

What do Jews in the UK think about Israel's leaders and its future?

Dr Jonathan Boyd and Dr Carli Lessof

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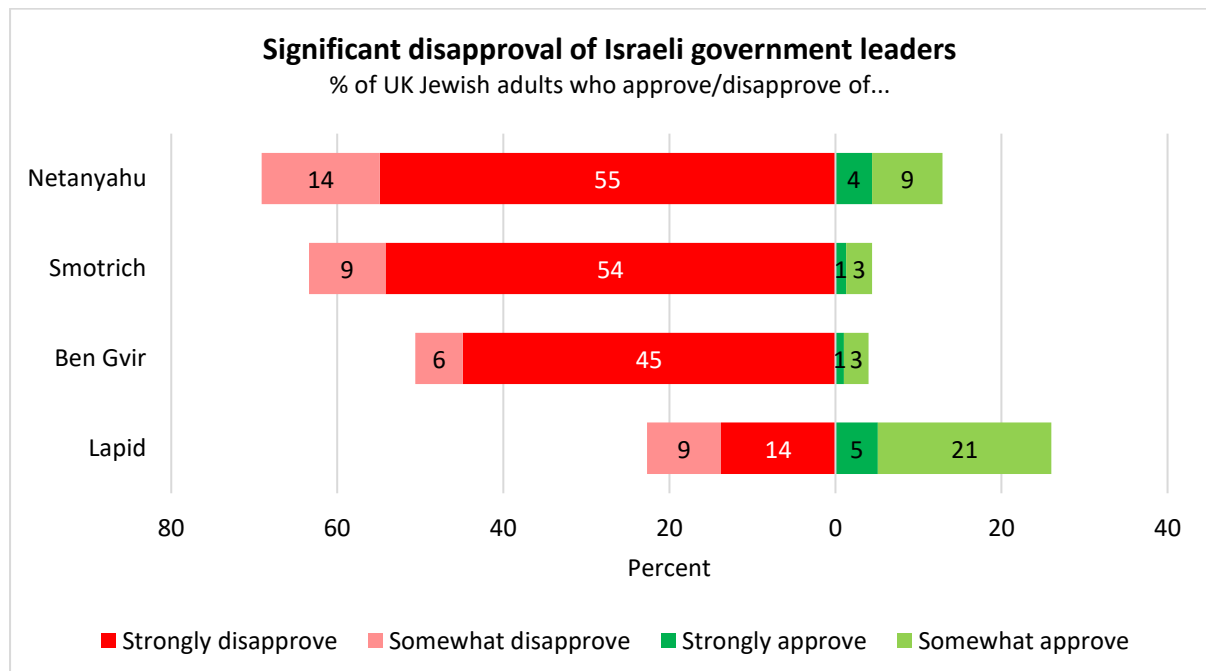
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/ Approval and disapproval of Israeli leaders

A strong majority of UK Jews disapprove of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu today, and similar proportions express the same sentiment towards two staunchly right-wing Israeli senior politicians, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir. And a wave of pessimism about Israel's current situation appears to be sweeping across the UK Jewish community, according to data from JPR's most recent survey (April/May 2023).



Source: Wave 4 JPR panel survey, April/May 2023; n=3,748. Proportions for 'neither approve nor disapprove' and 'don't know' not shown.

On first viewing, disapproval ratings towards Netanyahu appear to be somewhat higher than towards Smotrich, leader of *HaTzionut HaDatit* (Religious Zionism), and Ben-Gvir, leader of *Otzma Yehudit* (Jewish Strength). But it is important to bear in mind that Netanyahu is far more well-known than any of the other characters assessed. We see this clearly in the proportions who said they did not know whether they approved or disapproved of each of them – where 13% said this about Netanyahu, the equivalent figures for Smotrich and Ben-Gvir were 25% and 35% respectively. When we recalculate the figures to reflect only those who expressed an opinion, Netanyahu has a disapproval rating of 79%, Ben-Gvir rates similarly at 78%, and Smotrich leads at 85%.

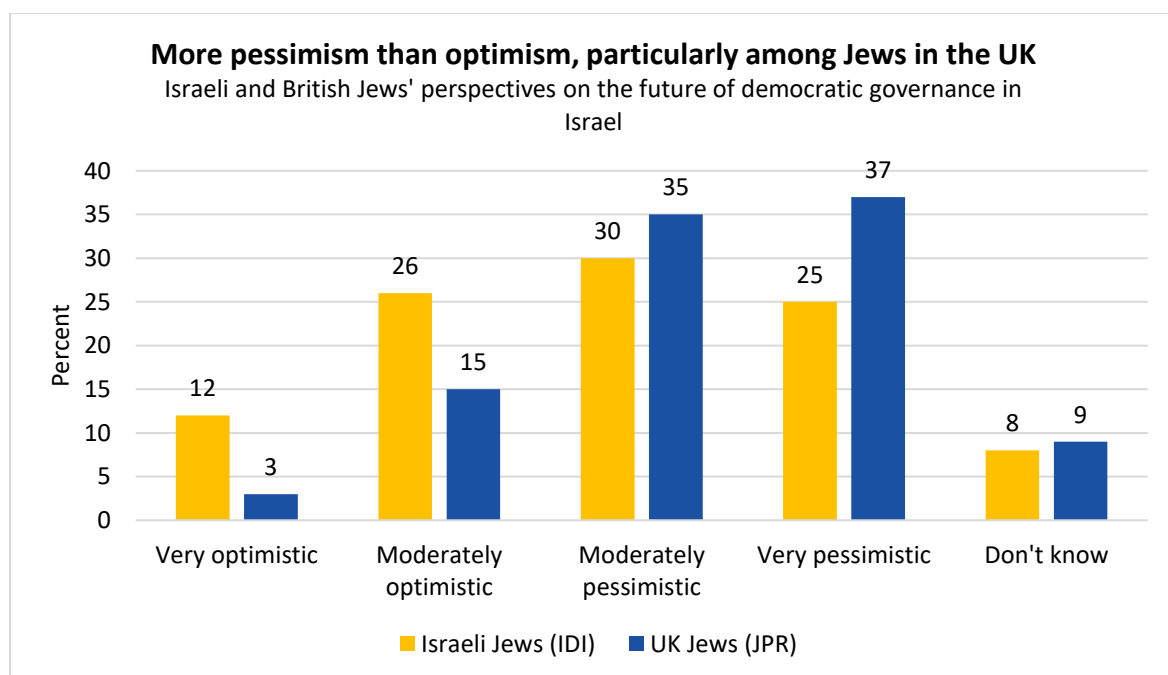
All of these views stand in sharp contrast to attitudes towards Leader of the Opposition and Chairman of the centrist *Yesh Atid* party, Yair Lapid, where opinion is far more mixed. Again, we find a high proportion (34%) not knowing whether they approve of disapprove of him, but of those who hold a view, a much small proportion (34%) expresses disapproval.

Measuring British Jews' approval ratings of senior Israeli politicians is not something that has been done in the past, so it is impossible to assess the extent to which scores around the 80%-mark or higher compare to British Jewish attitudes towards Israeli political figures in Israel's history. But intuitively, it seems unlikely that such levels have been seen before – major British Jewish community organisations have typically honoured Israeli politicians when they have visited the UK, but several have been notably [critical, even antagonistic](#), in recent months.

However, alongside these data, measures for Netanyahu and Smotrich were taken by JPR in November/December 2022, just after the current government was elected. Strikingly, disapproval ratings for both characters have climbed substantially over the past six months by about five percentage points in the case of Smotrich, and ten in the case of Netanyahu. That period has been marked particularly by the Israeli government's judicial reform plans, which have sharply divided opinion in Israeli society, with critics arguing vehemently that they represent a threat to Israel's democracy, while supporters counter that they are essential to curb the power of the Supreme Court and its ability to overturn decisions taken by a Knesset majority.

/ Pessimism about Israel's future among British Jews

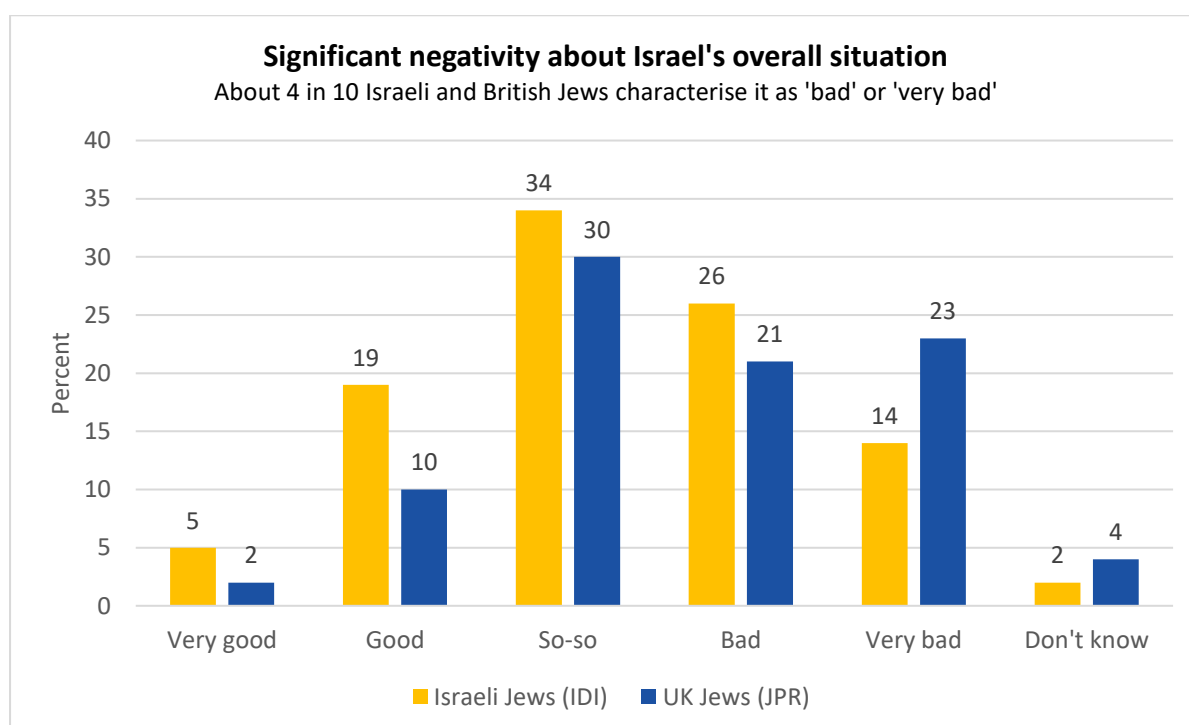
Tensions over the issues are very high across Israel, with large demonstrations taking place regularly for several months. According to data produced by the Viterbi Family Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research at the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), Israeli Jews are more likely to feel pessimistic than optimistic about the state of democratic governance in Israel in the foreseeable future, by 55% to 38% (the remainder are unsure). JPR data show that the pattern with Jews in the UK is similar, only more so, with levels of pessimism outscoring levels of optimism by 72% to 18%.



Sources: Israeli Jews – Israel Democracy Institute, April 2023, n=603; UK Jews – Wave 4 JPR panel survey, April/May 2023; n=3,747.

These distinctions between Israeli and British Jews can also be seen in their perspectives on Israel's security situation in the foreseeable future, although in this instance they are far less pronounced. Drawing on data from the same two sources, Jews in both countries are again more pessimistic than optimistic, with 58% of Jews in the UK expressing pessimism and 32% optimism, compared with Israeli Jewish figures of 54% and 39% respectively (not shown graphically).

With such high levels of concern about the future prospects of democratic governance in Israel and the country's security situation, it is perhaps no surprise that both Israeli and UK Jews are more likely to characterise Israel's overall situation as bad than good. Again, we find more concern among Jews in the UK than in Israel: close to four times as many Jews in the UK consider the situation as a whole to be bad/very bad than good/very good, whereas the equivalent ratio among Israeli Jews is closer to two to one. While data have not been gathered on this question previously for Jews in the UK, IDI time series data about Israelis show that their levels of concern have not been this high for about fifteen years, and they have risen sharply since 2020.



Sources: Israeli Jews – Israel Democracy Institute, April 2023, n=603; UK Jews – Wave 4 JPR panel survey, April/May 2023; n=3,747.

Jews in the UK have long had a robust relationship with Israel, and JPR data from the past three years suggest that this largely remains the case. About nine in ten have visited the country at least once, more than seven in ten feel a sense of attachment to it, and a similar proportion sees it as an important component of their Jewish identity. Yet there are some indications that the relationship may be shifting. The proportion self-identifying as Zionist has fallen by about ten percentage points over the past decade or so (from about seven in ten in 2010 to about six in ten in 2022) with a parallel climb among those saying that they 'don't know' if they are Zionists, suggesting a growth in uncertainty, discomfort or ambivalence on this issue among some. About one in ten says they don't feel accepted by the Jewish community (either not very well accepted or not accepted at all), and among these, the most common reason they give for this feeling of alienation is their views on Israel or Zionism. And

the new data showing such high disapproval ratings for key members of the current Israeli government provide another sign that the bonds that have long tied Jews in the UK to Israel may be starting to fray.

/ Key findings in this report:

- Among those who expressed an opinion, 79% of Jews in the UK disapprove of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. A slightly higher proportion (85%) disapprove of Finance Minister Bezael Smotrich.
- 72% of Jews in the UK are pessimistic about the future of democratic governance in Israel. The equivalent figure for Israeli Jews is 55%.
- A higher proportion of Jews in the UK are pessimistic about the future of democratic governance in Israel (72%) than about Israel's security situation (58%).
- Over four in ten Jews in the UK (44%) say Israel's overall situation is 'bad' or 'very bad' compared to 12% who say it is 'good' or 'very good'. The equivalent figures for Israeli Jews are 40% to 24%.

/ About the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR)

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) is a London-based research organisation, consultancy and think-tank. It aims to advance the prospects of Jewish communities in the United Kingdom and across Europe by conducting research and informing policy development in dialogue with those best placed to positively influence Jewish life. Web: www.jpr.org.uk.

/ Data sources for this factsheet

Data about the attitudes of Jews in the UK are from the JPR Research Panel. This analysis is based on all respondents who took part in the third and/or fourth waves of the panel (November/December 2022 and April/May 2023). The data have been weighted to reflect the age, sex, regional and denominational distribution of Jews in the UK.

The questionnaires and data about Israeli attitudes are from the Viterbi Family Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research at the Israel Democracy Institute, an independent research centre which focuses on gathering, analysing and preserving empirical data on Israeli society.

/ Authors

Dr Jonathan Boyd is the Executive Director of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and a former Jerusalem Fellow at the Mandel Institute in Israel. A specialist in contemporary Jewry with expertise in the study of Jews in the UK and across Europe, he is a Board member of the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry, and advisor to several trusts and foundations investing in contemporary European Jewish life. He holds a doctorate in education from the University of Nottingham, and an MA and BA in Jewish history from University College London.

Dr Carli Lessof is a Senior Research Fellow at JPR, responsible for JPR's community statistics programme, online research panel, and monitoring and evaluation. She holds a PhD in Social Statistics from the National Centre for Social Research at the University of Southampton and an MA in Applied Social Research from Manchester University.