

Perceived Intent: How Americans View Israel's Actions in Gaza

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between September 17–23, 2025, researchers at Florida State University's Institute for Governance and Civics (IGC) surveyed 1,447 U.S. adults—including an oversample of 252 Florida residents—to examine how Americans interpret Israel's intentions toward civilians in Gaza. Overall, the findings reveal a public that is divided, uncertain, and sharply polarized along ideological and generational lines.

- **Americans are evenly split and uncertain over Israel's intentions**
- **Older and conservative Americans are more likely to hold the opinion that Israel tries to avoid civilian casualties**
- **Younger and more liberal Americans are more skeptical of Israel's motives**

INTRODUCTION

Public debate over Israel's conduct in Gaza has become one of the most polarizing issues in American politics. Yet much of what we know about public sentiment comes from oversimplified polling questions. The most widely used item, employed by YouGov and others, asks whether respondents believe Israel is "committing genocide against Palestinian civilians." While useful for gauging outrage, this question ignores intent: Do Americans believe Israel seeks to harm civilians as part of its military operations?

To dig deeper on this complex issue, the Institute for Governance and Civics at Florida State University included a question on our September 2025 national survey that asked Americans to choose which of several statements best reflected their view of Israel's military

policy in Gaza. The item distinguished between the intent of causing intentional harm, mere indifference, or attempts to avoid civilian casualties. Respondents were also given the option to reject the offered framing or expressing uncertainty.

The results offer a clearer and more nuanced portrait of how Americans interpret Israel's intentions—and, by extension, how they morally navigate a conflict saturated with competing narratives.

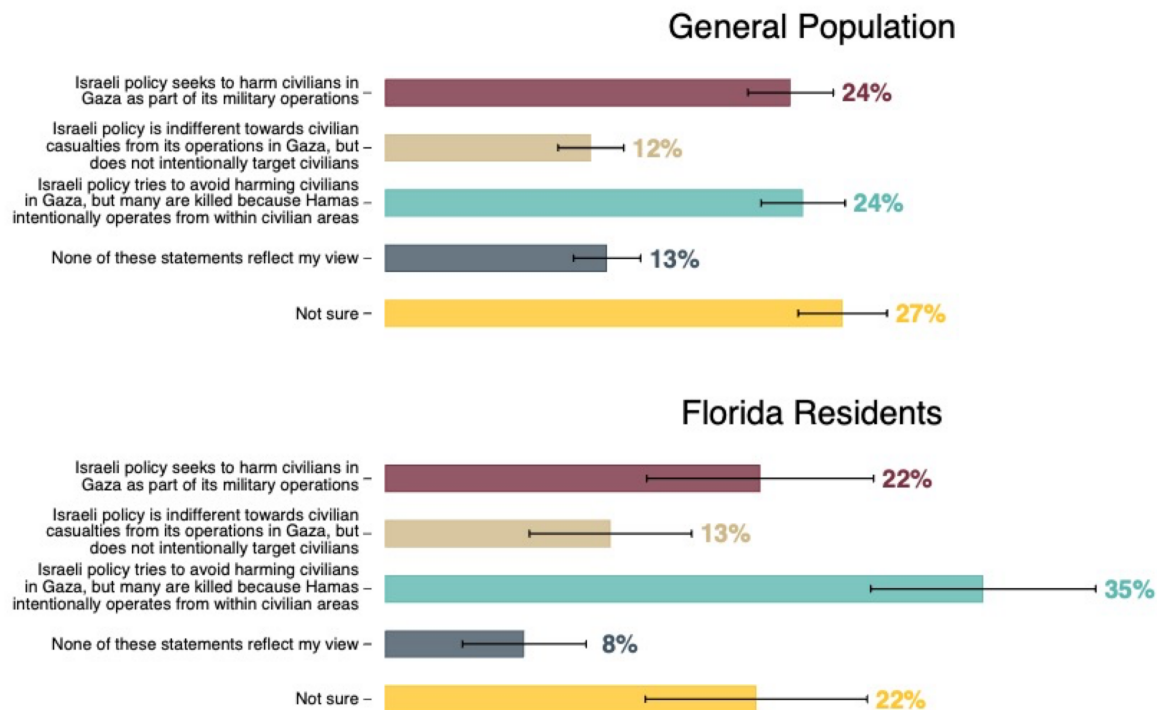
AMERICANS ARE DIVIDED (AND UNCERTAIN) OVER ISRAEL'S INTENTIONS IN GAZA

Americans are nearly evenly divided in how they interpret Israel's intentions toward civilians in Gaza (Figure 1, top panel). About one-quarter (24%) of Americans said Israeli policy tries to avoid harming civilians but many are killed

because Hamas operates from within civilian areas. An identical share said Israel seeks to harm civilians as part of its military operations. Another 12% viewed Israeli policy as indifferent toward but not intentionally targeting civilians. Thirteen percent said none of the statements reflected their view, and 27% were not sure.

The public is split between two opposing narratives: one that casts Israel's actions as intentionally harmful, and another that portrays civilian deaths as tragic but largely the result of Hamas's tactics.

Figure 1. Views of Israel's Intentions Towards Civilians in Gaza: General Population and Florida Residents



Note. Data are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. and Florida adult populations, respectively. The general population sample includes 1,447 adults nationwide, and the Florida subsample includes 252 adult residents of Florida. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall.

This distribution of responses paints a public split between two opposing narratives: one that casts Israel's actions as intentionally harmful, and another that

portrays civilian deaths as tragic but largely the result of Hamas's tactics. The balance between those two interpretations stands in contrast to the

42% of Americans who told YouGov in September 2025 that Israel is “committing genocide” — a figure that likely overstates the share who see deliberate intent to kill civilians.

Florida respondents showed greater support for the belief that Israel tries to avoid civilian casualties. Thirty-five percent of Floridians said Israel tries to avoid harming civilians — about 11 points higher than in the general population. This difference remains statistically significant even after accounting for differences in demographic and political characteristics, suggesting a modest but genuine state-level tilt toward more charitable

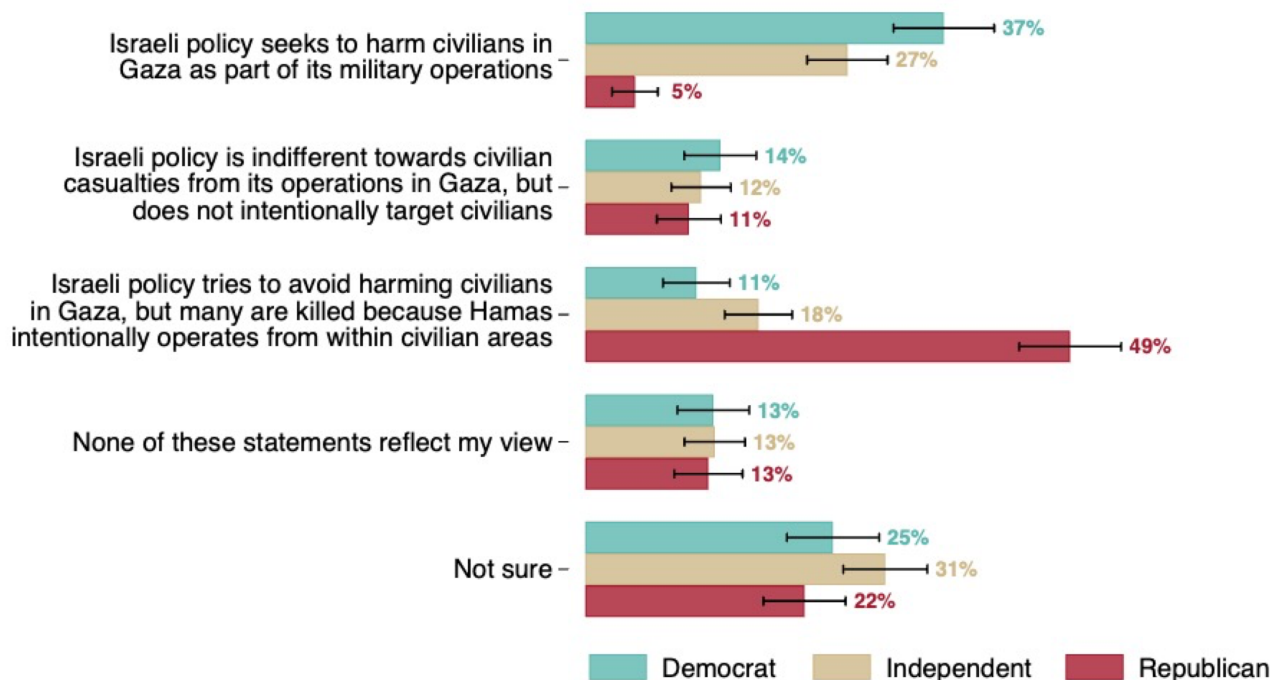
interpretations of Israel’s actions.

VIEWS OF ISRAEL’S INTENTIONS ARE POLARIZED ALONG POLITICAL LINES

Partisanship and ideology are by far the strongest predictors of how Americans interpret Israel’s motives—stronger than age, education, or any other demographic factor.

As shown in Figure 2, more than a third of Democrats (37%) believe Israeli policy seeks to harm civilians, compared to just 5% of Republicans. Republicans, by contrast, are about four times as likely as Democrats to say Israel tries to avoid harming civilians (49% vs. 11%). Independents fall in between, leaning closer to Democrats in skepticism but

Figure 2. Views of Israel’s Intentions Towards Civilians in Gaza, by Party Affiliation



Note. Data (N=1,446) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. adult population. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall.

showing somewhat higher levels of uncertainty than both partisan camps. These gaps remain large even after accounting for demographic characteristics and ideological orientation.

The strength of party affiliation also shapes these views (Figure 3). Solid Democrats (37%) and Democratic leaners (35%) are almost equally likely to say that Israel seeks to harm civilians—and equally unlikely (11% vs. 10%) to think it tries to avoid harming them.

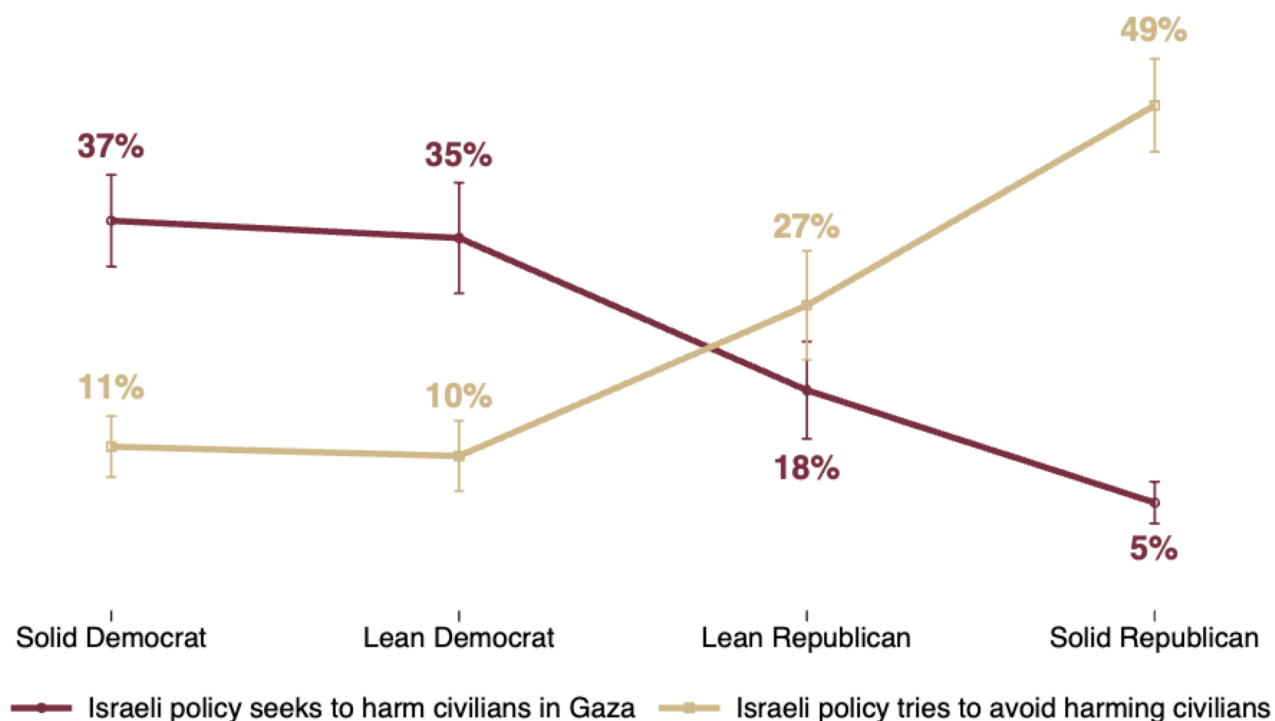
Among Republicans, however, leaners

differ sharply from partisans. Nearly one in five GOP leaners (18%) attribute harmful intent to Israel, compared with just 5% of solid Republicans. Leaners are also much less likely to say Israel tries to avoid harming civilians (27% vs. 49%) and far more likely to say they are not sure (34% vs. 22%).

These patterns persist after controlling for demographic and ideological factors, suggesting that partisan strength matters more on the right than on the left.

Political ideology amplifies these divisions. As shown in Figure 4, half of

Figure 3. Views of Israel's Intentions Towards Civilians in Gaza, by Strength of Party Affiliation



Note. Data (N=1,414) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. adult population. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall. Respondents who did not lean toward either major party (n = 12) or answered “Don’t know” (n = 12) were excluded from the analysis.

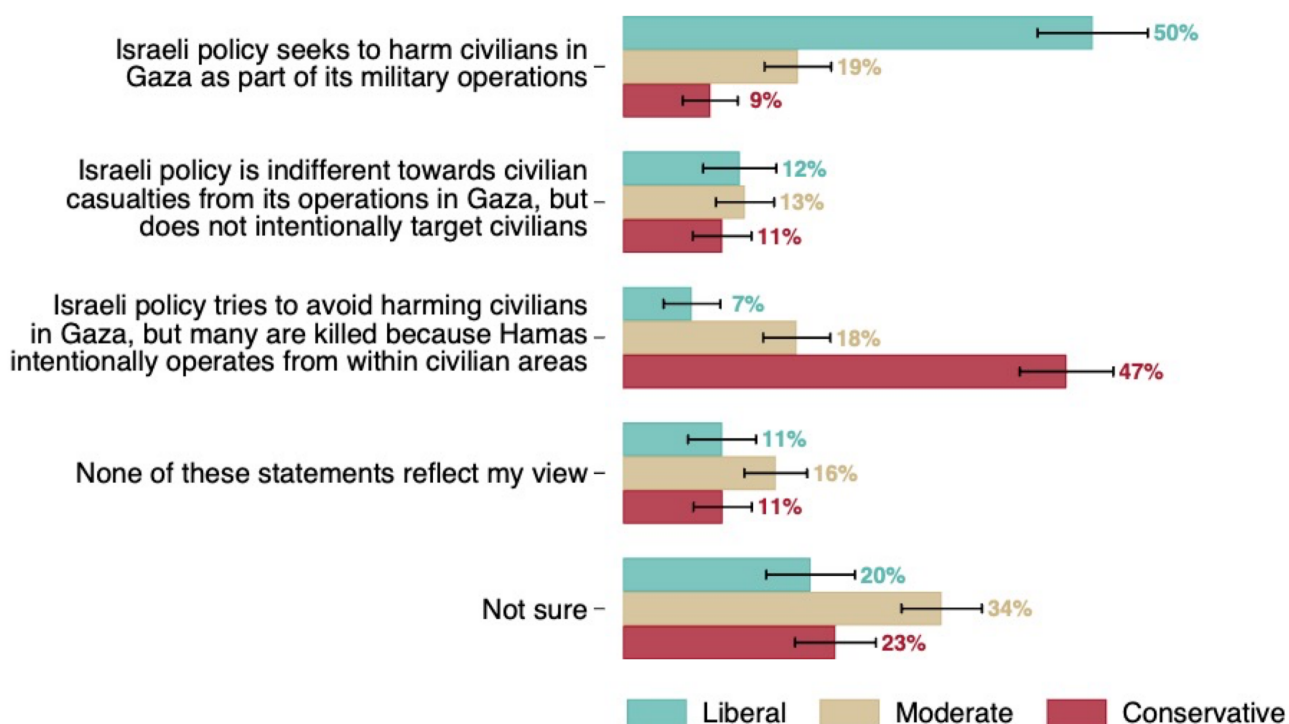
self-identified liberals (50%) say Israeli policy seeks to harm civilians in Gaza, compared with just one in ten conservatives (9%). Conservatives, by contrast, are far more likely to say Israel tries to avoid harming civilians (47% vs. 7% among liberals).

Democrats and liberals overwhelmingly interpret Israel's actions as intentionally harmful, while Republicans and conservatives tend to see them as constrained by Hamas's tactics.

Moderates, meanwhile, stand out for their uncertainty: roughly one-third (34%) are not sure how to interpret Israel's intentions—the most common response within this group. All of these gaps remain sizable and statistically meaningful after accounting for partisanship and demographic factors. Liberals and conservatives thus form a mirror image in their views of Israel's intent towards Gazans.

Taken together, these results reveal how deeply the conflict over Israel's military conduct has become entangled in America's political divisions. Democrats

Figure 4. Views of Israel's Intentions Towards Civilians in Gaza, by Political Ideology



Note. Data (N=1,445) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S. adult population. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall.

and liberals overwhelmingly interpret Israel's actions as intentionally harmful, while Republicans and conservatives tend to see them as constrained by Hamas's tactics. Leaners and moderates, meanwhile, express higher levels of uncertainty or detachment.

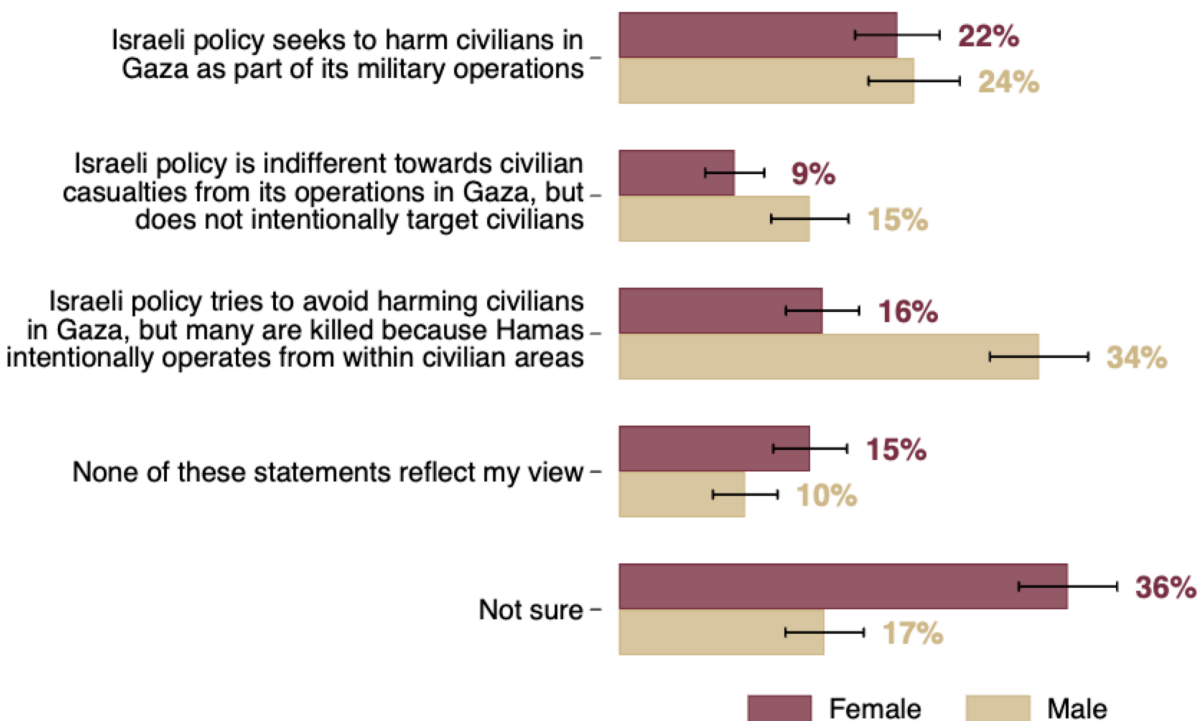
Finally, while these patterns mirror findings from simpler "genocide" questions in other national polls—where Democrats dominate the "yes" camp and Republicans the "no"—the rates of "intentional harm" responses are considerably lower in our data than the share labeling Israel's actions "genocide"

in YouGov's poll. For example, in a September 2025 YouGov survey, 67% of Democrats and 81% of liberals said Israel is "committing genocide," compared with 37% and 50%, respectively, in our survey who said Israel "seeks to harm civilians.[1] Even when combining those who describe Israeli policy as "indifferent" toward civilian casualties, the resulting figures (approximately 50–60%) remain well below YouGov's totals.

MEN AND WOMAN DIFFER IN THE CONFIDENCE OF THEIR BELIEFS

Roughly one-third of men (34%) say Israel tries to avoid harming civilians—

Figure 5. Views of Israel's Intentions Towards Civilians in Gaza, by Gender



Note. Data (N=1,415) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S adult population. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall. Respondents who identified as another gender ($n = 11$) or declined to specify a gender ($n = 20$) are excluded from the analysis.

more than twice the rate of women (16%) (Figure 5). Yet this apparent gender gap is largely a mirror image of women's higher uncertainty: more than a third of women (36%) say they are not sure how to answer, compared with just 17% of men. These differences remain even after accounting for political and demographic traits, suggesting that they reflect a genuine difference in certainty rather than the underlying political or demographic makeup of each group.

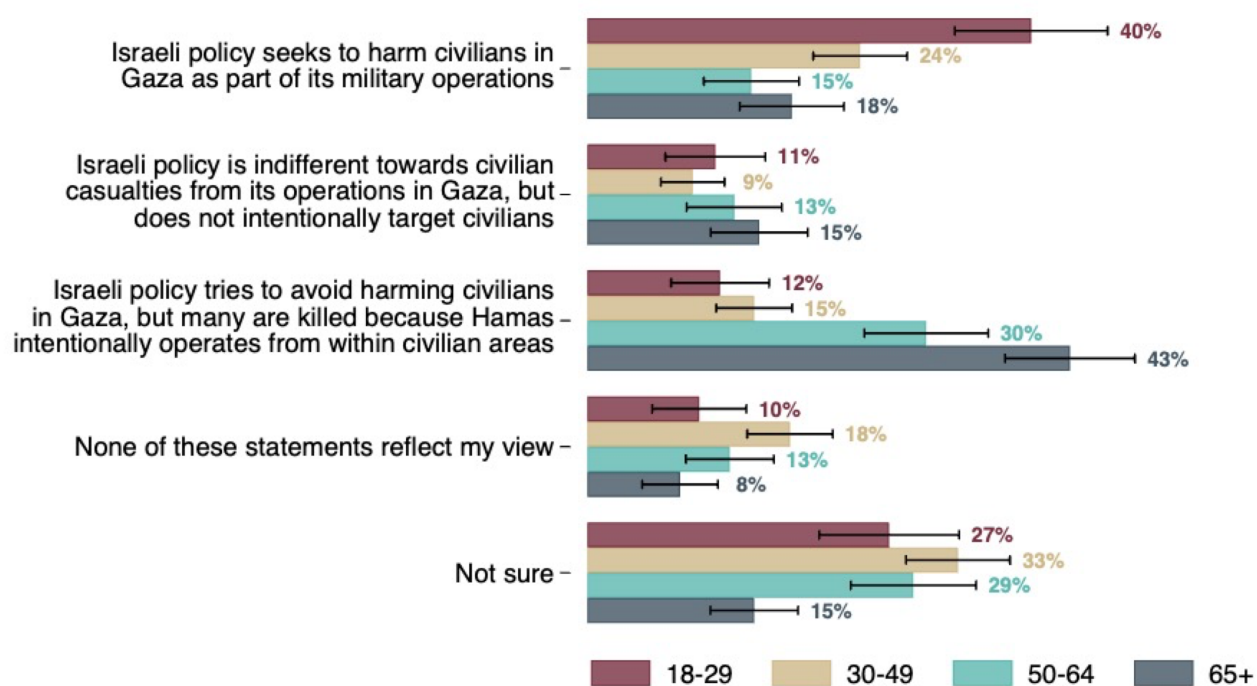
Overall, gender differences on this issue are best described as differences in certainty rather than sympathy: men are more likely to take a stand—whether

supportive or critical—while women are more likely to withhold judgment when asked to interpret the intent behind Israel's military operations in Gaza.

YOUNGER AMERICANS ARE FAR MORE LIKELY TO THINK ISRAEL INTENTIONALLY TARGETS CIVILIANS

Public perceptions of Israel's motives vary sharply by age (Figure 6). Nearly four in ten adults under 30 (40%) say Israel seeks to harm civilians in Gaza—more than double the share among those aged 50–64 (15%) and far higher than in any other age group. By contrast, older adults, particularly seniors, are much more inclined to view Israel's actions as

Figure 6. Views of Israel's Intentions Towards Civilians in Gaza, by Age Group



Note. Data (N=1,446) are weighted to be representative of the national U.S adult population. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, indicating the range within which the true population value is likely to fall.

restrained: 43% of those 65 and older say Israel tries to avoid harming civilians, compared with just 12% among the youngest cohort.

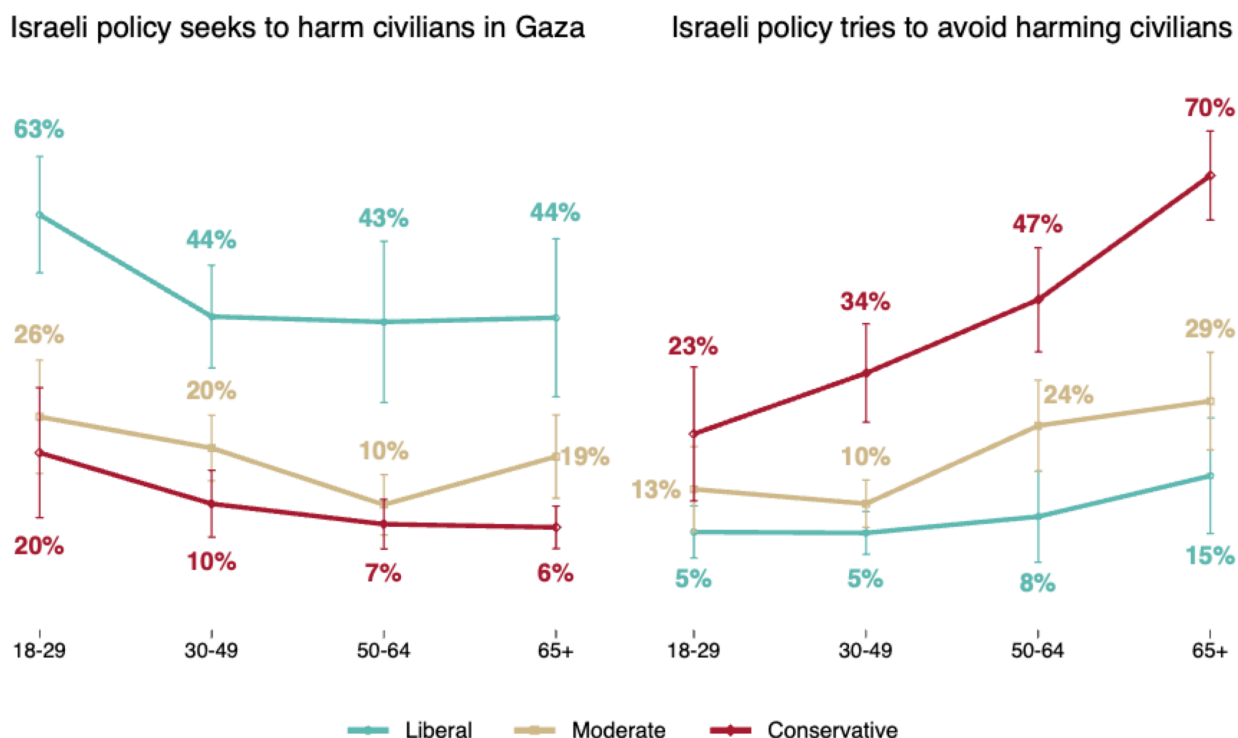
Younger liberals and younger conservatives both tend to take a harsher view towards Israel's intentions than their older counterparts.

While both figures are higher than in older groups, the youngest adults display notable gender differences: 49% of men under 30 say Israel seeks to harm

civilians, compared with 30% of women. Likewise, among seniors, 56% of men versus 31% of women say Israel tries to avoid harming civilians. These gaps largely reflect women's greater uncertainty—higher rates of “Not sure” responses—rather than differences in substantive attitudes.

Ultimately, much of the generational divide reflects ideology. Younger Americans lean liberal on average, and liberal ideology strongly predicts the belief that Israel intends to harm civilians. Yet Figure 7 shows that generational contrasts persist even within ideological

Figure 7. Views of Israel's Intentions Towards Civilians in Gaza, by Political Ideology



Note. Data (N = 1,444) are weighted to represent the national U.S. adult population. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. Responses of “Israeli policy is indifferent toward civilians,” “None of these statements reflect my view,” and “Not sure” are included in the data but omitted from the chart for clarity.

groups. Younger liberals and younger conservatives both tend to take a harsher view towards Israel's intentions than their older counterparts.

CONCLUSION

Americans' views of Israel's actions in Gaza are as complex as the actions themselves. Roughly equal shares of adults interpret Israeli policy as seeking to harm civilians and as trying to avoid doing so. An even larger share of respondents say they are simply not sure. This ambivalence points to a public that is far from united in its moral or factual judgments about the conflict—and often hesitant to assign intent amid the fog of war.

Beneath this general division lies clear ideological and generational patterns. Younger and more liberal Americans are markedly more likely to see Israel's behavior as intentionally harmful. Older and more conservative adults tend to accept Israeli statements that they try to limit civilian deaths.

At the same time, the survey highlights the limits of binary polling questions that reduce complex moral evaluations to a simple "yes" or "no." For instance, while 42% of respondents in a September 2025 YouGov poll said Israel is "committing genocide," only about half that share in this study ascribed deliberate intent to harm civilians. The difference suggests that many Americans' views are more uncertain or qualified than a single

question can capture. By offering multiple, mutually exclusive statements that distinguish between intent, indifference, and restraint, this survey uncovers a broader spectrum of opinion—one that spans deliberate malice, tragic inevitability, moral ambivalence, and uncertainty.

Ultimately, the findings portray an American public that is attentive but conflicted, sympathetic but skeptical, and often unsure how to make sense of a complicated issue. For policymakers, advocates, and journalists, the takeaway is that headline numbers can mislead: public sentiment toward Israel's conduct is not fixed but fluid, divided, and shaped by the frames through which people encounter the conflict.

Poll Information

This study was conducted online between September 17–23, 2025 by Social Science Research Services (SSRS) using a Probability-Based Opinion Panel. The sample consisted of 1,447 respondents age 18 or older, including an oversample of 252 Florida residents. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-2.9% at the 95% confidence level. Weighted demographic characteristics of the survey group are presented in Table 1 on the next page.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics by Survey Sample

Category	General Population	Florida Sample
Sex		
Male	49%	49%
Female	51%	51%
Age		
18 to 29	20%	18%
30 to 49	34%	30%
50 to 64	24%	25%
65 or older	23%	27%
Race/Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic White	61%	55%
Black	12%	14%
Hispanic	18%	26%
Asian	6%	3%
Other	2%	2%
Household Income		
Less than \$50,000	40%	39%
\$50,000-\$74,999	15%	18%
\$75,000-\$99,999	14%	16%
\$100,000 and over	30%	27%
Education		
Less than HS	9%	8%
HS Graduate	29%	31%
Some college	26%	26%
BA Degree	20%	20%
Postgrad / Prof. Degree	16%	16%
Parent Status		
Parent	26%	17%
Not a Parent	74%	83%
Stated Party		
Democrat	30%	28%
Republican	27%	28%
Independent/ Something Else	43%	44%
Political Ideology		
Liberal	26%	21%
Moderate	43%	49%
Conservative	31%	30%

[1] See YouGov. (2025, September 22). The Economist/YouGov Poll, September 19–22, 2025 [Survey report, p. 59]. YouGov. https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/econTabReport_x7JTALZ.pdf