



No Birds with No Stones: Israel's Policy in the Russia-Ukraine War

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Introduction

Since the eruption of the Russia-Ukraine war, Israel has been among the countries that have felt the impacts of the conflict the most. Although located thousands of miles away from the war zone, several reasons have pushed Israel's diplomatic engagement in the conflict. Having good relations with both Russia and Ukraine, Israel has had to walk a diplomatic tightrope, even prior to the onset of the war. However, as the war continues, Israel's position is becoming increasingly delicate. Any misstep could be harmful to Israel's relations with both Russia and Ukraine.

This discussion paper argues that Israel's efforts to mediate between Russia and Ukraine should not be seen as active involvement in peace-making, but

rather as an endeavour to facilitate communication between the two sides. This passive form of mediation is an outcome of a complex set of reasons, which Israel has taken into account regarding its relations with both countries. As a result, it hovers between two roles, an intermediary one and a non-interfering one that it seeks to play in the Russia-Ukraine war. On the one hand, Israel supports Ukraine since it considers itself a part of the Western camp due to the alliance with the United States. On the other hand, Israel does not want to confront Russia, which has increased its influence all over the region, particularly in Syria. Given that Israel enjoys good economic relations with both Ukraine and Russia, as well as internal factors such as a large population from the former Soviet Union and a fragile governing coalition, the situation becomes far more complicated.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett meet in Sochi, Russia on October 22, 2021.
(Israeli Government Press Office - Anadolu Agency)

Global Ambitions, Regional Realities

Even prior to the war, Israel had been gearing its policy towards the Russia-Ukraine dispute towards becoming an intermediary actor. In 2019, then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reportedly [discussed](#) a possible role for Israel as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia, which bore no fruits at that time. However, Israel took the initiative and Israeli PM Bennett [flew](#) to Moscow on Feb. 26 in a first attempt to mediate between the two countries. However, as [debates](#) in Israeli media outlets have demonstrated, Israel's embracing of such an intermediary role was seen to be overly ambitious due to constraints resulting from regional interests, the most prominent of which was Israel's coordination with Russia in Syria, which ultimately outweighed any willingness to press Moscow to end the war.

First, with its military presence in Syria, Russia has effectively become one of Israel's neighbours. This inhibits Israel from taking bolder action as it relates to the effort to isolate Russia on the global stage. Israel has a de-conflicting mechanism with Russia in Syria and [coordinates](#) its attacks against Iran backed militias. Having been called a "campaign between wars", Israel aims to thwart Iranian entrenchment and weapon smuggling to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Moreover, based on this mechanism, Israel can reduce the capabilities of Iranian backed groups inside Syria before they reach a level that can be considered an actor like Hezbollah in Lebanon. Losing this advantage would be of great concern to Israel.

In fact, Russia has consistently used this mechanism as a means of ensuring limits on any Israeli cooperation with Ukraine. At the UN Security Council's February meeting, Russia raised an objection to [Israel's occupation](#) of the Golan Heights. In addition, Russian Ambassador to Syria

Alexander Efimov [stated](#) on March 24 that Israeli strikes in Syria were "provoking" Russia to react. Russia has drawn a redline for Israel in regards to supporting Ukraine by reminding the Israelis that it is the most powerful actor in Syria. For these reasons, Israel does not want to provoke Russia and Israeli policy vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine war remains cautious. Moreover, even though Israel would be pleased to see Moscow reducing support to Iran, its militias and the Syrian regime in the event of an extended war in Ukraine, this could also mean more missiles fired from Lebanon and Syria toward Israel, embroiling Israel in a deeper conflict on that front.

Russia also occupies a strategic military position in the Eastern Mediterranean. Its naval base in Tartus and Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia in Syria are indicators that Russia is an important player in a region, where Israel also endeavours to increase its influence, particularly as it relates to the region's natural gas reserves. Russia has invested a lot in these military bases, which are key for increasing its power projection in the Black Sea as well, primarily because these bases [enable](#) the Russian navy to avoid dispatching ships to naval installations in the Black Sea for maintenance. Moreover, the Mediterranean is key for Russia for trade and serves as a buffer zone for its military and economic dominance in the Black Sea. Even though Moscow [sees](#) the Mediterranean as largely NATO-dominated, it still hopes to spot opportunities to make political, economic, and military inroads with some regional states like Syria. Therefore, it is not surprising that on the day Russia launched its attack on Ukraine, it significantly [reinforced](#) its naval presence in the Mediterranean.

Such a robust Russian presence in the Eastern Mediterranean represents a potential challenge for Israel and its Western allies in their efforts to build energy pipelines for the transfer of the Eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe. In this regard, tensions between the West and Russia have escalated on several occasions since last year. In June 2021, Russian air forces [launched](#) several drills in the Mediterranean Sea featuring warplanes capable of carrying hypersonic missiles, which came as a British carrier strike group was in the area to launch combat sorties against Daesh targets in Syria. In addition, the Russian military also [sent](#) long-range nuclear-capable bombers and warplanes carrying hypersonic missiles to its Khmeimim airbase in the coastal province of Latakia in Syria just a week before the war started in Ukraine. This marked the biggest Russian naval deployment to the Mediterranean Sea since the Cold War.



Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid (L) speaks at The Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in Israel's parliament (The Knesset) in West Jerusalem on December 27, 2021.
(Israeli Parliament Knesset - Anadolu Agency)

Secondly, regarding the Iranian presence in the region, Israel has concerns that Iran might regain the capacity it possessed during the Obama term as a result of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement, which was [wiped](#) away when Trump pulled the US out from the agreement in 2018. In addition, Iranian influence in the region was pushed further back with Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign, the maintenance of sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy and the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force, and Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the mastermind of Iran's nuclear programme in 2020.

However, the revival of the JCPOA talks in Vienna led by the Biden administration in the US and the increasing possibility of reaching an agreement have resurrected Israel's concerns regarding Iran, particularly its nuclear programme and the alliance with Hezbollah in Lebanon. In addition, the energy crisis that has erupted with the Russia-Ukraine war could prove to be a [watershed](#) moment for Iran. In the event of the US and EU's [reconsidering](#) Tehran's marginalization in the global economy and giving it an opportunity to become an active natural gas supplier to the West, Iran's regional influence can be consolidated. In order to prevent this happening, Israel has avoided band wagoning with the West in the war in Ukraine due to the risk that it will isolate Russia further and give Iran the edge in terms of strengthening its alliance with Russia, particularly in Syria.

Finally, US disengagement from the region and military withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan have caused Israel to act cautiously in the Russia-Ukraine war. The US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the persistent attitude in avoiding any military confrontation with Russia in Ukraine, have demonstrated to Israel that it should not fully rely on the alliance with the US in regional conflicts. Since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Israel has [treated](#) Washington as essential to its survival and became dependent on American diplomatic and military support over the decades. However, regional developments over the last decade, such as US disengagement and the Arab Spring, stimulated Israel to cultivate an effective autonomy from the US.

This also is related to Israel's changing priorities in the region. Unlike the perception in the Cold War era, Israel no longer regards itself as a small country surrounded by adversaries and locked in conflict with the Palestinians. Rather, it is eager to promote itself as a partner of several Arab countries, particularly after the normalization between Israel and several Arab states as part of the Abraham Accords. This growing cooperation with Arab countries should also be seen as an attempt to reduce dependency

on the US by increasing the regional influence. As a result, Israel's efforts to become more self-reliant in security require it to follow a more balanced policy towards the war in Ukraine, particularly given Russia's more active military presence in the region.

Israel's seeking more strategic autonomy is strongly related with its stance on the Russia-Ukraine war. These efforts began decades ago, especially after Israel decided to diversify its commercial ties, particularly through selling military technology to China. The two countries have been engaged in some degree of military cooperation since the 1980s and Israel was set to sell China the Phalcon, an airborne early-warning radar system in 2001, until Washington [pressed](#) Israel to cancel the deal. In spite of the US reaction, Israel and China continue to develop their economic relations.

In parallel, Israel has sought to diversify its foreign policy regarding Syria. As discussed previously, the current de-conflicting mechanism with Russia in Syria is one of the most significant determinants of Israel's policy vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine war. This security cooperation with Russia should also be taken into consideration as an evidence of Israel's increasing strategic autonomy and maintaining this cooperation will be indispensable for Israel as long as the conflict in Syria continues and Iranian military presence remains in the country. Moreover, such autonomy in foreign policy and reducing US dependency is not unique to Israel. Several Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have followed a similar balanced policy regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. Their neutral stances can also be regarded as part of expanding their own strategic [autonomy](#) and decreasing dependency on the US.

Nevertheless, for Israel, this reduced dependence on the US does not necessarily exclude allying with US interests on certain regional matters as well as more generally around the world. Israel is still the [largest](#) recipient of US foreign assistance in the world. This military assistance became far more robust in 2016 when the 10-year, \$38 billion Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) [signed](#) during the Obama presidency. In accordance with the MOU, the United States also annually provides \$3.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing and \$500 million for cooperative programmes for missile defence. In this regard, Israel even [receives](#) US funds for its Iron Dome missile defence system, which is key for its security. However, as Israeli PM Bennett's [stated](#) during his meeting with US President Biden in August 2021, Israel will never outsource its security, even though it is thankful to US for the support that has been given for decades.

Inhibiting Internal Factors

Several internal factors also forced Israel to take a balanced stance in the crisis. First, Bennett [lacks](#) political charisma and is unable to fill Netanyahu's shoes in the foreign policy agenda. His current far-right Yamina party is the fourth political party he has been affiliated with in his 15 years of active politics (Likud, The Jewish Home, New Right and Yamina). His political projects within the far-right political network in Israel in this period have mostly failed and he was only able to become prime minister only after his decision to form coalition with the Israeli centre/left political parties following the March 2021 elections.

He is relatively younger than his counterparts on the global stage and seems to be more of a manager rather than a leader in his position, as Gideon Levy, a journalist at Haaretz, [says](#). This is also sourced by the fact that except for Diaspora Affairs, almost all ministerial portfolios that he held were related to domestic matters (Education, Economy, Religious Affairs, Defence). Therefore, it is not surprising that most Israelis do not find his mediation efforts promising. According to a [poll](#) by the Israel Democracy Institute, 54% of Israelis do not believe Bennett will succeed in brokering an agreement between Russia and Ukraine to end the war, whereas only 30% of Israelis think there is a good chance that the mediation efforts will help.

Second, Israel is currently led by a coalition of eight parties with multiple ideologies from the far right to the left. While PM Bennett is the leader of the far-right Yamina party with only seven seats, Yair Lapid, chairman of centre-left Yesh Atid party, the main pillar of the coalition, holds the foreign ministry portfolio. Since the beginning of the war, Bennett and Lapid have maintained a delicate balance. This balance has included a compartmentalization strategy in which Bennett sought to lead the contact between Russia and Ukraine behind the scenes, while at the same time Lapid made statements criticizing Russia and giving rhetorical support to Ukraine. However, the situation is more complex than these two politicians, given the presence of the left-wing parties in the cabinet and some outliers who prefer to act differently from the position of their political parties in the government.

For instance, the absorption of Ukrainian refugees has created an uproar in the cabinet. Several ministers, such as Interior Minister Ayeled Shaked, Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Agriculture Minister Oded Eran [defended](#) Israel's hard-line stance against taking in large numbers of Ukrainian refugees who are not eligible for citizenship. However, other ministers from the leftist Meretz and Labour parties [slammed](#) those strict policies, whereas



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (C-L) being received by Israeli President Isaac Herzog (C-R) within the Negev Summit in Tel Aviv, Israel on March 27, 2022. (GPO - Anadolu Agency)

Bennett and Lapid stood mostly silent on the issue. This fragmentation within the cabinet even regarding humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian Jews has revealed that Israel's ruling system has inhibited taking swift actions in dealing with the crisis. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, coalitions have ruled the country. Because political parties from multiple ideologies can become a part of the government, coalitions have always included a delicate balance. Hence, Israeli politicians avoid from taking any initiative that will challenge to the coalition in the first years of the government.

Israel has strong societal and cultural relations with both countries. Most Jews from the former Soviet Union Jews in Israel today came from Ukraine in the 1990s. It is [estimated](#) that more than 500,000 Israelis have Ukrainian origins. Since the first days of the war, Ukrainian Jews have held [demonstrations](#) in support of Ukraine and they had an impact on creating a public opinion about receiving Ukrainian refugees. At the same time, a significant part of the former Soviet Union Jews also speaks Russian and maintain their ties with the Russian culture. This has been perceived as an instrument of implementing Russian influence in Israel by Putin since 2009, when Avigdor Lieberman, leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu party who also has a Soviet background, became foreign minister of Israel. "There is a large Russian community in Israel, and you are part of it. I am glad that people from the Soviet Union built such brilliant political careers in Israel. This is something that unites us in a way that is unlike any other country," Putin [said](#) in a meeting with Lieberman in 2009. Russian-Jewish oligarchs also [constitute](#) a significant part of the Russian influence in the country. Thanks to the Law of Return, in which anyone has Jewish descent can be automatically granted Israeli citizenship, some of them have also Israeli citizenship.

Among them is Roman Abramovich. Having [been granted](#) Israeli citizenship in 2018, Abramovich is also [known](#) for donating millions of pounds to Elad, an Israeli settler group supported by the Israeli state, which has sought to strengthen the Jewish presence in the Palestinian neighbourhood of Silwan. Another is Len Blavatnik, co-owner of Israel's Channel 13 and previous owner of the Clal Industries conglomerate, which controls Nesher Cement and several other companies in Israel. It has been [reported](#) that Blavatnik funds scholarships for IDF veterans, and that he [has](#) very good relations with former PM Netanyahu, which even has been a subject in the police testimony of Netanyahu's trial process.

Netanyahu is not the only Israeli politician who enjoyed close relations with Russian-Jewish oligarchs. Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman has [received](#) funding on multiple occasions from Michael Cherny, who owns several Israeli real estate projects. His relations with Cherny were even [investigated](#) by the Israeli judiciary, with accusations of bribery, fraud and money laundering. In addition, Housing Minister Ze'ev Elkin has close relations with several oligarchs such as Temur Khikhashvili, who serves as chairman of the Israeli-Russian Business Council, Yuri Zablonsky, Lev Kenago, Vladimir Gusinsky and Mikhael Mirilashvili. These relations [helped](#) Elkin, especially during his rally for mayor of Jerusalem in 2018. Finally, Justice Minister Gideon Sa'ar is reportedly received support from Gusinsky in the Likud primaries and appealed to the Population and Immigration Authority to come to his assistance and issue a passport to the Russian oligarch. Even though Foreign Minister Lapid [stated](#) that the country will prevent sanctioned oligarchs, including Israeli nationals, from using Israel as a safe haven for their private jets and yachts, the presence of oligarchs cannot be eliminated in a short time period.

No Birds, No Stones

Israel is apparently hitting no birds with two stones with its neutrality policy in the Russia-Ukraine war. Unlike Türkiye, which has yielded mediation efforts that were welcomed by both sides, Israel's neutrality policy welcomed is far from becoming effective. From the Russian side, Israel's careful stance to maintain a relative air of neutrality, led by PM Bennett, is significant, since Israel is the most important US in the Middle East and among a few states belonging to the Western camp that aims to preserve its relations with Russia. Even though Russia is [unwilling](#) to accept Israeli mediation, Israel still matters to Russia due to the alliance with the US. Russia might prefer Israel's becoming an intermediary between Moscow and Washington, rather than Kyiv. Moscow can utilize the US-Israeli alliance to express demands to Washington regarding Ukraine, NATO and other problematic issues with the West. In such a case, Israeli FM Lapid might be one of the first options to run the initiative due to his good [relations](#) with the Democratic Party in the US that currently controls the White House and both chambers of Congress. Lapid can represent Israel in managing the contact between the US and Russia for the solution of problems and delivering reciprocal demands in regards with the war in Ukraine. Having said that, Lapid's publicizing a relatively more sympathizing image with Ukraine and condemning [statements](#) regarding Russian aggression, would complicate this prospective attempt.

From the Ukrainian side, disappointment in regard to Israel's stance is more obvious. Israel refused to give any military support to Ukraine. As an indication of this policy, Israel [stopped](#) the US from transferring the Iron Dome defence system to Ukraine last year to preserve Israel's ties with

Russia. Iron Dome is a joint Israeli-American project and a [sale](#) to a third party cannot take place without the approval of both developer countries. Despite Ukraine's consecutive [requests](#) for defence assistance with air and cyber defences, Israel is still [reluctant](#) to give active support to Kyiv.

Israel also reportedly [blocked](#) Ukraine from buying Israel-based "Cyber Warfare" vendor NSO Group's Pegasus spyware in order to protect its relations with Russia, despite the fact that numerous countries including Bahrain, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates [led](#) surveillance operations by using the same spyware. A similar attitude by the company was also reported in 2019, when Estonia, a NATO member, acquired access to Pegasus in 2019 but was informed by NSO in August that year that the company would not permit Estonian officials to use the spyware against Russian targets.

Ukraine's disappointment gained an even more concrete aspect when Zelensky reproached Israel's neutral stance, [saying](#) "you can mediate between nations but not between good and bad" in his address to Israel's Knesset in March. Israeli lawmakers even [criticized](#) Zelensky's speech for drawing comparisons between the Holocaust and Russia's attacks on Ukraine, which demonstrated the reciprocal disappointment between the two countries. In such a mood of bilateral relations, Ukraine's [request](#) for Israel to become the security guarantor of the country can remain unheeded given that Israel [formed](#) its foreign policy strategy by keeping the issue low profile since the beginning of the war.



Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu visits Russian naval base to inspect Russian navy exercises in the eastern Mediterranean in Syria's Tartus on February 15, 2022. (RUSSIAN DEFENCE MINISTRY - Anadolu Agency)

