

The JPPI Jewish World Dialogue 2025-26

GLOBAL JEWRY'S ATTITUDES ON JEWISH HARD POWER: POLITICAL AND MILITARY MIGHT



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Introduction

Israel, as a sovereign nation-state, functions in many respects like other nation-states. It has a responsibility to protect its citizens, and that protection requires a military with the capacity to use force to defend all Israeli citizens and residents within its borders. Military power is normalized in Israeli society. All eighteen-year-old Israelis are conscripted and expected to serve in the army, with important exceptions among the ultra-Orthodox and Arab segments of the population. Military service is also part of the Israelization process; in some ways, it serves as a form of acculturation and civic education, cultivating a sense of “Israeliness” among populations that come from disparate educational systems, multi-ethnic backgrounds, and secular and religious communities, and that do not all share a common civic education experience in school. Conversely, for the majority of Diaspora Jewry, there is no direct connection to military service. Most Jews across the Diaspora do not serve in the army, participate in Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) or their equivalents, or consider military service as a professional path. As a result of this difference in exposure, each community attributes a different value to military life. For most Diaspora Jews, Jewish military power is an abstract notion. For Israeli Jews, not only is it a concrete lived experience; it is deemed necessary to ensure the survival of the state and its citizens.

To a certain extent, this American, and more broadly Diaspora, attitude reflects a continuation of traditional Jewish Galuti attitudes toward military power and the warrior ethos. Since Jews in exile were, for the most part, demilitarized and dependent on gentile rulers and powerholders (such as bishops or noblemen) for protection, the successful warrior came to be identified as a non-Jewish, gentile model of virtue. Although Jews in exile were aware that many biblical heroes were great warriors, this dimension of Jewish life was relegated to the future messianic era. Perhaps making a virtue of necessity, Jews developed cultural ideals of learning, piety, intellectual acumen, and the like.

According to scholars such as Daniel Boyarin,¹ Talmudic Judaism and the exilic Jewish life that followed from it presented an alternative image of masculine prowess. Whereas the dominant Western model (derived from ancient Roman culture) emphasized masculine dominance and aggressiveness, the alternative Jewish model highlighted gentleness, scholarship, and consideration for others. As a result, Jewish men in Western culture were often considered effeminate.

The Return to Hard Power

One of the central aspects of the Zionist revolution was the return to military activity. This was necessitated by the hostility of Arab populations and states to the Zionist project of creating a Jewish state. Yet it went deeper than immediate security needs. As with the return to agriculture, the return to militarism was part of the Zionist program of normalization. The Jewish people, in their state and homeland, were to become like other independent peoples: self-reliant in matters of defense and not dependent on the good graces of others. This aspect of Zionist ideology gained tremendous persuasiveness after the horrors of the Holocaust.

The “Purity of Arms”

At the same time, this return of instrumental violence, at least in principle, was fashioned to fit within the general contours of how important Zionist thinkers and leaders conceived of the Zionist “Jewish return to history”: the collective Jewish return to politics, social and economic policy, international relations, and the military. As a persecuted minority, Jews tended to think of themselves as more morally virtuous than those in their oppressive gentile surroundings. It could be argued that this was because Jews did not possess power and therefore could not oppress others (as the King of the Khazars argues in Yehuda HaLevi’s fictional dialogue, *The Kuzari*),² but many Jews attributed it to their superior religion and ethics. Hence, many Zionists, including the secular Labor Zionist leadership, understood the Zionist “return to history” as an opportunity to demonstrate the superior Jewish civilizational vision (embodied in the Bible and Jewish history) as it applied to politics, economic and social policy, statecraft, the military, and international relations. This attitude found supreme expression in David Ben-Gurion’s notion that the historic ideal of the people of

Israel is to be “a model nation and a light unto the gentiles,” and that this is the ultimate “guiding star” of the efforts of the State of Israel.

It is in this context that the ideal of “purity of arms” should be understood. The concept was first introduced by Labor Zionist leader Berl Katznelson in an address to the Zionist Congress of 1939. Katznelson argued that the weapons (neshek) the Yishuv was adopting and learning to use should “not be stained with innocent blood,” and that the arms should remain “pure” and used for defensive purposes only. Underlying this declaration was the idea that the Jewish state was also to be a “model nation” in its use of military force: it was to use military force in an ethically exemplary way. This attitude was adopted, at least officially, by the elite Labor Zionist militia, the Palmach, under the leadership of Yitzhak Sadeh and Yigal Allon, which was later incorporated into the IDF. “Purity of Arms” is one of the nine leading values of the IDF’s code of military ethics, “The Spirit of the IDF.”

In recent years, Religious Zionist and conservative figures have put forth an alternative formulation of military ethics: “Jewish Military Ethics.” While Jewish law (Halacha) prohibits harming civilians in combat, it is more “lenient” regarding civilian and “bystander” casualties than Western military ethics, especially in connection with asymmetrical warfare against non-state actors embedded in the civilian population (as Hamas and Hezbollah are). In recent years, Religious Zionist and conservative politicians have also criticized “The Spirit of the IDF” as reflecting foreign and liberal ideas, being too cosmopolitan, and not sufficiently emphasizing victory on the battlefield as the overriding value.

Diaspora Attitudes Toward the Israeli Military

After World War II, although Diaspora Jews did not adopt a military way of life for themselves, they applauded the creation of an Israeli military capable of fending off the Arab armies in 1948 and winning a spectacular military victory in the Six-Day War. This appreciation was enhanced by the official Israeli presentation of its military endeavor. Israel stressed that its military was primarily defensive in nature, as the name of its armed forces – the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) – indicates. Israel also presents its military as operating under the ideals and

strictures of “purity of arms”: limiting violence to combatants and trying to minimize civilian casualties. Most liberal Diaspora Jews tended to identify with this conception of Israel and were able to view it as a “model nation,” with the IDF as an ethically exemplary military organization.

Nevertheless, over the decades, as unease within the liberal American Jewish community over Israeli government policy has grown, some of that unease has spilled over into questions about Israel’s use of military force. This is especially the case as some of the central visual symbols of the Israel-Palestine conflict have been dead Palestinian children, an iconography that has become especially prevalent in the current war. Further, the Israeli military ethic itself is increasingly contested as right-wing and nationalist-religious elements, which are amply represented in the ruling coalition, demand or defend a less scrupulous and more callous attitude toward harming non-combatants.

Developments in Western liberalism and progressivism, especially among the younger generation, have also sharpened differences between Israelis and most Diaspora Jews in how they view military might and the use of force more generally. Israelis tend to see force as a necessity for protecting the sovereignty of their nation and its citizens, especially in the last decade, when wars have felt increasingly asymmetrical and have often involved non-state actors. Many young American Jews, more removed from regular, direct existential conflict, prefer to rely on a liberal international order in which problems are resolved through negotiation. For them, force should be used only as an absolute last resort and, even then, in a very limited and controlled manner. These important values-based distinctions lead to very different conceptions of how to navigate conflicts and highlight why the two major centers of Jewish life in the modern world – Israel and America – may have diverged in their understandings of what it means to hold real hard power and when military force should be used.

The Israel-Gaza War of 2023–2025 greatly sharpened these issues. Israel sustained a significant number of civilian and military casualties on October 7, 2023, and in the ensuing war (around 2,000 dead and many thousands wounded), while the IDF killed tens of thousands of Palestinians, including women, children, and infants. Israel has been accused of committing war crimes, including ethnic cleansing and genocide. In many settings, these charges have gained currency and are accepted as fact or, at least, the consensus view.

Many observers and journalists have offered explanations for why the IDF's warfare was so deadly. These ranged from the desire for revenge for the October 7 massacres, to the significant presence of Religious Zionist junior officers (who hold a different conception of military ethics) and whose prominence in the ranks set the ethical tone for some fighting units, to the way Hamas deliberately embedded itself in the civilian population (and the civilian population acquiesced to such embedment). In any event, the Gaza war raised new thoughts, doubts, and feelings regarding Israel, the IDF, and military power among most Diaspora Jews, and amplified existing ones. These thoughts and feelings were not of one piece; they moved in many directions and contained many nuances. In the 2025-26 Jewish World Dialogue, we wanted to understand these thoughts and feelings in all their complexity.

The 2025-26 Dialogue

The 2025-26 Jewish World Dialogue was tasked with further exploring the attitudes of Diaspora communities regarding Jewish military force. As part of our research, we sought insight into how Israeli and Diaspora Jews conceive of power, the potential and limits of its use, and the impact this has on the broader relationship between Israel and Diaspora communities. A central question of our inquiry was whether the use of military might creates another potential tension between Israeli and Diaspora Jews, as they appear to be moving in opposing directions on the issue. Does this issue combine with other tensions between Israel and its right-wing government and liberal Diaspora Jewish communities, such as those regarding a peace process and relations with the Palestinians? To what extent is it connected to a new “Diasporist” Jewish identity, which retains a separate ethos regarding military and hard power, such as that presented by Daniel Boyarin?

Moreover, we wanted to understand the impact of the Gaza war: How did Jews of various ages and backgrounds react to it and to the widespread charges that Israel was committing war crimes and even genocide? We know that the vast majority of the Jewish community has strongly identified with Israel. Yet this war, and the scale of Palestinian casualties, also lent a new degree of voice and legitimacy to Jewish criticism of Israel and even to anti-Israel and anti-Zionist sentiment.³ We tried to understand the extent to which attitudes toward Jewish and Israeli military power played a role in these interactions. We began this year’s Dialogue process, suspecting that views on this subject would be complex and nuanced. Through our breakout groups, we aimed to achieve a better, more comprehensive understanding of this complexity.

JPPI’s 2014 Jewish World Dialogue addressed this issue in connection with Operation Protective Edge from August of that year. As more than a decade has passed, and Israel has been embroiled in war for more than two years, we

chose to revisit this issue. Investigation of this theme may also help elucidate critical underlying questions of what Zionism means in the 21st century, the sense of connection between Israel and global Jewish communities, and the future of Israel's alliances with the home countries of Dialogue participants.

The Dialogue Framework

We explored these issues through small focus groups and a questionnaire administered to the non-representative sample of Dialogue participants. We engaged more than a hundred participants of all ages from across North America, Australia and New Zealand, and South Africa in ten separate sessions conducted via Zoom. (A list of partner organizations appears as an appendix.) As is the case every year, the 2025 Jewish World Dialogue was an exercise in qualitative research. Our aim was not to reproduce the findings of polls and surveys, but to dig deeper to see what lay behind the opinions expressed in them: were they entrenched, unequivocal opinions, or was there a greater degree of complexity, ambivalence, and nuance that could not be represented entirely by numbers? We wanted to see if we could learn something beyond the straightforward but simple brushstrokes that quantitative research produces. We hoped that by engaging in intensive conversation for about an hour and a half with 108 diverse participants, we could obtain a more complex and truer picture, one that could hopefully lead to practical steps and policy recommendations. Since our conversations were semi-structured and open-ended, we supplemented them with a short questionnaire that enabled us to conduct a baseline comparison between the responses of participants with various political, religious, and ideological backgrounds who resided in Jewish communities across the world. Still, this questionnaire did not change the qualitative nature of the project.

Every year, it is a challenge to ask people to devote an hour and a half to discussing issues that, while of general concern to the Jewish people, do not necessarily affect them directly. This year, we found Dialogue participation particularly challenging. Contacts in Jewish Federations, Hillels, and other organizations initially responded with strong interest, even eagerness, when we presented them with the opportunity to participate in a discussion on Jewish hard power.

Yet when it came to nailing down a date and time, setting up a Dialogue session with actual participants became much more difficult. We had the impression that this difficulty went beyond the logistical tangles we had experienced in previous years. This year's difficulties may, in fact, help illuminate the topic and process, and we therefore devote a few paragraphs to it.

We began discussing the topic of the 2025 Dialogue toward the end of 2024, when Israel had been at war for more than a year, and protests against it were highly visible in the international public sphere. Given the controversy concerning Israel's prosecution of the Gaza war, we thought Diaspora Jews might have complex, nuanced, and even ambivalent feelings and thoughts about the war. On the one hand, we wanted to provide Dialogue participants with the opportunity to articulate their specific views and opinions at an individual level. On the other hand, we wished to "take the temperature" of Diaspora Jewry more broadly on this issue. We wanted to get a sense of where communities stood vis-à-vis these issues, and whether and how they may have affected Israel-Diaspora relations. Once we had crystallized this topic among ourselves, we sent invitations to Jewish communal organizations around the world.

At the same time, there were signs that a Dialogue concerning Israeli military power while the Gaza war was still unfolding would not be easy. Several of JPPI's key staff members expressed reservations about the topic, saying that it might invite condemnation of Israel and serve as a sounding board for accusations of war crimes and genocide against it. Ultimately, we decided to keep the topic, however loaded, because we genuinely thought that Diaspora Jews had complex feelings about the war and wanted and needed a forum to discuss them. We therefore obligated ourselves to writing and publishing this report in a circumspect manner and, if necessary, limiting its distribution to Jewish communal leaders rather than public mass distribution.

When we reached out to various Jewish organizations about Dialogue participation, our assumptions seemed to be validated by the positive responses from organizational contacts regarding a discussion of the war and Israeli military power. Yet, beyond the initial enthusiasm, committing to actual

times for a Dialogue session proved far from easy. The difficulties seemed to go beyond logistical constraints and included some discomfort or unwillingness among individuals to speak openly about the complexity of this topic. We also sensed that many engaged Jews, and younger Jews in particular, were tired of talking about and defending Israel. This, in and of itself, is an important takeaway. Ultimately, we were able to conduct ten sessions with slightly more than a hundred participants, and despite the lower-than-usual number, those who did participate provided extensive and meaningful reflections on the subject. In the end, we believe the depth and breadth of this year's project, though somewhat more limited in scope, remain a valuable asset that helps shed light on how Diaspora Jewry relates to Israel. This is especially the case as it concerns Jewish military power after more than two years of war, which accentuated the divergence in ideologies and experiences between the communities.

The Dialogue Participants

The 2025-26 Jewish World Dialogue included 108 participants from the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and South Africa. Seventy of them completed the online questionnaire (included in this report as an appendix), which included both background questions and substantive, multiple-choice questions on the Dialogue topic. We summarize the responses to the questionnaire bearing in mind that they include only about two-thirds of the participants. We believe, however, that answers to several of the questions likely represent the group as a whole.⁴

Seventy-four participants were from the United States, eleven from Canada, seven from Australia and New Zealand, and eighteen from South Africa. Except for the Canadian group, these proportions more or less held in relation to the questionnaire: 48 participants from the United States filled out the questionnaire, 6 from Australia, 12 from South Africa, and just 4 from Canada.

According to the questionnaire responses, Dialogue participants were more or less evenly divided in terms of gender and age. About a third were below the age of 35, a third between 35 and 55, and a third were over 55. Based on the questionnaire responses, the participant group is not at all representative of American and

Diaspora Jewry as a whole and may not be representative of its leadership overall. Twenty-two of the 70 respondents to the questionnaire (about 30%) were Orthodox, a far higher percentage than in the Jewish population as a whole (the Orthodox, both Haredi and Modern Orthodox, constitute about 10-12%). According to the questionnaire, the Dialogue participants also have a stronger connection to Israel than most of the American Jewish community and possibly much of its leadership. Thirty-nine of the 70 respondents had been to Israel more than twice, and 17 had visited more than ten times; 58 of the 70 respondents stated that their connection to Israel is strong.

At the same time, 42 respondents (60%) self-identified as either leaning liberal (22) or strongly liberal (20). This included Orthodox participants. Of the 18 Modern Orthodox questionnaire respondents, six identified as leaning liberal, one identified as strongly liberal, and five identified as centrist. Thus, our participants more or less follow the characteristic political orientation of the American Jewish community, though they appear to be somewhat more conservative.

The Dialogue Sessions

As in every Jewish World Dialogue, Dialogue sessions were conducted in a semi-structured fashion. JPPI moderators prepared a PowerPoint presentation with a series of questions that served as jumping-off points for the discussion. We complemented the discussion analysis with responses to the questionnaire.

We went into the Dialogue aware that survey data indicated that, while most American Jews experienced increased identification with and support for Israel right after October 7, certain important population groups – such as younger age cohorts (below 35), strong liberals, and Democratic supporters – showed increased detachment from, or “distancing” from, Israel and gave less support to Israel and its policies, including its conduct of the Iron Swords war against Hamas. What was confirmed to us in the Dialogue sessions in a very tangible manner is that reality does not organize itself in neat, schematic boxes. Significant proportions of Modern Orthodox and even Chabad participants, in response to certain questions, identified with “leftist,” universalist, human rights-oriented positions, while some “strong liberals” took establishment

Zionist positions normally associated with AIPAC and the Israeli government. Of course, this does not contradict the survey statistics but fleshes out their true meaning.

More telling is that such complexity characterized the inner world of the participants themselves. Many of the participants exhibited views that were ambivalent, complex, and contradictory. A statement by a participant from the American Jewish Committee (AJC) is emblematic in this regard:

“I believe Jews have a great deal of pride for the strength of the Israeli military, the ingenuity of its intelligence services, what it’s able to accomplish in Lebanon, in Iran in Syria, and at the same time, today, that overwhelming ability to exert force on its enemies at times, elicits discomfort, in so far as it is viewed here at times as an unequal fight – not so much as against its enemies like Hamas – but against the collateral damage for the civilians within Gaza...those issues, those areas of Israeli military strength cause pause for a lot of American Jews now.”

Here, in one statement, one finds both pride and discomfort. Similarly, many participants said explicitly in the sessions that our questionnaire (and surveys generally) felt too limited. The options did not fit their answers or their more mixed feelings; often, they felt they identified with multiple options on the list. We suggest that this complexity may be more representative of what many engaged American Jews are feeling than any one simple statement about support or “distancing.”

The first question we posed approached the subject obliquely. We asked why the State of Israel was created, thinking that the responses would shed some light on attitudes toward military power.

At the start, the discussion assumed a “conventional” or common-sense approach to the subject: countries have the right to defend themselves and their populations. As one AJC participant put it: “As a country, [Israel] should and does have the right to defend itself, regardless of any further reason. Full stop.” Despite this common-sense approach, there was a hint of the moral complexity of the topic. In almost all sessions, participants placed great stress

on defense and deterrence. Most participants took it for granted that Israel's military power could be used legitimately only for defensive purposes. This moral aspect of participants' approach to the topic, and their expectations of Israel, found fuller expression in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire asked directly: "What level of moral conduct in armed conflict should Israel strive to maintain?" Thirty-six of the 70 respondents (51%) answered, "Israel should attempt to exercise its highest moral values regardless of the enemy it is facing." It should be noted that these thirty-six respondents included twelve Orthodox participants, one specifically being a Chabad adherent. Nineteen of the 70 (27%) answered, "Israel should balance between morality and the fact that it is facing ruthless enemies who wish to destroy it."

Thus, the initial discourse concerning Israeli military power moved between two poles: common sense and realpolitik on one side, and high moral expectations on the other. It must be stressed that most of the participants attempted to hold on to both of these guiding orientations.

When respondents were asked about the frameworks Israel should consider most in guiding its military code on the use of force, a plurality (29 of 70) said "international law." This was despite the fact that most respondents considered international law to make a lower level of moral demands on conduct in armed conflict than "Jewish values." In other words, demanding that Israel follow international humanitarian law was, for these respondents, a concession to the realities of realpolitik. Most respondents resolved the tension between realpolitik and (Jewish) moral demands by specifying that Israel's military power should be used only for defensive and deterrent purposes.

Here is how one respondent from the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) framed the issue and related to its problematic aspect:

"[The Israeli army is] called the IDF for a reason, since Israel needed an army to defend itself. But today, in reality, this has been weaponized and has been used more for provocation. Any state needs defense, but offensive operations have become more uncomfortable."

In some of the discourse in this part of the discussion, Israel appeared as a small, beleaguered country defending itself against powerful, aggressive enemies. It seemed that this image did not always represent what Israel is today, but rather what it once was and what it should be, morally, in the eyes of some participants.

The discussion then turned to historical and cultural factors. Was an important component of Zionism to create “muscular Jews,” as the Zionist leader Max Nordau put it? Was Zionism, at its inception, a response to the image of helpless Jews being massacred in Kishinev and other pogroms? If so, does this component remain relevant today? An important voice among the participants insisted that while the concept of “muscular Jews” was significant historically, when Jews were weak, it should not be highlighted today. Jews today, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, are perceived as powerful, and the concept of muscular Jews reinforces the identification of Jews as oppressors. As one Chicago participant expressed it: “It feeds the narrative of Israel as the oppressor.”

In response to the issue of Diaspora Jews’ relationship to the military organizations of their home countries, many participants bristled at the suggestion that Diaspora Jews did not contribute to their countries of residence. They acknowledged, however, that the socialization and education of most Diaspora Jews did not incline them toward military service, but rather toward contributions in fields such as law and medicine. Participants noted, too, that even when Jews did join the military, they served more often as doctors and lawyers than as combat commanders. They also acknowledged that joining the Israeli military, though rare in their communities, was accorded higher value than joining their home country’s army. While joining the American army, for example, was considered alongside other career choices that were more lucrative or prestigious, joining the IDF was considered an act of self-sacrifice in the service of Israel’s survival and was accorded much more esteem.

We next asked participants how they and other Jews in their social circles feel about Israeli military power, both in the past, around the time of the Six-Day and Yom Kippur wars, and today. Participants were practically unanimous

in saying that the Six-Day War had engendered pride. Regarding the Israeli military today, they were not at all condemnatory, but they did largely express themselves in careful and reserved terms. This was reflected first in the questionnaire responses. The questionnaire asked: “Given the fact that Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Iranian proxies deliberately situate themselves among a civilian population, has Israel’s prosecution of its recent armed conflicts made you feel more ...” Forty-three percent answered “pride”; an equal percentage answered, “more worried about Israel’s character.” Similarly, 18 of the 70 respondents answered that other Jews in their community became more detached from Israel, 23 answered that their fellow community members seemed to be prouder, and 22 answered that Jews in their community became more worried about Israel’s character.

Here again, the correlation with background factors was not very high. Twelve Orthodox (Haredi) and Modern Orthodox participants expressed pride in Israel’s military, but a substantial minority (six) of that same population stated that they were worried about Israel’s moral character, while one mentioned feeling embarrassed by Israel and its military.

In the breakout sessions, participants also expressed themselves in reserved and nuanced terms. One Chicago participant said that there used to be unanimous pride, but that attitudes now “are more complicated and careful.” Another participant spoke about giving the Israeli military the “benefit of the doubt.” Some also mentioned that people they know felt shame in connection with the Gaza war, especially after mid-2024. Furthermore, some noted that since this war had been by far the longest war Israel has been part of, they found it increasingly harder to associate with and defend as time went on. Most telling were statements that Israel and the IDF had lost their special status and “were just like any other country and every other army” and were misbehaving in the eyes of participants. In sum, even among this group, which is distinguished by its high attachment to and engagement with Israel, there is awareness of Israel’s controversial behavior toward non-combatant populations and, as a result, doubt, distancing, and some shame.

But it was not only the “usual suspects” from left-leaning J Street and JCPA who felt such discomfort. A participant from the Chicago Federation said:

“What troubles me more is what is happening in the West Bank. And the actions of the Israeli government toward the Palestinian population in the West Bank, to me, is indefensible... That seemingly immoral behavior, by the Israeli government, that impacts us [American Jews] because it reflects on who we are as a Jewish people.”

Yet, even as participants acknowledged the problematic behavior of the IDF and the Israeli government, they also acknowledged that they felt a degree of pride. A participant from the Toronto Federation put it this way:

“They [members of my community] may not agree with the decisions of the [Israeli] government, how [the war] went on or how long, and all of those things. And those heated conversations I’ve heard many, many times, but when it comes to the military itself, they really feel it is quite remarkable.”

The notion that Israel is just “like everyone else” in terms of its ethical behavior was voiced in a significant number of sessions. One participant in the JCPA session put it very bluntly: “Israel markets itself as if it holds itself to a higher ethical standard, but the actual conduct of the IDF has not lived up to it.” In a slightly different tone, other participants complained that they constantly see things on social media that make them “not proud,” and that the algorithms are designed to focus attention on those aspects. One participant in the J Street group stated that the role of the [Israeli] military today “does not line up with our Jewish values.” This attitude was echoed by another participant: “The most moral army in the world! And then you watch how they behave nowadays. That’s not ‘purity of arms’ – that’s not the Israeli military that I want.”

We then asked, both in the questionnaire and in the Zoom sessions, whether Israeli military operations or the Gaza war impinged upon participants’ lives. In the questionnaire, 63 of the 70 respondents answered affirmatively. In the focus group sessions, some responses to this question were very direct. One JCPA participant stated that he felt he was being looked at as a genocidal killer

just because he was a Jew. Another participant echoed that experience: “I spend all of my work with people looking at me like I’m a baby killing monster because I’m Jewish and a Zionist.” Other participants, such as those in the J Street group, described how the conflict with the Palestinians has become part of their day-to-day interactions and has strained relationships and friendships.

Participants tied this impingement to the possible involvement of Diaspora Jews in Israeli decision-making processes. The main view that emerged was that since Israel’s actions affect Diaspora Jews, their position and impact should factor into Israeli decision-making without violating Israel’s character as a sovereign state. The questionnaire responses reflect this clearly. Half of the respondents said that “Israel should consider the views of other Jews because its armed conflicts could have an impact on their lives.” Another 22 respondents answered that “Israel should consider the views of other Jews if it wants to keep other Jews’ support for its armed conflicts.” Only nine respondents indicated that Israel need not consider the views of Jews abroad.

However, when discussing how the Diaspora has actually been treated, the dominant view that emerged was, as one participant put it: “Netanyahu has been clear that he doesn’t give a shit about us. Are we really obligated to defend these death ratios [between combatants and non-combatants]? We’re forced to defend these actions.” This participant articulated a feeling that Israel’s actions are being imposed upon Diaspora Jews. Another participant put this claim in slightly more diplomatic terms: “The Netanyahu government doesn’t care about the Diaspora and is leaving Americans to defend Israel at home without any input ... [there] needs to be more of a conversation.”

This feeling that the Diaspora was, in fact, defending Israel despite the Israeli government’s indifference was widespread. “Jews in the Diaspora do have to defend Israel a lot, so [they] should have a sense of how to best do that in being part of the conversation.” Despite feeling ignored by the State of Israel, Diaspora Jews took their responsibility seriously and wished to improve Israel’s perception in the Diaspora. At the same time, some participants had a more negative view: “Israel has done a poor job actually protecting Jews in recent

years. The policies of the government actually endanger Jews,” said one J Street participant.

As in previous Dialogue sessions concerned with Israel, many participants were at pains to differentiate between the State of Israel and its people, on the one hand, and the Israeli government, on the other. As one JCPA participant put it:

“I have never, in my life, felt so distanced from a place that I love because of the actions of the leadership of the country. I have many friends there, who are like family, and so, I love the land and I love the people and I never feel more at home there, but I feel so distanced from where the leadership of this country is taking a land that I love.”

These participants felt that criticizing Israel’s leadership while supporting the state and its people can show the younger generation a more complex approach, and that condemnation of Israel’s policies does not necessarily lead to condemnation of the state’s very existence.

Many of the Dialogue sessions reflected a Diaspora perspective very different from an Israeli one. For some participants, pride in the IDF resulted from reports that some Israeli soldiers refused to participate in atrocities against the Gazan non-combatant population. This is a discourse that was not heard at all in Israel, except perhaps in marginal far-left circles. What could be termed a Diasporan perspective, even if not a full-blown progressive one, also surfaced regarding another important issue: diplomacy versus military deployment and war. One of the questions in the questionnaire asked: “Should Israel use more political or diplomatic approaches in pursuit of its goals?” Sixty-one of the 70 respondents answered “yes.” This unequivocal answer contrasts with the distrust of diplomacy and negotiations vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue that has characterized Israeli political culture since the Second Intifada.

Participants generally did not deploy Israeli defensive strategies when discussing Israel’s actions and policies. One such strategy is to claim that, as a small country surrounded by bloodthirsty enemies, Israel is in a unique situation that cannot be easily understood by outsiders. The implication is that outsiders cannot judge Israel’s actions and policies because they do not really

understand its situation. This line of reasoning was rejected by the majority of participants. Thirty-nine of the 70 questionnaire respondents answered that they “fully understand” Israel’s situation vis-à-vis its enemies, and 31 respondents said that they “somewhat understand” it. In the sessions, one also did not hear many of the arguments that Israelis typically use to justify their military tactics against Hamas and other asymmetrical actors; for example, that Israel is conducting urban warfare in a densely populated area with enemy fighters heavily embedded in the civilian population.

Most participants who self-identified as liberal or leaning liberal saw the Israeli army as one that is “strong and can defend itself,” while centrists and conservatives viewed the enemy as “an existential threat to the state of Israel.” Again, the implication of the conservative position is that since Israel is under existential threat, the IDF must do whatever is necessary to neutralize the threat, even if doing so violates accepted norms. The liberal position implies, in contrast, that the Israeli army has enough leeway to be ethical in its conduct in wartime.

In fact, what was not heard at these sessions seems to be as important as what was. Standard Israeli “hasbara” arguments that unequivocally justify Israel’s conduct were not heard often. Instead, there were attempts to formulate a complex response to a complex reality, one that was not black and white.

The Dialogue sessions also reminded us of the complexity of contemporary Jewish life. The session with the South African participants revealed that their reality is very different from that of European and North American communities. On the one hand, they face a government that is implacably anti-Israel; on the other hand, they asserted that the majority of the population is strongly pro-Israel because of its Christian faith. To our surprise, they also indicated that they could “push back” against the anti-Israel stance of the government and the ruling party, the ANC. In other words, South African democracy, at this stage, is sufficiently pluralistic to allow pro-Israel arguments to be heard.

The End of Israel as a Civilizational Project of the Jewish People?

Part of the unique value of the 2025 Jewish World Dialogue was that the participants were so deeply engaged with Israel and were such strong representatives of the mainstream leadership. Thus, they can be considered to stand in a fortiori relationship to the broader Jewish community. If these Jewish establishment and Israel-backing stalwarts are searching for new, nuanced, and complex ways of relating to Israel and the IDF, then such efforts certainly characterize the broader Jewish community as well, alongside perhaps more negative attitudes among certain segments of the general public.

Based on this preliminary and limited material, we suggest that the mode of attachment to Israel may be undergoing a reordering. The intensity seems to remain the same, but the respective weight of its component parts may be shifting. Jews are a complex people, and their attachment to Israel is also a complex phenomenon. It is based on ethnic and national affinity and common religious identity and commitment. Beyond these material factors, though, there has been another component that is more elusive and less well defined: pride in Israel as a Jewish civilizational project. That is, pride that Israel seems to be developing as a “model nation” or a “light unto the nations,” and that it expresses a unique civilizational vision of how society, culture, and state institutions ought to be organized. Such a project would express a unique Jewish civilizational DNA.

This drive toward civilizational expression was one of the main driving forces of Zionism, though it was not always explicit. Jews felt that in exile, lacking power, they could not shape political and international arenas at all and could shape communal and social arenas only to a limited extent. They sensed that in modernity they could acquire the prerequisites of civilizational implementation – territory and sovereignty, whether to a full or limited extent – and hence would have a chance to implement their civilizational vision. Many of the most prominent pioneers of Zionism exhibited this drive: Ahad Ha’Am, Ben-Gurion, and Berl Katznelson.

Thus, both Zionist ideology and practice have long exhibited a tension. On one side, the central aims of Zionism were to reduce the anomalous character of the Jews – to make them “like everyone else” – that is, to enable them to engage in productive occupations such as agriculture, as normal nations do, to defend themselves as other peoples do, and in general to become normalized. Yet at the same time, the Jewish state was to be a Jewish civilizational project. That is, the State of Israel, with its territory and its political, economic, and social spheres, was to express a unique civilizational vision of how society, culture, and state institutions ought to be organized and could become a model or a light for other nations around the world.

One significant articulation of this drive toward making Israel a civilizational project was the humanist (leftist) one: the idea that the Jewish state could implement humanist ideals in a superior fashion. Many of the iconic features of Labor Zionist Israel subscribed to this ideal, such as the kibbutz and, most importantly, *Tohar HaNeshek* – purity of arms – the principle that weapons should not be “stained” with the blood of innocents, as expressed in a speech by Berl Katznelson in 1939.

One significant new insight that seems to have emerged in the course of the Dialogue sessions is that Diaspora Jews have stopped regarding Israel as a Jewish civilizational project.

From the conversations we held with these engaged Jews from communities around the world, one can conclude that they no longer think the IDF is “the most moral army in the world” or that it acts in accordance with superior military ethics. In contrast to the statements made by participants in the 2014 Jewish World Dialogue, who said they believed the IDF was more moral than other armies, some participants in the 2025 Dialogue mocked this very notion. It can be inferred that they do not think Israel is in any way “a model society” or “a light unto the nations” in the sense Ben-Gurion envisioned. This attitude was expressed most strongly by the liberal J Street and JCPA participants, but it seems to have been shared by other participants, including religiously Orthodox ones, who said that they were worried about Israel’s moral character.

If our understanding of this shift is correct, it could very well affect the mode of attachment to Israel. Israel would represent less pride in Jewish civilization and what it can accomplish, and more of an ethnic or even familial attachment. One might be attached to Israel not because it embodies higher and nobler values, but because Israelis are like one's cousins. Thus, the intensity of the attachment remains the same, but the mode of attachment may shift.

The vast majority of participants in the Dialogue do not think that Israel commits genocide or even war crimes, but they assume that Israeli soldiers and the Israeli public are like everybody else. The visionary-messianic character assigned to the Jewish state is gone. They still support and love Israel, but it is different. It is like supporting your brother or cousin, no matter what he does. Alternatively, they could support a non-visionary Israel as a refuge or insurance policy against antisemitism. Or they may hold some combination of these two approaches: shared primordial ethnic identity and the Herzlian refuge against antisemitism.

In this connection, it is important to note an insight this Dialogue provides for understanding Jewish collective identity, its components, and the divergent ways in which Diaspora Jews and Israeli right-wing Jews construct Jewish collective identity. Following a model in which Jewish collective identity is understood to contain different components – an ethno-national component, a religious-sacred-values component, and a political-territorial component – we may say the following:

Diaspora Jews emphasize the sacred-value dimension, but in a universalistic mode. Jews are (or are supposed to be) a “light unto the nations” because they fulfill universalistic liberal values more completely and in superior fashion. This is what they call “Jewish values.” The Israeli right emphasizes the ethno-national dimension of Jewish collective identity. Pew Research has consistently shown that 69% of American Jews (and 76% of Jewish women) viewed “leading an ethical/moral life” as essential to their Jewish identity. In stark contrast, only 47% of Israeli Jews shared this view, instead defining their Jewishness primarily through national-ethnic affiliation or ritual practice. To the extent that

Religious Zionists emphasize the sacred-value dimension, they tend to do so in a particularist mode. Thus, in Israel, the sacred dimension is associated with particularism, while in the liberal Jewish Diaspora it is associated with universal values. Any attempt to bridge the gap between the two communities must take these differences into account.

Over the years, Jewish intellectuals who had the greatest moral and civilizational expectations from Israel were often those who, upon the disappointment of their hopes, became Israel's most severe critics; some even became anti-Zionists. In this connection, names such as Tony Judt, Hannah Arendt, and Noam Chomsky come to mind. This poses the following challenge: What will the long-term effects be of the loss of Israel's civilizational and visionary character? Will it eventually lead to mass defection from identification with Israel, or will it be shrugged off as Jews around the world adopt a less ambitious and demanding form of identification? Or will something entirely new emerge, such as a revival of spiritual-cultural Zionism like that of Martin Buber and Judah Magnes? If a new approach to Zionism and Israel does emerge, what will be the role of Jewish Federations, Hillels, and the organized Jewish community? Will they help develop the role of "connected critic" and create space for continued nuanced discussion, so that members of the Jewish community can remain committed to the Jewish civilizational project while remaining critical of the Israeli government and military? In any event, we may be at the beginning of a serious inflection point in Jewish life in the Diaspora and its connection to Israel.

Policy Recommendations

Despite the way survey data are presented, what characterizes most American and Diaspora Jews today is not hard-and-fast opinions and attitudes. Rather, they are in the midst of an ongoing conversation with themselves and with other members of their community concerning Israel and their relation to it. They feel both pride and shame about Israel. They love Israel, but not its policies or its government. In other words, what most characterizes their attitudes is ambivalence, complexity, and contradiction. Again, this was expressed most directly by the participants themselves, and not only American ones. A participant from Australia acknowledged these self-contradictory feelings fully:

“There is no one clear-cut answer to the question, ‘Am I proud or am I ashamed?’ It’s incredibly complex, and being able to hold that complexity is probably the most truthful answer a young person in the Diaspora can obtain... You can hold both pride and shame. There doesn’t need to be an ‘or.’ Two truths can exist at the same time.”

In the language of social science, the situation of many Diaspora Jews is that of liminality, that is, of being “betwixt and between.” They seem to have left one mode of relating to Israel, but they have not yet crystallized a new alternative mode. We suggest that it is vital for the organizations of the organized Jewish community to play a constructive role in crystallizing new modes of relating to Israel based on honesty and integrity.

- On the basis of this situation, our major policy recommendation is that the organized Jewish community facilitate these inner conversations. It should provide open, inclusive, “safe” spaces where Jews can talk about their ambivalent and self-contradictory thoughts and feelings concerning Israel and the Diaspora’s relation to it. Ultimately, such conversations can also include thoughts and feelings about living in the Diaspora and its

meaning and value. Many participants said that they do not have enough opportunities for such conversation. In fact, one participant from the Chicago Federation group referred to exactly this sentiment, expressing appreciation for the JPPI Dialogue: “Despite spending a lot of time in Jewish spaces, I don’t have this opportunity for the richness of this kind of Dialogue – especially in a multigenerational group – and so I wanted to say I appreciated the opportunity to listen and to learn and to engage in a conversation.” These opportunities for engagement should not be so unique and limited; the organized Jewish community should respond to this feeling by ensuring that such conversations are consistently included as part of regular programming. We expect that, out of such a process, a new positive equilibrium of Israel-Diaspora relations will emerge.

- Such facilitation should also include the preparation of materials – readings, discussion questions, etc. – by agencies that engage in Jewish education, especially adult Jewish education. The preparation of such materials and the facilitation of such inner conversations should be based on two principles: 1) that continued Israel-Diaspora ties are vital for continued Jewish flourishing; and 2) that such ties should be based on honesty and integrity.
- To help American Jews navigate this “liminal” period in which they are re-evaluating and reformulating their relationship to Israel and Israelis, it is important that they receive full and accurate information about Israel. This should include access to the experiences, emotions, and thoughts of Israelis. Too much is being lost in translation. Israelis do not fully understand the Diaspora experience, the increase in antisemitism, and how Israel is both a wedge issue and a political pawn. At the same time, far too many Jewish communal leaders are too quick to minimize the complexity of Israeli society and how Israelis must negotiate the tensions between Israel as both a Jewish and democratic state while living amid heightened geopolitical and security concerns.

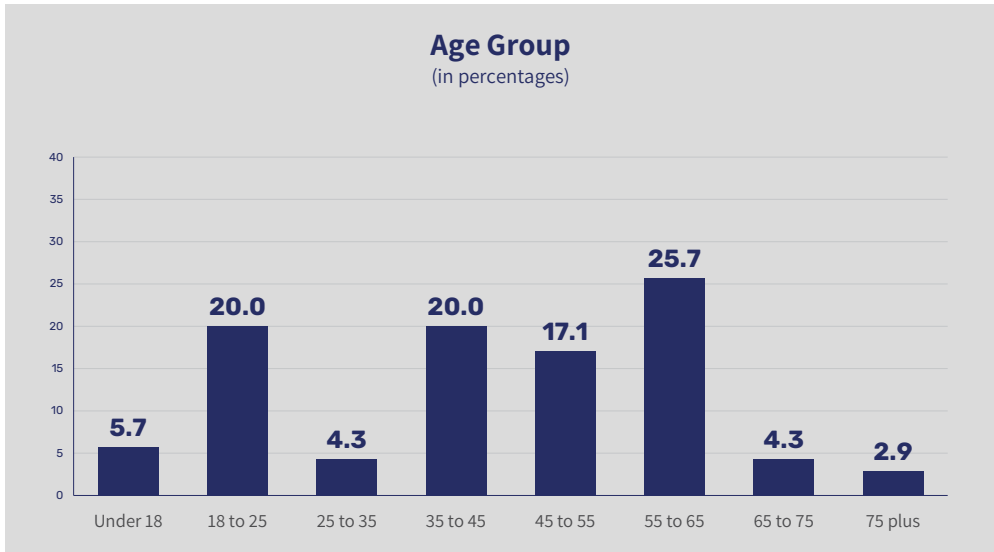
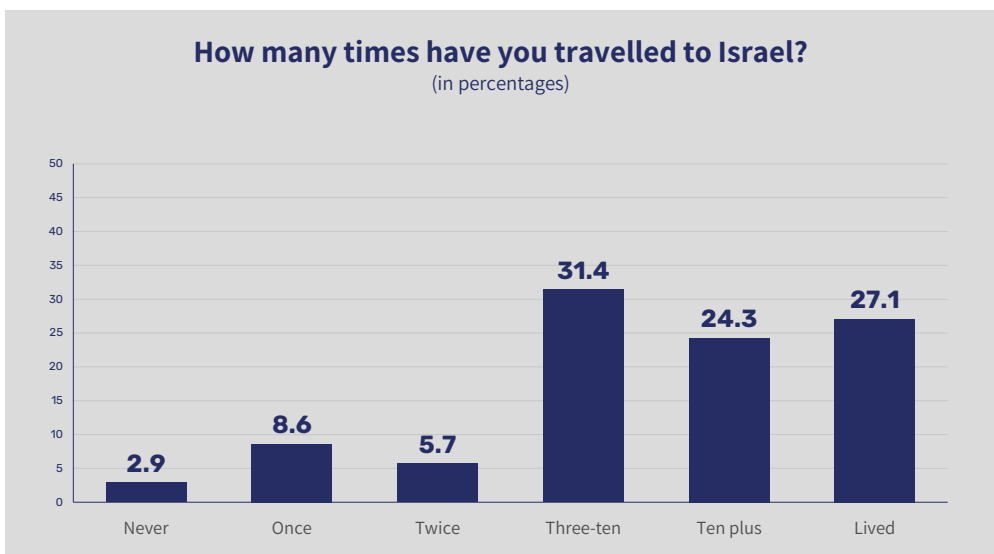
To enable this, we recommend the following steps:

- In light of participants' complaints that they are ignored by Israeli authorities, Israeli consuls and their professional staff should increase their contact with local Jewish communities and consider how better to share the Israeli perspective. This is important at a time when far too many Diaspora Jews do not fully grasp the Israeli reality and experience.
- Birthright, Israel gap-year programs, study-abroad programs, and Federation mission trips are uniquely situated to help Israelis and Diaspora Jews engage more deeply with one another. Israelis and Diaspora Jews should be part of one another's programmatic experience, creating real connections (not in an abstract or theoretical manner) that allow Diaspora Jews and Israelis (Jews and non-Jews) to connect, build relationships, explore one another's identities, lived realities, and pressures, and understand one another in a more significant way.
- At a larger scale, major organizations such as Federations, Hillel, and JAFI should create a joint initiative for world Jewry that centers on a year of service in Israel and in Diaspora communities. This would allow Diaspora Jews to engage deeply in Israeli society, with all of its complexity, challenges, and opportunities, and Israelis to spend significant time in Diaspora communities learning and engaging with what it means to be a minority and what it means to center one's Jewishness and Jewish values as the operating system in a non-Jewish framework.
- Special programs should be created for Jewish community leadership (from JCCs, Federations, day schools, rabbis of major congregations, etc.) to engage much more deeply with Israelis, and vice versa. These programs could be arranged on a professional basis (i.e., lawyers with lawyers, university professors with university professors) or by community (e.g., a community in Raanana, Rechovot, or Efrat could host a rabbinical delegation).

Endnotes

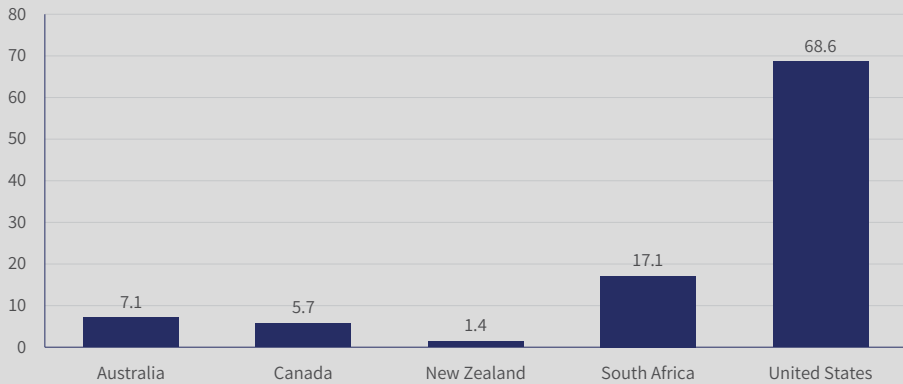
- 1 Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 1997, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- 2 Yehuda Halevi. *The Kuzari: In Defence of the Despised Faith*, New York, Feldheim, 2013.
- 3 David Manchester and Meg Siritzky, JFNA 2025 Survey of Jewish Life Since October 7.
- 4 The questionnaire was administered as part of the JPPI Voice of the Jewish People initiative, which conducts monthly surveys of Diaspora Jews. Some participants experienced technical difficulties stemming from the use of that platform outside its usual frame.

Appendix 1: Dialogue Demographics (self-reported)



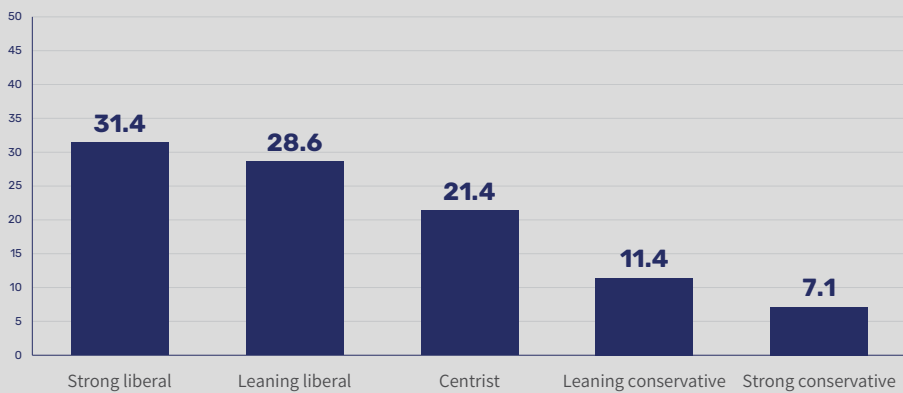
What Country Are You From?

(in percentages)



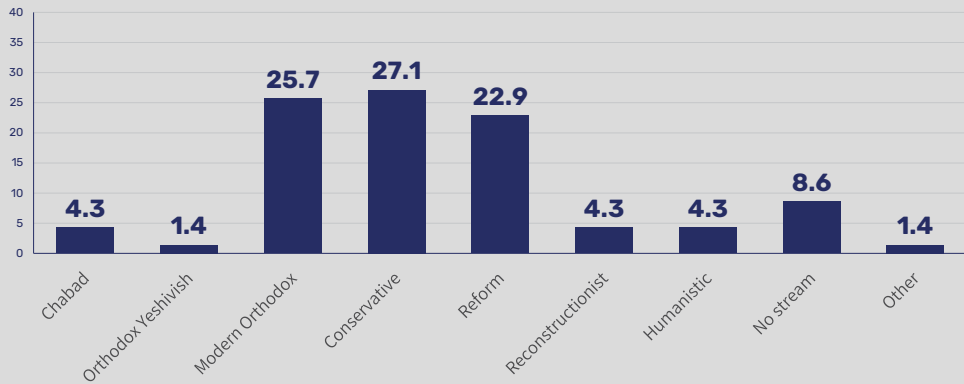
How would you define your politics / ideology?

(in percentages)



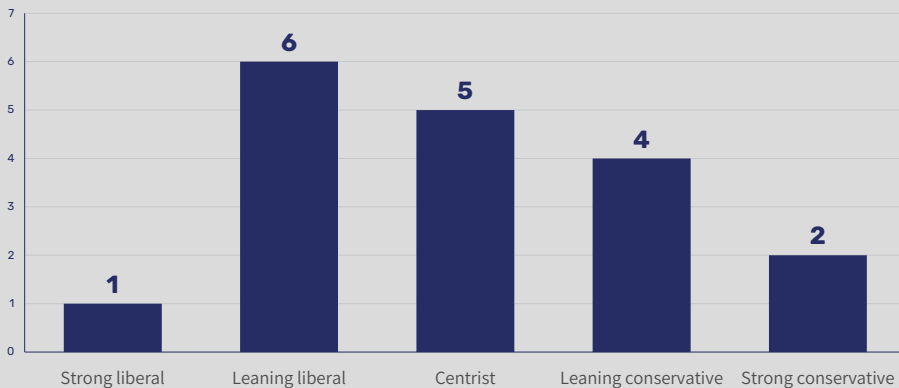
With which Jewish “stream” do you identify?

(in percentages)



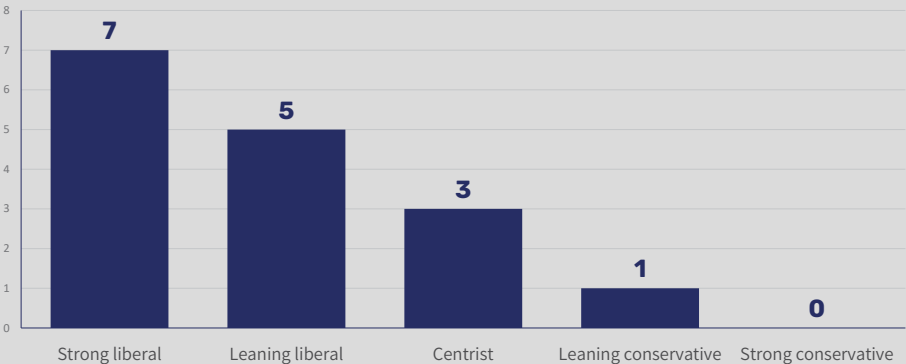
Political leanings of Modern Orthodox participants

(absolute numbers)



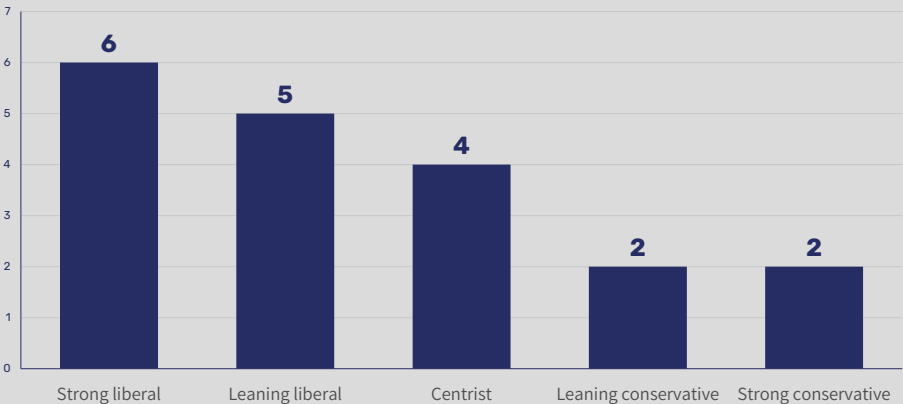
Political leanings of Reform participants

(absolute numbers)



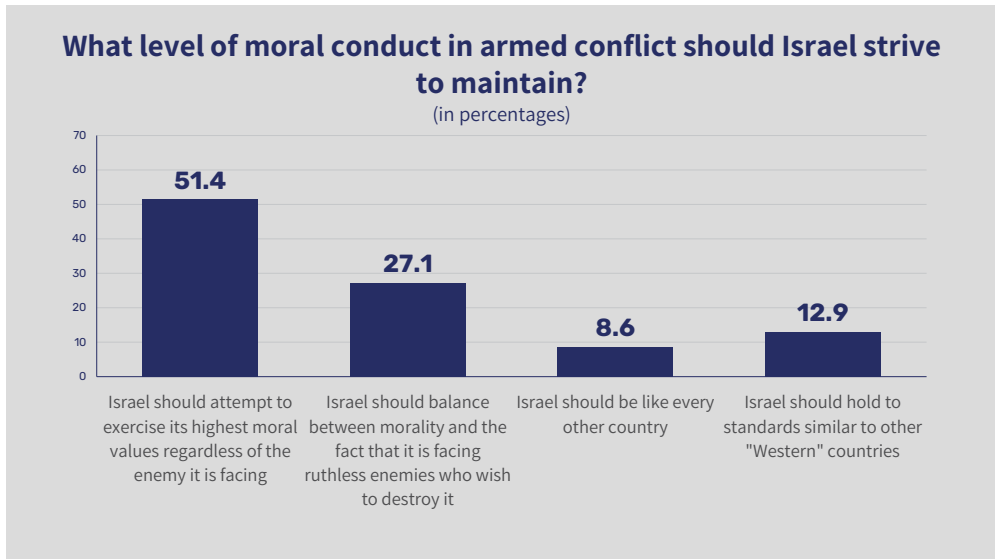
Political leanings of Conservative participants

(absolute numbers)

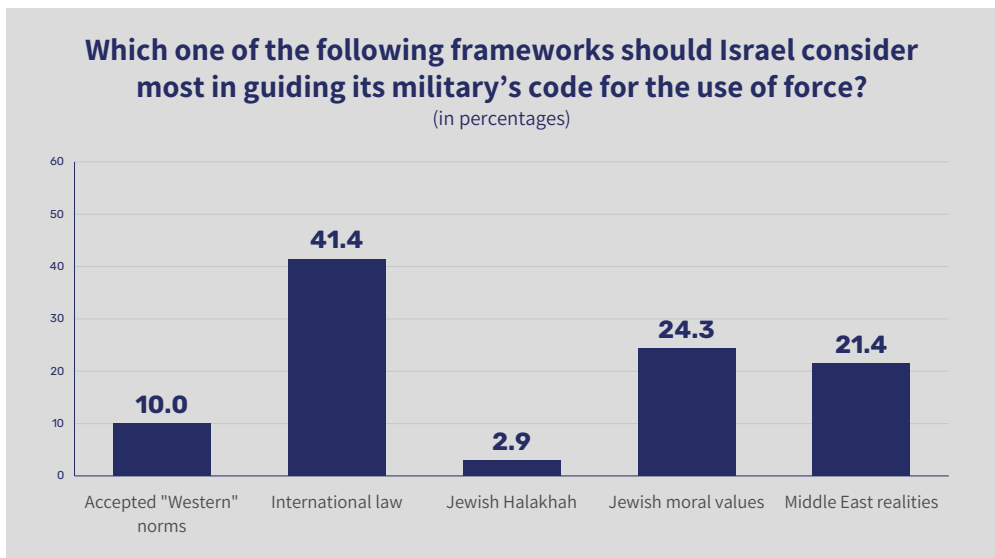


Appendix 2: Dialogue Questionnaire

Question 1: Answered: 70



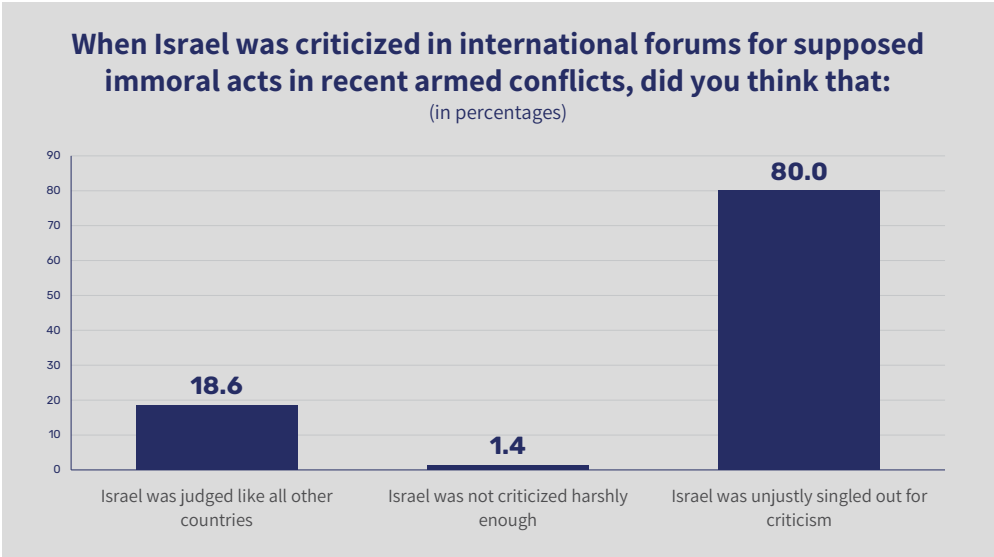
Question 2: Answered: 70



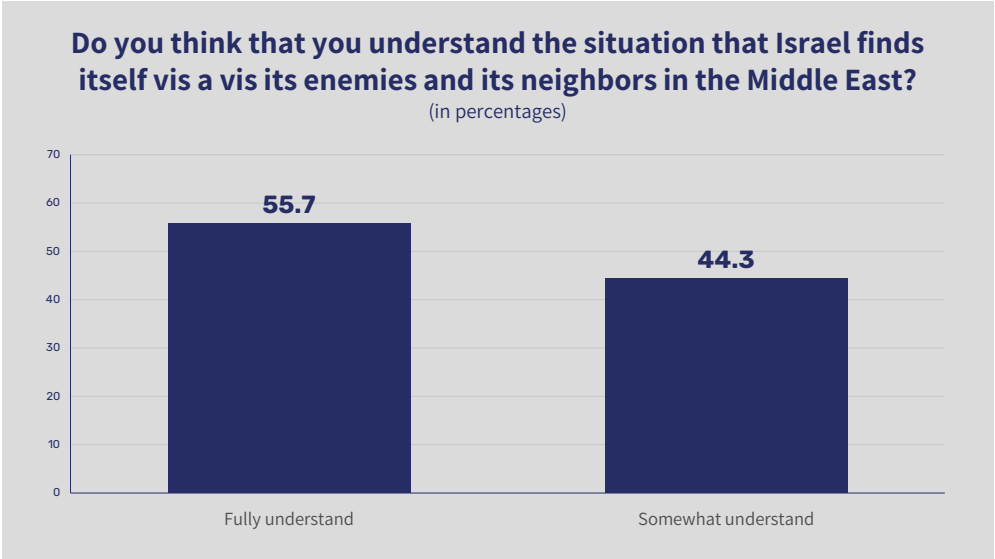
Question 3: Answered: 70



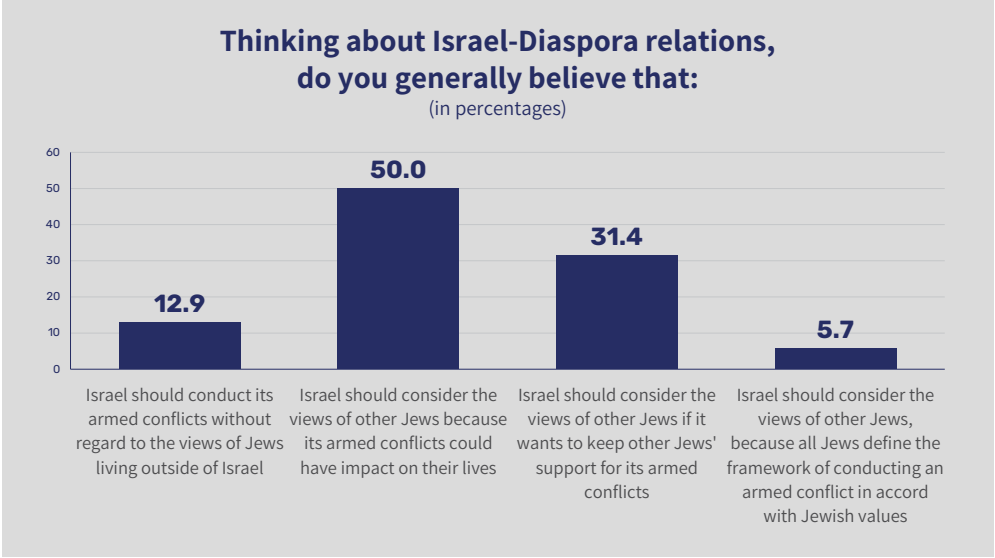
Question 4: Answered: 70



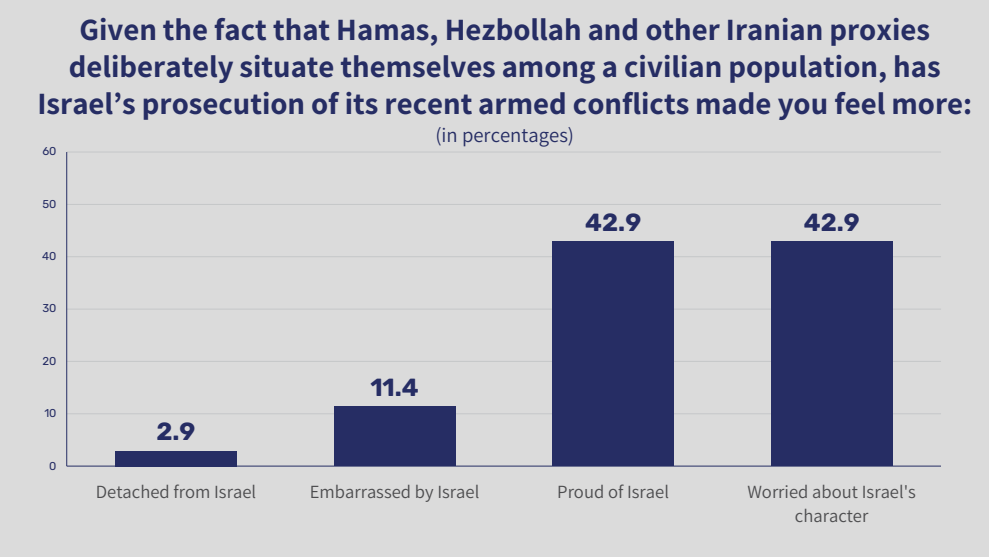
Question 5: Answered: 70



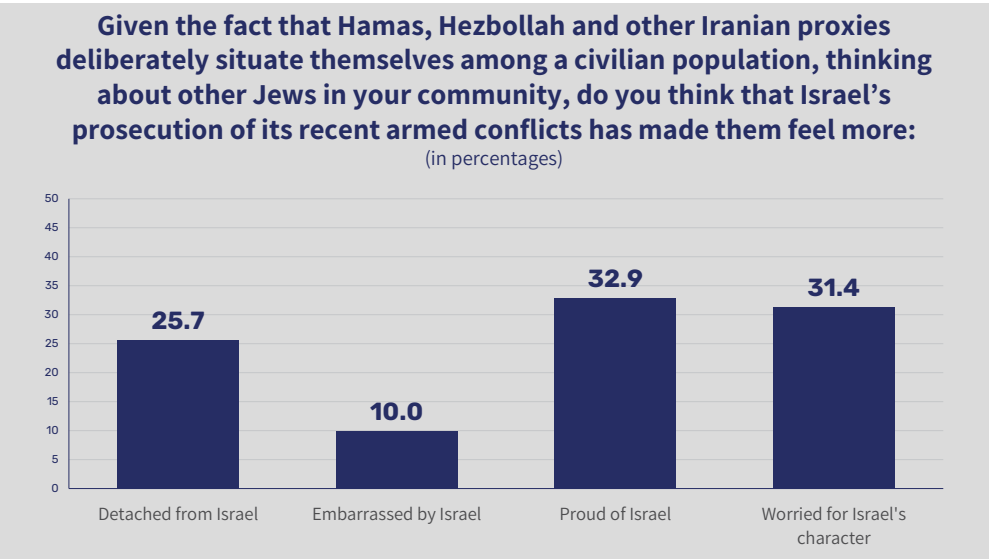
Question 6: Answered: 70



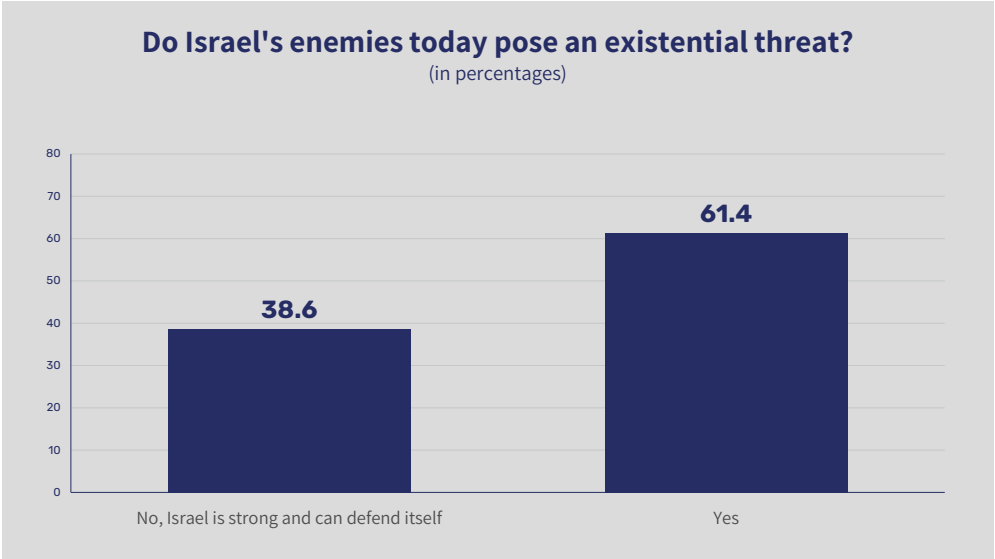
Question 7: Answered: 70



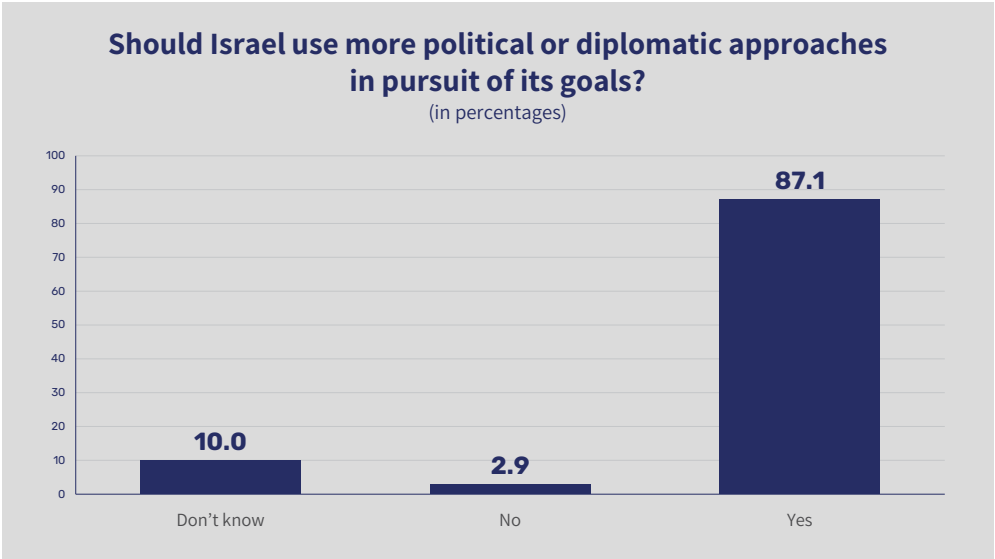
Question 8: Answered: 70



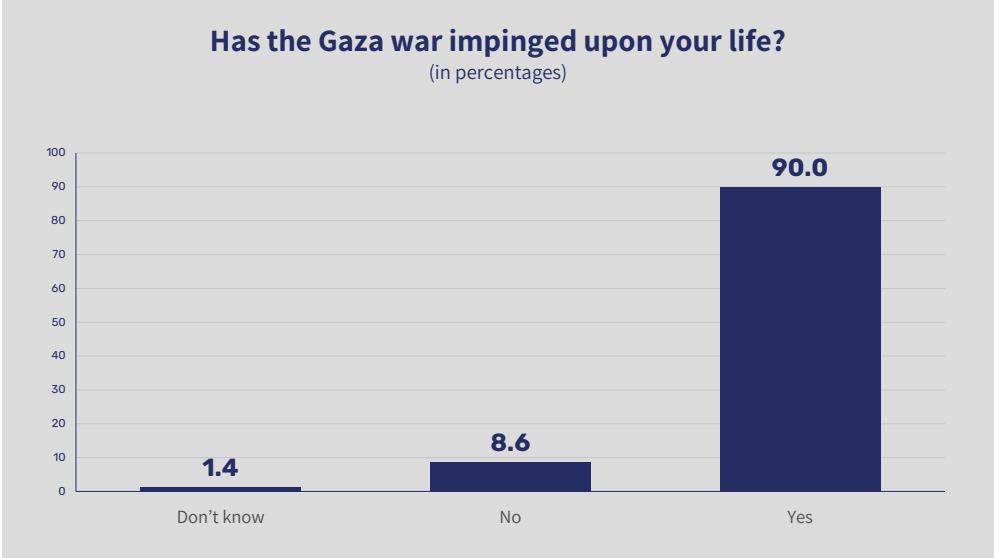
Question 9: Answered: 70



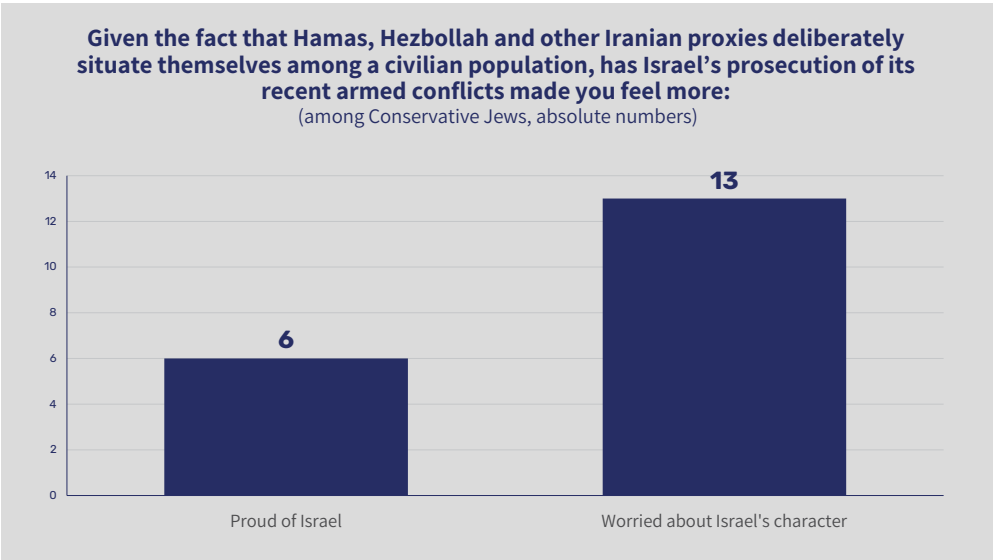
Question 10: Answered: 70



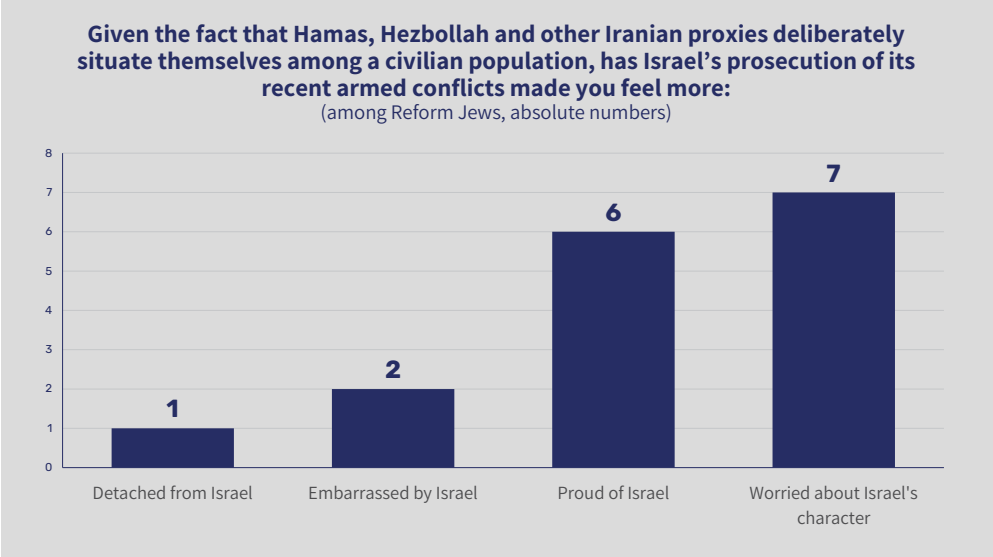
Question 11: Answered: 70



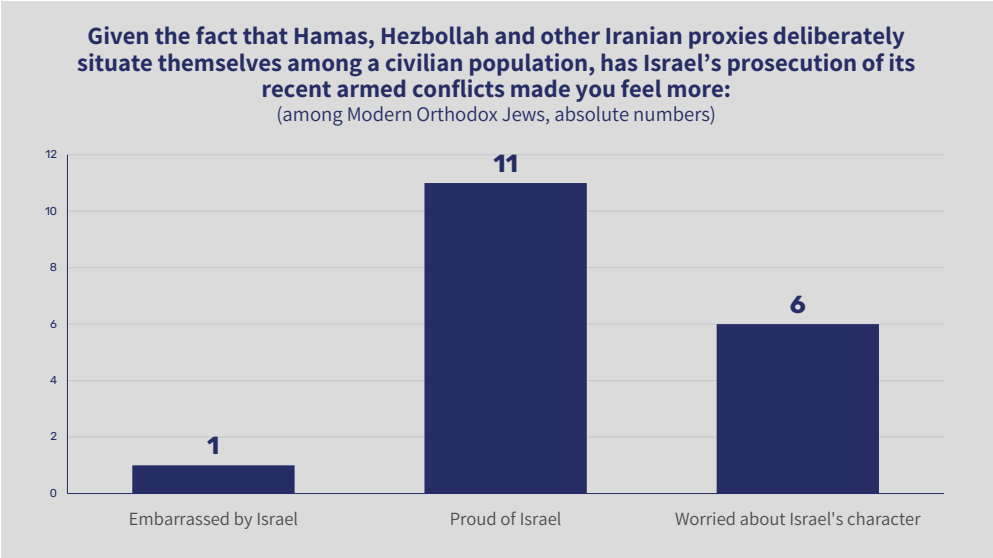
Question 12: Answered: 70



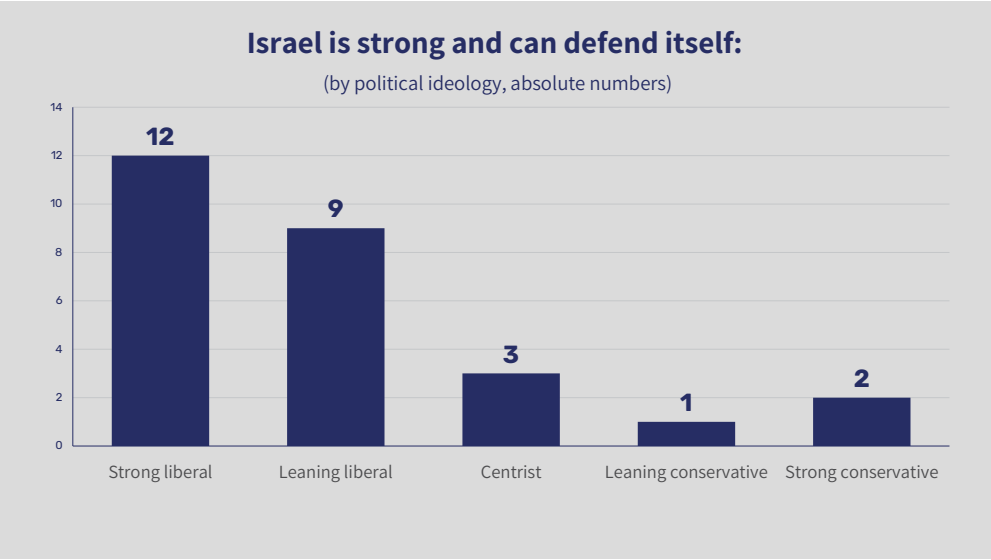
Question 13: Answered: 70



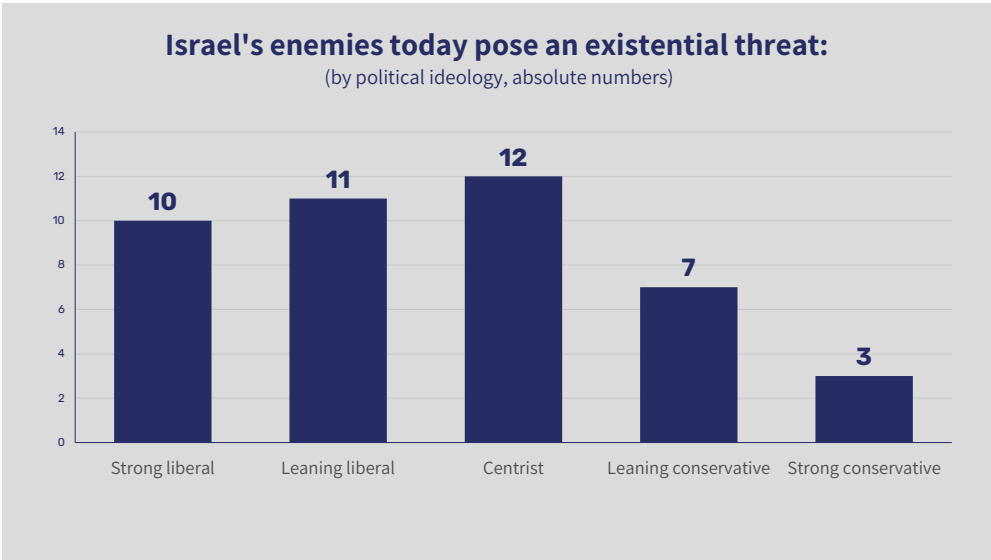
Question 14: Answered: 70



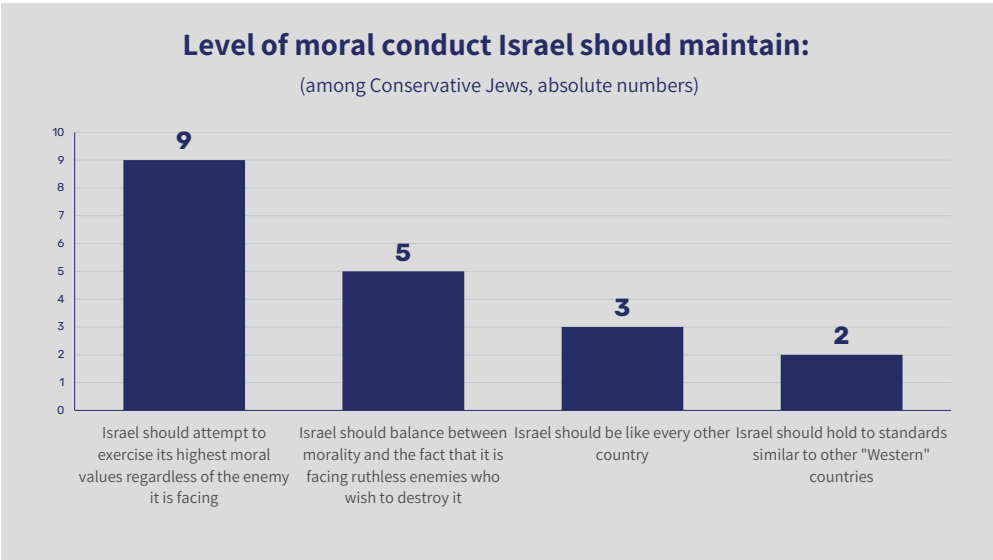
Question 15: Answered: 70



Question 16: Answered: 70



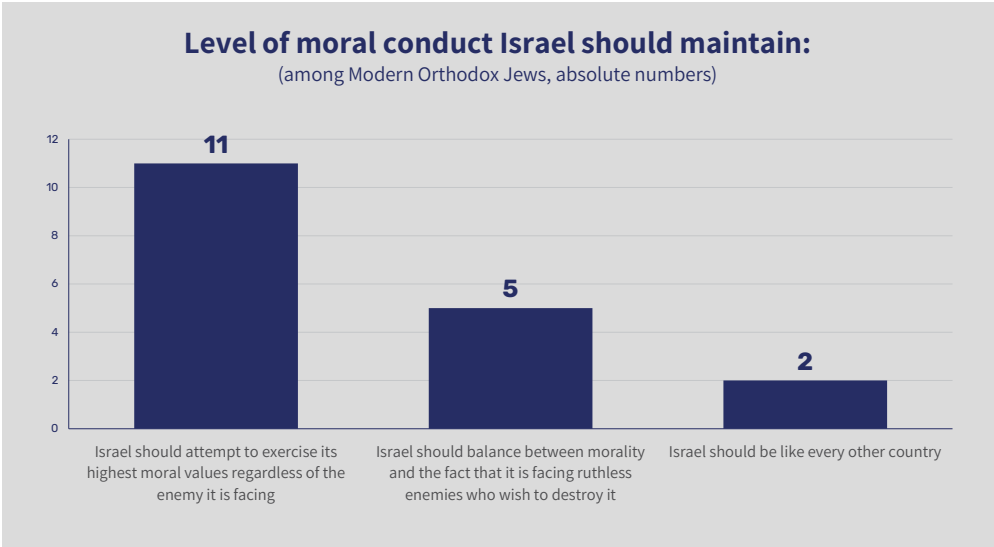
Question 17: Answered: 70



Question 18: Answered: 70



Question 19: Answered: 70



Appendix 3:

Participating Organizations

- American Jewish Committee (AJC)
- Australian Zionist Youth Council (AZYC)
- Brandeis Hillel
- Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA)
- Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago (JUF)
- JStreet
- Shalom Hartman
- The South African Zionist Federation (SAZF)
- UJA Federation of Greater Toronto