

Americans Believe Israeli Actions Are Justified but Share International Reservations about Extent of Military Offensive

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A strong majority of Americans believe Israel is justified in taking action against the Hezbollah militia. But recent polls also show that U.S. support for Israel's offensive is not absolute. Most Americans blame both sides for the violence in Lebanon and a plurality favors the negotiation of a cease-fire as soon as possible. Like other publics abroad, a majority in the United States believes Israel's military campaign has gone too far.

Israeli Defense Forces in Maroun A-Ras, Lebanon (Abir Sultan/IDF)

Americans also support sending international peacekeepers to the region, though they are divided about whether U.S. ground forces should participate. Most believe the U.S. government should continue its efforts to bring peace to the Middle East but they are divided on the issue of whether the United States should press for an immediate ceasefire in Lebanon. A majority are wary of expanding the United States' role in the region.

More than four in five Americans (81%) said that Israel's offensive in Lebanon was justified, but nearly half (44%) thought the Jewish state had "gone too far," according to a [Gallup](#) poll, taken July 28-30. Another 10 percent thought that Israel's actions were not justified. Thirty-seven percent believed that Israel was "justified in all military action taken" in Lebanon. Those percentages are approximately the same as the results from the same question asked in another [Gallup](#) poll, July 21-23. In the previous poll, 83 percent thought the offensive was justified, though 50 percent thought Israel had "gone too far." The proportion of those believing Israel was not justified was seven percent in the previous poll.

In Great Britain, six out of ten (63%) said Israel's response to Hezbollah had been "inappropriate and disproportionate," according to a [Daily Telegraph/YouGov](#) poll taken July 24-26. In Germany, three out of four (75%) considered Israel's offensive to be "disproportionate," a July 13-14 poll by the Forsa institute for Stern magazine found. Seventy percent of Germans view Israel as the aggressor, according to a poll published by Der Spiegel July 31.

International Opinion on Israeli Response

US: Israeli offensive is "justified" but has gone too far (■) and Israeli offensive is not justified (■)



Do you approve of the military action Israel has taken in Lebanon?
Approve



Great Britain: Israeli military action is "inappropriate and disproportionate"



France: Israel and Hezbollah are equally responsible for the violence in Lebanon



Canada: Israeli response is somewhat (■) or completely (■) justified



Sources: Gallup, Daily Telegraph/YouGov, Stern/Forsa, Roy Morgan, La Croix/CSA

More Russians believe that either Israel (23%) or the United States (21%) are responsible for the violence in Lebanon than blame Hezbollah (14%), Hamas (13%), Iran, Syria and "other terrorist sponsors" (5%) or Lebanon (4%), according to a survey taken July 23 by the [All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center](#). Twenty-eight percent said that all were "guilty to some degree."

Canadians, however, tend to support Israel's military response, according to a July 20 poll by [Ipsos Reid](#) for CanWest News Service. Two out of three Canadians believe Israel was somewhat (44%) or completely (20%) justified. Respondents in Quebec, however, were much more critical of Israel's offensive: 57 percent said it was "not at all justified."

A July 26-27 poll by [Roy Morgan](#), a survey firm, asked Australians whether they believed Israel should start negotiating a ceasefire, something the Ehud Olmert government has so far refused to do. Four out of five

Australians (79%) said Israel should start cease fire talks. Only 12 percent believed it should continue fighting.

The Bush administration has also opposed calling for an immediate ceasefire that did not address the root causes of the conflict. A [CNN](#) poll taken July 19, however, found that a plurality of the U.S. public (43%) wanted Israel to "agree to a cease-fire as soon as possible" while 39 percent felt it should continue fighting until Hezbollah could no longer launch attacks.

When asked who was responsible for the current crisis, Americans tended to fault both sides. Nearly half of Americans (46%) said they blamed Israel and Hezbollah equally for the conflict, a [New York Times/CBS](#) poll taken July 21-25 found. Thirty-eight percent said they thought Hezbollah was "mostly to blame" while five percent said Israel was.

A poll taken for [La Croix](#) newspaper by CSA found that a majority of the French (58%) also hold Israel and Hezbollah equally responsible for the violence. If not given the option of blaming both sides, the French also tend to side with Israel. In a poll taken for the [Journal du Dimanche](#) by the Ifop institute from July 20-21, thirty-nine percent of the French said they blamed Hezbollah for the current crisis, compared to 30 percent who blamed Israel. Other neighboring countries were faulted far less often: 12 percent said they blamed Iran and five percent blamed Syria.

Most of these polls were taken the July 30 Israeli air strike on the village of Qana, the single bloodiest attack of the conflict so far, which killed dozens of civilians.

A clear majority of Americans favors an international peacekeeping force in Lebanon, though Americans are divided about whether the United States should contribute troops. The New York Times/CBS poll found that 60 percent favored the United Nations sending a force to the region. Those who said yes were then asked if they thought the United States should send ground troops to take part in such a force. Only 32 percent favored the participation of U.S. ground troops.

The CNN survey asked a similar question about sending U.S. ground troops to Lebanon. However, this poll simply asked whether respondents favored or opposed “the presence of U.S. ground troops, along with troops from other countries” to the border between Israel and Lebanon. When U.S. forces were described as part of an international mission, American support for their participation was higher: 45 percent favored the inclusion of U.S. troops, while 42 percent were opposed.

Although Americans support U.S. participation in multilateral efforts in the Middle East, they are wary of further increasing the United States’ role there. The most recent Gallup poll found that Americans were divided about what the United States should do to help resolve the conflict in Lebanon, with a plurality (43%) saying that U.S. leaders were doing “about the right amount.” Thirty-two percent said the United States was not doing enough to resolve the conflict. Only a fifth (19%) said the U.S. government was doing “too much.” Republicans were twice as likely as Democrats to believe the United States was doing enough (65% vs. 30%).

There is bipartisan reluctance to have the United States take a leading role in trying to resolve the conflict. Despite international criticism of the Bush administration for not pushing the Israeli government to halt its offensive, a plurality of Americans (43%) believe U.S. leaders should “not get involved in pressing for a ceasefire.” Only a third (32%) of those polled by Gallup think the United States should press for an immediate ceasefire and a fifth (20%) think it should “allow the conflict to go on a bit longer.” Democrats were more likely than Republicans to want an immediate ceasefire (38% vs. 23%) and far less likely to want the conflict to continue (13% vs. 32%). But there was little difference between the two on not getting involved: 44 percent of Democrats and 39 percent of Republicans did not want the United States to intervene to stop the Israeli offensive.

The N.Y. Times/CBS poll also found that Americans wanted the United States to stay involved in the Middle East but not necessarily as the predominant actor. While 53 percent said the United States should maintain its level of diplomatic involvement, only 25 percent favored a “more active” role. Less than a fifth (17%) wanted the United States to reduce its role in the region.

CNN also asked Americans about the level of U.S. government involvement in the conflict, but it allowed them to choose between only two options: “an active role in trying to resolve the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah” or having “the U.S. stay out of the situation.” Sixty-five percent said the United States should “stay out,” while only 27 percent favored an “active role.” This reluctance to approve an active role for the United

States suggests that Americans are wary of giving their government a blank check to act unilaterally in the Middle East. As noted above, however, Americans do not want to decrease U.S. involvement nor do they oppose participation in multilateral efforts.

Israel began bombing southern Lebanon on July 12, after Hezbollah launched a cross border raid, capturing two Israeli soldiers. Lebanese casualties total more than 500, most of them civilian, according to news reports. More than 50 Israelis have also died, including at least 18 civilians killed by shells fired into Israel by Hezbollah forces in Lebanon.

Americans have historically tended to sympathize more with Israelis than with the Palestinians or other neighboring Muslim populations. But outright support for Israel has not exceeded 50 percent. Surveys over the past decade by the [Pew Research Center](#) found sympathy for Israel had ranged from highs of 48 percent in September 1997 and May 2006 to a low of 37 percent in July 2005, when Israeli plans to build a barrier along the West Bank seemed to be undermining the United States “road-map” for Mideast peace.

Pew’s most [recent poll](#), conducted July 6-19, found that the ongoing campaign in Lebanon had not changed U.S. public opinion about Israel. A plurality of 44 percent said they sympathized with Israel while 9 percent said they favored the Palestinians. Two out of five were neutral, saying either that they favored neither side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (20%) or that they did not know (22%).

Asked who was responsible for the current violence in Lebanon, most Americans (53%) said they blamed Hezbollah “a great deal,” according to the July 21-23 Gallup survey. Only 27 percent blamed Lebanon, while 29 percent blamed Syria and 39 percent blamed Iran. Fifteen percent said they blamed Israel. But, as previously noted, a strong plurality of Americans say they favor neither side when given that option. The New York Times/CBS poll found that 46 percent said they blamed both sides equally.