

# Israel's Tightrope between Russia and Ukraine

by Robert O. Freedman

**A**s the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, Israel surprised many observers by taking a relatively neutral position in the war and even sought, without much success, to mediate an end to the conflict. However, as the war progressed, Israel tilted to the Ukrainian side, providing it with humanitarian and medical aid as well as voting at the United Nations to condemn the Russian invasion. To understand the Israeli position requires a look back at the evolution of Israeli-Russian relations over the past decade and the factors that compelled Jerusalem to take a relatively neutral stance at first.

## Historical Background

Up to 2011, bilateral Russian-Israeli relations were flourishing. Trade had risen to US\$2 billion per year; Moscow and Jerusalem coproduced an airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft that was sold to India with Russia providing the airframe and Israel the avionics; cultural ties flourished with Russian artists performing in Israel to the acclaim of the million-plus Russian-speaking Israelis who had emigrated from the former Soviet Union; and tourism blossomed with Israel a favorite destination for Russian tourists who could visit the Chris-



*Ukrainian ambassador to the U.N. Sergiy Kyslytsya (left) embraces Israeli U.N. ambassador Gilad Erdan, March 3, 2022, following Israel's vote to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine.*

tian holy sites in Jerusalem and have access to Russian language newspapers and TV stations in Israel. In addition, the emigration of Russian Jews to Israel continued without hindrance; Russian rockets put Israeli satellites into orbit, and Jerusalem sold Moscow drones after the poor performance of Russian drones in the Russian-Georgian war of 2008.

On the regional level, in contrast, relations were problematic as far as Israel was concerned with Russia strongly backing Iran, both diplomatically and with arms, despite Tehran's relentless commitment to

Israel's destruction. Similarly, Russia backed Syria, as well as Hamas and Hezbollah, enemies committed to Israel's destruction, which Moscow, unlike Washington and most European states, refused to designate as terrorist organizations.<sup>1</sup>

This dichotomous relationship changed in the early 2010s as a result of the geopolitical transformation occasioned by a string of Arab uprisings (the so-called "Arab Spring") and the U.S. actions (or inactions) vis-à-vis these momentous events. In 2011, President Barack Obama announced a shift in the focus of U.S. policy toward Asia and, by implication, away from the Middle East. He pulled U.S. troops out of Iraq, kindling fears among Washington's regional allies that its security guarantees were about to evaporate. These fears were reinforced in 2013 when Obama failed to make good on his "red line" pledge of military retaliation if Bashar Assad's regime used chemical weapons against its citizens in the rapidly developing Syrian civil war. They were further exacerbated by Obama's eagerness to reach a nuclear deal with Iran that would lift sanctions on the Islamic Republic and give it more money to develop weapons and intensify its subversive activities across the region. (Only in 2014, did Washington return some forces to Iraq in response to the newly-emergent threat of ISIS.)

Alarmed by these actions, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) tilted a bit toward Russia in a bid for reinsurance if Washington did, in fact, pull out of the Middle East. In the case of Israel,

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the shift toward Russia became evident in 2014 when, following the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine's Donbas region, Jerusalem effectively abstained on the U.S.-organized U.N. General Assembly resolution denouncing the Russian actions in Ukraine. And while Israel ascribed the de facto abstention to the fact that its foreign service was on strike, the real reason was articulated by Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman who stated,

We have good and trusting relations with the Americans and the Russians, and our experience has been very positive with both sides. So I don't understand the idea that Israel has to get mired in this.<sup>2</sup>

Needless to say, the Israeli "non-vote" at the U.N. was not appreciated by the Obama administration with a "Senior Administration Official" stating,

We have been consulting on Ukraine not only with our partners and allies around the world, obviously, we are looking to the entire international community to condemn Russia's actions and support Ukraine, so we were surprised to see that Israel did not join the large majority of countries that voted to support Ukraine's territorial integrity at the UN.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Reuters, Mar. 12, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), Apr. 13, 2014; Robert O. Freedman, "The Erosion of US-Israeli Relations during Obama's Second Term," *Israel Affairs*, 23/2 (2017), p. 257.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert O. Freedman, "Israel and Russia: Jerusalem and its Relations with Moscow under Putin," in Colin Shindler, ed., *Israel and the World* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), pp. 129-54.

A similar situation was to occur when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and Israel took a neutral stance.

## Russian-Israeli Relations, 2015-22

The geopolitical situation was to change yet again in September 2015 when Moscow sent military forces to Syria to prevent the collapse of the Assad regime. Russia deployed attack jets from the Khmeimim air base near Latakia and naval combat ships from the expanded naval base secured in Tartus (where it had previously only had use of some floating docks and warehouses). To protect its assets, Russia also deployed SA-300 and SA-400 anti-aircraft batteries that controlled much of the airspace in western Syria.

Not only did the Russian intervention save the Assad regime, but it also gave Moscow a major military presence in the heart of the Middle East. While Obama said that Russia was getting itself into a quagmire in Syria, Middle Easterners saw the situation quite differently, and their tilt to Moscow increased. This was especially the case for Israel. In October 2015, Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu initiated what was to become a series of visits to Moscow to coordinate with Russian president Vladimir Putin over Syria. Israel feared that Iran, which along with Russia had played a vital role in saving the Assad regime, would use the regime's recovery to entrench itself in Syria, making it much easier for its forces to attack Israel than from Iranian territory almost 1,500 miles away. Israel wanted to prevent this from happening by launching a sustained air campaign against the



Beginning in 2015, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu (left) had a series of visits with Russian president Vladimir Putin to coordinate policies over Syria.

Iranian military positions in Syria and interdicting Tehran's arms shipments to its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah, in what came to be known as "the war between the wars."

In order to sustain its air attacks, Israel needed Russian acquiescence because Moscow now controlled much of the airspace over which Israeli planes would have to operate. Putin agreed to the Israeli request, most probably because he wanted Moscow, rather than Tehran, to be the dominant external power in Syria. This arrangement seemed to be working fairly well with the occasional political squabble, notably the September 2018 incident when the Russian ministry of defense blamed Israel for the accidental downing of a Russian reconnaissance plane by Syrian anti-aircraft units. The incident quickly blew over, however, and Israel continued its airstrikes against Iranian targets in Syria.<sup>4</sup>

This was the situation on the eve of the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine

<sup>4</sup> Zvi Magen, "Russia and Israel," in Robert O. Freedman, ed., *Israel under Netanyahu* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 268-9.

with Israel taking great care not to alienate Moscow lest its freedom of action in Syria be jeopardized. It thus refused Ukrainian requests prior to the war to purchase Israeli weapons and the Pegasus spyware system that would have enabled the Ukrainians to eavesdrop on Russian phone conversations.<sup>5</sup> Two weeks before the invasion, Israel's new prime minister, Naftali Bennett, gave a revealing speech on U.S.-Israeli relations at the Tel Aviv Institute for National Security Studies' annual conference:

The United States was and will remain our best friend, but Washington has its own constellation of interests, which do not always overlap with ours. Its interest in the region at the moment is declining.<sup>6</sup>

Bennett's comments set the stage for U.S.-Israeli disagreements over Ukraine once the invasion began.

### Mixed Messages on Russia's Invasion

The 8-party Israeli coalition government was not unified in its response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While Bennett, as head of the right-wing Yamina party, tended to give precedence to Israel's security requirements and hence deferred to Moscow, alternate PM and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, head of the centrist Yesh Atid party, by far the largest member of the ruling coalition, was more critical of Russia and backed the

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U.S. position on the invasion. The tension in the government was visible even before the invasion when, on February 23, the Israeli foreign ministry issued a statement supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. This angered Moscow, which summoned the Israeli ambassador to protest the statement and pointedly noted Israel's “occupation” of the Golan Heights.<sup>7</sup>

When the invasion came on February 24, Washington was disappointed by Israel's lukewarm attitude to its failed February 27 attempt to engineer a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Russia.<sup>8</sup> However, the Israelis supported and rallied votes for a March 2 General Assembly resolution condemning the invasion and demanding the immediate cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Still, Jerusalem sought to mitigate the response from Russia by having Israel's deputy ambassador to the U.N., rather than the ambassador, speak in favor of the resolution. She read a statement urging Moscow to stop the invasion, which described it as “a serious violation of the international order.” This failed to impress the Russians, and their Tel Aviv embassy informed the Israeli

<sup>7</sup> David Daoud, “[Israel won't stick out its neck for Ukraine: It's Because of Russia](#),” Atlantic Council, Washington, D.C., [Apr. 13, 2022](#).

<sup>8</sup> “Resolution 2623 (2022) Adopted by the Security Council at its 8980th meeting, on 27 February 2022,” U.N. Security Council, New York, [S/RES/2623 \(2022\)](#).

<sup>9</sup> “General Assembly Overwhelmingly Adopts Resolution Demanding Russian Federation Immediately End Illegal Use of Force in Ukraine, Withdraw All Troops,” U.N. General Assembly, Eleventh Emergency Special Session, [Mar. 2, 2022](#).

<sup>5</sup> *The New York Times*, [Mar. 24, 2022](#).

<sup>6</sup> *Haaretz*, [Feb. 4, 2022](#).

foreign ministry that Moscow was “very disappointed” by the Israeli position at the U.N.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Washington rallied its Western allies to terminate flights to and from Russia as well as to sever economic ties and impose sanctions on Moscow including on Russian oligarchs close to Putin. But Israel took none of these actions. According to reported Israeli government sources, there was no legal option for sanctioning assets and citizens of a state not defined by law as an enemy country<sup>11</sup> though the government could have tried to pass such a law had it really been interested in joining the international sanctions. In addition, despite Ukrainian pleas for military assistance, including the Iron Dome anti-missile system, Israel initially refused to provide anything other than humanitarian aid. And while this behavior revealed a clear effort to avoid alienating Moscow, Bennett claimed that Israel refrained from cutting economic ties with Russia in order to preserve its mediatory role as Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky had asked him to do on February 25, a day after the invasion began. Indeed, the religiously observant Bennett even flew to Moscow on March 5—on the Jewish Sabbath when no travel is normally allowed—to try to mediate an end to the conflict, to no avail.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, U.S. patience with Israeli efforts to remain neutral was running thin. On March 11, Victoria Nuland, U.S. under-secretary of state for political affairs, told Israel’s Channel 12 News that Israel’s



*Members of an Israeli humanitarian group distribute food to displaced Ukrainians. Early in the war, Israel limited its assistance to humanitarian aid.*

joining the financial sanctions was the most important thing for the United States, even more than Jerusalem giving military assistance to Ukraine or mediating between Putin and Zelensky. She said,

You don’t want to become the last haven for dirty money that’s fueling Putin’s war. … We have to squeeze the [Putin] regime. We have to deny it the income that it needs … We squeeze the oligarchs around him, we squeeze its economy.<sup>13</sup>

Nuland’s sharp criticism widened the rift within the Israeli government regarding the response to the Russian invasion. Speaking at a press conference in Slovakia on March 14, Lapid declared that Israel would not be

a route to bypass sanctions imposed on Russia by the U.S. and other Western countries. The Minister of Foreign Affairs is coordinating the issue together

<sup>10</sup> *The Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), [Mar. 7, 2022](#).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., [Mar. 15, 2022](#).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., [Mar. 8, 2022](#).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., [Mar. 11, 2022](#); *Haaretz*, [Mar. 13, 2022](#).

with partners including the Bank of Israel, the Finance Ministry, the Economy Ministry, the airports authority and others ... Israel, like Slovakia, condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine and calls for an end to the fighting. There is no justification for violating Ukraine's territorial integrity, and there is no justification for attacks on a civilian population.<sup>14</sup>

While Lapid's words were strong, it was clear that he did not speak for the entire cabinet. Not only did PM Bennett not condemn the invasion, but Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman emphasized Israel's neutrality in the conflict. In words reminiscent of his comments following the Russian annexation of Crimea, Lieberman stated:

Russia is accusing Ukraine and Ukraine is accusing Russia. And Israel should avoid adjudicating one way or the other. We here need to maintain Israel's moral stand on the one hand and Israel's interest on the other.<sup>15</sup>

Needless to say, without the finance ministry's help, Israel's cooperation with Washington on the sanctions was questionable at best. Nonetheless, some Israeli companies took the initiative to freeze or restrict sales to Russia. These included WIX, which provides a platform for building websites; Stratasys, a 3D printing firm, and Tipalti, which stopped

**By early April, Israel had absorbed 24,000 Ukrainian refugees. Only a third were Jewish.**

transferring payments to customers in Russia.<sup>16</sup> In addition, while still refusing to sell military equipment to Ukraine, Israel sent a 100-ton humanitarian aid pack-

age, and in mid-March, built a field hospital near Lviv. In addition, by early April, Israel had absorbed 24,000 Ukrainian refugees, only about a third of whom were Jewish—after the interior minister was forced to reverse her initial reluctance to accept a large number of non-Jewish refugees.<sup>17</sup>

## **Growing Demands to Back Ukraine**

Meanwhile, pressure was building on Israel to back Ukraine more strongly. After some delay, Zelensky was invited to address the Knesset in mid-March despite the Russian ambassador warning, "A mediator must be careful not to become unbalanced."<sup>18</sup> In his speech, the Ukrainian president sought to put the Israeli leadership on the defensive for not doing more to help Ukraine:

We can ask why we can't receive weapons from you, why Israel has not imposed powerful sanctions on Russia or [is] putting pressure on Russian businesses. What is this? Apathy? Calculations? Or mediation without taking a side? I'll let you answer that question, but I want to point out that apathy kills.

<sup>14</sup> *Haaretz*, [Mar. 14, 2022](#); *The Times of Israel*, [Mar. 14, 2022](#).

<sup>15</sup> *The New York Times*, [Apr. 11, 2022](#).

<sup>16</sup> *Haaretz*, [Mar. 8, 2022](#).

<sup>17</sup> *The Washington Post*, [Apr. 19, 2022](#).

<sup>18</sup> *The Times of Israel*, [Mar. 11, 2022](#).



*Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky addressed the Knesset, March 20, 2022. His speech prompted questions about Israel's neutrality.*

Zelensky then went on to compare the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the Holocaust:

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not just a military operation as it is presented in Moscow, it is a total and unjust war, which is meant to destroy our people. The Russian army is deliberately destroying, and the whole world is watching. Therefore, I can make this parallel of our history to your history.<sup>19</sup>

While the comparison of the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the Holocaust raised some eyebrows in Israel, there is no question that Zelensky's speech had an emotional impact in the Jewish state. In addition, by mid-March, voices in Israel were openly questioning the wisdom of Bennett's neutrality

19 Ibid., [Mar. 20, 2022](#). Zelensky's speech was delivered in Ukrainian, with Hebrew voiceover translation. The official Ukrainian Embassy translation of the text into English differs slightly from the Hebrew voiceover.

policy. Former foreign minister Tzipi Livni, for example, claimed that it was a

mistake that the message coming out of Israel is so binary, that Israel's "values and democracy" interests lie with the U.S. while its security interests are clustered only around Russia. The biggest security interest of the State of Israel is its relationship with the United States.<sup>20</sup>

Former Israeli defense minister Moshe Ya'alon asserted,

Israel must address these events of historic proportions. We need to be on the right side of history, and the right side of history is not with Putin.<sup>21</sup>

Former Israeli consul to New York City, Alon Pinkas, put it more bluntly:

Israel has adopted a patently immoral and politically imprudent type of quasi-neutrality. ... By supposedly acting neutral—basically endorsing the false "two side-ism" approach—Israel is essentially supporting Russia.<sup>22</sup>

Critical voices were also raised in the United States. Representative Adam Kinzinger (Rep.-Ill.) warned that Israel had to pick a side in the conflict and that its

20 Dahlia Schendlin, "Should Israel Arm Ukraine? Israeli Generals Speak Out," *Haaretz*, Mar. 16, 2022,

21 Ibid., [Mar. 16, 2022](#).

22 Alon Pinkas, "[Israel's Ukraine Policy](#) Isn't Only Immoral. It's Also Unwise," *ibid.*, Apr. 29, 2022.

reaction to the war would have a bearing on future aid from Washington.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, *Washington Post* columnist Josh Rogin claimed,

Israel's balancing act of maintaining ties to Russia while offering only tepid support for Ukraine is becoming morally and strategically untenable. ... As more and more evidence of Putin's war crimes spills out, Israel's explanations have become little more than alibis for inaction. ... As Elie Wiesel said, we must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, not the victim.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile the Russian campaign seemed to have bogged down, allowing the Ukrainian forces to regain territory in the Kyiv area, such as the town of Bucha where the grim remains of massacred Ukrainian civilians were found. This apparently spurred the Israelis to join Washington on April 7 in voting at the U.N. General Assembly to expel Russia from the U.N. Human Rights Council. Yet again, Lapid took the lead in denouncing Russian actions. "A large and powerful country has invaded a smaller neighbor without any justification," he stated during a visit to Greece in mid-April. "Once again the ground is soaked with the blood of innocent civilians. The images and testimony from Ukraine are horrific."<sup>25</sup> A few days later, Israeli defense minister Benny Gantz announced that Israel

**One critic said Israel's "tepid support for Ukraine is becoming morally and strategically untenable."**

had agreed to provide helmets and flak jackets to Ukrainian rescue personnel.<sup>26</sup>

By contrast, Bennett seemed adamant in maintaining Israel's neutrality.

In an April 20 CNN interview, the same day as Gantz announced the dispatch of helmets and flak jackets to Ukraine, Bennett asserted his determination "to not allow Israel to become a bypass to any form of sanctions." Yet he did not specify the measures Israel was taking to prevent sanctions violations, instead emphasizing the importance of Jerusalem's role as a potential mediator in the Russia-Ukraine conflict:

I will say that I know that in order to mediate later at the right moment, we do need to continue to preserve lines of communication with Russia as well. Otherwise, we won't be able to mediate.<sup>27</sup>

However, in the interview, Christiane Amanpour pressed the prime minister on his contention that the security threat from Iran justified Israel's neutral position. Bennett's reply underscored his continuing security concerns about Iran and Syria:

Israel retains freedom of action in our area. We have an Iran who is always trying to surround us and to build up more and more rockets that will threaten Israel's population centers. We are not going to allow that to happen anywhere, including Syria.<sup>28</sup>

23 Ibid., [Mar. 21, 2022](#).

24 Josh Rogin, "As the Atrocities Continue in Ukraine, Israel Must Take Sides," *The Washington Post*, Apr. 8, 2022.

25 I-24 News TV (Tel Aviv), [Apr. 18, 2022](#).

26 *The Times of Israel*, [Apr. 20, 2022](#).

27 CNN, [Apr. 20, 2022](#).

28 *Ibid.*

Despite Bennett's continued efforts to maintain Israel's neutrality, Moscow was getting increasingly exasperated with Lapid's comments and Jerusalem's tilt toward Ukraine, slight as it was. Capitalizing on the rioting then underway on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the Israeli ambassador was summoned to the Russian foreign ministry where he was told,

We have taken note of Israeli foreign minister Yair Lapid's aggressive statement. ... The Israeli foreign minister's statements evoke regret and rejection. ... This was a poorly camouflaged attempt ... to distract the international community's attention from one of the oldest unsettled conflicts—the Palestinian-Israeli one.<sup>29</sup>

Alongside its condemnation of Jerusalem's policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians, Moscow stepped up the military pressure in Syria—as if to remind the Israelis they needed Russian acquiescence to continue overflying the Syrian airspace. Thus, a Russian admiral stated that a Syrian-operated air defense missile had recently intercepted a guided missile fired from an Israeli F-16 fighter-bomber in Syrian airspace.<sup>30</sup> For his part, the Russian ambassador to Syria derided the Israeli air campaign as designed “to escalate tension and allow the West to carry out military activities in Syria,”<sup>31</sup> and warned that Moscow might respond to this “provocation.” By contrast, the Russian ambassador to Israel took a more restrained position. While calling Lapid's comments “baseless” and insisting



*Following a meeting with a Hamas delegation in Moscow, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov's antisemitic comments escalated Israeli-Russian tensions.*

that a “more balanced” Israeli position was expected, he noted that Russia and Israel were still friends.<sup>32</sup>

### Antisemitic Russian Libels

Israeli-Russian tensions escalated further in early May when the Russian foreign ministry hosted an official visit to Moscow by a Hamas delegation, headed by the terror organization's political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh.<sup>33</sup> Then, Foreign Minister Lavrov, in response to a media query how Moscow could claim to be fighting Nazis in Ukraine at a time when President Zelensky was Jewish, said that he thought Hitler had Jewish blood and that “for a long time we've been hearing the wise Jewish people say that the biggest antisemites are the Jews themselves.”<sup>34</sup>

Lavrov's antisemitic comments ignited a political firestorm in Israel. Even Bennett and

<sup>29</sup> TASS News Agency (Moscow), [Apr. 15, 2022](#); I-24 News TV, [Apr. 18, 2022](#).

<sup>30</sup> Haaretz, [Apr. 2022](#).

<sup>31</sup> The Jerusalem Post, [Mar. 24, 2022](#).

<sup>32</sup> Haaretz, [Apr. 18, 2022](#).

<sup>33</sup> Al-Monitor (Washington, D.C.), [May 20, 2022](#).

<sup>34</sup> Reuters, May 2, 2022.

Lieberman, who had been loath to criticize Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine, felt obliged to respond. Stating that he viewed Lavrov's utterance with "the upmost severity," Bennett said that the

comments "were untrue and their intentions were wrong," insisting that "the use of the Holocaust of the Jewish people as a political tool must cease immediately." For his part, Lieberman, perhaps the most pro-Russian member of the Israeli cabinet, said that he expected an apology for Lavrov's "absurd" comments, which should have never been made.<sup>35</sup> Lapid offered the strongest criticism of his Russian counterpart:

This is an unforgivable and scandalous comment, a terrible historical error, and we expect an apology. Hitler was not of Jewish origin, and the Jews did not murder themselves in the Holocaust. ... We are making every effort to maintain good relations with Russia, but there is a line, and this time the line has been crossed. The Russian government must apologize to us and to the Jewish people.<sup>36</sup>

He added that the Russian ambassador to Israel would be summoned for "a not so easy talk."<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, the Russian foreign ministry seemed to be doubling down on the Jewish-Nazi linkage. On the one hand, they claimed that Israeli mercenaries were fighting alongside the far-right Ukrainian Azov unit in the

### Moscow reportedly fired missiles at Israeli aircraft departing Syrian airspace after attacking an Iranian base.

war while, on the other, they accused Lapid of making "anti-historical statements" that largely explain why the current Israeli government supports the "neo-Nazi regime in Kyiv."<sup>38</sup>

By way of preventing relations from deteriorating further, Bennett called Putin, asserting after their conversation that the Russian president had apologized for his foreign minister's comments.<sup>39</sup> Yet while the Kremlin acknowledged that the two leaders discussed the Holocaust, the Russian description of the conversation did not mention any apology. Instead, Moscow continued to exert pressure on Israel, reportedly firing SA-300 missiles at Israeli aircraft that were departing Syrian airspace after attacking an Iranian base.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusions

One hundred days into the Ukraine war, Jerusalem had not yet cut off trade with Moscow, nor severed air travel to and from Russia, nor sanctioned Russian oligarchs despite Washington's repeated entreaties. The primary reason for this is the desire of Israeli policymakers, especially PM Bennett, to avoid antagonizing Putin lest he ends the years-long Russian-Israeli understanding that enabled the sustained Israeli air campaign against Iranian and Hezbollah military targets in Syria. This policy has, however, been

<sup>38</sup> *Al-Monitor*, [May 3, 2022](#).

<sup>39</sup> Voice of America News (Washington, D.C), [May 5, 2022](#).

<sup>40</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), [May 22, 2022](#). For a different view, see Robert Ford "New Balances and Red Lines in Syria," *Asharq al-Awsat*, [May 25, 2022](#).

<sup>35</sup> *The Times of Israel*, [May 2, 2022](#).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

opposed by powerful elements within the Israeli cabinet headed by alternate prime minister and foreign minister Lapid, who used his position to sway Israel toward Ukraine.

For the time being, Jerusalem seems to be successfully walking the political and diplomatic tightrope between these two poles. Moscow has done little to constrain the Israeli air attacks in Syria, limiting its displeasure with Jerusalem's pro-Ukrainian tilt to diplomatic and propaganda measures (e.g., denouncing Lapid's statements, courting Hamas, hurling antisemitic diatribes) while Washington has refrained from excessive pressure so as not to rock the precarious Bennett-Lapid government (which, in any event, fell in June 2022, paving the way for another round of Israeli elections).

Given its longstanding pro-Western orientation, particularly the special relationship with the United States, it is in Israel's best interest to place itself squarely in the camp of the Western democracies even at the risk of operational constraints in Syria, which might diminish if the Ukrainian quagmire reduces Moscow's Syrian leverage.

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