

Ukraine, Russia, and Israel: Mission Improbable but Important

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Criticisms and limitations aside, Bennett has kept open a trusted high-level channel to Putin for any party that may need it as the crisis continues.

Last Saturday the world witnessed the extraordinary spectacle of Israel's prime minister, [Naftali Bennett \(https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-iran-israel-syria-f9344bcaffbf69446c671400536a166d\)](https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-iran-israel-syria-f9344bcaffbf69446c671400536a166d), flying unexpectedly to Moscow—to become the first and only Western leader to meet personally with Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, since he invaded Ukraine in earnest two weeks ago. Bennett says that he is simply trying to help end the war. To do so, his entourage added, justified this travel on the Sabbath by Israel's very first Orthodox Jewish head of government, in line with the classic rabbinic precept of “pikuakh nefesh dokheh shabat” (saving souls supersedes the Sabbath).

Bennett's highly unusual mission immediately evoked very mixed public reactions, both in Israel and abroad. Commentary ranged from delighted to derisive, depending largely upon the political leanings of the commentator. Some pundits pointed out that Bennett has other strategic and domestic political motives for taking on this seemingly quixotic quest: preserving Israel's tactical military deconfliction with Russia in Syria; deflecting calls to adopt a tougher anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian posture; striving to protect the still very substantial Jewish communities (and potential immigrants to Israel) in both Russia and Ukraine; and, of course, burnishing his own credentials as an international statesman. Other commentators focused more on wondering whether Bennett actually could help broker some kind of negotiated solution to the increasingly dire war raging between Russia and Ukraine.

But both these opposing views miss the main point. What Bennett has accomplished is keeping open a trusted high-level channel for all interested parties, in case they opt for a diplomatic solution. That explains why his efforts have

garnered public praise from the key relevant parties: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, and senior diplomats and officials from the major European powers (the UK, Germany, and France). Ironically, in contrast, others who lament Putin’s “dangerous isolation” have nevertheless restrained their enthusiasm for Israel’s unique messenger role.

It is still too soon to say too much about the content, let alone the consequences, of Bennett’s ongoing efforts. In the end, judgments about that will largely depend on how, and how soon, this war eventually ends. Yet a few salient points are already worth noting here, precisely because they have escaped wide notice elsewhere.

First, Bennett’s trip to Moscow last week was not a one-shot attempt. Ever since, he has kept in direct telephone contact with Putin, Zelensky. (<https://www.newslooks.com/live-updates-ukraines-zelenskyy-says-invasion-will-backfire/>) and American and European leaders. His role in this regard is probably secondary at this point, but it remains significant.

Second, this Israeli initiative has been coordinated with allies right from the start: first with the new German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, during his timely visit to Israel just after the Russian invasion; and then immediately thereafter with Israel’s other Western partners. Moreover, the ongoing contacts appear to be unusually well coordinated inside Israel’s own diverse governing coalition, including Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, Defense Minister Benny Gantz, and probably also Finance Minister Avigdor Liberman.

Third, for all this coordination, some significant differences of emphasis have emerged. A prime case in point came to light during the meeting in Latvia last week between Blinken and Lapid. The former publicly noted his support for these Israeli and other diplomatic efforts—but only so long as the starting principles are upheld. His Israeli counterpart sounded a bit more emphatic about the need to end the war in Ukraine as soon as possible.

Fourth, in this connection, the attempt to find an acceptable diplomatic compromise is not a lost cause, even though the parties are still far apart. In the past few days, for example, Zelensky has openly spoken of a Ukrainian “alternative” to NATO, and of some kind of special regime for the breakaway provinces at the eastern edge of his country. Putin spokesman Dimitri Peskov outlined conditions falling far short of the earlier, absurd Russian demands for the complete demilitarization and “denazification” of Ukraine. Tragically, it may well take a few more weeks of war before military losses and sanctions persuade Putin to negotiate seriously. All the more reason why keeping open the option of a diplomatic off-ramp remains essential.

Fifth, and finally, as this crisis continues, Israel’s supporting role may well be eclipsed by other, larger powers. Perhaps China or India will step up as active peace brokers or intermediaries, although they have shown little interest in assuming that position so far. Yet history will record that, improbable as it may seem, it was Israel and Naftali Bennett who first took on that imposing if not insurmountable challenge.

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Project Fikra. This article was originally published on the Newslooks website (<https://www.newslooks.com/ukraine-russia-and-israel-mission-improbable-but-important/>) and is republished here under the auspices of the Institute’s Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East. ❖

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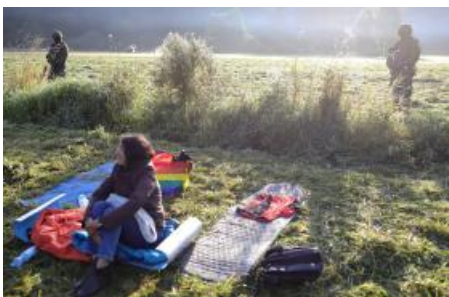


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