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Israel's strategic balancing act

Israel's refusal to sell weapons to Ukraine disappointed Western allies — but there are strategic reasons for this stance

Since the end of September, the Ukrainian political leadership has resumed demanding that Israel should supply Kyiv with air-defence systems, alongside other military aid. Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz had clearly stated on 19 October that Israel would not change its position, which it has held since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, not to supply Kyiv with offensive weapon systems. But what drives Israeli policy on this issue and what makes it a special case among the US allies?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has posed Israel with a severe dilemma: how to balance its intricate ties with Moscow, its strategic alliance with the United States, its significant partnerships with Western countries and its long-cordial relationship with Kyiv. Israel's refusal to sell Ukraine weapons disappointed Ukrainian officials, whereas at least some of Israel's Western allies think Jerusalem should have done more to help Kyiv, as well as to question its deep ties with Moscow.

Kyiv had issued critical statements on Israel's stance in the early months of the war but seemingly reconciled with the idea that Israel might be helpful in other ways. But the surge in Russian attacks on the Ukrainian hinterland with Iranian-made missiles and drones made President Volodymyr Zelensky's government's need for air-defence systems urgent. He claimed on 23 September that only a handful of states could produce these air defence systems, Israel being one of the few. Ukrainian officials claim that Russian-Iranian convergence emphasises that Moscow will do anything to support Iranian nuclear ambitions; therefore, helping to defeat Russia in Ukraine would allow Israel to weaken Iran.

Kyiv officially asked for Iron Dome short-range anti-rocket systems. The Israelis claim they don't have spare systems and interceptor missiles and question whether that is the right system for Ukraine. Indeed, Iron Dome is used in Israel against unguided rockets, whereas in Ukraine, the main threat are precise missiles and drones, and it's not warranted that Iron Dome will have the same success rate there as with rockets from

Gaza.

The main reason behind the Israeli refusal is not functional or financial problems but political-strategic calculus.

The Israeli Iron Dome batteries are concentrated in a small territory. To cover the vast Ukrainian lands, there would be a need for a more extensive air-defence array than the Israeli one – too much for the Israeli production capabilities. Taking the systems out of the Israeli order of battle might leave the country vulnerable, as there is a constant threat of escalation with the Palestinians or Lebanese Hezbollah. The US could have funded an increase in production, although this would take time. There is also an apprehension that Russians will study the Iron Dome to find weaknesses and retaliate against Israel by helping Hamas and Hezbollah challenge it more effectively.

Ukraine could benefit even from a few systems to defend critical objects or have other Israeli air-defence systems. Still, the main reason behind the Israeli refusal is not functional or financial problems but political-strategic calculus.

Pressure to be 'on the right side of history'

Many compare Israel to the Baltic states which, despite having a direct border with Russia, had contributed a lot of military and financial help to Ukraine. They also allude to Jewish history and claim that, given the Holocaust, Israel should have adopted a high moral stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, as the closest ally of the USA in the Middle East and part of the Western camp, Israel is expected to support the anti-Russian coalition actively.

However, this comparison is not fair. For the Baltic states, who fear of becoming the next target of a potential future Russian invasion, the war in Ukraine was a 'wake-up call', amplifying the direct military existential threat to their national security. Unlike the Baltics, which enjoy the protection of Article 5, Israel is defended only by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). Hence, the supply of Israeli weapons to Ukraine might bring immediate retaliation from Russia in Syria or put barriers before the repatriation of the Russian Jews to Israel, which increased significantly during the war.

Since the 2015 intervention in Syria, Russia agreed to turn a blind eye to Israeli attacks against Iran as long as its strategic dominance in the country was accepted. It continues to do so, throughout the Russian-Ukrainian war, despite moving closer toward Iran. Moscow threatens that the Israeli weapons supply to Ukraine will change its passive position considering the Israeli attacks. Despite the weakness of the Russian military in Ukraine, the country could make it harder for the Israeli Air Force to act in Syria, and no Israeli commander or politician is willing to sacrifice their soldiers to help Ukraine.

Recent polls suggest that the majority of Israelis are against supplying lethal weapons to Ukraine.

Last summer, Russia initiated a process of 'liquidation' of the 'Jewish Agency' activity in its territory, which was viewed in Israel as a signal that the Kremlin can put pressure on the country by endangering its capability to help Russian Jews find a safe haven in Israel.

There is an intensive public debate inside Israel between those calling for Israel to be 'on the right side of history' and those demanding to refrain from adding another severe strategic challenge to its overloaded agenda. The Israeli public and the government are quite sympathetic to Ukraine and are not interested in Russia defeating the Western camp. Nevertheless, its security is under constant threat of sudden escalation with the Hamas in Gaza or the Lebanese Hizballah, as well as an increasing probability of a nuclear Iran scenario and internal political instability.

Most Israelis view the comparison to the Holocaust as totally unacceptable. Recent polls suggest that the majority of Israelis are against supplying lethal weapons to Ukraine. Not many in Israel support opening a new confrontation front with Moscow, if not necessary.

The issue was also politicised in front of the recent elections to the Knesset. The right camp accused Yair Lapid's government of not being sensitive enough in manoeuvring between Moscow and Washington. The Israeli right claimed that former – and probably future – Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could reduce tensions with Moscow. Thus, the government tried to avoid a new crisis with Russia, playing into the hands of its political opponents shortly before the elections.

Russia is not interested in alienating Israel.

Although Washington or most of the European capitals are quite understanding of the Israeli concerns, many people in the West are not satisfied with Israel's policy. But, even though Israel felt pressured to alter its policy at the

beginning of the war, it now seems to be at an equilibrium point regarding accommodation of the Western concerns. The Western military help to Ukraine, especially from the European countries, is also limited and not unconstrained.

Russia is not interested in alienating Israel. Putin understands the need for Israel to distance itself from the Kremlin following the war. Still, he pressures Jerusalem on issues of importance for Russia while making sure that Israel will not drift too far away.

The war had brought Russia and Iran closer together as a clear opposition towards the West. There is no clarity over whether Israel is helping Ukraine with intelligence to counter newly employed Iranian-made weapons. Some Ukrainians claim Israel is helpful, while others disagree. Israel doesn't believe it is in Moscow's interest to help Iran go nuclear. However, nobody in Jerusalem is hopeful that Russia will actively act to prevent that scenario.



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