



## Israeli-Russian Relations Strained but Intact Despite the War in Ukraine

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Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Israeli-Russian relations have only partially weakened. The main instruments of influence used by Russia in maintaining relations with Israel are the military coordination mechanism concerning Syria and the situation of Russian Jews. The Israeli government probably will continue its conciliatory approach towards Russia, which will affect the scope of Israeli support for Ukraine.

**Israel and Russia Since the Invasion.** Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 forced Israel to modify its policy towards Russia, with which maintaining close relations had been one of the main aims of Israeli diplomacy since renewal in 1991. The government led by Naftali Bennett adopted a strategy of non-antagonism and maintaining relations, expressing its opposition to the Russian actions primarily through harsher rhetoric and diplomatic actions. Criticism and direct condemnation of Russia were expressed many times by the then foreign minister and later (from July 2022) by the prime minister at the time, Yair Lapid (e.g., after the disclosure of [Russian war crimes in Bucha](#)). At the diplomatic level, Israel has supported most of the UN resolutions against Russia and Prime Minister Bennett has engaged in mediation between Ukraine and Russia. In this framework, [he met with Vladimir Putin in Moscow in March 2022](#). At the same time, the majority of the political scene in Israel has [maintained a favourable attitude towards Ukraine](#) while remaining cautious in attacking Russia. Stronger protests from the authorities were triggered by anti-Semitic statements by Russian politicians (e.g., Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov), although at the same time the pseudo-historical rhetoric used by Russia (e.g., comparisons between the Ukrainian government and the Third Reich) generated limited reactions. A symbolic action was the downgrading of the WW2 Victory Day celebrations in Israel (and in states of the former USSR) on 9 May.

A partial shift in Israel's policy came with the [return of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister](#). It has been

associated with announcements of restraint in statements regarding the war and greater openness to contacts at the government level. Putin contacted Netanyahu by phone to congratulate him on his government coalition, and in January, talks took place between Eli Cohen, the new foreign minister, and Lavrov. Netanyahu himself has spoken rarely and with great restraint about the Ukrainian-Russian war, but he confirmed his readiness to mediate.

Although Israel has not formally joined the sanctions regime against Russia, it has complied with some of the restrictions, for example on financial transfers. Business contacts have been limited (along with the withdrawal of some Israeli companies) and trade has fallen. According to Israeli data, compared to 2021, exports from Israel fell from about \$794 million to about \$647 million, while imports from Russia have plummeted from \$705 million to \$392 million, mainly as a result of the drop in imports of diamonds (even though, as is the case in EU states, the diamond trade remains not covered by sanctions). Israel is still open to artists and tourists from Russia, supported by air connections (including by Russian carriers). Israel has sought to retain access for its airlines in Russia to secure a transport channel for the Jewish diaspora, which numbers between 80,000 and 150,000 (the total number of people eligible for Israeli citizenship may be as high as 600,000). In 2022, about 37,500 Russian citizens emigrated to Israel and took citizenship (15,000 from Ukraine), with frequent cases of further emigration after receiving an Israeli passport.

**Russia's Leverage.** The two most important instruments of pressure on Israel are the situation of the Jewish population in Russia and the coordination mechanism regarding Syria. Russia maintains constant political pressure on Israel to deter it from deeper cooperation with Ukraine. Russian politicians have reacted quickly and sharply to reports about possible Israeli arms deliveries to the Ukrainian military. For example, former President Dmitry Medvedev declared that it would “destroy mutual ties”.

Israeli politicians emphasise that, as retaliation, Russia may turn to repression of its Jewish minority. Since the beginning of the invasion, Russian authorities have pressed domestic Jewish organisations for open approval of its “special military operation”, obtaining some support from a few leaders (others chose to emigrate). Last July, Russia launched an investigation into the activities of the Jewish Agency, an entity facilitating immigration to Israel, on charges of violating the “foreign agent” regulations and illegal processing of personal data. The investigation is ongoing, while the activities of Russian institutions are subject to criticism by Israeli diplomacy. In addition, Israel is concerned that, as in the past, Russia will make a pretext for arresting Israeli citizens or people with dual citizenship on its territory.

For Israel, the main argument in relations with Russia, and thus in the context of the war in Ukraine, is to maintain [operational capabilities in Syria](#) to attack targets in Iran and its allies. As of February 2022, the coordination mechanism aimed at avoiding conflicts between Israeli and Russian forces remained in force, although Russia took actions unfavourable to Israel, such as joint air patrols with the Syrian Air Force since last January and disruption of GPS signals in Israel. At the same time, due to Russia's losses in Ukraine, it withdrew parts of its contingent and equipment from Syria (according to media, also the S-300 anti-aircraft systems), which may be a factor that encourages Israel to revise its previous arrangements.

Russia's broader Middle East policy is an additional context intensifying the tensions in Russian-Israeli relations. Israel's greatest concern is the tightening of [Russian-Iranian military relations](#), especially the prospects of strengthening Iran's air force and air defences. During the war, Russia has [maintained ties with Palestinian entities](#), including both the Fatah leadership (Mahmoud Abbas visited Moscow in October 2022) and Hamas. Russia also has raised pressure on existing, contentious issues, such as land claims in

Jerusalem that belonged to the Tsarist Russia before 1917. Russia also supports local, marginal, Israeli pro-Russian groups.

**Perspectives.** Russia will pressure Israel with existing political instruments (the Syria mechanism, the Jewish Agency case, [involvement in Palestinian affairs](#)), actively counteracting interest in increased political and material support for Ukraine. Actions involving diplomatic concessions on the part of Israel, for example, through international organisations, cannot be ruled out. Russia is taking advantage of the fact that the government coalition, unlike the previous cabinet, includes parties less eager to open criticism and more focused on domestic politics.

Israel's approach to the Ukrainian-Russian war is part of a broader foreign policy strategy in which the priority is on security policy and limited activity in conflicts outside the Middle East region, even at the price of image damage. Netanyahu's government will try to maintain proper relations with Russia, especially since the current model of relations secures Israel's current interests and allows maintaining dialogue on contentious issues. This political line is supported by the lack of pressure from public opinion, which, while pro-Ukrainian, is also reluctant to increase Israel's involvement in the conflict. An additional justification for the policy of non-antagonism is the desire to maintain credibility as a possible mediator, although such a role for Israel at the current stage of the war is very unlikely.

A source of potential change in Israel's approach to relations with Russia may be, above all, the deepening of [Iranian-Russian cooperation](#), especially if Russia is willing to actively counter Israeli operations [against Iranian military infrastructure](#). Pressure from external partners remains an additional factor for policy change. In the face of growing internal tensions (regarding justice reforms) and in relations with the Palestinians, Netanyahu's government might avoid further antagonising the countries of the transatlantic community through actions perceived as pro-Russian. The most important role will be played by American diplomacy, which will influence Israel to include Ukraine's needs in its calculations and has the widest range of leverage related to [Israeli interests in the Middle East](#). Hence, the limited nature of official support for Ukraine may be balanced by the Israeli authorities with the secret dimension of cooperation (e.g., intelligence).