Focus Canada has been tracking Canadians' sympathies in the Middle East since the early 1980s, providing a valuable historical perspective on how opinions have evolved over time.³ Since 2006 (the most recent survey prior to the current one), the proportion of Canadians who say they are neutral has declined significantly (down 14 percentage points), with increasing percentages who now express pro-Palestinian sympathies (up 8 points) or have no opinion (up 8 points). The percentage with pro-Israeli sympathies has declined marginally (down 3).



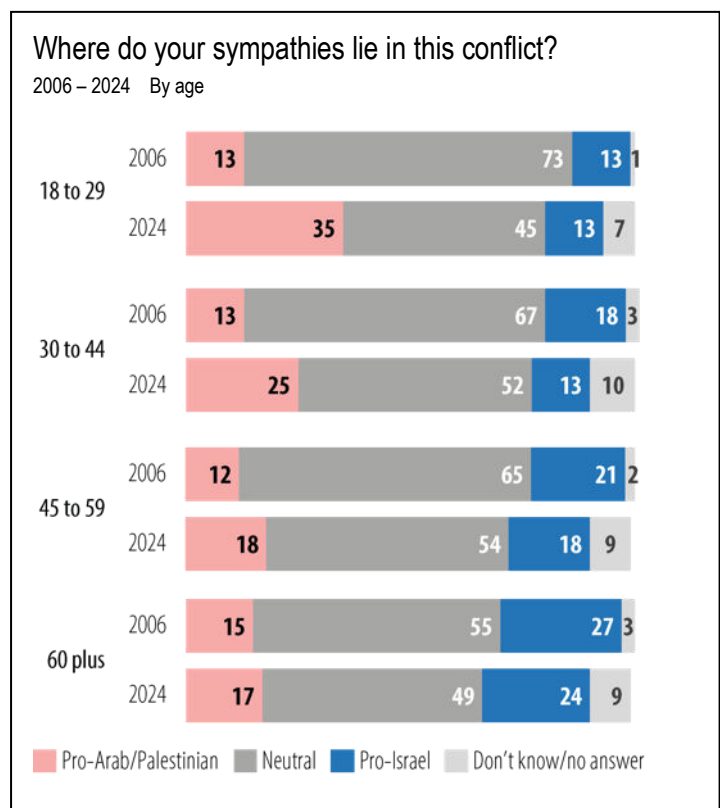
² The sample under-represents Canadians ages 18 to 29. This age cohort has been weighted to bring it into proper proportion in the population, but the small subsample (N=91) means the results for this age group are less precise than for other groups.

³ In the surveys conducted between 1983 and 2006, the question asked if sympathies were “pro-Israel” or pro-Arab.”

Looking back over the past four decades, Canadians' sympathies in the Middle East have fluctuated significantly over time, although a plurality or majority have always expressed a neutral position. It was in 1991 when opinions were most divided, with almost as many people taking a side as were neutral. In that year, three in ten (30%) Canadians were pro-Israeli (marking a high point for this sentiment), compared with 12 percent who sympathized with the Arab side.

The shift in public sympathies between 2006 and 2024 is evident across generations of Canadians, but is more evident among younger Canadians:

- It is among the youngest Canadians (ages 18 to 29) where the increase in pro-Palestinian sentiments is most pronounced (35%, up 22 points), offsetting a significant decline in those who are neutral (45%, down 28). The proportion who are pro-Israeli is unchanged (13%).
- Canadians 30 to 59 show a similar pattern but with smaller changes: A more modest rise in pro-Palestinian sympathies and corresponding decline in neutral sentiments. For these cohorts, there is also a marginal decline in the proportion who sympathize with Israel.
- Canadians ages 60 plus have changed comparatively little in their sympathies in the Middle East conflict. This cohort continues to be the most sympathetic to Israel, but marginally less so than in 2006 (24%, down 3).



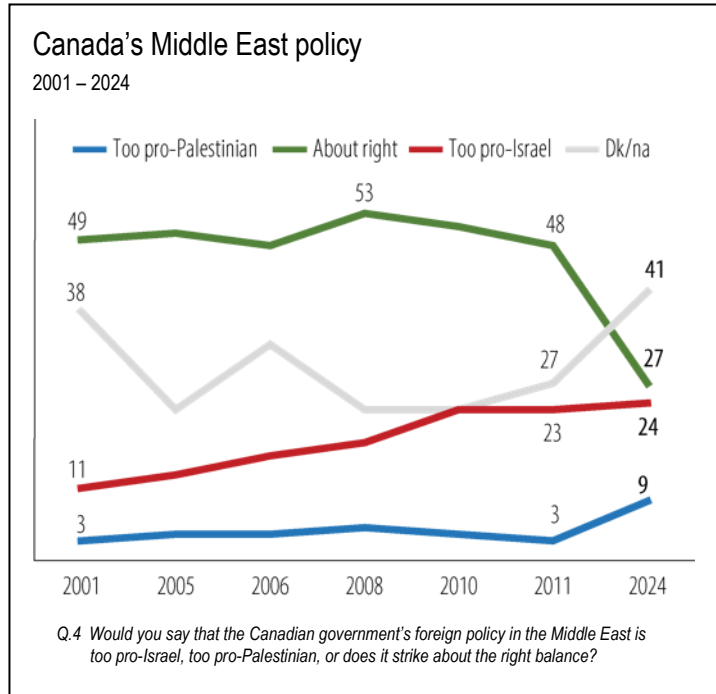
Canada's Middle East policy

Only one in four believe Canada's Middle East policy strikes the right balance, reflecting a sharp decline over the past 20 years as a greater number now offer no opinion. One-quarter say Canada is too pro-Israel, versus one-tenth who believe it is too pro-Palestinian.

Over the past two decades leading up to 2024, most Canadians have judged their country's foreign policy in the Middle East as appropriately balanced in its approach. The current war between Israel and Hamas has disrupted this perspective, as increasing numbers are now unsure or unaware of how the Canadian government is responding to this complex and tragic conflict.

Just over one in four (27%) Canadians now believe their country's Middle East foreign policy strikes the right balance (down 21 percentage points from 2011); this is the lowest proportion recorded since this question was first asked in 2001.

This decline in positive opinion about Canada's foreign policy in the Middle East is accompanied by a significant jump in the number of Canadians who express uncertainty or offer no opinion (41%, up 14). By comparison, there has been much less change in the proportions who say that Canada's foreign policy is either too pro-Israel (24%, up 1) or too pro-Palestinian (9%, up 6).



Similar to the public's sympathies in the Middle East, opinions about Canada's foreign policy vary by age and education. The country's foreign policy is most likely to be seen as too pro-Israel by those who 18 to 29 (32%), among whom this view has increased significantly since 2011 (up 18 percentage points). This age cohort is now the least of any to say that Canada's foreign policy strikes the right balance (17%, down 31), with a plurality not offering any opinion (46%, up 11). By comparison, Canadians ages 45 and older are now *more likely* than before to say foreign policy is too pro-Palestinian (10%, up 8) and it is those ages 60 plus who are now *less likely* to believe it is too pro-Israel (18%, down 10).

Predictably, public opinion of Canada's Middle East policy is strongly shaped by personal sympathies toward the two sides in the current conflict. Those who do not take sides are most likely to express uncertainty about government policy in the region:

- Among the 21 percent of Canadians who sympathize with the Palestinians, a clear majority (63%) say the country’s foreign policy is too pro-Israel, compared with only 18 percent who believe it strikes the right balance.
- Among the 18 percent who sympathize with the Israelis, one-third (34%) say the country’s foreign policy is too pro-Palestinian, compared with 29 percent who believe it strikes the right balance.
- Among Canadians who express neutrality in this conflict (comprising 50% of the population), only one-third (32%) believe the foreign policy strikes the right balance, with half (51%) unsure or offer no opinion. The remainder of this group are more likely to judge the foreign policy as too pro-Israel (13%) than too pro-Palestinian (4%).

