

# With ties to Russia and Ukraine, Israeli leader seeks to turn awkward position into diplomatic opportunity

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett is trying to mediate between the warring countries, but critics say now is no time for neutrality

 **Listen to article** 5 min

By [Shira Rubin](#)

Today at 3:00 a.m. EDT



TEL AVIV — When Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett jetted to Moscow this month, offering himself as a broker between Russia and Ukraine, it marked an unlikely initiative for Israel.

While its Western allies have closed ranks in support of Ukraine, Israel has been reluctant to antagonize Russia, an important military force in the Middle East, and Bennett has sought to convert his country's perhaps awkward position into a diplomatic opportunity.

After meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 5, Bennett jumped on the phone twice with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and he finished the day with a dinner meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin.

The urgency of his shuttle diplomacy — not just for Ukraine, but also for Israel and Bennett himself — was underscored by the fact that his efforts came on the Jewish Sabbath. It's a day when Bennett, Israel's first Orthodox Jewish leader, and at least one other religiously observant minister who accompanied him abstain from work or travel unless, as dictated by Jewish tradition, it is needed to save a life.

On Monday, Bennett stepped out of a Cabinet meeting to take a 90-minute call with Putin about cease-fire efforts and humanitarian matters, according to a senior Israeli official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject. Bennett then spoke with Zelensky, who tweeted that the call included an exchange of "information on our joint steps and steps of our partners against the background of Russian aggression" and agreements regarding "further actions."

Describing Israel's policy as "measured and responsible," Bennett has pledged support for Ukraine while avoiding harsh criticism of Russia. This approach has played well domestically for Bennett, but it has also drawn ire from Ukrainian officials and Israeli supporters of the Ukrainian cause who have watched in horror as Russia's bombardment of Ukrainian cities escalates.

Bennett himself has sought to temper expectations regarding Israel's peacemaking capabilities, saying that while Israel maintains unique strategic and cultural ties to Russia and Ukraine, the crisis is severe. "Even if the chance is not great — as soon as there is even a small opening, and we have access to all sides and the capability — I see this as our moral obligation to make every effort," Bennett said after returning from his European trip.

He has also stressed that he will continue to put a priority on Israel's strategic interests in neighboring Syria, where Russia maintains a large military presence. Israeli forces unofficially coordinate with Russia while carrying out airstrikes on targets that Israel says are involved in transferring weapons to Hezbollah, its foe in Lebanon.

Yevgen Korniychuk, the Ukrainian ambassador to Israel, said at a news conference Friday that Israel was "afraid" of Russia. Korniychuk has repeatedly called on Israel to send Ukraine defensive gear such as helmets and flak jackets instead of the blankets, drugs, and other medical and humanitarian equipment included in the 100-ton aid package that Israel airlifted into Ukraine this month. He said Israel's offers to mediate do not require it to maintain neutrality.

"That's not the name of the game," he said, speaking at the Ukrainian Embassy's Cultural Center in Tel Aviv.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba has not spoken with Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid for three months, though Lapid has been in contact with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, according to Israeli media. Lapid and Kuleba were scheduled to speak early this week, Israeli media have reported.

Emmanuel Navon, an international relations lecturer at Tel Aviv University, said Israel's position — which he said includes offering insufficient support to Ukraine while conducting face-to-face contact with Putin — risks placing Israel "in the club of Putin's useful idiots." As the conflict continues, he said, Israel will need to publicly join its European and American allies and more assertively condemn Russia.

"There's a limit to how long you can sit on the fence," Navon said.

He said Israel may also be able to play a small part in helping European countries to diversify their energy supplies, as they try to wean themselves off Russian imports, by exporting Israeli-produced natural gas. The European energy commissioner has requested that Israel supply liquefied natural gas to the continent, according to Israeli media.

In February, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told reporters on a flight home from Ukraine that Turkey could buy Israel's natural gas "and also engage in a joint effort on its passage to Europe." Last week, Erdogan met with Israeli President Isaac Herzog during the first visit to Turkey by an Israeli leader since 2008, following more than a decade of tensions between the two countries.

This month, Zelensky said relations with Bennett were "not bad at all" but that he did not think Bennett was "wrapped in our flag," referring to a picture of Jews draped in the Ukrainian banner at the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem. Since the start of the war, Zelensky has asked Bennett to host negotiations in Jerusalem but has not received an official answer.

"We talked to Mr. Bennett. I told him it was neither right nor constructive to meet in Russia, Ukraine or Belarus. These are not points where understandings can be found to stop the war," Zelensky said at a news conference Saturday. "Do I think Jerusalem can be such a point? I think so."

On Sunday, Jerusalem's municipal government illuminated the Old City's walls with images of Ukrainian and Russian flags, white doves, and a biblical prayer for peace. But after protesters objected that the projection minimized Russia's role as an aggressor, the government took down the light show.

The municipal government later said in a statement that it would be "happy to answer the request of the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, and host the diplomatic dialogue between the two countries here in Jerusalem."

Bennett's government has also been criticized for its refugee policy. Israel has said it is prepared to absorb 100,000 Jewish Ukrainian refugees who are eligible for Israeli citizenship, but in recent weeks, it has detained, deported and required financial bonds from non-Jewish refugees, mostly women and children who have come to Israel to stay with friends and family.

On Sunday, Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked announced a policy under which Ukrainians with Israeli relatives will be allowed to stay "for a month or two to rest" and will be required to sign a statement saying that they don't intend to remain.

## **War in Ukraine: What you need to know**