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‘I think that might be one bridge too far for Russia’

Middle East expert Gil Murciano on Israel's relationship with the West, arms exports to Ukraine, Moscow's role in Syria and the threat from Iran

With regard to the war in Ukraine, Israel tried to walk a fine line between the West and Russia and decided not to supply Ukraine with weapon systems. Is this the right call?

Israel walked a fine line not only with regard to possible weapon supplies but also concerning their willingness to join the sanctions and to uphold them as other western countries do. The issue of weapon supplies, especially of anti-drone and air-defence systems, came about when Russia decided to use specifically Iranian drones in Ukraine. That made Israel a very relevant part of the solution. There are obviously important considerations against and for supplying these kinds of weapons. However, in the end, I believe that supplying defence systems to Ukraine under the condition that they will be deployed to protect civilian targets is a step which Israel should take despite the risks.

How do you come to this conclusion?

First of all, defending the civilian population or crucial infrastructure in Ukraine – energy and otherwise – is a cause that has a moral stake to it. It's not a debate about battlefield equipment and it's not an issue of providing Ukraine with lethal weapons. It's about being able to uphold basic values, especially the protection of the civilian population. Second, the war in Ukraine has become a global test point to countries’ belonging to the community of liberal democracies. Therefore, providing its added value in time of need is a long-term Israeli interest. It can prove instrumental in preserving Israel’s relations with its strategic allies in the western world, specifically the US.

Some dissenting voices point to the presence of Russia in Syria and

argue that Israel must be very careful because it is dependent on the cooperation with the Russians. Is this a valid point?

We cannot really challenge the fact that the Russians affect Israel's freedom to operate in Syria. But firstly, Israel already experienced times where Russia was trying to limit their actions in Syria and they still were able to continue with their operations. And secondly, I would challenge the Russian willingness to overstretch themselves while they are fighting in Ukraine and increase the friction vis-à-vis the Israelis in Syria. I think that might be one bridge too far for them. And finally, I'm not sure that in the long run, being seen as vulnerable or responsive to Russian pressure would actually benefit Israel, it might even invite more pressure in the future. So, I am not really sure that the discussion over this assumption, that we cannot add defensive military items to our support in Ukraine because the Russians are going to retaliate in Syria, is decisive.

What about Israeli technology? Couldn't the weapons end up in Russian hands and subsequently in Iranian hands? Some fear that the technology could be reverse engineered and used by Iran to develop next generations of missiles to circumvent the Israeli defence systems.

It is a valid concern that should be mitigated by limiting the exposure of these systems in areas of warfare. However, operationally it's also an opportunity. When the Iranians entered the picture by supplying the Russians with the lion's share of their drones, they also created an opportunity for Israel to learn a lot about the next possible attack of Iran. One of the most likely threat scenarios of a future Israeli-Iranian, Israeli-Hezbollah or Israeli-Hamas conflict includes these drones being used in a large magnitude against Israeli civilians, infrastructure and other strategic targets. So being able to examine the effectiveness of Israeli systems against Iranian drone attacks is pretty important. Ukraine became the beta-site for the testing of systems that are likely to appear in the next confrontation between Israel and Iran as well as its proxies.

Should Iran's support of Russia's war efforts influence the Israeli position towards the war?

When you supply defence systems against Russia, you are basically placing Israel as a leading force in trying to save civilian life and civilian infrastructure from a joint threat that basically includes Iran. In that way you're becoming part of a western coalition that is fighting not just against what we see as a gross violation of international law by the Russians, but also against the specific attempt by Iran to present new warfare systems. This is very important

because, while we have the Russian-Ukraine war, there's also a very strong effort by the Israelis to convince the international community of its strategy in regards to Iran.

There is not just the issue of the Iranian nuclear project but also a set of different conventional threats that are presented by Iran and its proxies to Israel and other countries in the region. So, using our systems, which were developed specifically to counter the Iranian threat and putting them into the service of defending civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine – against the same threat from Iran – is of distinct political value. It clarifies the message to the international community that Iran's destabilising military influence is a global concern – as it stretches from Kyiv to Beirut to the Red Sea.

When you connect the political and the operational value and if you can still mitigate somewhat the risks that are related to these systems ending in Russian hands, then I believe that there's a value here to consider of supplying Israeli defence systems to Ukraine. And I'm talking only about air defence systems deployed around civilian centres, not offensive capabilities.

Israel will have a far-right government under Benjamin Netanyahu. How do you expect this would change Israel's position on the entire conflict?

What we've seen is a clash of discourses between the right and left that is not just about foreign policy, but also domestic policy – about the values the Israeli Government projects not only to the World but also inwards. It's not a secret that Netanyahu has affiliated himself very closely with Vladimir Putin in the past. It was actually celebrated as one of his major achievements during the election campaign in 2021. This move has defined Netanyahu as 'a leader of a different league' by showing his ability to work with Putin and to harvest the fruits of the cooperation in Syria. But you also saw it after Netanyahu was gone. Politicians from the right, such as the former Minister of Internal Affairs, Ayelet Shaked, spoke specifically about the need to avoid increasing the friction with Russia.

But then you had the approach from Yair Lapid as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, which was much more decisive against the Russian invasion, including in relation to sanctions and the Russian annexation of parts of Ukraine. This represented a completely different position.

What we've seen basically reflects two approaches to foreign policy. On the one hand, the *Realpolitik* camp stating that Israel could not afford to include moral arguments in its foreign policy. And on the centre left, an opposing discussion, specifically about the importance

of morals. Many see this war not as an isolated case but the first in a chain of events that we are about to experience in the next one or two decades of growing friction between the western liberal world and nondemocratic forces.

Hence, the question of how to treat the war in Ukraine is also about Israel's identity and its role within the world of liberal democracies. It's not just about Russia, it's not just about Ukraine. When I speak about supplying defence systems to the Ukrainians, this also includes the following: how do we create a positive and active role of Israel within liberal democracies. In this case, moral is an interest, which we can judge vis-a-vis other interests.

The interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.

You can also read a different opinion on this debate in the article by Daniel Rakov

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Gil Murciano
Tel Aviv

Dr Gil Murciano is the CEO of Mitvim (Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies). He is a member of the Adjunct Faculty of the Hertie School of Governance Berlin, where he is a lecturer in International Politics of the Middle East.