

Blinken moves to bring Middle East allies behind US/NATO war on Russia

Jean Shaoul

30 March 2022

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken flew to the Middle East at the weekend to hold an extraordinary meeting with Middle East leaders.

His ostensible purpose was to discuss the region's relations with Iran, but his overarching mission was to secure full backing for the US/NATO war drive against Russia.

The hastily arranged meeting, attended by leaders from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, all of whom signed the Abraham Accords with Israel in 2020, and Egypt, was hosted by Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. It was held in Sde Boker, a town in Israel's Negev desert. Jerusalem would have been too contentious a location for Israel's newfound allies, still supposedly committed to a "two-state solution" to the decades-long Israel/Palestine conflict.

The Negev summit comes amid US concern that its longstanding Middle East allies are not firmly on board the Biden administration's war drive against Russia in a bid to assert US hegemony.

On Tuesday, Blinken met Morocco's King Mohammed VI and the UAE's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed in Rabat. The UAE hosts numerous Russian oligarchs, has bought weapons from Russia, initially refused to denounce Russia's invasion of Ukraine, abstaining from a resolution at the United Nations Security Council, and declined calls from US President Joe Biden. Its welcoming of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, who survived US imperialism's covert war for regime change with Russian help, for a state visit to Abu Dhabi has infuriated Washington.

Tel Aviv has desperately sought to balance between the US and Russia, despite having acted for years as the custodian of US imperialism's interests.

Israel is home to many immigrants from both Russia and Ukraine on whom it is reliant as a source of cheap labour for its high-tech industries. It has formally supported the US/NATO war drive in Ukraine, but has been very reticent in public, with Bennett ordering his cabinet to remain silent on the issue and refusing to publicly mention "Russia" or

"Putin" or criticize Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Senior US politicians and officials have criticised Israel for "sitting on the fence."

Victoria Nuland, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, called on Bennett to come out of his "comfort zone" and provide Ukraine with military aid while joining the sanctions against Putin, adding that the US did not want Israel "to become the last haven for dirty money that's fuelling Putin's wars."

While Israel has sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine, it has refused Kiev's requests to send arms, including US-made anti-aircraft Stinger missiles or drones, or supply it with Israeli arms company NSO's Pegasus spyware. Bennett has sought to avoid antagonising Russia, even paying a flying visit to Moscow as the first Western leader to meet Putin after the invasion of Ukraine. He has refused to impose sanctions on Russia or Russian oligarchs, despite Nuland's insistence that joining the financial sanctions was more important than Israel providing military aid to Ukraine.

A Ukrainian official accused Bennett of using his role as mediator "to justify the fact that Israel is avoiding transferring military aid to Ukraine or joining the sanction slapped on Russia," while also pressuring Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to accept Russian President Vladimir Putin's conditions for ending the war—a claim Bennett denied.

Some 30 to 40 Russian oligarchs reside in Israel, where many hold Israeli citizenship. As new immigrants, they do not have to report on their source of income for a 10-year period, while charitable donations to academic, cultural, and other public institutions serve to protect their interests in the public arena. Indeed, Yad VaShem, Israel's Holocaust Museum, was forced to turn down tens of millions of dollars from the Israeli-Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich, after its appeal to the US not to include him in sanctions failed.

At least five cabinet ministers in the present coalition government, including Minister of Defence Benny Gantz, the Speaker of Israel's parliament and a former political

prisoner in the Soviet Union Yuli Edelstein, Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman, Housing Minister Ze'ev Elkin and Justice Minister Gideon Sa'ar, have links to Israel's Russian oligarchs.

Israel relies heavily on its trade and investment links with Russia, importing about \$1 billion of Russian coal, wheat, diamonds and other goods annually, and exporting about \$718 million in agricultural products to Russia in 2020.

Crucially, Israel coordinates its hundreds of airstrikes on Syria with Russia, attacking government positions and fighters and facilities belonging to Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iranian forces, which have played a key role in defending the Assad regime against the oppositionists armed and trained by the Sunni Gulf states, Turkey and the CIA.

Tel Aviv's too open public opposition to Russia's invasion and occupation of Ukraine would contradict its own diplomatic campaigns against the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement that opposes Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories and the International Criminal Court that is investigating suspected crimes committed during Israel's brutal assault on Gaza in 2014, its 15-year blockade of the enclave and military occupation of the West Bank. It was for this very reason that former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu turned for support and trade with far right and authoritarian governments including Brazil, Hungary, Ukraine, India, China, the Philippines and Russia.

The petro-monarchs in the Gulf have also been less than enthusiastic about the Biden administration's war drive. They have been angered by:

- Washington's lack of support for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the Egyptian revolution in 2011.
- Its failure to openly prosecute the proxy war for regime change in Syria.
- Its lack of overt support for the Saudi-led war against the Houthis who toppled Riyadh's hated puppet in Yemen, President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, that has turned the country into the world's greatest humanitarian disaster.
- Its distancing from the Gulf nations' public split in 2017 with Qatar, which they accused of supporting Iran and extremism.
- Its treatment of Saudi de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as a pariah for ordering the murder of insider turned dissident Jamal Khashoggi in its Istanbul consulate in 2018.

And above all:

- President Joe Biden's apparent political withdrawal from the Middle East, where Saudi Arabia and Iran have backed opposing sides in regional wars and political conflicts in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria for years, in favour of its "great power rivalry" policy with China and Russia; and

- His efforts to revive the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, which is accused of supporting their own restive Shia populations.

The Gulf rulers have sought to end their overwhelming reliance on the US and turned to Russia and China for trade and investment. They have refused US demands to increase oil production to lower prices on the world market.

The US has sought to reassure them that Washington will not agree to Iran's demand for the US to lift its designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organisation. Neither would the US allow Tehran to acquire nuclear weapons.

The growing distance between the US and its allies takes place amid the disastrous economic impact of the war in Ukraine, threatening shortages of wheat and other products from Ukraine and Russia in a region already seething with discontent, poverty and inequality.

Blinken, who also met Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank, later flew on to Rabat where he discussed the contentious issue of the Western Sahara. There, in his meeting on Tuesday with the UAE's de facto ruler, he sought to reassure the Gulf monarchs of Washington's determination to help them fend off attacks from the Iran-aligned Houthi group in Yemen.

Speaking in advance of his trip to neighbouring Algiers, the Algerian capital, the following day, he said he would discuss how "to alleviate some of the burden that this [the war] is placing on people, including throughout the Middle East." This was code for trying to persuade Algeria to become an alternative gas supplier to Russia, thereby reducing his allies' dependency on Moscow for its energy needs and reducing gas prices.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact