

War in Ukraine Forces Israel Into a Delicate Balancing Act

Israel is a strong ally of the United States, and its leaders have a good relationship with Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's Jewish president. But Israel also doesn't want to provoke Russia.

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Pro-Ukraine demonstrators outside the Russian Embassy in Tel Aviv on Thursday, after Russian troops attacked Ukraine. Oded

TEL AVIV — On the day [Russia invaded Ukraine](#), Israel's prime minister, Naftali Bennett, did not mention Russia once. Mr. Bennett said he prayed for peace, called for dialogue and promised support for Ukrainian citizens. But he did not hint at Moscow's involvement, much less condemn it — and it was left, as preplanned, to Mr. Bennett's foreign minister, Yair Lapid, to criticize Moscow in a separate statement that day.

The pair's cautious double act embodied the bind in which the war in Ukraine has placed Israel.

Israel is a key partner of the United States, and many Israelis appreciate longstanding cultural connections with Ukraine, which, for several months in 2019, was the only country other than their own with both a Jewish president — Volodymyr Zelensky — and a Jewish prime minister. But Russia is a critical actor in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, Israel's northeastern neighbor and enemy, and the Israeli government believes it cannot risk losing Moscow's favor.

For much of the past decade, the Israeli Air Force has struck [Iranian, Syrian and Lebanese](#) military targets in Syria without interference, trying to stem the flow of arms that [Iran sends to its proxies](#) in both Syria and Lebanon and to limit a military buildup on its northern border.

Israel also wants to leave itself enough room to act as a go-between in the conflict. After Ukrainian requests, Mr. Bennett has offered at least twice to mediate between Russia and Ukraine, most recently on Sunday — when Mr. Bennett rushed abruptly from a cabinet meeting to speak with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia for 40 minutes. And Israeli officials, including Mr. Bennett, shuttled between their Russian, Ukrainian and American counterparts on Sunday afternoon, two senior Israeli officials said, a mediation that may have contributed to Ukraine's decision to meet with Russian officials on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border.

Israel, which often asks that its allies support it unconditionally, finds itself in the uncomfortable position of appearing to refuse to publicly criticize Russia, even when other countries with seemingly more at stake have condemned Mr. Putin's war.

It is a “delicate situation for Israel,” said Ehud Olmert, a former Israeli prime minister who dealt often with Mr. Putin during his time in office.

“On the one hand, Israel is an ally of the United States and a part of the West, and there can be no doubt about it,” Mr. Olmert said in a phone interview. “On the other hand, the Russians are present in Syria, we have delicate military and security problems in Syria — and that requires a certain freedom for the Israeli military to act in Syria.”



Image

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett in Sochi, Russia, last year. Credit...Pool photo by Evgeny Biyatov

Israel also wants to avoid taking any action that might stir antisemitism against the hundreds of thousands of Jews in both Ukraine and Russia.

And Israeli officials must simultaneously consider the responses of Israel's large Russian-speaking population, who form about 12 percent of its electorate. Roughly 1.2 million Russian speakers have arrived in Israel from the former Soviet Union over the past three decades, about a third of them from Russia and about the same from Ukraine, according to government data.

Some of the latter are even back in Ukraine to defend their original homeland.

"Yes, I love Israel, but I have two countries and I need to defend both of them," said Mykhailo, 25, an Israeli-Ukrainian digital marketer currently fighting in Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, who asked to be identified only by his first name for security reasons.

"Here is a war," he said in a phone interview on Sunday afternoon. "I need to do my job."

Israel's primary concern is to maintain its ability to act in Syria with near impunity and without Russian interference.

But Russia also maintains a significant presence in Syria, and Israel needs Moscow's good will to continue to operate there with ease. Israeli officials currently notify Russian counterparts about impending strikes, and vice versa, using a special encrypted communication line between the Israeli Air Force's subterranean bunker, situated under a military base in Tel Aviv, and the Khmeimim air base in western Syria, a senior Israeli defense official said.

Any change to that relationship might complicate both the Israeli and Russian strategies in Syria. In September 2018, Syrian anti-aircraft missiles firing at Israeli planes [hit a Russian aircraft](#) that was passing through the area by coincidence. It crashed and all 15 Russian soldiers on board were killed.



Israeli troops near the Syrian border last month in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights. Jalaa Marey/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Russian planes have been more active around Syria's borders in recent weeks, both on the western border with Israel and in eastern Syria where American planes frequently operate, the senior Israeli defense official said. The uptick may have been a show of force intended to send a signal about the growing Ukraine crisis, the official added.

Conscious of the need to placate Russia, Israel has rejected several requests in recent months to send military and intelligence equipment to Ukraine, three Israeli officials and a Ukrainian official said. The most recent request was rejected by Mr. Bennett during the call on Friday, the Ukrainian official said.

Even after [approving the sale of Pegasus](#), an Israeli-made spyware program, to dozens of other countries, Israel refused to sell it to Ukraine — rejecting a request last August from a Ukrainian

delegation that visited Israel to discuss spyware purchases, according to an Israeli official and two people familiar with the matter. And Ukraine never formally asked Israel to use its fabled air defense system, known as Iron Dome, precisely because it knew that Israel would never agree to supply it, the Ukrainian official said.

Israel has instead allowed private Israeli firms to sell Ukrainian military communication equipment and robotics, and on Sunday it announced a 100-ton delivery of humanitarian and medical supplies to Ukrainian civilians.

Within Israel, the war in Ukraine has divided Russian speakers along political lines, though not necessarily along national ones.



Immigrants from Ukraine arriving last week at Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv. Jack Guez/Agence France-
Presse — Getty Images

Eduard Shtrasner, a teacher and businessman who moved to Israel in 1990 from an area that at the time was part of Moldova,

has become estranged from some friends of Moldovan origin for expressing a less critical attitude of Mr. Putin.

“I am not at all in favor of war,” said Mr. Shtrasner, 48. “But I can justify what Putin is doing. I read, I listen, I gather information and, if I were him, I would do the same thing.”

He acknowledged, though, that in Israel, his position was “not popular at all.” The invasion has been a unifying moment for Russian speakers, with those who once supported Mr. Putin now increasingly turning on him, community activists said.

On Thursday, as Russia began its invasion, the Russian-born owners of the Putin Pub, a bar popular with Russian-speaking Israelis in Jerusalem, removed the golden “P-U-T-I-N” letters from its facade and announced that they were seeking a new name for their bar.

“It was our initiative,” said Yulia Kaplan, one of the bar’s three owners, who moved to Israel from St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1991. “Because we are against war.”

In 2014, during the Russian invasion of Crimea, there was a much stormier debate on social media among opposing camps of Russian-speaking Israelis, said Ksenia Svetlova, a journalist, academic and former member of the Israeli Parliament who moved to Israel from Moscow in 1991.

“But then there wasn’t the violence and bloodshed that there is now,” Ms. Svetlova said.

Even among older Russian speakers here who tend to rely on the Russian news media and have admired strong leadership in the past, there seems to be little sympathy for Mr. Putin this time around.

“There is a sense of shock — people of my parents’ age are saying it’s shameful,” said Pola Barkan, a community activist who moved to Israel as an infant in the early 1990s with her family from Ukraine. “They say their grandparents fought shoulder to shoulder against the Nazis, and the grandsons are now fighting each other.”



The Putin Pub in central Jerusalem on Friday, after its management removed the “P-U-T-I-N” from above the front door. Maya Alleruzzo/Associated Press

Russian speakers in Israel are also bracing for a new wave of Jewish immigration from Ukraine; anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent can apply for Israeli citizenship.

The Jewish Agency, a worldwide Jewish organization that operates in coordination with the Israeli government and assists Jews interested in immigrating to Israel, said it was opening six processing stations for potential immigrants at Ukrainian border crossings with Poland, Moldova, Romania and Hungary.

Israel's Ministry of Immigration and Absorption has been planning for a new wave of immigration and making contingency plans, including for temporary housing.

"I feel like we are back in the '90s," said Alex Rif, a Ukrainian-born poet and activist. "All those questions, like how many will come."