



**The Jewish Federations®**  
OF NORTH AMERICA  
Israel Office

## **JEWISH FEDERATIONS AND THE CRISIS IN UKRAINE**

*March 6, 2022*

**As the Russian sieges on Ukrainian cities become more intense, the humanitarian crisis on the ground has intensified. At the same time, Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett is attempting to help mediate between the sides.**

(For background on the crisis, as well as information on the Jewish community in Ukraine, see [here](#)).

### **FIGHTING**

The latest on the conflict:

- Fighting has continued in many parts of Ukraine, but Russian forces have only captured one major Ukrainian city, Kherson - though it has made other key advances, such as seizing the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant on Friday.
- Thousands of people are reported wounded and dead in the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol (population 450,000), which has been without power for five days, and is now without fresh water. Cell phone and Internet networks are also down. According to the city's mayor, Russian bombing is preventing authorities from collecting dead bodies from the street. On Saturday, the planned evacuation of civilians from the city was aborted due to renewed Russian attacks, despite an agreed upon temporary cease-fire to allow humanitarian relief.
- Outside the capital of Kyiv, a massive Russian military convoy still stretches over 40 miles, but remains stalled. Ukrainian defense officials say they have been hitting selected targets within the convoy where they can. At the head of the convoy, to the north-west of Kyiv in a town called Irpin, there has been intense fighting near the strategic Hostomel Airfield.
- Citizens of the major Ukrainian port city of Odessa fear a probable Russian assault from the sea. Moscow sees the city as a crucial linchpin in its capture of the country's south.
- In Kherson, now under Russian control, there are reports of occupation troops firing on protesters to break up anti-Russian demonstrations.
- According to the United Nations, at least [1.2 million refugees](#) have fled Ukraine since the beginning of the invasion.

### **ISRAELI RESPONSE**

Following multiple requests by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky for the Jewish state to potentially serve as a mediator with Russia, Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett surprised many by travelling to Moscow to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin for three hours yesterday (Saturday). The meeting surprised many since Putin has not met with any other world leader since the invasion of Ukraine began. In addition, Bennett, an Orthodox Jew, does not travel or conduct matters of state on Shabbat except in extraordinary and life-threatening circumstances.

Prime Minister Bennett was accompanied on his trip to Moscow by Housing Minister Ze'ev Elkin, also an Orthodox Jew, who acted as a translator and advisor. Elkin is a Russian speaker and a native of Ukraine. Commenting on his meetings, Bennett said that "I returned from Moscow and Berlin a few hours ago. I went there to assist the dialogue between all of the sides, of course with the blessing and encouragement of all players. As you all know, the situation on the ground is not good. The human suffering is great and is liable to be much greater. There are also Israelis who need to return home and Jewish communities in distress that need help... 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."

Hebrew-language media reports said that Bennett also spoke with Putin about the safety of Ukraine's Jewish communities, and that the meeting also dealt with nuclear talks with Iran as well.

Following their meeting, Bennett then headed to Germany, where he met with Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who had been in Israel earlier in the week. According to reports, the two "discussed several issues, including the situation between Ukraine and Russia." Bennett has also spoken with President Zelensky three times following his meeting with Putin yesterday, as well as with French President Emmanuel Macron. Zelensky tweeted that Bennett had called him and "we continue dialogue."

Washington-based Axios reported that while President Biden had not objected to the meeting, he also "doubted Bennett's chances to influence Putin's position." Conversely, Israel's Channel 12 news claimed the White House had actively supported and encouraged the effort.

See [here](#) for an article on Israel's dilemmas and balancing act in its relations with Ukraine and Moscow since fighting began.

Meanwhile Israel's Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked suggested that Israel may move to limit the number of Ukrainian refugees allowed into the country. Over the weekend, Shaked said that of the 2,034 Ukrainians who have arrived in Israel since the start of the war, only around 10 percent are eligible for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return. "It's impossible to continue with a rate of entry like this. We need to delineate a policy. Relative to its size, Israel has brought in more [Ukrainians] than any state in Europe besides those bordering Ukraine."

Many commentators discuss the sometimes unintended consequences of conflict. See [here](#) for an article on how the war in Ukraine could spill over to the Middle East.

## INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS

- The White House has said that the United States is working on the possibility of Poland providing fighter jets to Ukraine. In response, Putin has said that he would consider any nations imposing a no-fly zone over Ukraine as participating in the conflict.
- Western sanctions continue to hit Russia very hard. Speaking by phone to President Zelensky on Saturday, US President Joe Biden "highlighted the ongoing actions undertaken by the United States, its allies and partners, and private industry to raise the costs on Russia for its aggression in Ukraine." In a significant blow to Russian consumers and businesses over the weekend, both Visa and Mastercard suspended their operations in the country, citing the invasion.
- In response to economic sanctions, and in a threat to the West, Putin said that sanctions against Russia are the "equivalent of a declaration of war."
- In an attempt to help Ukrainian citizens, people across the world who have no plans to visit the country are [booking up rooms on Airbnb](#) in Ukraine, as part of a creative social media campaign to funnel money to those under siege.
- Russia and Ukraine are expected to hold a third round of talks to end hostilities tomorrow (Monday). The first two rounds of talks on resolving the Russia-Ukraine war produced no breakthrough, though the two sides agreed to meet again.

## FLEEING UKRAINE AND FEDERATIONS AND PARTNERS ON THE GROUND

In just one week, **Jewish Federations** have raised \$16.4 million towards Ukrainian relief efforts. A total of \$7.95 million has already been allocated to The Jewish Agency for Israel, The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), World ORT, United Hatzalah, and Hillel International; and JFNA's Allocations Committee is meeting again on Thursday to make another significant round of allocations.

Jewish Federations' consultant Zvika Klein, currently on the ground at the Polish – Ukrainian border, has written an [article](#) about relief efforts. A different article on Jewish relief efforts can be read [here](#). And see also [here](#) for a piece on the rescue of Jewish orphans from Ukraine. Also see an [article](#) from CNN about how a Ukrainian synagogue in Uman is being used as a bomb shelter by people of all faiths.

With the first two flights of olim scheduled to arrive in Israel later today (Sunday), Prime Minister Bennett commented, "We are prepared for a significant wave of immigration as a result of the situation. The system is currently working on scenarios to absorb varying numbers of immigrants, which will be presented to the Security Cabinet this week. This is a challenge for the State of Israel but it is a challenge we have met in the past, time and again. At such moments, when the world is facing turmoil and Jews are no longer safe where they are, everyone is reminded how important it is that there is a home for Jews wherever they are; how important it is that we have the State of Israel."

The Jewish Agency and JDC have established [emergency hotlines](#) to assist the Jewish community in Ukraine.

JFNA will hold a briefing on March 9th at 12pm ET that will deliver an update on the latest developments in the war in Ukraine and the Ukrainian Jewish community. Click [here](#) to register.

**The Jewish Agency for Israel** has received some 5,000 requests to immigrate to Israel in recent days, and believes that up to 10,000 Ukrainian immigrants could arrive in Israel in the near future, in what would only be the first wave of refugees headed to the Jewish state.

The Agency's emergency hotline for Jews has so far received over 10,000 calls. Of those, almost 5,000 are interested in making Aliyah. This number has already surpassed the number of olim from Ukraine in 2021. With the enormous volume of incoming calls, the Agency is constantly expanding the staff of the call center. Currently there are 40 call center employees and volunteers working around the clock .

The Agency is now operating both within Ukraine and within Poland, Moldova, Romania and Hungary – all neighboring countries – at five different crossings, and have secured over 3,000 beds in transit facilities. The Agency reports that they are seeing a significant increase in the number of people seeking to reach the border, and together with their shlichim (emissaries) and rabbis from local communities, they are helping families and refugees escape through various and complex rescue/transportation channels. The Agency has sent dedicated teams from Israel – both professionals from across the organization and former shlichim who have volunteered their time – to assist in operations along the border. There are already over 15 dedicated staff members who flew out to the surrounding countries and that number will likely increase as the situation dictates. Watch a video report [here](#) of a senior Agency shaliach from Ukraine.

So far 700 Jews have arrived at Aliyah processing centers run by the Agency in countries bordering Ukraine. The future olim are escorted from the border to temporary housing facilities where they receive their visas to Israel. From there they will be flown to Israel, where they will stay in hotels across the country for about a month. Afterwards, the immigrants will be transferred to permanent residences, located in communities throughout Israel.

The first two flights carrying over 200 olim, plus 100 orphans, will arrive in Israel later today (Sunday) on three flights. They will be welcomed at Ben Gurion Airport by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and other senior ministers.

The Agency is also concerned about Ukrainians in Israel who are participating in Agency programs, and have family in Ukraine. There are currently 800-1000 young adults in Israel on special Aliyah or immersive experience programs. The Agency is working on assisting them in locating their families and enabling them to get in touch.

The Jewish Agency has also joined a humanitarian operation, together with local Israeli municipal authorities, to mobilize the Israeli public, collecting donations for the entire refugee population from Ukraine, who are now located along border areas.

Separately, 150 community organizations across Ukraine identified by the Agency's Security Assistance Fund will receive immediate assistance for protection. This budget will be used to implement security measures at Jewish organizations and institutions across the country, to prevent looting and other security breaches.

For more information about the work of the Jewish Agency in the Ukraine crisis, including other moving stories, see [here](#).

The **American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)** and local community partners in Poland, Hungary and Romania are working together to answer calls on JDC's emergency Ukrainian hotline. In addition, local volunteers and staff at the border are distributing flyers and information, working the reception centers, answering calls for assistance, and reaching out to collect people as they cross. These teams work in shifts, offering hot soup, coffee, tea, information and medical help for any refugee that is passing by. Short term hotel accommodation, transportation and meals for the Jewish refugees is also available.

In total, JDC has helped shelter approximately 1,500 Jewish refugees, and given other support to some 3,000-4,000 Jews, plus thousands more non-Jewish refugees. The assistance includes transit advice, food, and more. JDC has also evacuated more than 3,000 Jews together with Chabad, local Jewish communities in Ukraine, the Jewish Agency, and the Jewish communities of Romania, Poland, Moldova, and Hungary.

See [here](#) for an article about JDC workers' ongoing efforts helping Ukrainian seniors, even under bombardment, and [here](#) for a piece about JDC's Hesed centers work during the war.

For more about JDC's efforts, see [here](#).

**World ORT** supports seven schools in Ukraine: in Chernivtsi, Dnipro, Belaya Tzerkov, Odessa and Zaporozhe, and two in Kyiv. These schools educate more than 3,000 full-time students. ORT also runs KeshetNet centers, which support unemployed women with job training, as well as an education center in Kyiv and a technology center in Dnipro.

As a result of the war, all ORT schools in Ukraine are currently closed and mobility is limited. As a result of 25 years of building schools and training centers in Ukraine, there are today more than 8,000 people who rely on ORT as part of their daily lives. Since the start of the conflict, these lives have of course been upended by rockets, sirens and violence. The ORT School in neighboring Moldova is preparing to eventually accept ORT Ukraine refugees at their school and is helping with accommodations and essentials.

Tens of Israeli and **Jewish organizations** are working to provide humanitarian relief for Ukraine. JFNA has put together a summary of these efforts, which can be found [here](#).

**Jewish Federations have activated our emergency protocols and are working closely with the Government of Israel and our partners to do everything in our power to support efforts that ensure the safety and well-being of the entire Jewish community in Ukraine.**

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