

Reassessing the Czech Public Attitudes towards Israel and the Israel-Palestinian Conflict

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ABSTRACT	The Czech political elites have traditionally maintained an unwavering support for Israel, and it has been popularly assumed that this view is widely translated into the Czech public opinion. In this review essay, I contest this popular assumption and argue that the Czech public opinion is more nuanced and less uniformly pro-Israel than previously believed. Drawing on public opinion data and original surveys, this paper highlights that many Czechs adopt neutral or even maintain some pro-Palestinian stances in this regard despite a dominant pro-Israel media narrative and a unified political consensus. The empirical evidence confidently shows that there is a significant gap in public and elite attitudes towards Israel and Palestine. The Czech case thus goes against the theoretical assumption that an undivided elite discourse favoring a particular policy should translate into a general public support.
KEYWORDS	public opinion, surveys, elite cues, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Czech foreign policy
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INTRODUCTION

In world politics, and particularly within the European Union, the Czech Republic stands out as one of the staunchest supporters of Israel. While experts and political scientists often highlight the unique diplomatic and material ties between Israel and the United States, Czech politicians emphasize the “strategic” nature of their alliance with Israel. Much like its American counterpart, Czech foreign policy is distinctive for its consistent diplomatic backing of Israel in international bodies, especially in the voting patterns observed at the United Nations General Assembly (KALHOUSOVÁ – RUBÍNOVÁ 2020). While others in this discussion forum investigate the historical and political underpinnings of Czechoslovak and, later, Czech policies towards Israel, my contribution lies in examining to what extent these strong elite views are reflected in contemporary public attitudes.

Whether and why public opinion matters in foreign policy has long been a subject of scholarly debate. Although early theorists dismissed public opinion as being ill-informed, incoherent, and overly moralistic (LIPPMANN 1955; ALMOND 1962), the premise that public opinion indeed affects foreign policy, although in varying degrees, is widely accepted among scholars today (RISSE-KAPPEN 1991; HOLSTI 1992; MILNER – TINGLEY 2013; KERTZER – ZEITZOFF 2017). The intriguing question in this debate is why the public often holds strong opinions on foreign policy issues that are far removed from people’s daily lives. A prominent strain of scholars popularly argued that members of the public turn to “trusted” political elites to form political judgments about foreign affairs (ZALLER 1992; BERINSKY 2007, 2015). Public opinion is thus, in this logic, primarily structured by partisan and group-based preferences in domestic politics. Simply put, what citizens think about foreign affairs is primarily driven by what politicians say about them.

In this essay, I explore the extent to which the unwavering support for Israel among political elites is translated into the general public’s attitudes. Via examining existing as well as original public opinion data, I argue that Czechs are less supportive of Israel than is widely assumed. In fact, the Czech public tends to adopt more neutral and, to some extent, even more critical positions on it than the political elites. Moreover, despite formidable obstacles such as the dominant political discourse, pro-Israel news media reporting, and a lack of anti-Israel or pro-Palestinian social

movements, the Czech public maintains certain levels of pro-Palestinian attitudes (ZÁHORA ET AL. 2024). In contrast to the theoretical assumption that an undivided elite discourse favoring a particular policy should translate into general public support (BERINSKY 2015), the Czech public holds significantly contrasting opinions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and thus goes against this assumed logic.

THE UNSHAKEABLE SUPPORT OF CZECH POLITICAL ELITES TOWARDS ISRAEL?

The Czech political elites have been remarkably unified in their support for Israel since the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Apart from the Communist Party, politicians across party affiliations have consistently endorsed pro-Israeli positions. Surprisingly, neither the numerous conflicts between Israel and various Palestinian groups nor the ongoing Israeli occupation of the West Bank had any impact on the Czech Republic's official stance towards Israel, for a detailed overview, see Čejka (2017) and Kalhousová (2019).

While strong pro-Israel sentiments have been particularly pronounced on the conservative center-right, even liberal left-wing parties have rarely challenged this consensus regardless of their voters being critical or less supportive of Israel. Let me illustrate it with a recent example. The appointment of the foreign minister Jan Lipavský (the Pirate Party) in December 2021, who was believed to hold at least some critical views towards Israeli policies, sparked a short-lived hope for a shift towards a more balanced foreign policy. However, despite a certain critique from the liberal left wing of his party, he quickly embraced the mainstream political discourse of the center-right government in fully supporting Israel. This may be quite surprising in the context of the European Union, where liberal left parties traditionally voiced pro-Palestinian sentiments (GREENE – RYNHOLD 2018). Close followers of Czech foreign policy may nevertheless find this behavior less surprising. Despite previous challenges mostly coming from the Social Democrats (ČSSD), once the most potent force in Czech parliamentary politics, aiming to align the Czech foreign policy closer to the European mainstream, any attempt to reform the pro-Israeli position failed to bring any meaningful change (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2025: 4).

The October 7 attack by Hamas and the following escalation in Gaza only further solidified the Czech unwavering support for Israel. With the increasing violence towards Palestinian civilians, the Czech Republic did not join the chorus of the EU countries criticizing Israel for the destruction of Gaza. In fact, the Czech Republic was among the ten countries voting against the immediate ceasefire in Gaza (UNITED NATIONS 2023) and, yet less surprisingly, against the proposition to end Israel's presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (UNITED NATIONS 2024).

For over three decades, Czech political elites have offered only a few incentives to cast doubt on their friendly stance towards Israel, let alone criticize it publicly. It was thus vastly uncontested that these predominant views were mirrored in the Czech public attitudes (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2025). When discussing public views on the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict with journalists and experts, I often encountered the assumption that nearly every Czech has an opinion on the matter (E.G., VIZINA, 2022). Thus, for years, it was popularly believed that Czechs are generally strongly pro-Israeli in their attitudes despite having arguably little knowledge about the conflict or the two nations. In the following section, I explore public opinion data from the past two decades to evaluate the merits of this claim.

WHAT DO CZECHS THINK ABOUT ISRAEL AND PALESTINE? AND DO THEY CARE?

Considering that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict represents a salient issue in global politics, research on international public opinion regarding the conflict is relatively scarce. Quite naturally, the few existing studies of this sort predominantly focus on Israel's closest ally – the United States (CAVARI 2012, 2013; CAVARI – FREEDMAN 2019, 2020). However, one of the rare comparative perspectives confirmed that the Czech Republic belongs to the so-called “pro-Israeli camp” next to the United States (BENLEVI ET AL. 2019).

In 2007, 1 respondents in 45 countries across the world were asked which side in the Middle East conflict they sympathized with more: Israel or Palestine. The Czech Republic ranked among the top countries supporting Israel, with 45% of the Czech respondents sympathizing with Israel and only 17% with the Palestinians (IBID.: 1011). This may seem like a significant difference. However, the percentage of those who, in fact, held neutral

positions was nearly as high as the percentage of those who sympathized with Israel (38%). In contrast, only 26% of the American citizens remained neutral compared to 61% of those who stated that they felt sympathy for Israel. Bearing in mind that the data are surely outdated, they reveal an important pattern suggesting substantial variation even among the staunchest supporters of Israel in world politics.

The data published by the national polling agencies reveal a more nuanced image and up-to-date assessment of the Czech public attitudes towards Israel and Palestine. One way to evaluate whether Czechs follow or simply care about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to gauge their general interest in Middle Eastern affairs. According to the most recent report published by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM) in February 2024, more than one-third (35%) of Czechs expressed interest in information about developments in the Middle East (ČERVENKA – AVČR 2024). Czechs thus showed surprisingly less interest in the region during the early months of the war in Gaza than in other turbulent events in the past such as the Second Intifada in 2002 (42% were interested) or the early months of the Arab Spring (53% were interested), as was documented by earlier CVVM surveys in the times of the events.

In our original study, we observed a similar trend when we asked the respondents directly whether they were interested in the news, this time specifically news about Israel (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2024). In the survey conducted in January 2024, just three months after the October 7th attack, we found that 40% of Czechs expressed interest in news about Israel, compared to just 24% the previous year (IBID.). While it is a common finding that the public tends to pay increased attention to the news in the early stages of a conflict (ENTMAN 2004; BAUM – GROELING 2009), are Middle Eastern affairs more salient for Czechs than other foreign policy issues?

In February 2024, CVVM researchers asked, analogously to how they asked about the Gaza war, whether Czechs followed developments in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The results showed that almost twice as many people were interested in the war in Ukraine as were interested in the war in Gaza (ČERVENKA – AVČR 2024). This finding is quite impressive yet less surprising for a closer observer. While the crisis in Ukraine sparked widespread solidarity within the Czech society from the early days, the

increasing humanitarian crisis in Gaza had nearly no mobilizing effect on the Czech public, unlike in other European countries.

ARE ELITE VIEWS TRANSLATED INTO
CZECH PUBLIC ATTITUDES?

Surveying the public interest in various conflicts forms a good basis to assess whether a public opinion exists in the first place. The next step is to evaluate individual attitudes and the levels of support for the warring parties.

In our longitudinal series of surveys (2022–2024), we asked the respondents which side historically bears a greater responsibility for the conflict: Palestinians or Israelis. We observe that, in general, there is an inclination to blame the Palestinians (21%) rather than the Israelis (10%); see Table 1 for details. A similar pattern emerged when we asked the respondents about the responsibility for the ongoing war. After the Hamas attacks on Israel, we noticed that Czechs more often blamed the Palestinians compared to the previous year, while nearly the same percentage blamed the Israelis. However, immediately concluding that the Czech public is strongly pro-Israel would be impetuous. In fact, most Czechs do not know which side to support (43% on average) or believe that both sides share equal responsibility for the conflict (27% on average)

TABLE 1: RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Survey question: Who do you think bears a greater responsibility for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestinians or Israelis?

	Historically		Currently	
	2023	2024	2023	2024
Definitely Palestinians	4%	8%	6%	15%
Rather Palestinians	11%	13%	14%	17%
Both nations equally	29%	30%	25%	24%
Rather Israelis	5%	7%	5%	6%
Definitely Israelis	2%	3%	2%	3%
Do not know	49%	40%	47%	36%

Source: Kalhoušová et al. (2024); reproduced with the authors' permission.

The assumption that Czechs are strongly pro-Israel becomes even more contestable when the respondents are asked about a future reconciliation and potential pathways for peace. According to our study, the so-called two-state solution remained the most preferred option (46%) for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2024 (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2024). In addition, more than one-third of Czechs (37%) agree that Palestine should be recognized as a sovereign and independent state in contrast to 20% opposing it (IBID.).

Even though they are purely observational, the recent public opinion data suggest that Czechs hold more varying opinions on the conflict than previously assumed. While we admit that there is still a general leaning toward supporting Israel, an insignificant portion of the population also holds opposing views, and many remain indifferent despite the increased media coverage. This stands in stark contrast to the United States, as was discussed earlier, where the majority of people hold favorable views of Israel, and far fewer remain undecided (CAVARI – FREEDMAN 2020).

However, purely observing public opinion data may seem insufficient for confidently concluding that the public views are distinct from the political elites' views. In our latest study, we thus provide the first systematic account to statistically assess² whether there is a significant gap between the views of the elites and public opinion by utilizing an original survey of both the Czech parliamentarians and the population (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2025). Our empirical results reveal that Czech parliamentarians are significantly more likely to support pro-Israel policies and less likely to support pro-Palestinian policies than the general public. The elite respondents were significantly more likely to support moving the Czech embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem than ordinary citizens ($p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.69$) and less likely to agree with the statement that Palestine should be recognized as an independent and sovereign state ($p < .001$; Cohen's $d = -0.61$), allowing us to conclude that Czechs are thus less strongly pro-Israel than previously believed (IBID.: 9).

This new empirical evidence also does not lend itself to the conclusion that the Czech public necessarily takes cues from elites despite sustained political alignment. To illustrate it on an example, Czech politicians have occasionally questioned the possibility of relocating the Czech embassy

from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. One of the most prominent proponents of this step was former President Miloš Zeman, who repeatedly advocated for its relocation (ČTK 2018). The current prime minister, Petr Fiala, although from an ideologically and politically distinct position, supported the relocation just two days after the Hamas attack on Israel (ČTK 2023). Such a solid political cue does not seem to translate into public opinion, though. The Czech public leans towards not relocating the Czech embassy (24%), compared to 15% who would support it. At the same time, the rest of the population remains without a clear opinion on the issue.

WHAT DOES OR DOESN'T SHAPE THE CZECH PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS ISRAEL AND PALESTINE?

Until this point, I have primarily focused on showing the gap in public and elite attitudes toward Israel and Palestine. I aimed to demonstrate that Czechs hold neutral and even critical attitudes toward Israel despite a unified elite consensus. In the final section, and by way of conclusion, I want to discuss the key factors that shape the division in public attitudes.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a dominant line of work argues that ideological alignment plays a key role in shaping public attitudes (JENTLESON 1992; BAUM – POTTER 2008; HOLSTI 2009; CAVARI – FREEDMAN 2018). In Europe, left-wing voters have traditionally supported the Palestinian cause, mainly in opposition to Israel and its policies (SHINDLER 2012; GREENE – RYNHOLD 2018). Surveys in Western European countries showed that respondents who identify as left-wing express strong support for the Palestinians, while those on the political right express weaker though distinct sympathies for Israel (PEW RESEARCH CENTER 2009). This argument also appears to hold in the case of the Czech public. In our survey, we confirmed that left-oriented individuals are generally more critical of Israel than supporters of parties on the right side of the political spectrum (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2025).

Nevertheless, political preference alone cannot fully explain the divisions in public attitudes. Previous studies have identified that religious identity is another important factor influencing the global attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (BENLEVI ET AL. 2019). In the Czech context, however, the potential influence of religion appears limited as Czechia regularly scores among the least religious³ countries in the world (GALLUP 2022). Thus,

religion is rarely included as a sociodemographic factor in Czech population surveys since sociologists have found little empirical support for the idea that religion drives Czech attitudes.

Czech society is also relatively homogeneous, with rare engagement with Middle Eastern cultures. Scholars have suggested that Czech attitudes towards other cultures are heavily influenced by perceived cultural proximity. Although the Jewish as well as the Muslim communities in the Czech Republic are strikingly small, Arabs and Muslims, in particular, are often viewed by Czechs with suspicion and as those who oppose “European values” (ČEJKA 2017: 38). In contrast, Jewish culture is commonly accepted as part of a shared “Judeo-Christian” tradition in Europe, a narrative that gained prominence only after World War II (BERGER 2013).

Although the empirical evidence supporting this assumption is limited, the existing public opinion data hints at the influence of cultural perceptions on attitudes toward Israel. In the 2022 survey, we asked the respondents to share their spontaneous associations with Israel (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2022). The most frequent associations included religion, culture, historical landmarks, and the concept of Israel as a nation. In comparison, political topics were rarely mentioned, which suggests that for many Czechs, historical memory and a perceived cultural affinity play a more prominent role than political considerations in the shaping of their opinions.

Despite a certain level of mythologizing Israel, the empirical evidence also points to the persistence of stereotypes within Czech society. When asked about potential neighbors from different nationalities and ethnicities, over 80% of Czechs expressed no objection to having a Christian or Jewish person as their neighbor. Yet, more than half (54%) indicated discomfort with the idea of having a Muslim neighbor (IBID.). Although positive attitudes toward Jews and Israel are prevalent among Czechs, certain prejudices remain entrenched. In the same survey, nearly two-thirds of Czechs agreed with the statement that “Jews are good with money,” and 37% believed that “Jews differ from others in their physical appearance.”

In addition to these stereotypes, the Czech public’s views are aided by a one-sided media landscape. The mainstream media, on which most Czechs rely for information, tends to focus predominantly on negative

issues like war, terrorism, and political violence while presenting a largely pro-Israel narrative in regard to Middle Eastern affairs (ČEJKA 2017: 38). This bias was particularly evident during the early months of the Gaza war, when pro-Palestinian voices were almost entirely absent from the public discourse. Moreover, anti-Israeli or pro-Palestinian movements have had little influence in the Czech Republic. Movements such as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign have gained minimal traction, and organizations like the Czech branch of the International Solidarity Movement have struggled to mobilize any meaningful public support.

Despite the limited presence of anti-Israel movements, the strong pro-Israel stance of the political elites, and the predominantly pro-Israel media coverage, the Czech public opinion remains more nuanced. As discussed in this essay, while the public tends to lean pro-Israel, there are significant segments that hold more balanced or pro-Palestinian views. However, compared to Western European countries, where the growing dissatisfaction with Israel's policies in Gaza has fueled protests and public demonstrations, Czechs have been more hesitant to engage in collective action in this respect. Even university campuses, traditionally seen as drivers of social change, have remained relatively inactive. Czech university students did not participate in the so-called encampment movements, unlike their counterparts in Germany, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, or the United States. A small exception can be found in a handful of academics and public intellectuals who, after October 7, have called for a more balanced and critical discourse on Middle Eastern affairs (ZÁHORA ET AL. 2024). However, their efforts have so far had little impact on the broader public or political discourse.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this brief essay, I attempted to contest and deconstruct the widespread belief that Czech public attitudes are inherently one-sided in their support for Israel, especially when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By utilizing available public opinion data as well as original surveys, I showed that despite a uniform political consensus among the elites, the Czech public tends to adopt more neutral⁴ and, to some extent, even critical positions towards Israel. While recognizing that there is indeed a general

leaning toward supporting Israel, a noticeable portion of the population holds ambivalent attitudes towards issues such as the historical responsibility for the conflict, the future reconciliation of the two nations, or the potential relocation of the Czech embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

In the review, I primarily focused on observational data. However, employing survey experiments could prove to be even more fruitful in advancing our understanding of what drives public preferences, which is a critical step in other foreign policy areas as well. While it was established that there is a significant gap between elite and public attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, future research scrutinizing to what extent public preferences can affect policy is highly needed. And finally, such a non-negligible disconnect between the public and political elites' preferences may invite a normative debate on its long-term implications in domestic politics.

ENDNOTES

- 1 In their study, BenLevi et al., 2019 use observational data from 2007 collected by the Pew Research Centre.
- 2 Using a series of Welch two-sample t-tests.
- 3 According to the latest population census, over two-thirds (68%) of Czechs report no religious affiliations, while only 19% identify with a religious group (ČSÚ 2021).
- 4 However, "neutrality" in this context should be interpreted with caution, since stating the middle ground in surveys is often driven by a lack of information or knowledge on a given matter (Sturgis et al. 2014; Nadler et al. 2015).

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