

The West's rearguard: Israel's stance on the war

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The Russian aggression against Ukraine is taking place far from Israel's borders and does not affect it directly. However, it poses a serious political problem for the government in Jerusalem, for at least two reasons. First of all, the war is distracting the attention of the world (and above all American) public opinion from the Iranian threat, which for Israel is the most important issue (and at the same time, it has not yet been decided whether a new nuclear agreement with Iran will be concluded). Secondly, the confrontation between Moscow and the West is compelling Israel to manoeuvre between these two forces. It views both of them as necessary to guarantee its national interests. As a result, since 24 February, the country has been balancing between the expectations of its most important ally, the United States, and the interests of Russia, whose favour determines the security of Israel's northern flank. In practice, it has been implementing the minimum demanded by Western policy (condemnation of the aggression, humanitarian aid, etc.), but it has also carefully avoided any actions that could antagonise Moscow. Relations with Ukraine are good and multifaceted. However, considering the circumstances, they have been given a lower priority and, despite the Israeli public's strong sympathy for the country under attack, they do not have a key impact on the state's policy.

Despite some glitches in relations with Washington, this strategy seems to be working for the Israeli government. Politically Israel remains largely in step with the major Western players, and its relations with Russia have not suffered significantly. The country is likely to pursue a similar political strategy in the future. However, it remains an open question to what extent this will remain feasible if the conflict is prolonged, and especially if it is escalated.

The evolution of the Israeli stance

Israel's response to the tension over Ukraine – which had been growing for months, and was visible in the increasing concentration of Russian troops on the border – was limited to regularly repeated warnings to its citizens against travelling to this country and appeals to leave it. However, in the face of the invasion and the increasingly clear confrontation between Russia and the West, it had to take a stance that went beyond expressing concern for its own citizens and the Jewish diaspora in Ukraine. While domestic public opinion has, to a great extent, been vigorously sympathetic towards the Ukrainian people since the beginning of the war, the government's stance has been more cautiously modified. It had to consider two priorities that are difficult to reconcile: trying to remain part of the



Western political mainstream and avoid criticism for an insufficiently firm stance on Russia, while at the same time limiting any losses in its relationship with Russia to the minimum necessary, so as not to violate the existing arrangements and formats for bilateral co-operation. In practice, Israel has frequently modified its position so it can navigate between these imperatives. This has also resulted in a 'distribution of tasks' within the government coalition: the Minister of Foreign Affairs Yair Lapid has effectively been put in charge of maintaining the 'Western line', while Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has provided a counterbalance, restricting his moves to generalities that do not irritate Moscow.

The formation of Israeli policy can be traced on several levels: the language of official statements, its actions at the UN forum, and

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the country’s position on sanctions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the following statement on 23 February in response to Russia’s recognition of independence of the so-called DPR and LPR: “Israel shares the concern of the international community regarding the steps taken in eastern Ukraine”.¹ These enigmatic phrases, which do not precisely state what steps were taken or who took them, clearly show that the government in Jerusalem wanted to avoid directly criticising Moscow at all costs. Similarly, the first official Israeli communiqué released in the morning of 24 February spoke of “a new and difficult stage in the war in Ukraine”.² It was only in the afternoon on the same day that Israel condemned the “Russian attack on Ukraine” and called it “a serious violation of the international order”,³ because it no longer could maintain such ambivalence in the face of the unity displayed by the Western world.

Political manoeuvring is also visible in Israel’s activities at the UN forum. On 25 February, to Washington’s disappointment, Israel refused to join the ranks of 87 countries sponsoring the draft UN Security Council’s resolution condemning the aggression (which was ultimately not adopted anyway due to Russia’s veto). However, when an extraordinary session of the General Assembly was convened a few days later, it could not afford to be on a different side to the US and the vast majority of the world’s countries (and in the same camp as Iran, Cuba and China, which abstained from the vote). As a consequence, it became actively involved in supporting the resolution against Russia. As regards sanctions, it also initially avoided taking any concrete steps, but after criticism from the United States (indicating that Russian oligarchs were coming to Israel), on 14 March Minister Lapid announced that the country “will not be used to circumvent sanctions” and added that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was co-operating on this matter with the central bank, the Ministries of Finance, Economy and Energy, and the airport administrations.

Israel has not imposed its own sanctions, citing a lack of “adequate legal infrastructure”, but it has been curbing the loopholes in its regulations that could be used to circumvent restrictions imposed by the US, EU and UK. For example, a restriction has been introduced under which domestic ports have been closed to yachts owned by sanctioned persons, and their planes will not be allowed to stay at Israeli airports for more than 48 hours. Making financial transfers between sanctioned banks and the domestic banking sector has also been blocked. Some Israeli companies have withdrawn from Russia on their own initiative, out of a desire to avoid coming into conflict with the sanctions regime and jeopardising their interests on Western markets. At the same time, however, despite Washington’s appeals, Israel has not introduced trade restrictions or individual restrictions targeting Russia’s political and business elites.

¹ ‘Israel shares the concern of the international community regarding steps taken in eastern Ukraine’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, 23 February 2022, gov.il.

² ‘Situation in Ukraine’, *idem*, 24 February 2022.

³ ‘Israel condemns attack in Ukraine’, *idem*, 24 February 2022.

The attempts at mediation

The government in Jerusalem has invoked its 'mediator' status as one of the factors preventing it from taking a firmer stance on the aggression. Prime Minister Bennett took a series of actions that suggested that he was acting in such a role: after 27 February, he had a series of telephone conversations with Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelensky and Western leaders, and on 5 March he paid a visit to Moscow. The United States confirmed that it knew these steps had been taken, but the tone of Washington's subsequent statements did not suggest that it was pinning any particular hopes on Israel's involvement. The US said that it appreciated his efforts, as well as the efforts made by all the other countries searching for a diplomatic solution.

The involvement of Israel (like that of other countries) did not bring any tangible results, and lost its dynamics after the first weeks of the war (Bennett and Putin last held a telephone conversation on 14 March). The Israeli-Russian contacts can be viewed as an additional line of communication between Russia and Ukraine & the West rather than any genuine peace mediation. At the same time, the government in Jerusalem has been using them to discuss issues that are important to it, such as the situation in Syria, negotiations on a nuclear agreement with Iran, and the situation of the Jewish diaspora in Russia.

” Israel’s attempts to mediate between Russia and Ukraine have not brought any tangible results.

On the other hand, the Russian side is using Israel's role as a 'mediator' for political purposes. On 16 March, Minister Sergei Lavrov stated in an interview that Moscow appreciated most of all the diplomatic commitment of countries such as Israel and Turkey, which "refused to play the game of Russophobia", "are aware of the causes of the current crisis, that is, the essential and legitimate national interests of Russia", and had not joined the "sanctions war".

The 'special circumstances'

The Israeli government argues that its country's 'special situation' obliges it to adopt a cautious attitude towards the attack on Ukraine. This is the context in which it refers to Russia's strong position in Israel's neighbourhood. Moscow joined the Syrian war in autumn 2015 and saved the regime of its ally Bashar al-Assad from collapse. As a result, it became a key player in this part of the Middle East, largely replacing the United States in that role. For Israel, this situation means that in practice Russia has become its northern 'neighbour'. Furthermore, Russia controls Syrian airspace, and is thus a regulator of the Israeli-Iranian conflict in that country. The Kremlin's favour allows Israel to freely operate in Syrian airspace and eliminate targets related to Iran. If this favour is withdrawn, it will become very difficult for Israel to continue these operations, while its opponent will gain room for manoeuvre.

Despite some crises, Israel has managed to develop good relations with Russia over the years, allowing it to pursue its security interests without significant obstacles. This has also led to the intensification of bilateral contacts at the highest level and the development of political relations in other areas. As a result, the government in Jerusalem has ceased publicly criticising Moscow, and thus refrained from participating in the West's front against it: it did not join the sanctions related to the aggression against Ukraine that had been ongoing since 2014, condemning Russia's actions in Syria or expelling Russian diplomats after the chemical attack in Salisbury.

Good relations with Moscow are also part of the Israeli government's broader strategy of developing relations with countries outside the West, such as China, India and Russia. This is a response to the US's gradual withdrawal from the region, as well as growing frustration that despite enormous

American political and military assistance, Washington is not doing enough to neutralise the threat posed by Iran. This is a particularly important aspect, as the beginning of the invasion in Ukraine coincided with negotiations on the conclusion of a new nuclear agreement with Iran, which is one of President Joe Biden's policy priorities. It is not yet known whether these negotiations will be successful. Nevertheless, the government in Jerusalem believes that a deal is ever more likely and considers its expected final form, as pushed through by the United States, to be a threat to Israeli security. From Israel's perspective, the US expects it to adopt a more unequivocal stance towards Russia, which will adversely affect Israeli-Russian relations, while the US seeks to finalise an agreement that Israel considers a threat.

This situation brings Israel closer to the approach taken by other Middle Eastern countries, such as the

” Despite its ties to Europe and the US, Israel views the war differently from the Western countries.

United Arab Emirates (UAE) or Saudi Arabia, which are using the war in Ukraine to show Washington their dissatisfaction with its policy in the region, including the lack of an adequate response to the Iranian threat. Despite many years of close ties with the US, these countries have not only kept their distance from the events in Ukraine and avoided condemning Moscow, but are also openly acting against American interests, for example, by refusing to increase oil production or (in the case of the UAE) allowing Russia to circumvent sanctions.

As Ksenia Svetlova, an Israeli expert on the region, summed up: “Israel looks at the [Ukraine] crisis through an entirely different lens than Western countries, and more and more like most Middle Eastern countries, even though it's a democracy”,⁴ i.e. as at a conflict that is far away from its borders.

Russian oligarchs with Israeli passports

An additional element that links Israel with Russia and makes it difficult for it to join the Western sanctions regime is that a large group of the most important Russian oligarchs also have Israeli citizenship. Roman Abramovich, Viktor Vekselberg, Mikhail Fridman and German Khan, on all of whom restrictions have been imposed, are among those who hold Israeli passports. Some of them have companies in Israel, and all of them own spectacular properties there. For years, they have also been engaged in large-scale charity activity in Israel, thus gaining influential friends among the local elite. For example, the Yad Vashem institute, which boasted about concluding a ‘strategic partnership’ with Abramovich two days before the Russian invasion, asked the US ambassador not to sanction the oligarch due to his philanthropic engagement, and only announced its suspension of co-operation with him “in the light of recent events” as late as 10 March. According to media reports, at least 14 private planes from Russia landed in the country during the first ten days of March. This caught the attention of the US, which urged Israel not to become “the last refuge for dirty money feeding Putin's wars”.

Silence in the face of the Kremlin's historical lies

The Israeli government's determination to place relations with Moscow under a protective umbrella has also prevented it from responding to Russian historical manipulations. The Kremlin has employed rhetoric in building its ideological justification for its attack on Ukraine which is particularly sensitive for Israelis and the Jewish diaspora. Putin has branded the Ukrainian government as ‘neo-Nazi’, accused it of ‘genocide’, called for ‘de-Nazification’, and compared the alleged harassment of Russians in the West to “anti-Semitic pogroms in Germany in the 1930s”. None of these statements has received a response from the President, Prime Minister or Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel. This stands in

⁴ Quote from G. Gorenberg, ‘Israel's semi-neutrality on Ukraine can't last’, The Washington Post, 15 March 2022, [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com).

stark contrast to the state's historical policy to date and to the condemnation of Putin's words from a number of the most important institutions researching and commemorating the history of the Holocaust. On 24 February, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum stressed that the president's claims about the need to 'de-Nazify' democratic Ukraine were false and that Putin had "misrepresented and appropriated the history of the Holocaust". The accusations that the Ukrainian authorities have committed genocide have been called groundless and egregious.⁵ In turn, on 25 February, the special envoy of the US State Department for the Holocaust, Ellen Germain, said that Putin's statement was "the worst kind of distortion of the truth about the Holocaust". In an open letter, more than 150 Holocaust researchers from around the world described the Russian rhetoric as "factually wrong, morally repugnant and deeply offensive to the memory of millions of victims of Nazism".⁶ Israel responded to the aforementioned historical manipulations on the fourth day of the war, late in the afternoon of 27 February, in a short statement by the Yad Vashem institute (a public but not a government institution) condemning the Russian invasion and the "trivialisation and distortion of historical facts of the Holocaust".⁷

Israel's extremely reserved official stance on Moscow's manipulation stands in stark contrast to the spontaneous reaction of the political class and public opinion to the historical analogies used by President Zelensky in his speech to the Knesset on 20 March. The Ukrainian leader's statements suggesting that Russia is implementing a 'final solution' in Ukraine, and referring to the aid Ukrainians provided to Jews during World War II (on a mass scale, implicitly) sparked a wave of criticism from all sides of the political spectrum, including Prime Minister Bennett. Representatives of the right-wing opposition (including Likud) even stated that Zelensky's words "border on Holocaust denial".

Conclusion

To summarise Israel's stance, it should be emphasised that the country has condemned the Russian aggression, supported the resolution of the UN General Assembly, provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine (including a field hospital, power generators and medicine) and made a (difficult to assess) mediation attempt. At the same time, however, it has not stigmatised Moscow for its historical lies, consistently ruled out any arms supplies to Kyiv, and joined the sanctions regime to only a very limited extent. Israeli policy is likely to continue pursuing this kind of 'middle way' in the future.

Israel's reaction to the war in Ukraine reminds us that despite its democratic system and strong ties (historical and contemporary) with Europe and the US, it is first and foremost a Middle Eastern country which, in its perception of international politics, is closer to the other countries in this region, where Russia plays an increasingly important role.

⁵ 'Museum Condemns Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 24 February 2022, [ushmm.org](https://www.ushmm.org).

⁶ I. Tabarovsky, E. Finkel, 'Statement on Ukraine by scholars of genocide, Nazism and WWII', 28 February 2022, from: Jewish New Syndicate, [jns.org](https://www.jns.org).

⁷ 'Yad Vashem Statement Regarding the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', Yad Vashem, 27 February 2022, [yadvashem.org](https://www.yadvashem.org).