

Why Zelensky's Dream of Ukraine Becoming 'Big Israel' Makes Moscow Nervous

The Ukrainian president's comparison bolsters Moscow's claim that Kyiv is intent on a programme of violent 'de-Russification'

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The [Israeli](#) government has been trying to keep as low a profile as possible over the [war in Ukraine](#), but Volodymyr Zelensky, the Ukrainian president, seems determined to drag Israel on to centre stage.

Zelensky made a direct appeal to the Israeli parliament last month, ostensibly asking for weapons, especially the [Iron Dome interception system](#) Israel uses to stop short-range rockets fired out of Gaza by [Palestinians](#) trying to draw attention to Israel's 15-year siege of the enclave.

But rather than being flattered by the attention, many Israeli politicians objected to Zelensky's speech. In it, he compared Russia's treatment of Ukraine to the [Nazis' "Final Solution"](#) for European Jews.

Zelensky, who is Jewish, hoped the parallel would strike home. To most Israeli ears, it sounded offensive. So far [Israel has refused](#) to supply Ukraine with weapons or join the West in waging economic warfare on Russia.

It does not help that major Israeli political parties and religious communities have strong geographical and emotional ties to Russia. Or that Moscow is a major actor in the Middle East, not least in neighbouring [Syria](#). Israel coordinates closely with Russia over regular air strikes in Syria – themselves in [violation of international law](#).

Israel has been trying its best to tread a difficult diplomatic path over Ukraine. On the one hand, Israel is a regional client state of the [United States](#), under Washington's protection, and wishes to keep its patron happy. And on the other, Israel's military interests are to maintain good relations with Moscow.

Furthermore, Israeli leaders are worried about reinforcing the consensus that what the Russian army is doing in Ukraine amounts to war crimes, thereby creating a very public precedent that could be [turned against Israel](#) over its own abuses in the occupied territories.

Adopting an early role as mediator, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett even urged Zelensky to accept a [Russian ceasefire proposal](#).

Mass corpses

Nonetheless, Zelensky is intent on tipping the scales in Ukraine's favour with Israel. He understands that his country's plight has captured the western media and western public sympathy. He has every incentive to weaponise that sentiment to press-gang Israel into more openly supporting Ukraine.

In his speech to the parliament, he appropriated a quote from a former Israeli prime minister, Golda Meir, who claimed that "our enemies want us to cease to exist". Russia planned to do the [same to Ukraine](#), Zelensky warned.

Last week, after the first images emerged of mass corpses in Bucha, near Kyiv, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid changed tune. He commented on Twitter: "Intentionally harming a civilian population is a war crime and I strongly condemn it."

It is impossible to remain indifferent in the face of the horrific images from the city of Bucha near Kiev, from after the Russian army left.

Intentionally harming a civilian population is a war crime and I strongly condemn it.

— יאיר לפיד - Yair Lapid (@yairlapid) [April 3, 2022](#)

Presumably, Israel hopes it can evade such criticism itself by claiming it has no "intention" to harm Palestinian civilians, despite so often harming civilians.

And then, last Thursday, Israel conceded further ground by joining the US and Europe in voting to suspend Russia from the United Nations human rights council. Moscow had warned countries that it would treat the move as an "unfriendly gesture", [with repercussions for diplomatic relations](#).

A 'big Israel'

The Israeli vote at the UN followed hot on the heels of Zelensky making a statement promoting Israel as a model for post-war Ukraine. He said his country would [become a "big Israel"](#), with the armed forces having a strong presence in every aspect of Ukrainian society.

He observed that in "all institutions, supermarkets, cinemas, there will be people with weapons". For the foreseeable future, Ukraine would develop as a highly militarised society like Israel rather than being "absolutely liberal, European". Almost as an afterthought, he added that Ukraine would [avoid becoming "authoritarian"](#).

The cosyng up to Israel began some time ago under Zelensky. In 2020, he delighted Israel by [pulling Ukraine out of a UN committee](#) established in 1975 "to enable Palestinian people

to exercise ... the right to self-determination ... the right to national independence and sovereignty, and the right to return to their homes and property from which they have been displaced”.

But the significance of modelling a future Ukraine on Israel is being largely ignored.

Israel is highly militarised because, as a settler-colonial state trying to dispossess and replace the native population, it must treat the Palestinians as an enemy that needs either to be beaten into submission or expelled.

For decades, the Israeli army and settler militias have worked hand in hand to drive Palestinians off their land (ethnic cleansing) and keep them ghettoised and away from the exclusively Jewish communities built in their place (apartheid). Is this what Zelensky intends for Ukraine: a deeply segregated society where the Ukrainian army and militias drive out those seen as not truly Ukrainian?

Donbas region

Paradoxically, that approximates the accusation Vladimir Putin levelled against the Ukrainian government as he justified Russia’s invasion in late February. He claimed Ukraine [needed to be “denazified”](#) – an allegation met with revulsion in western capitals.

But Zelensky’s vow to create a Ukraine modelled on Israel, it could be argued, validates the Russian leader’s argument.

Kyiv will have no need to station soldiers and militias in every cinema and supermarket if Zelensky makes good on his vow to drive the Russian army out of Ukraine. It will need a large, well-equipped military to defend its northern and eastern borders. But the Ukrainian president, it seems, does not see Russia as Ukraine’s only enemy.

So who else is he worried about? To understand that, we need to parse Putin’s hyperbolic speeches.

The Russian president’s “denazification” allegation, justifying the invasion of Ukraine, was premised on the idea that fascist elements in the Ukrainian army have been carrying out pogroms and ethnic cleansing against a large population of ethnic Russians inside Ukraine, in the Donbas region bordering Russia.

Russia has claimed that, in part, troops are there to prevent Ukraine from carrying out such pogroms – often described as “de-Russification”- in the country’s east. Putin has even [used the term “genocide”](#).

Parties banned

One can dispute Putin’s claim, while also recognising it has not been invented out of thin air – though you might imagine that by [listening to the western media](#). Ukraine has been plunged into what amounts to a civil war in its east since large-scale protests in Kyiv in 2014 removed a government sympathetic to Russia and replaced it with one keen to integrate into Nato.

To some observers, what happened eight years ago looked suspiciously like a [US-backed “soft coup”](#), with one senior White House official who had been dispatched to Kyiv at the

time, Victoria Nuland, [caught on tape discussing](#) who should be installed as the new president.

Subsequent moves by the new nationalist government included not just antagonising Russia by lobbying for greater integration into Nato and the European Union. Kyiv also passed legislation severely downgrading the [status of the Russian language](#), spoken by large swaths of the population, and merging neo-Nazi, openly anti-Russia militias like the [Azov Battalion](#) into the Ukrainian military.

Since the invasion, Zelensky has also [banned 11 opposition parties](#) because they are considered supportive of Russia or Ukraine's Russian communities.

Putin's "denazification" claim has been exploited by the western media to characterise as "Russian disinformation" any mention of a long-standing neo-Nazi problem in Ukraine – even though all of these outlets [reported extensively](#) on that very problem a few years ago.

But the point – at least from Moscow's perspective – about the Azov Battalion and groups like it is that they represent a powerful strain of Ukrainian ultra-nationalism that not only celebrates historic [Ukrainian collaboration with Nazi Germany](#) but sees ethnic Russians in Ukraine as a threat.

In a rare example of Zelensky being challenged about this recently by the western media, he admitted that there were neo-Nazi militias that were ["defending our country"](#). He seemed to imagine that western audiences would be reassured by the fact that these far-right groups had been integrated into the Ukrainian military and operated under the national flag.

Fifth column

Since the change of government in 2014, groups like Azov have been at the forefront of a [civil war in the Donbas region](#), where ethnic Russians are concentrated. Fighting has claimed at least 14,000 lives and driven many hundreds of thousands more Ukrainians from their homes.

That may explain why on a visit to one of those eastern towns, even the BBC's defence correspondent had to concede – however reluctantly – that some Ukrainians he interviewed appeared to view their own government, under Zelensky, as more of a problem than Putin or the Kremlin.

This returns us to the question of why Zelensky might be so keen to model Ukraine on Israel – and why such a development would make Moscow nervous.

Israel regards all Palestinians under its rule – whether citizens inside Israel or subjects under military occupation – [as a potential fifth column](#), working to destroy Greater Israel from within on behalf of millions more Palestinians in the diaspora and the wider Arab world.

This ultra-nationalist narrative has underpinned Israel's development as a highly militarised ethnic fortress committed to oppressing any Palestinians left within its walls, with the ultimate aim of driving them out.

For anyone not in thrall to Zionism's clash of civilisations, war-without-end narrative, what Israel has done to the Palestinians [looks a lot like apartheid](#) – the reason why so many

human rights and legal groups have recently started [saying this out loud](#).

But while much of the world increasingly deplores Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, the Ukrainian leadership gives every impression of believing this extreme, ethno-nationalist, apartheid model is an ideal one for Ukraine.

Which, if right, would breathe credibility into – though not justify – some of Putin's reasoning for launching an invasion: to pre-empt the expulsion of Ukraine's historic ethnic Russian communities and their replacement on Russia's doorstep of those sympathetic to the neo-Nazi ideology of the Azov Battalion.

Rising tide of blood

Western pundits have made much of Zelensky being Jewish to swipe away claims of a [neo-Nazi problem in Ukraine](#). But it is not clear how much control the Ukrainian president exercises over these militias, or the degree to which an ultra-nationalism expressed chiefly in terms of vehement hatred of all things Russian is spreading among Ukrainians as the war takes a heavier toll.

The corpses littering streets in places like Bucha, and the [videos apparently](#) showing Ukrainians [executing Russian prisoners of war](#), are signs of how rapidly these divisions are becoming even more poisonous, deepening the existing trauma of eight years of civil war.

In such circumstances, the West ought to be doing its level best to impose a ceasefire on both sides as quickly as possible. Instead western states are fanning the flames by flooding Ukraine with weapons to intensify the fighting and raise the death toll.

Even if Ukraine eventually manages to drive out the Russian army, western weapons will remain in the hands of Ukrainians, including militias like the Azov Battalion.

If Zelensky's dream of Ukraine becoming a "big Israel" is realised with the exit of Russian soldiers, that most likely will mark not an end to the blood-spilling but simply a new chapter in Ukraine's trauma.

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