

<https://doi.org/10.53231/LZAV.24.1.4>
Iesniegts/Submitted: 14.01.2024

FROM FRIENDSHIP TO HOSTILITY: FOLLOWING THE CURRENT DEVELOPMENT OF RUSSIAN–ISRAELI RELATIONS

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Keywords: *Russia–Israel relations, political interests and confrontation, Russian–Ukrainian military conflict*

The foreign policy of modern countries nowadays often looks inconsistent. A very illustrative example of this are the relationships between Russia and Israel, which since recently have undergone serious and, in some way, even dramatic changes. They turned from friendly to truly gloomy and contradictory. The reason for this is the war developed by Russia in Ukraine, which changed the usual status quo of the interaction between Jerusalem and Moscow. The article examines in detail how this process evolved, what stages it went through and what are the possible consequences of this situation, which is not yet very predictable. Accordingly, the main question posed in the article is how the current war and other negative occurrences taking place within and around the Russian–Israeli relations can influence them in the future.

Introduction

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1991, the contacts between Israel and Russia have always been marked by dynamics and great mutual interest of both countries to each other. They were supported by frequent meetings between their leaders, Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu, and consistent development of political, economic, and cultural priorities. Manuel Trajtenberg, the Executive Director of the Tel Aviv Institute for National Secu-

rity Studies, in his speech at a scientific conference dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and Israel, stressed that the ties between the two countries remain strong and dynamic.¹ In turn, Russian political scientist George Mirzayan noted: “Israel needs Russia no less than Russia needs Israel. This has been the basis for the fragile balance of interests between Moscow and Tel Aviv over the past years.”²

Nothing seemed to foreshadow a change in the current situation. However, since recently, Israel has ceased to be considered in Russia as a “friendly state”. On Saturday, 30 December 2023, the audience viewed a list of the leaders of friendly states to whom Russian President Vladimir Putin wished Merry Christmas and the coming New Year. Israeli Prime-Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was not on the list, likewise it happened a year before.³

This can be explained by nothing other than serious problems in relations between Russia and Israel. One of undisputable reasons for the watershed was the “special military operation” initiated by Russia against Ukraine (by this name it was pronounced by President Putin in his first message⁴), which began in February 2022. In fact, from the very outset it became, without an overestimation, a full-fledged war against the independent Ukrainian state. During its military activities, Russia has repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the Israeli position regarding this situation. Moscow considered Jerusalem as “aligned” to its interests.⁵ Meanwhile, the position of Israel was at least unilateral: Jerusalem was clearly critical of Moscow’s actions in Ukraine but simultaneously it refused from active assistance to Ukraine.

In this article, the author intends to look at the twists and turns of the ongoing disagreements between Israel and Russia and to sort out the main difficulties taking place in these relationships. Obviously, the abovementioned conflict between Jerusalem and Moscow clearly confirmed how vulnerable the modern world looks like and how rapidly changes in the current status quo can take place. This originates painful consequences not only for “big” politics, but also for the well-being of millions of people.

Russia and Israel: problems of mutual understanding

These problems were already identified in the first stage of the war unleashed by Russia in Ukraine. The Israeli leadership immediately faced an obvious and very uneasy question: how to build relations with Russia now, given the current situation?

Obviously, Jerusalem could not abandon the existing relations with Moscow under the new political conditions although the latter did not facilitate this. This was determined by a number of strategic reasons. Firstly, by the need for Israel to maintain security of its northern border, in the conditions of permanent confrontation with Syria and Lebanon. They continue to threaten Israel, in particular by supporting terrorist organisations including Hezbollah which constantly attacks Israel.⁶ Russia is still capable of affecting not only Hezbollah but also Hamas having its undoubted influence in the Gaza Strip.⁷ Maintaining productive relations with Moscow thereby remains a top priority for Jerusalem. Secondly, Israel tends to maintain stable economic ties with Russia, which have developed over the last 30 years, since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.⁸ Thirdly, the current policy of Israel is greatly influenced by its Russian-speaking citizens who have repatriated here from Russia. Although it is impossible to say exactly how many of these repatriates who came here since 1991 still stay in Israel, their number is very significant and seems to be not less than a million people.⁹ Their political interests therefore become essential for shaping state priorities for Russia. Thus, building relations with this country is not idle for Israeli politicians but continues to be paramount.

Despite the above factors, in terms of Russia–Ukraine war Israel turned out to be in a very difficult situation. Under these circumstances, the main dilemma for Israel was whether, like Western states, it should

supply Ukraine with various types of weapons or has to refrain from this and thereby to maintain the same trusting relations with Russia.

It is worth noting that the first decline in Russian–Israeli relations occurred as early as in 2014, due to Jerusalem’s negative reaction to the Russian annexation of the Crimea. Among 66 states, it favoured a special UN resolution demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Crimea, and also condemned Moscow’s increasing military presence in the waters of the Black and Azov seas.¹⁰ At the same time, Israel did not support the sanctioning policy of the U.S. and other leading Western countries against Russia. The Israeli political establishment was seriously worried that joining the sanctions would gravely undermine the country’s economy since Russia will close the market for Israeli goods.¹¹ The originally negative reaction of Jerusalem towards Moscow thus gradually became less acute.

The Jerusalem’s position was favourably received by Moscow. Bearing in mind the long-term positive relations between Russia and Israel, the Kremlin hoped that they would gain a new impetus in the context of Russian military aggression against Ukraine.¹²

However, this did not happen: the Jerusalem’s stance turned out to be more unpredictable to the military conflict than Moscow had initially anticipated. This was especially evident in the first months of the Russian attack against Ukraine. Pressure from both Russia and Ukraine inevitably forced Israel to act cautiously. As former Israeli Ambassador to the EU Oded Eran noted, Israel remained a “secondary actor” in the Russian–Ukrainian war and therefore “should not take sides”.¹³ It is hard to imagine how in the modern world one or another key country can distance itself from a serious international problem, but it was obvious that Israel

did not want to spoil relations with either Russia or Ukraine.

One way or another, on 2 March 2022, after some hesitation, Israel voted for a UN resolution (among 140 other countries) requiring Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine. Nonetheless, the Israeli leadership continued to maintain a very ambivalent position towards Russia during the first months of the conflict. With its vote, Israel seemed to unequivocally confirm that Russia had invaded Ukraine in defiance of all international norms. In the meantime, the then Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett did not dare to publicly make this announcement, leaving it to the Foreign Minister Yair Lapid.¹⁴

After the resignation Bennett recalled his meeting with Vladimir Putin. He noted Putin’s sharp mind, his sense of humor and called the Russian president “the sweetest interlocutor” who does not make a frightening impression. Simultaneously, even then, without being limited in his opinion, Bennett did not express his condemnation of Russian policy and added only that both Moscow and Jerusalem are acting “on their own side”.¹⁵

It is still questionable what Bennet meant in these words. In the initial period of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, Jerusalem consciously tried to abstract from it. In particular, it refused to supply military technics to Ukraine (including defensive equipment).¹⁶ “I emphasise that Israel will not transfer weapons to Ukraine for operational reasons,” said the then Defense Minister of this country, Benny Gantz. Justifying these words, he added: “Israel supports and stands on the side of Ukraine, NATO, and the West”.¹⁷

The Gantz’ point illustrated a clear discrepancy with reality. Israel entirely refused to help Ukraine with weapons. “Any systems that we give to Ukraine can... fall into Iranian hands and be used against us. By the

way, this is not a theoretical possibility. This has already happened with Western anti-tank weapons, which we now find near our borders. So here we must act very carefully,” the new Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced sometime later.¹⁸ Earlier Israel explained its actions by unwillingness to destroy Russian military, which could inevitably lead to a complication of its relations with Russia.¹⁹ As a result, Israel narrowed itself only to sending military uniforms to Ukraine and deploying portable medical hospitals on its frontline territory.²⁰

Kiev, in turn, considered the position of Jerusalem as “pro-Russian” and reacted on it very negatively. In April 2022, the Ukrainian Ambassador to Israel, Evgeniy Korniychuk, defiantly left a press conference of the two key Israeli officials: Benny Gantz (Defense Minister), and Yair Lapid (Foreign Minister).²¹ Such a demarche seems to be extremely rare in modern diplomacy and has been publicly interpreted as an act of Kiev’s full distrust to Israel. The U.S. presidential administration tried to change Israel’s attitude to the “Ukrainian issue” during the Gantz’s visit there. However, nothing came out of it: Gantz openly expressed his concern that Israeli military support for Ukraine could weaken the role of Jerusalem in the Middle East, due to strengthening Russia’s military presence in Syria and installing its new cruise missiles there aimed at Israel.²²

All this has once again confirmed that relations with Russia kept remaining more important for Israel compared to those with Ukraine. In confirmation of this the Israeli Foreign Minister, Eli Cohen, floridly remarked that although Israel supports the position of Ukraine and Western states, it cannot ignore also the role of Russia in the Middle East. “We express a moral position of support for Ukraine, while preserving the interests of our security and the Jewish Agency in Russia.”²³

To top it all, the Israeli authorities did not even consider the possibility of accepting Ukrainian refugees.²⁴ When asked to comment on these actions the then Israeli Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked put it the following way: “We are in a very delicate situation. The Prime Minister is in constant contact with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and they talked for a very long time yesterday. We will continue to do what is right for the State of Israel.”²⁵ Russia obviously has again become a deterrent in this situation.

True, in a short while, Israel granted to Ukrainian refugees the right to enter the country and a work permit.²⁶ However, it did not specify how many refugees could come. President of Ukraine Vladimir Zelensky diplomatically announced that such a “restrained” position of Israel towards Ukraine is going to be “temporary” and “change” in the future.²⁷ Israel, in turn, remained silent, and since January 2023 took a decision that all Ukrainian refugees who arrived in the country after the outbreak of the war will no longer receive special monthly benefits.²⁸

Thus, Israel’s politics towards Russia in terms of the war between Russia and Ukraine continued to remain ambivalent. In the meantime, Russia continued to consider this politics hostile to its interests which naturally worsened the relations between Jerusalem and Moscow.²⁹

From a “cautious” policy to confrontation

Since the mid-2022, the relationship between these countries have already entered the stage of open confrontation. Russia even began to resort to blatant insults against Israel. At one of regular press conferences, the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, unequivocally accused Israel of a “pro-Ukrainian position” and “support for the Kiev regime”, which was perceived by the Russian side as somehow a

“strange and wild voice of the West”.³⁰ A few days later, Zakharova publicly declared that all countries that take a pro-Western position towards Ukraine are ready to write off all its sins, “even if Europeans are among the victims”.³¹

Thereby, the Russian Foreign Ministry refused all other countries in developing an independent position. In turn, Israel did not stay on the sidelines and unflatteringly blamed Russia. Moscow was severely criticised for its attitude to the “Jewish question”.

The beginning of a new round of confrontation between the two actors was laid by a false statement of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who called Adolf Hitler a man “with Jewish blood”. Lavrov used this analogy as his argument about Jewishness of the Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky, whom he also called a “Nazi”.³² The reaction from Israel was immediate: President Yitzhak Herzog, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid called this statement as “false”, “racist”, and “exuding anti-Semitism”. Lavrov, in turn, did not remain in debt, saying that Lapid’s statement “supports the neo-Nazi regime in Kiev”.³³ Lavrov, however, did not tend to explain why he called the existing government in Ukraine “neo-Nazi”. Instead, he simply put a label on it, in full accordance with the long Russian tradition of defaming those who express views being different from the officially permitted position.

Despite the tense situation with Russia, Israel somehow endeavored to restrain its emotions. The then Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, referring in his speeches to the Russian military aggression, refused to mention the name of Russian President Putin. In turn, Foreign Minister Lapid spoke in favour of suspending Russia’s membership in the UN Human Rights Council.³⁴ In response to this statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a message noting that the statements of the Israeli Foreign Minister “cause

regret and rejection”. Israel is trying to “take advantage of the situation around Ukraine to distract the attention of the international community from the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, one of the most long-standing and unresolved”.³⁵

Following this, Israel began to drift more and more confidently from Russia to Ukraine. By the late 2022, Israel supplied Ukraine with 20 powerful heating generators (worth more than \$1 million) and sent the latest communication systems (without specifying for what purposes).³⁶ Simultaneously, Israel took part in organising humanitarian assistance for the people living in territories previously seized by the Russian army and then liberated by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Israel also shipped to Ukraine medical equipment for many millions of US dollars. Speaking about this, Israeli Ambassador to Ukraine Mikhail Brodsky assured that his country “will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, as it is [its] moral duty”.³⁷ Besides, within a few months after the outbreak of the conflict, Ukraine began to receive support from the Israeli Defense Forces. Former Israeli officers started to train Ukrainians in Israeli combat units (one of the most advanced in the world) and also participated in military operations against Russian troops.³⁸ All this gave rise to harsh criticism of Israel from Russia.

Israel vs. Russia: basic reasons for enmity

Except for the war between Russia and Ukraine, there were several reasons that forced Israel to welcome Ukraine and to neglect Russia more insistently than before.

Firstly, according to the Israeli leadership, Moscow took an unfriendly step by threatening in June 2022 to close Sokhnut, the Jewish Agency being responsible for the repatriation of Jews to Israel. The Russian Ministry of Justice also firmly stated that Sokhnut “illegally collected information on

Russian citizens” from foreign websites, which violated the law on personal data.³⁹ Later, several Sohnut offices in Russia were closed. Jerusalem perceived these actions as Moscow’s revenge against Israel which was gradually becoming more pro-Ukrainian.⁴⁰

Secondly, Israel reacted extremely painfully to Russia’s increased desire to develop friendly relations with Hamas, a militarised Islamist organisation that until recently patrolled the Gaza Strip.⁴¹ Hamas has been an irreconcilable enemy for Israel for many years, involved in carrying out many terrorist acts against its population. Throughout these years, however, Russia has actively supported Hamas, repeatedly hosting its top representatives in the Kremlin. In the last few years, this support has even increased, which was due to the Moscow’s desire to drive an additional “wedge” into the confrontation with Western countries, constantly expanding the list of sanctions against Russia.⁴² After the attack by Hamas militants on Israel in October 2023, following the death of 1400 Israelis, Russia, in fact, sided with this terrorist organisation. Moreover, Khaled Mashal, the chairman of the Hamas politburo, praised Vladimir Putin for his “courage and manliness”.⁴³ All these statements and actions were extremely negatively received by Israel, and violated the “balance of interests” between Jerusalem and Moscow that existed until then, albeit conditionally.⁴⁴

Thirdly, Jerusalem became more hostile to Russia and open to Ukraine, due to the existence of the “Syrian problem”. Moscow negatively perceived the Israeli air attacks on Syria, calling them “entirely unacceptable”.⁴⁵ Yet, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from Iran, that has repeatedly made threats against Israel, continued to locate in the immediate vicinity of its border, and this made the situation even worse. As early as in 2017, the then Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman declared that the deploy-

ment of the Iranian military contingent in Syria, in close proximity to the Israeli border, looked “unacceptable”.⁴⁶ In the meantime, supervising this situation for many years Russia flatly refused to take into account the Israeli position and kept declaring that the Iranian troops in Syria reduce the tension in this region.⁴⁷ All this prompted Jerusalem to openly express a more hostile position towards Moscow refusing to understand the presence of a real danger for Israel.

Fourthly, Israel painfully took strengthening of Russian-Iranian relations, which impetuously began in 2022. Given that both countries by then were under Western economic sanctions, their mutual desire for rapprochement looked natural and simultaneously threatening. In addition, Russia received from Iran, Israel’s main enemy, a large batch of unmanned drones planned for use in combat operations in Ukraine.⁴⁸ This made the entire situation totally unfavourable to Israel and forced it to look more unapologetic to Moscow.

Fifthly, a serious reason for political differences between Russia and Israel has become the “historical topic” that is not directly related to nowadays, but has left a negative imprint on the relations between the two countries. In June 2023, the Israeli diplomatic attorney in Russia, Ronen Kraus, was invited to the Russian Foreign Ministry due to the statements of the Israeli ambassador to Kiev, Mikhail Brodsky. Moscow considered these statements as “whitewashing of former Nazi collaborators in Ukraine”. The Russian Foreign Ministry reminded that Russia and Israel worked together on repelling attempts to rewrite history. Following this, there is “the need for an unambiguous assessment of the actions of those being encouraged by Russophobe sentiments and such war criminals as Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevich”. Both two “stained their hands in the blood of hundreds of thousands of innocent victims, including Jews”.

At the same time, Israel violated its moral and ethical obligations to preserve historical memory, declared the Russian Foreign Ministry.⁴⁹

A specific reason for the disagreement between Russia and Israel was Mikhail Brodsky's interview to the ITON TV Channel, where he noted that Ukraine "is still searching its identity and its heroes". Brodsky added that although both Bandera and Shukhevich adhered to the Nazi's ideology, Israel cannot influence the political process in Ukraine, especially when Russia caused aggression against it.⁵⁰ These words were immediately criticised harshly by the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova. "If, according to Mikhail Brodsky, Kiev has the right to have these heroes and identity, then this is the problem of the Israeli Foreign Ministry," Zakharova declared on Twitter and added that "no one has the right to such heroes because these are not heroes, but fiends of hell, and not identity but the shame of the people of Ukraine. This is a glorification of Nazism."⁵¹ Zakharova's words immediately provoked an unequivocal reaction from the Israeli Foreign Ministry. A day later, its official representative, Lior Hayat, fiercely reproached Zakharova: "No one should lecture the State of Israel, the Israeli Foreign Ministry or its diplomats on the importance of preserving the memory of the Holocaust or the war against the distortion of history," Hayat wrote on Twitter.⁵²

All the mentioned difficulties between Israel and Russia have made it even more difficult to find compromises and agreements between them. Nonetheless, different stances of the two countries on many international issues did not negate relations between Moscow and Jerusalem. Benjamin Netanyahu, who again replaced Naftali Bennett as prime minister, in an interview with the French TV Channel LCI (in the elections held in February 2023) said that regarding military flights over Syria, he "found

a compromise" in relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, "which, on the one hand, satisfies the Israeli side, on the other hand, it does not violate the interests of Moscow".⁵³

"At the lowest point of development..."

The Israeli political establishment is obviously aware of the consequences regarding a violation of the long status quo with Russia. The situation has become even harder when through diplomatic channels Israel tried to obstruct agreements between Moscow and Tehran on the supply of Russian SU-35 fighter jets to Iran. These efforts have not been in vain for Israel. Representatives of the diplomatic corps and the security apparatus of the Islamic Republic of Iran began to accuse Russia of postponing these deliveries. There were statements that the fighters would not reach the Iranians until the end of 2023.⁵⁴

The current interaction between Russia and Israel is seriously complicated by the different geopolitical interests of both actors. While emphasising its independence in the international arena, Israel, nevertheless, is severely dependent on Western, and primarily U.S. interests.⁵⁵ Russia, which purposefully opposes the U.S. today, finds itself "on the other side of the barricades". As experts note, nowadays these relations seem to be at their lowest point since the mid-1980s.⁵⁶ In turn, the Russian position is perceived very critically in the U.S. and other Western countries, as it tends to undermine Ukraine's independence.⁵⁷ Russia's foreign policy and military activity are considered to be extremely wary, as they are treated by Israel itself.⁵⁸

International politics has never been one-sided, and the modern one is unlikely to be interpreted this way, too. Moreover, this politics becomes even a more complex phenomenon, due to a great number of diverse

and often contradictory interests penetrating the modern world. Therefore, despite constant disagreements, Israel and Russia seem to be aware of construing reliable partnership with each other. In an interview with the American newspaper *The USA Today* in October 2022, Benjamin Netanyahu, at that time the leader of opposition, expressed support for strengthening Russian-Israeli relations and his country's role in the process of settling relations between Russia and Ukraine.⁵⁹ In turn, congratulating Benjamin Netanyahu on his new victory in the Parliamentary elections in Israel in December 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin noted: "I hope that the new government under your leadership will continue to strengthen Russian-Israeli cooperation in all spheres for the benefit of our peoples, in the interests of guaranteeing peace and security in the Middle East."⁶⁰

Thus, the relationship between Russia and Israel, albeit problematic and unpredictable, do not seem to be looking as frozen. Simultaneously, the development of the situation depends on the political intentions of both countries. However, it is still unclear whether their leaders will be able to overcome their personal ambitions and come to an understanding of each other.

Conclusion

Russia's wish to pull Israel over to its side is defined by its ardent desire to create a reliable perspective for itself in the Middle East and thereby to overcome unfavourable conditions for advancing its geopolitical interests. This originated the presence of the Russian military contingent in Syria and

Moscow's intention to retain the power of the current Syrian President Bashar al-Asad.⁶¹ In the context of a severe conflict with the West, Russia perceives all these intentions as a guarantee of its future victories in the international arena.

In turn, it is also very important for Israel to fully cooperate with Russia, primarily to ensure a stable situation in Syria and Iran, which are unfriendly to Jerusalem.⁶² In addition, Israel is constantly striving to implement its strategy, in particular in the fields of tourism, medicine, agriculture, etc., and over the last thirty years Russia was one of the main consumers of these goods and services. Israel is also committed to interacting with Russia regarding, in particular, the implementation of the nuclear programme and the exchange of military-technical innovations.⁶³

Thus, Russia and Israel have certain common points for cooperation. Therefore, it can be assumed that both countries will be striving to neutralise the current conflict situation. This requires, first of all, the political will of both sides for the future of relations. Simultaneously, it is obvious that in the current conditions, Russia as a military aggressor in Ukraine, bears a much greater responsibility for pacifying relations with Israel. On its part a qualitatively different level of foreign policy thinking is needed than before. This is only possible with a change in the political leadership of Russia and coming to key positions in foreign affairs of new people capable of qualitatively transforming the usual foreign policy relations.

*The article is peer-reviewed.
Raksts ir recenzēts.*

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NO DRAUDZĪBAS LĪDZ NAIDAM: PAR KRIEVIJAS UN IZRAĒLAS ATTIECĪBU PAŠREIZĒJO ATTĪSTĪBU

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KOPSAVILKUMS

Atslēgvārdi: *Krievijas un Izraēlas attiecības, politiskās intereses un konfrontācija, Krievijas un Ukrainas militārais konflikts*

Valstu ārpolitika mūsdienās nereti izskatās nekonsekventa. Ilustratīvs piemērs tam ir attiecības starp Krieviju un Izraēlu, kas pēdējā laikā piedzīvojušas nopietnas un zināmā mērā pat dramatiskas pārmaiņas. No draudzīgām tās pārtapušas ļoti drūmās un pretrunīgās. Tam par iemeslu ir Krievijas veiktais karš Ukrainā, kas mainīja ierasto *status quo* Jeruzalemes un Maskavas savstarpējās attiecībās. Rakstā detalizēti apskatīts, kā šis process attīstījās, kādi bija tā posmi un kādas ir šīs neparedzamās situācijas iespējamās sekas. Līdz ar to galvenais rakstā izvirzītais jautājums ir par to, kā pašreizējais karš un citi negatīvie notikumi saistībā ar Krievijas un Izraēlas attiecībām var tās ietekmēt nākotnē.