

**Lebanese American University**

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*Double-Edged Double Standards: The Implications of Public Opinion for Western Stances on  
Israeli-Hamas Conflict*

by

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**Abstract**

The Israeli-Palestinian issue has long been a source of international contention. Throughout the years, Western support to Israel has become a staple of the conflict. As such, research on the matter often assumes an incontrovertible Israeli-Western partnership. However, recent outbursts of violence have been met with growing outrage about Israel's actions, whether from the general public or the Global South. Simultaneously, there have been signs of the West's lessening enthusiasm when it comes to backing Israel unconditionally. Existing literature points to a strong relationship between public opinion and government stance, including foreign policy, but this has not been explored in the context of Western (particularly European) views on Israel and Palestine. As such, this senior study thesis aims to examine the relationship between public opinion that is increasingly favorable to Palestine and shifts in the unqualified support given by the British and French governments to Israel. It consists of a cross-case analysis within a longitudinal design and relies on qualitative data. The thesis hypothesizes a correlation between shifting public opinion and changes in Western foreign policy on Israel. It focuses on discerning patterns between French and British responses to the 2014 Gaza war and the current Israeli-Hamas conflict. Its findings highlight a link between domestic and international empathy towards Gaza and less British and French governmental support for Israel, moderated by internal factors such as demographics and party politics.

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**Abbreviations**

BBC British Broadcasting Corporation

EU European Union

FP Foreign Policy

ICJ International Court of Justice

JDL Jewish Defense League

UK United Kingdom

UN United Nations

US United States

### *A. Introduction*

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict dates to 1948 when Israel first declared its independence. Though the United Nations' partition plan clearly delimited an Arab state and a Jewish state, Israel went on to occupy Palestinian territories outside its determined borders. This launched a cycle of oppression characterized by human rights violations such as arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and blockades. In recent years, several intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, including the UN and Human Rights Watch, have produced reports on Israeli breaches of international law. The reports vary between a mere condemnation and the classification of Israel as an apartheid state. Despite such claims, Israel has faced little to no consequences for its allegedly unlawful actions, with its expansion into Palestinian territories remaining unregulated. This stands in stark contrast with other cases such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which prompted a swift and definitive response from the Western community. The discrepancy between the West's treatment of Israel and that of other countries highlights the special immunity, or perhaps impunity, granted to Israel. In fact, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has long been a source of international contention. The ongoing Israeli-Hamas "war", which is the latest outburst of visible violence in this protracted conflict, is no exception. It has been a source of divide between the Global North and the Global South, with most Western countries standing behind Israel and its "right to self-defense". Though the war was triggered by Hamas' operation against Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, its branding as an Israeli-Hamas clash implies that it solely targets the Islamic militant movement, and the Gazan death toll nearing 35,000 suggests otherwise. To this end, many countries of the Global South have pointed out the West's double standards in promoting democracy and human rights and are seemingly leading the charge for Israeli accountability. Additionally, criticism of

Western governments' unconditional support of Israel has risen sharply among their own populations, with an unprecedented number of protests demanding a ceasefire.

In an increasingly polarized world order, the soft power aspects of FP have played a role in pushing the West towards policies that are more palatable to the rest of the world. Losing the moral high ground and legitimacy of its "rules-based" order is a risk that the West cannot afford. As such, it is plausible that the West has found itself bound by public opinion with regard to high-visibility issues, including the current Gaza crisis. Recent months appear to have been marked by a shift in the unqualified support given by countries such as the UK and France to Israel. It is therefore interesting to take a closer look at public opinion and its impact on the policy of Western governments when it comes to Israel and Hamas.

This senior study thesis will tackle the following research question: In the context of an increasingly polarized world order, how has public opinion impacted Western stances, namely those of UK and France, on Israeli-Hamas conflict? It is important to answer this question as it sheds light on the dynamics that make up Western support of Israel. Indeed, the pro-Israel attitude of many Western states has become a sort of given in studies on the conflict. However, answering this question would aid in recharacterizing the "immutable" Israeli-Western relationship. Moreover, it is highly relevant to the current political landscape and provides a basis for understanding the influence of public opinion on the Israeli-Hamas conflict, which may reveal ways for citizens to influence divisive issues.

This thesis will rely on a post-colonial lens to observe the interactions between public opinion, domestic and international, and Western reactions to Israeli-Hamas conflict. It will focus on the cases of two traditionally pro-Israel countries, the UK and France. It argues that changes in

public opinion, specifically in favor of Palestine, may induce shifts in the French and British governments' approaches to the conflict away from Israel.

### ***B. Scope of the Study***

The thesis will discuss the cases of the UK and France individually across two events. First, it will look at their actions in relation to the 2014 Gaza war, focusing on the period between July and December 2014. Then, it will dissect their response to the 2023 Israeli-Hamas war, limiting the analysis to the period between October 2023 and April 2024. The chosen periods facilitate an overview of the dynamics between Western states and Israel through the analysis of all actions taken by the UK and France as a result of or in response to each conflict. They help illustrate the progression of public opinion across two key events and include mass protests, protest bans, media controversies, executive statements, and intergovernmental votes. The intervals also account for shifts in the polarity of the world order and the popularization of alternative and social media.

### ***C. Literature Review and Gaps***

Existing literature relevant to this thesis may be divided into two sections. First, scholars have tackled western stances on Israeli-Hamas conflict by dissecting the special relationship between the US and Israel as well as the latter's fluctuating ties to the EU. They have pointed to the resulting impunity accorded to Israel throughout the crisis. Second, research has assessed the influence of public opinion on the conflict, and more specifically on the foreign policy of involved states, through the intervening role of media.

## **Western Rhetoric on Israeli-Hamas Conflict**

### *US, EU, and Israel*

While there is a widely held belief that Israel has had full Western support since its inception, the literature shows that the West hesitated in its policy on Israel in the years following



its establishment. Indeed, countries such as the UK and the US feared that Israel would pose a threat to their oil and security interests in the Middle East, with the US rescinding its support for the UN partition plan in 1948. At the time, France was a notable exception as it provided Israel with advanced military support, becoming one of its closest allies. Overall, the West's view of the Jewish state as a proxy for Soviet influence dampened the possibility for broader support. However, the intersection between post-World War II anti-fascism and Cold War anti-communism highlighted the role that Israel could play in communist containment with support from the West.<sup>1</sup> In 1969, the US replaced France as Israel's most trustworthy ally. This marked a turning point with the West's assistance facilitating Israeli intransigence in subsequent regional conflicts.<sup>2</sup> In 1997, Hamas was designated a terrorist group by the US and EU and increasingly isolated. Following Hamas' shocking 2006 electoral victory, the West conditioned further assistance to Gaza on Hamas recognizing Israel and renouncing violence.<sup>3</sup> Though Hamas refused, the following years witnessed a rise in the group's commitment to talks with Israel. By 2014, Hamas had conceded to the West's conditions and agreed to the creation of a national consensus government. However, the prospect of a pragmatic Hamas incited Israeli fears and pushed the West to halt the agreement, thwarting Palestinian attempts at nonviolent resolution and potentially leading to an escalation in aggression.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, the literature distinguishes between the "special" US-Israeli relationship and nuanced Israel-EU dynamics. It should be noted that the scholarship mostly takes the E3 – Germany, France, and UK – as the lens through which to analyze European relations with Israel. Throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Israel-EU relations have been partly characterized by the EU's focus

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *Israel's Moment* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 452-453.

<sup>2</sup> Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 192-193.

<sup>3</sup> Nathan J. Brown, *Western Policy toward Hamas* (The International Spectator 43, 2008)

<sup>4</sup> Nathan Thrall, *How the West chose war in Gaza* (International New York Times, 2014).

on advancing a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Europe’s commitment to a two-state solution has featured as a point of contention between both parties.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the EU’s “normative” perspective on the Middle East contrasts with its sometimes one-sided actions, damaging its legitimacy across the region and limiting the extent to which it can influence both Israel and Arab countries.<sup>7</sup>

### *Israeli Impunity*

With most of the West according near-unconditional support to Israel, it is unsurprising that the Jewish state has been able to foster a culture of impunity. Though the duty to uphold international law falls on international organizations, it should be noted that they lack the tools for effective enforcement and thus rely mostly on the compliance of states.<sup>8</sup> This is exemplified by the lack of accountability towards the ICJ’s 2004 opinion that urged Israel to end construction of the Wall and provide reparations to affected Palestinians.<sup>9</sup> The scholarship indicates that the cocoon of impunity afforded to Israel is vastly dependent on the diplomatic cover which the West, namely the US, has provided it with. Nevertheless, some argue that the accession of Palestine to the Rome Statute and the ICC’s recognition of Palestinians’ right to self-determination in 2021 have created an environment less favorable to Israeli impunity.<sup>10</sup>

## **The Role of Public Opinion**

### *Media Influence*

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<sup>5</sup> Oded Eran and Shimon Stein, *Israel and the New European Parliament: No Spring in the Offing* (Institute for National Security Studies, 2019), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Mertes, *Uneasy Neighbours: the EU and Israel – A Paradoxical Relationship* (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2015), p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> Guy Harpaz and Asaf Shamis, *Normative Power Europe and the State of Israel: An Illegitimate Eutopia?* (JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies 48, no. 3, 2010), pp. 600–616.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Hurd, *International Organizations: Politics, Law, Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 9-11.

<sup>9</sup> Renske Hollants, *Advancing Accountability? Orientalism, Impunity and International Crimes*. (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2022), pp. 93-94.

<sup>10</sup> Sajjad Abbassi, *The Decision of the International Criminal Court in the Palestine Situation: A Beginning in the Prevention of Impunity for Israeli Crimes* (Iranian Review for UN Studies, 2023), p. 43.

Media has been shown to play an important role in manufacturing the public's approval for government actions. Studies have demonstrated the distortion of facts surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is often depicted in a manner favorable to Israel.<sup>11</sup> They acknowledge that a mainstream media misrepresentation of the events in Israel and the Occupied Territories may well play a role in strengthening Israeli impunity.<sup>12</sup> This distortion is facilitated by the Western claim that anti-Zionist stances are inherently antisemitic. Such a reductionist approach has contributed to the dismissal of even the most well-founded criticisms of the Israeli state as hateful or racist propaganda.<sup>13</sup> It has been theorized that contradicting Western narratives is not profitable for media outlets owned by conglomerates whose interests overlap with those of Western governments. In fact, academics have criticized the increased focus on sensationalism and profit at the detriment of accurate representation.

Nevertheless, there has emerged scholarship examining the potential of new and alternative media platforms in combatting misinformation on Israel and Palestine. Studies argue that the digital era has initiated a new phase in the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, disrupting the gatekeeping role played by mainstream media and emphasizing grassroots voices.<sup>14</sup> A main reason behind this disruption is the rise in citizen journalism enabled by platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok.<sup>15</sup> The latter are now recognized as transformative forces in contemporary conflicts as they have become primary sources of information and avenues

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<sup>11</sup> Jonas Xavier Caballero, *The Impact of Media Bias on Coverage of Catastrophic Events* (University of Pittsburgh, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Neureiter, *Sources of bias in coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict*. (Israel Affairs, 23(1), 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Graham Holton, *Criticism of Israel and Zionism is not antisemitism* (Guardian, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Awuor Kokeyo, *Exploring The Dynamics Of Social Media In Shaping Narratives And Perceptions In The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Preliminary Reflections* (African Journal of Emerging Issues 5 (17), 2023), pp. 181-183.

<sup>15</sup> Bader Alakklouk and Aida Mokhtar, *Facebook and Its Uses and Gratifications: A Study of Palestinian Students at a Public University in Malaysia* (IIUM Repository (IRep), 2019).

for public diplomacy.<sup>16</sup> In the context of the 2023 Israeli-Hamas war, the use of social media to document Gazan reality translated into wider empathetic engagement with the Palestinian cause, which may have triggered on-the-ground protests and donation campaigns.<sup>17</sup> However, the ability of online platforms to advance non-Western narratives is challenged by moderation policies. One study shows stricter moderation of Arabic content compared to Hebrew content across Twitter and Instagram, first seen during the 2021 Sheikh Jarrah expulsions.<sup>18</sup> To this end, scholars recognize that algorithms are a reflection of broader power imbalances exacerbated by the centralization of moderation in the hands of few Western companies.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, research points to the double-edged nature of social media as it has the potential to sow just as much division as unity. The true test of media influence is thus in its ability to sustain engagement outside the digital sphere<sup>20</sup>.

### *Foreign Policy Implications*

There is an empirical link between public opinion and political speech on two fronts: agenda setting and personal repositioning. When exposed to public opinion, officials not only modify the language of their speeches to reflect that of the public but may also adjust their positions to the public's preferences.<sup>21</sup> Studies have also pointed out the importance of soft power by examining the influence of foreign public opinion on a country's foreign policy, especially when it comes to controversial or globally significant issues.<sup>22</sup> It seems that a country's actions are not

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<sup>16</sup> Iman Garra-Alloush and Wissam Magadley, *War of Words: Virtualizing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict on Facebook in Times of Crisis* (AL-Majma 17, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Mohamed Buheji, Emmanuel Mushimiyimana and Dunya Ahmed, *Empathic Engagement with Gaza: Dynamics, Impact, and Prospects* (IAEME, 2024), p. 142.

<sup>18</sup> Houda Elmimouni et al., *Shielding or Silencing?: An Investigation into Content Moderation during the Sheikh Jarrah Crisis* (Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction 8, no. GROUP, 2024), pp. 17-18.

<sup>19</sup> Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2020), pp. 158-159.

<sup>20</sup> Ifeanyi Martins Nwokeocha, *Fighting Wars, Killing People: New Media And Awareness Of Gaza-Israeli 2023 War* (International Journal of Business and Quality Research 2, no. 01, 2024), pp. 7-8.

<sup>21</sup> Anselm Hager and Hanno Hilbig, *Does Public Opinion Affect Political Speech?* (American Journal of Political Science 64 (4), 2020), pp. 933, 935.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin E. Goldsmith and Yusaku Horiuchi, *In Search of Soft Power: Does Foreign Public Opinion Matter for US Foreign Policy?* (World Politics 64, no. 3, 2012), p. 583.

the sole determinants of its popularity, but rather how these actions are perceived. Times of crisis offer states the possibility to redefine their image on the international stage through aligned narratives in domestic and foreign media.<sup>23</sup> To that end, scholars argue that support for a war is determined partly by the media but also by factors such as the objective of the conflict and the number of casualties.<sup>24</sup>

### **Gaps**

The literature examines different Western stances and policies regarding Israel and Hamas. However, it presents a rather homogeneous view of Western positions vis-à-vis Israeli-Hamas conflict and neglects delving into the details. For instance, though it discusses the difference between US-Israel and Israel-EU ties, it does not account for the behavior of individual EU states, especially in the aftermath of Brexit. It also presents a holistic overview, failing to properly inspect shifts in stance or identify trends. Furthermore, the literature is evidently lacking when it comes to recent developments as Western positions on the 2023 war are yet to be studied. On another note, existing research covers the correlation between public opinion and foreign policy thoroughly, but not in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition to domestic opinions, studies fail to examine the implications of international pressures on European states in relation to the conflict.

It is important to fill the gap on current Western positions to better understand the dynamics going forward. Additionally, it would be interesting to build on present analysis of the link between media, public opinion, and policy from the perspective of a conflict as “divisive” as the one between Israel and Hamas, perhaps challenging the incontrovertible Israeli position.

### ***D. Argument, Hypothesis, Variables, and Concepts***

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<sup>23</sup> Kasey Rhee, Charles Crabtree, and Yusaku Horiuchi, Perceived Motives of Public Diplomacy Influence Foreign Public Opinion (*Political Behavior* 46, no. 1, 2023), pp. 683–703.

<sup>24</sup> Mary-Kate Lizotte, *Factors Influencing Popular Support for War* (Political Science, 2023).

## **Arguments**

It can be argued that increased polarization in international affairs has made soft power more attractive to all states, particularly Western major powers, as a manner to maintain dominance outside military and economic strength. It can also be argued that the controversial nature of an issue, such as that of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, increases its influence on an involved country's reputation domestically and internationally. Thus, Western states, including the UK and France, value the way outbursts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reflect on their image. Furthermore, it can be said that the desire to exert soft power may result in a need to safeguard one's reputation through conforming to public attitudes. It therefore can be claimed that the French and British governments' responsiveness is being tested by the public's increasing empathy towards Gaza, sustained through online and in-person mobilization.

## **Hypothesis**

It can be hypothesized that public opinion surrounding a controversial issue, such as the Israeli-Hamas conflict, is more likely to influence foreign policy in an increasingly polarized world. If public opinion shifts away from Israel towards Palestine, then Western states (particularly the UK and France), are less likely to offer Israel unconditional support.

## **Variables**

The hypothesis illustrates Palestinian-friendly trends in domestic and international opinion being mirrored by shifts in British and French government stances on the conflict, all in the context of growing global polarization. The antecedent variable is thus the increasingly polarized world order as it is the structure within which all states interact and where they have a stake in upholding a certain image. The independent variable is shifting public opinion as it is considered a main factor behind changes in Western foreign policy. The dependent variable is unconditional support

of Israel. The assumed relationship in this hypothesis is that of a correlation between growing domestic and international disapproval of Israeli actions and increasingly conditional British and French support to the country.

## **Concepts**

The increasingly polarized world order refers to the rise of several states to major power status and the gradual loss of US, and even Western, hegemony over the international system. In this thesis, it specifically includes challenges to Western powers from the Global South. Public opinion is the collection of views, values, and sentiments of the population. For the purpose of this thesis, public opinion encompasses both domestic and international views of a state's actions. Both are measured using opinion polls and indicators such as the number of protests on the conflict. Unconditional support of Israel entails its backing without any reservations, regardless of the legality or morality of its actions. It is assessed on the basis of language used in official statements or policies.

### ***E. Methodology***

This thesis will rely on a cross-case analysis within a longitudinal design. The selected cases, UK and France, will be assessed over two points in time, and then compared. The analysis will be qualitative and based on archival research targeting primary sources such as opinion polls, official statements, policy documents, governmental websites, media reports, UN voting records, and parliamentary voting records. The media outlets used in the analysis will consist of a variety of platforms such as France24, Reuters, BBC, Al Jazeera, and New York Times for an inclusive representation of the controversial issue.

## **Justification**

The longitudinal design seems to be the most appropriate approach to studying each of the cases at different points in time. For each case, it will look at the same elements, including government, public opinion, and media, first in relation to the 2014 Gaza war then the 2023 Israeli-Hamas war. This will facilitate the detection of trends between these key events and help determine whether there is change, and if so, in what direction(s). The analysis of two cases permits better coverage of the gap surrounding European public opinion and stances on Israel. As for the cross-case analysis, it is fitting to contrast the two countries in order to discern any patterns. This would help highlight common factors between the cases and strengthen the hypothesis, but also distinguish differences that may provide the basis for innovative research. Finally, the qualitative analysis was chosen as the best lens through which to understand the variables – public opinion and government policy – since content and document analysis contextualize and simplify the tracking of even the most subtle changes in language.

### *F. Analysis and Findings*

#### **France**

French-Israeli relations date to the establishment of the Jewish state. Though France was once one of Israel's closest – and only – Western allies, it has long advocated for a “just” peace process in the Middle East. Its position is influenced by a variety of factors, including historical ties and security interests in the region as well as internal politics and demographics.

At the time of its occurrence, the 2014 Gaza war was the deadliest bout of open conflict between Israel and Palestinians in decades. It came in the wake of the collapse of the 2013-2014 peace talks, which stemmed partially from Israel's fear of a united Palestinian front as was mentioned in the literature. It resulted in the death of approximately 2,200 Palestinians, 69%-75% of whom were civilians according to the UNOCHA, and 73 Israelis of whom 67 soldiers. In his



first statement on the war, then French President Hollande expressed “solidarity with Israel” and stated that France “condemns aggression by Hamas”. In a phone call with Netanyahu, Hollande voiced his support for Israel taking all measures needed to defend its population against attacks. Notably missing from his remarks was any condemnation of Israeli strikes on Gazan civilians, which is likely to have stoked internal tensions in France. Indeed, the country has some of the largest Muslim and Jewish communities in Europe and has long faced a contrast between their values and its principle of “laïcité”. As such, developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often invoke mobilization among French residents. On July 13<sup>th</sup>, 10,000 people assembled in Paris to protest the Israeli offensive, with clashes eventually occurring between pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli groups. However, French and other Western media immediately focused the blame on the pro-Palestinian protestors, labeling them as antisemitic. In reality, videos indicated that the violence had most likely been instigated by the extremist Zionist group “Jewish Defense League”. It should be noted that despite violence having occurred on both sides, only members of the pro-Palestinian group were arrested while JDL went free.

The ultimately false narrative fostered by French news outlets such as Le Figaro served as the basis for the government’s decision to ban pro-Palestine rallies in Paris starting on July 14<sup>th</sup>. The protest ban was not received well, and demonstrations continued to take place despite clashes with riot police. Pro-Palestinian protestors’ commitment to the cause coincided with a shift in the French government’s stance from July 14<sup>th</sup> onwards. Hollande and Prime Minister Valls repeatedly stressed that the conflict in Gaza should not be “imported” into France, despite having themselves shown unequivocal support for Israel. It appeared as if the government was attempting to shift its initially inflammatory and one-sided position into neutral gear. Additionally, though France had historically supported a two-state solution, the government made no explicit mentions of it in the

first weeks of the conflict, further reinforcing a “remote” stance. However, as internal tensions intensified, the government’s position hardened. Hollande assured Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas that France condemned civilian deaths. The media, including the state-owned Radio France Internationale, highlighted that communication between Hollande and Abbas happened despite the lack of diplomatic relations between France and Palestine. Effort was put into depicting French response to the conflict as balanced and fair, but this did not mark the end of biased reporting on the war. In fact, most media, such as the state-owned France24, continued misrepresenting the full picture. They stressed Hamas’ use of human shields as justification for Israel’s indiscriminate bombings, emphasizing events that turned out to be only partly true according to Amnesty International. While these articles contributed to anti-Palestinian discourse in digital spaces and among French users, they did not deter those advocating for an end to bloodshed in Gaza. Protests took place on the 18<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, and 25<sup>th</sup> of July, some with governmental permission and others unlawfully. On July 18<sup>th</sup>, French Foreign Minister Fabius expressed concern over “Israel launching a ground offensive in Gaza”. On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, he condemned the “unjustified massacres” in Gaza and was joined by Defense Minister Le Drian who called for an immediate ceasefire to avoid “tragic” escalation. Of course, this occurred in parallel with a quickly mounting Gazan death toll. While there may be a correlation between the persistent pro-Palestine demonstrations and the change in the French government’s position, the wording of official statements also points to a concern with the increase in violence and casualties.

Interestingly, a poll surveying French public sympathies in relation to the conflict found that 70% of French people did not take sides, either being unsure or supporting both parties. However, among those who took a side, 18% leaned towards Palestine and 11% towards Israel. One could easily say that the majority of the population’s quasi-indifference in this case entails

that public opinion could not possibly be a determining factor in government decisions on the conflict. However, this majority proved to be a silent one in the public discourse on the war. Said discourse was dominated by the divide between France's large Muslim and Jewish communities which translated into a number of antisemitic attacks mirrored by an increase in Islamophobic sentiments. On the political scene, the ideological rift was apparent with leftist parties such as La France Insoumise standing behind pro-Palestinian groups while the far-right Front National supported Israel and denounced antisemitism. The ruling Parti Socialiste appeared to hold a centrist position, supporting Israel's right to self-defense but eventually calling for restraint. However, popular perception of the party painted it as trying to backtrack on Hollande's initially incendiary comments on the conflict and "save face". The endeavor was unsuccessful. As the conflict was drawing to a close, a series of polls by YouGov showed that 39% of surveyed French thought of Hollande's response to the conflict as inappropriate. The public was divided over the objectives of his policies, with 70% either unsure of the purpose or seeing them as neither helpful to Israel nor Palestine. Finally, 60% believed that France did not have diplomatic influence on the conflict. On November 29<sup>th</sup>, the French parliament voted on a motion to recognize Palestine as a state, yielding 339 to 151 votes in favor of recognition. However, it was emphasized that this motion was symbolic, and that further action rested with the executive. In a speech, Fabius refocused the attention on a political solution to the conflict and alleged that Palestinian state recognition hinged on the latter's successful participation in the peace process, which did not happen.

Israel's current "military campaign" in Gaza has been described as the most destructive in recent history by researchers. It has surpassed past Israeli operations, including the 2014 war, in length and destruction. The October 7<sup>th</sup> Hamas attack on Israel was immediately condemned by

current President Macron who declared his “unreserved solidarity” with Israel. In a visit to the Jewish state, Macron reaffirmed his support and even suggested that the anti-ISIS coalition should be engaged in fighting Hamas. It should be noted that France banned pro-Palestinian protests in the immediate aftermath of the attack, under the pretext of preventing antisemitism and violence. A French court later allowed them on ad-hoc basis, with thousands joining the demonstrations. The public show of support for Palestine coincided with a rise in antisemitic attacks and subsequent pro-Israeli protests, leaving the French administration to struggle with internal cohesion.

On November 9<sup>th</sup>, Macron seemed to pivot ever so slightly by hosting a humanitarian conference for Gaza where he once again spoke of Israel’s right to self-defense but also asked the country to halt the targeting of civilians. To an extent, history seems to repeat itself when it comes to France’s stance on Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The chronology of events following October 7<sup>th</sup> reveals a pattern, starting with unqualified support of Israel, through suppressing domestic pro-Palestinian sentiment, to a more flexible position in the face of tensions and violence. However, this time around, the French President was accused of “double-messaging” by recalibrating his stance according to the interests of the day. This may have harmed his voice in the MENA region. In fact, while this case study so far supports a correlation between persistent domestic opinion and a shift in government policy, it is yet to explore the impact of foreign opinion seen in the literature. Indeed, the literature pointed to the significant role that international opinion can play in directing a country’s policy when it comes to controversial issues. In this case, it is fair to say that international opinion has shifted away from Israel towards sympathy and outrage for Gaza. A January 2024 poll revealed that Israel’s global net favorability had dropped by 18.5 percentage points between September and December of the previous year. In Arab countries specifically, the shift in Macron’s position was largely overshadowed by his initial response. During a trip to the

Middle East, Macron highlighted that France's stance was "misunderstood" by both political actors and public opinion. Whether he was misunderstood or simply unforgiven can be debated. Indeed, the protests in front of French embassies in Tunisia or Lebanon made clear that France's recently humanitarian take on Gaza was insufficient. This may have provoked France's subsequent return to its traditionally "balanced" position wherein it advocates for peace and the "revival" of the two-state solution. On November 17<sup>th</sup>, Macron broke rank with the West and urged a long-term ceasefire, said the bombing of "babies, ladies, and old people" had no legitimacy and asked Israel to stop. France then repeatedly voted in favor of UN Security Council resolutions pushing for a ceasefire, and recently submitted a proposal advocating an "open-ended" truce that shows the Council's "intent" to grant Palestine full UN membership.

In fact, France marked a series of firsts in its approach to this conflict. In January, Foreign Minister Colonna openly criticized Israel's actions, stressing that it could not decide Gaza's future as the enclave is Palestinian, not Israeli land and urging a return to international law. On February 16<sup>th</sup>, Macron announced that the recognition of a Palestinian state was not a "taboo" for France, an unprecedented statement for a French executive leader. These shifts have occurred in parallel with a drop in French support for Israel from 65% to 56%, and an increase in condemnation of Israel from 35% to 44%. Not only has there been a rise in pro-Palestinian sentiment at home and abroad, but pro-Palestinian actors have become more outspoken or active in their stance. For instance, at the start of the 2023 war, Libya recalled its ambassador to France (among other countries) as a sign of discontentment with French policy. In contrast, the 2014 war did not witness any such displays of diplomatic pressure on the side of Palestine. The ICJ case against Israel has also shaken the foundations of the Western "rules-based" order. If there is one thing media platforms seem to have agreed upon during this war, it is that the case against Israel is not just

about Israel, but about the West as a whole. Outlets from France24 to Al Jazeera to the New York Times have been flooded with reports and opinion pieces on the “end” of Western rule.

### **The United Kingdom**

Similarly to France, the UK’s stake in the conflict is defined by its historical ties to the region and the country’s very own political dynamics.

When the 2014 Gaza war erupted, the UK’s response was unsurprisingly in line with that of other Western states – in favor of Israel. Then-Prime Minister David Cameron assured Netanyahu of “staunch support for Israel in the face of such attacks, and underlined Israel’s right to defend itself from them”. The one-sided comment drew backlash from the public. Throughout July, the UK maintained its strictly pro-Israel stance. On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond dismissed a UN Human Rights Council resolution condemning Israel, and in a visit to the latter stressed that the blame was on Hamas. This position was representative of the ruling Conservative party’s take on the conflict. In the streets, similarly to many other European countries, both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian groups were mobilizing. However, the pro-Palestinian group had a sizeable numerical advantage with a base in the British Muslim community, which was then ten times larger than the Jewish community. London saw several mass protests demanding an end to “Israeli aggression” and to “Free Palestine”, with some turning violent. The outrage was also expressed through letters to MPs, which quickly revealed division within the government and political arena. Labour and Liberal party members publicly opposed their Conservative coalition partners. Deputy PM Nick Clegg, from the Liberal party, asserted that Israel’s actions constituted a “deliberately disproportionate form of collective punishment”. The Labour party went a step further, pointing the finger at PM Cameron and calling his silence on the “killing of hundreds of innocent Palestinian civilians by Israel” “inexplicable” both to British

citizens and the international community. Around this time, a public opinion survey showed that British people were more pro-Palestinian than the French or Americans, as 30% sympathized with Palestine and only 12% with Israel. This could have been a simple reflection of the large pro-Palestine and Muslim communities in the UK, however, another poll actually showed British public opinion moving towards Palestinians since the start of the 2014 conflict.

On August 5<sup>th</sup>, the first Muslim woman to serve in a UK cabinet, Baroness Warsi, resigned from her post over the government's policy on Gaza which she characterized as "morally indefensible". Days later, another march for Gaza took place in London, garnering unprecedented support with up to 150,000 attendees. While Conservative officials stuck to the pro-Israel narrative, it can be said that their statements became gradually more conditional. Indeed, in August, Cameron's speech of support to Israel in the House of Commons called for its actions to be "proportionate" and expressed "concern about mounting civilian casualties". Though the escalation in violence certainly encouraged a more qualified approach towards the conflict, it was not the only factor. In fact, direct confirmation that the government had been considering public opinion on the matter came from Hammond who described the British public being highly aware of the untenable civilian situation in Gaza. He recognized demands to address the crisis, stating: "we agree with them – There must be a humanitarian ceasefire that is without conditions. We have to get the killing to stop". This adjustment of political speech and official statements to align with public opinion matches findings in the literature that link agenda setting and repositioning to popular stances. In the face of backlash from both sizeable sections of the population and other political actors, the PM and Conservative party had little to gain and everything to lose from continuing to display one-sided support. The Foreign Secretary even highlighted the role of the media: "public opinion that feels deeply, deeply disturbed by what it is seeing on its television

screens coming out of Gaza”. This conforms with the literature stressing the impact of media on public opinion. In fact, news outlets constituted a large part of the fight for pro-Palestinians in the UK. The BBC, Britain’s leading public service broadcaster, faced backlash over its “incomplete” depiction of the conflict. Between demonstrations and an open letter, protestors demanded unbiased reporting, indicating a level of awareness on the public’s part with regard to media impact.

The later days of the conflict saw Cameron’s government finally asking for a ceasefire. Towards the end of the war, an ICM survey of UK residents showed that 52% believed Israel’s actions had been disproportionate, and 41% had a more negative opinion of Israel in the wake of the conflict. It seemed as if public discontent with Israel and UK policy on the conflict was unlikely to fade as quickly as the government may have hoped. In October, the British parliament passed a nonbinding resolution to recognize Palestine as a state. The parliamentary debate around the vote contained consistent mentions of public opinion, both domestic and foreign. Whether the symbolic move was the parliament’s attempt at catching up with public opinion or a way for the government to bury the hatchet and placate the dissatisfied public in a trivial manner is up for debate.

Whether the shift in British public opinion would be short-lived remained to be seen. In the context of the 2023 war, there is much to be dissected in terms of both internal and external dynamics surrounding the UK’s approach. It should also be noted that the UK’s response to the ongoing conflict is taking place in a post-Brexit Britain as opposed to the 2014 war, which may have implications beyond the scope of this thesis. Like his Western counterparts, current PM Sunak’s response to the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack consisted of unconditional support for Israel which he later visited. However, this did not seem to reflect Britons’ feelings as thousands mobilized in support of Palestine. Though the protests were reportedly largely peaceful, the Home Secretary



labeled them hate marches and encouraged a crackdown on participants, with hundreds of people being arrested. Despite public support for a ceasefire reaching 89%, this position was not reflected by the Conservative government or by the opposition. Even the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, came out in support of Israel, going so far as to advocate its “right” to cut off Gazans’ access to water and power. His comments caused an uproar within the Labour party and its supporters as well as the broader public. In fact, it wasn’t until December 17<sup>th</sup> that a member of government called for a ceasefire. This member was former PM Cameron, whose government had staunchly supported Israel in 2014, now in his capacity as Foreign Secretary. He called for a “sustainable ceasefire” and urged Israel to better discriminate between fighters and civilians. As surprising as the position is, perhaps Cameron learned the dangers of “sticky” comments on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from his time in office.

In February 2024, following disruptions within the Labour party, Starmer finally called for a ceasefire. However, this has had little effect on the public’s perception of him. 52% of Labour voters believe he handled the Gaza crisis badly. The statistic is the same for PM Sunak, though it represents the overall view of the British public, not just that of Labour voters. YouGov surveys assessing British attitudes on the conflict exposed a generally Palestinian-friendly trend. Between November 2023 and February 2024, sympathy for Israel fell from 25% to 18% while sympathy for Palestine increased from 30% to 32%. Additionally, 58% of Britons would support an end to the UK sale of arms to Israel for the duration of the conflict. Their belief in a permanent peace deal increased from 27% to 32%, while 65% agreed with a two-state solution. This data was followed by Cameron stating that the UK would consider the recognition of Palestine, bilaterally and in the UN, as part of the solution rather than as its outcome. This was the first instance of any such comments by a UK government official. He also assured that the UK’s support to Israel was not

“unconditional”. His surprising position has been the source of tensions and rumors within UK politics, with Sunak even contradicting Cameron’s recognition plea. However, several analysts have pointed to Cameron as the “real PM” as he seems to be leading the charge on Britain’s Gaza policy.

It should be noted that the UK has faced similar international pressures as France, with Libya also recalling its ambassador to the country. Moreover, in February 2024, Nicaragua warned several countries, including the UK, that it would file an ICJ case against them for complicity with genocide if they continued supplying Israel with weapons. Nicaragua has initiated proceedings against Germany, so it is not unreasonable to believe that it would sue the UK next. Considering the atmosphere fostered by South Africa’s ICJ case, it is logical for the UK to regard the situation as a risk that it would do well to avoid, especially with the proliferation of domestic calls to end the sale of arms to Israel. Perhaps Cameron’s stance is his attempt to hedge these diplomatic crises as the UK’s top foreign affairs official. Nevertheless, the country’s bureaucratic and party politics have muddied the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy, with some members of the government proving more responsive than others.

### **France & the UK – Patterns**

When comparing the cases of France and the UK between 2014 and 2023, one can say that public opinion is generally trending away from Israel, if not fully towards Palestine. While government policy in both countries seemed to conform partly with public opinion in 2014, it did so on a rather shallow and “exhibitory” level, yielding little change. The European trend of parliamentary votes on Palestinian recognition falls under this category, as it may have been used to appease the public and did not translate into anything concrete, with the British and French governments stressing the emblematic nature of the vote. In 2023, the UK and France’s shifts in

stance appear more significant, with unprecedented positions, such as the destigmatization of Palestinian statehood, coming to light. The international environment in which the 2023 war is taking place is in itself a factor behind the relevance of the shift. Indeed, the conflict is occurring in a world more polarized than it was ten years ago and one that is characterized by the West's gradual "loss" of the Global South. These circumstances make soft power unusually appealing to those trying to maintain dominance, including the UK and France. A 2023 report by ECFR and Oxford highlighted the "huge reserves" of soft power in Europe's possession, but it seems as though the Gaza crisis is draining these reserves. In the international realm, accusations of double standards have rained down on Western countries from the Global South, geopolitical rivals, and UN officials. Allegations of hypocrisy have plagued the reputations of states such as the US, the UK, France, and Germany. This has not only occurred through formal channels, but also on alternative and social media with the participation of the general public.

While double standards are not a new accusation for the West, they may for the first time carry a real threat. Previously, European countries may have accepted short-term reputational damage in the pursuit of their interests, however, they may no longer be able to afford the risk. Additionally, data supports the idea that this negative image of the West may be here to stay. A survey by the Doha Institute of 17 Arab countries found that only 8%-10% of respondents were positive about the British and French responses to the conflict. This is a slippery slope as Arab NGOs have begun to cut ties with their Western funders, and could constitute an interesting area of study in the future. Though the sense of threat from the international condemnation of Israel has contributed to shifts in European policy, internal dynamics in each country have played the role of a mediating factor. In France, the government appears more reactionary and the path of change is linear. This can be attributed to the significance of the conflict to French domestic politics as the

country with the largest Muslim and Jewish communities in Europe. In the UK, the whole of the government was not as responsive as party politics posed an obstacle to swift change. The difference in size between the British Muslim and Jewish communities also may have contributed as it made the divisions less apparent.

### ***G. Conclusion***

The objective of this thesis was to understand the implications of public opinion for both France and the UK's stances on Israeli-Hamas conflict. It focused on gaps in the literature surrounding European foreign policy on Israel and its relationship to domestic and international viewpoints. The analysis exposed a general trend in public attitudes on the conflict between 2014 and 2024. It showed international opinion shifting (1) away from Israel in all cases and (2) towards Palestine in the case of some communities. This was accompanied in most instances by a corresponding pivot in the country's policy on the conflict. The responsiveness of foreign policy and the timeliness of the change depended largely on interactions between internal and external factors. In France, internal divisions and the rise of antisemitic or Islamophobic sentiments acted as a catalyst for the government to change its mind. In the UK, while domestic divide was also present, it was not sufficient to overtake government and party clashes. Finally, the thesis' focus on public opinion has enabled a rather detailed analysis of the interplay between internal dynamics and foreign policy. However, it has also revealed a number of other factors that play into UK and France's stances on Israeli-Hamas conflict. Some of the most significant factors that should be studied are domestic politics in Israel as well as the UK and France's ties to other governments in the West.

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