



# Israel's tortured choice on Russia

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To a devoted Zionist, Israel's response to Russia's slaughter in Ukraine is an agonizing sight. That's because the siege of Ukraine presents a particularly challenging clash between Israel's strategic and moral interests.

On the one hand, Israel is heavily dependent on Russia as it confronts the radical regime in Iran and its terrorist proxies in Lebanon, Gaza and elsewhere. On the other, Israel was born in the ashes of a holocaust in which six million Jews died, so its leaders can keenly appreciate the torment of Ukraine's people as they confront Russia's strongman and his massive military.

At this moment in time, Israel is both the Middle East's most powerful nation and a perennially lonely one. Since its founding in 1948, it has endured multiple Arab invasions designed to eliminate the state, one-sided global blame for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, global boycotts and delegitimization campaigns, and undue attention over human rights by the United Nations and its Human Rights Council.

So, perhaps Jerusalem is right to walk a fine line with Moscow and prioritize strategic over moral concerns. Perhaps, but it's distressingly difficult to watch. In essence, Israel has muted its voice as Russia slaughters Ukrainian innocents, while threatening the liberal order from which Israel greatly benefits.

Strategically, Israel is heavily dependent on Russia in at least two ways. First, Russia controls most of the airspace over Syria, and has permitted Israel to strike targets there, including Iranian weapons facilities, as well as weapons convoys designed for Lebanon's Hezbollah terrorist group, which is positioned just over Israel's northern border.

Second, Russia is one of five permanent UN Security Council members and, as such, is participating in negotiations in Vienna over reviving the 2015 global nuclear deal with Iran. While Washington seeks to resuscitate the deal in hopes of restraining Iran's nuclear progress, Jerusalem fears that a new deal will pose the same problems as the original one – including sunset dates for restrictions on Iranian nuclear activities, a weak international regime for inspecting Iranian nuclear sites, and no curbs on Iran's related and growing ballistic missile program.

As a result, Israel has publicly tip-toed around Russia's invasion. Since Russia crossed Ukraine's border in late February, Jerusalem has studiously avoided blaming Russian President Vladimir Putin by name and, while providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine, has rejected Ukrainian requests for weapons. That puts Israel out of step with Washington, its most important ally, which is involved in a global effort to sanction and isolate Putin, other top Kremlin officials and Russia's oligarchs.

In fact, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has sought to negotiate an end to the crisis, meeting with Putin and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz over the weekend and speaking by phone with Ukraine's Jewish president, Volodymyr Zelensky, and French President Emmanuel Macron by phone.

While Zelensky thanked Bennett for his negotiating efforts, he had previously chastised the Israeli premier and other officials for their lukewarm backing of Ukraine. Referring to Israelis who wrapped themselves in Ukraine's flag at Jerusalem's Western Wall, Zelensky said that Bennett doesn't seem wrapped in our flag.

Criticism of Israel for its approach is hardly surprising. As Aaron David Miller, a former US negotiator in the Middle East, wrote in recent days, "As a state created as a safe haven for world Jewry in the wake of the Holocaust, Israel pays a price for appearing to waffle in the face of a predatory power preying on a weaker state."

Israel's situation, in fact, is growing more problematic. That's because, as a condition of stopping Russia's attacks on Ukraine, Putin is demanding that Kyiv abandon its claim to Crimea (which Russia annexed after invading that southern Ukrainian territory in 2014) and to a large part of eastern Ukraine (which Russia invaded last month as part of the current crisis).

So, Israel finds itself in the middle of talks with a ruthless dictator who previously gobbled up sovereign territory and now demands more. That seems little different than Hitler's demand for Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland, to which European leaders agreed in late 1938. That only encouraged Hitler to target more territory until the allies finally declared war, when Germany attacked Poland in late 1939. We all know how that ended for the world and particularly for Europe's Jews.

Today, the world holds Israel to a different standard, subjecting it to undue opprobrium over human rights, while doing little about the world's truly egregious offenders.

So Israel has learned to take care of itself. Fine. But, however understandable, that can be a bitter pill for Israel's defenders around the world to swallow.

