

Ukraine War: Why is Israel so Soft on Moscow?

Friday 1 April 2022, by [CYPEL Sylvain](#) (Date first published: 21 March 2022).

Among the “Western” nations, Israel’s voice is not heard on the Ukrainian crisis. And the leaders of this country do not want to oppose head-on Vladimir Putin to whom they are linked by strategic and economic interests. At the risk of angering the American ally.

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Since the beginning of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, Israel took up a one-of-a-kind political position in what is generally called the “western camp”. Although with some hesitation it voted on 2 March for the resolution adopted by 141 countries condemning the war launched by Russia and demanding it withdraws its troops immediately, Israel refused to join the economic sanctions imposed on Moscow and some of its leaders, and refuses to give the Ukrainians military supplies, even those of a supposedly defensive nature. Thus, it is, for example, that Israel has so far refused to supply Kiev with its Iron Dome air defence system used to counter rockets launched against its territory from Gaza or south Lebanon, confining itself to offering the Ukrainians only some deliveries of clothing and a field hospital. What is more, from the beginning of the war Israel refused to allow Ukrainian refugees to enter its territory. At the same time, it seeks to pose on the international stage as a “mediator” between Moscow and Kiev. Its Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, was one of the very few international figures received at length (on 5 March) by Vladimir Putin in Moscow. On 16 March, The Financial Times reported that Israel had put a 15-point peace plan to the Russians and Ukrainians. [[1](#)]

AIRSTRIKES ON SYRIA

There is no doubt that Russia’s posture in the Middle East since 2015 has a huge effect on the attitude adopted by Israel. As its current foreign minister (and future prime minister according to a coalition agreement), Yair Lapid, put it, since that year, which saw Moscow stage a massive intervention in Syria’s internal conflict, “Israel has had a common border with Russia”, a country whose political clout it could scarcely ignore. Accordingly, Israel negotiated a tacit agreement with Moscow allowing it to strike Iranian military sites in Syria and convoys transporting Iranian arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon. With a few minor hitches, that agreement has survived until now, allowing Israel to launch hundreds of air strikes in Syria in the past five years, and recently, for example, to destroy hundreds of Iranian drones there.

First, it is this agreement that the Israel government is trying to preserve by refusing to join international sanctions against Moscow. Because “if the Russians decide to cut that red phone, we’ll have to debate how much we continue to strike in Syria,” [2] Giora Eiland, retired general and former director of the Israeli National Security Council, explained. A row with Moscow could have a serious impact if, for example, Russia decided to retaliate by scrambling navigation signals for military aircraft and, even worse, for civilian air traffic. According to Israeli security circles, if Israel were no longer able to continue its air strikes on Iran in Syria, it would result in a “victory for Hezbollah” in Lebanon which would see its Iranian arms deliveries reach unprecedented levels. In short, Israel now cannot afford to anger the Russian bear unduly.

THE POWER OF OLIGARCHS

But there is another motive that explains Israel’s lenient attitude towards Moscow. Between 8 and 11 March, a discreet aerial dance took place in Israeli skies. At least 14 private jets, maybe more, landed at Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv, disgorging numerous Russian oligarchs and their families, companions and no doubt quantities of liquid assets stowed in their baggage. Among these fat cats was Roman Abramovich, the famous owner of Chelsea football club, who had managed, just before leaving, to obtain a Portuguese passport – enabling him to become European and thus have a hope of dodging sanctions imposed by the US and Europe. In the meantime, Abramovich had deemed it wise to quit the European continent and take refuge in his Israeli home. An investigation has been launched in Portugal on the suspicion that the oligarch had obtained his passport based on a false deposition.

There were two reasons why these oligarchs, several of them very close to Putin, were received seamlessly in Israel. Firstly, unlike most Russian oligarchs, they are Jewish and thus benefitted from Israel’s so-called Law of Return which stipulates that any Jew taking up residence in Israel immediately receives citizenship. The second reason is more prosaic: since the UN General Assembly resolution and the American and European decisions to impose unprecedented sanctions on Russia, including some directed specifically at its oligarchs, Israel is among the very few supposedly “western” states which have not complied.

POLITICAL CONNECTIONS

There is an easy explanation as to why Israeli leaders should protect the fate and assets of “its” oligarchs. Coming mainly from Moscow or Leningrad, but also Kiev, Tashkent and elsewhere following the breakup of the Soviet Union, some of these Jewish oligarchs set up in Israel but retained significant assets in and around Russia, while others, like Abramovich, simply kept Israeli citizenship and investments without living there regularly. These new billionaires, numbering several dozen, also established business relationships with many Israeli politicians. They saw this as an additional layer of protection, while for the Israelis it offered generously rewarded friendship. Avigdor Lieberman, for example, leader of the extreme-right secular settlement movement, currently finance minister and formerly defence minister, is known for his very many acquaintances with Russian oligarchs. Likewise, the current minister of housing, Zeev Elkin. The former chief of staff, Benny Gantz, enjoyed the help of the oligarch Viktor Vekselberg when he launched his security start-up Fifth Dimension.

Like Vekselberg, most of the Russian-turned-Israeli oligarchs invested in local companies. But very many Israeli politicians also benefitted from their generosity, either by being taken onto company boards or by having their electoral campaigns financed, or both. Today, according to the Israeli

business lawyer Ram Gamliel, these oligarchs are operating in “a climate of panic». [3] And those who signed up with them have a lot to lose. Because it is estimated that over the past 30 years, the financial clout of these oligarchs had reached between 5% and 10% of Israel’s GDP. Hence the desire to limit to the max the effect of the sanctions to which they are exposed. Just two days before Putin’s attack on Ukraine, the magnate Abramovich had offered a donation of \$3m to Yad Vashem, the Israeli holocaust museum.”The timing,“wrote the Israeli journalist Anshel Pfeffer,“could hardly be coincidental». [4] The museum began by pressing American officials to exempt from sanctions a man who had proven so useful to Jewish memory but thought again and decided to decline Abramovich’s gift.

MORAL AND HISTORICAL BLINDNESS

The Israeli government’s attitude to sanctions stirred little reaction in the country. The journalist Anshell Pfeffer was outraged. “The shameful posture of Israel’s leaders in the face of another invasion by a dictator of an independent nation, the way Bennett has avoided in all his speeches even mentioning the word ‘Russia’ in relation to the war, and his partner foreign minister Yair Lapid’s all-too-measured statements of mild condemnation are signs of moral and historical blindness”, [5] he wrote. This shameful position and moral blindness were exemplified even more by Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked (secular extreme right) who constantly advocated refusing to take in Ukrainian refugees, especially those who failed to meet the strictest interpretation of Jewishness. She began by refusing to receive any refugees, then changed tack and proposed that any such non-Jewish refugees should only be taken in if they had an Israeli host family ready to post a guarantee of 10,000 shekels (2 820 euros) against their not leaving within three months. She also refused refugees access to health care except for “emergencies”. As an outcry began – Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz (Zionist left) spoke of “shame” – some 12,600 refugees were finally taken in, two thirds of them non-Jewish, with a further 1,000 turned back.

Only a few political figures criticised the government’s conciliatory position towards Putin, and political debate in Israel remained very low-key. Former Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon (Likud) held that the government was exaggerating the risks involved in supporting Ukraine, and that Israel had more means at its disposal than generally believed to enable it to do without Russian approval for its strikes in Syria. The former foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, challenged the official position which portrayed Israel’s dilemma as a fateful choice between the country’s “security interests” and its “democratic values”. “We have to get on the right side of history, and that is not Putin’s,” she declared. How strong is the opposition to Bennett? At the political level, it was barely audible.

“PEACE PLAN” OR SURRENDER

So, the Israeli prime minister was able to develop and put forward his “peace plan” on 16 March. Without going into detail, it proposed that Ukraine should renounce any affiliation to NATO and any NATO bases on its soil, and in return it would be assured protection by allies such as the US, Britain or Turkey, all NATO members. What guarantees Ukraine would be offered was not clear, and the issue of the Ukrainian territories already annexed by Moscow (Crimea and Donbas) was not addressed. Russia’s reaction to the plan was favourable, if not warm. But a source close to the Ukrainian president Zelensky told the Financial Times that no agreement would be signed without the total withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory. A few days earlier, Naftali Bennett had advised the Ukrainian president to accept a Russian ceasefire proposal. The Ukrainians saw it as a “capitulation demand” [6], signalling to Israel that they saw its mediation as useless.

For its part, Washington appears at times appalled, even exasperated, by the way its “best ally” has distanced itself over the Ukraine war. Three Democratic members of Congress, Steve Cohen, Maria Elvira Sanchez and Tom Malinowski, wrote to the White House saying that “sanctioning Abramovich is an urgent matter”, urging the administration to “mobilise all its capabilities” to seize the funds that the oligarch puts at Putin’s disposal “so that it might be used for the defence of Ukraine, repatriation [of the refugees] and reconstruction” of the country. But the most virulent criticism came from Victoria Nuland, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. Questioned by Israel’s Channel 12, she had harsh words: “We have to pressure the regime [of Putin], deny him the funds he needs, and pressure the oligarchs around him,” adding that Israel would surely not want to become “the last refuge for the dirty money that fuels Putin’s wars”. She concluded that Israel’s compliance with international sanctions is in Washington’s view more important than its prime minister’s attempts at mediation. Aaron David Miller, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said that Nuland’s comments, “marked the toughest battering of [any] Israeli policy in a very long time.” [7]

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P.S.

- Orient XXI. 24 MARCH 2022:

<https://orientxxi.info/magazine/why-is-israel-so-soft-on-moscow,5472>

- Translated from French by Jim Muir.

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Footnotes

[1] Max Seddon, Roman Olearchuk, Arrash Massoudi and Neri Zilber: “Ukraine and Russia explore neutrality plan in peace talks”, Financial Times, 16 March 2022.

[2] Dahlia Scheindlin, “Should Israel arm Ukraine? Israeli generals speak out”, Haaretz, 16 March 2022.

[3] Shuki Sadeh, “The great Jewish oligarchs escape: ‘The ground is trembling. They will steam into Israel’”, Haaretz, 11 March 2022.

[4] Anshel Pfeffer, "Nothing excuses Israel's moral failure on Putin and his war in Ukraine," Haaretz, 4 March 2022.

[5] Ibid.

[7] Ben Samuels, "U.S. growing alarmed over Israel's safe harbor for Russian oligarchs", Haaretz, 13 March 2022.