

AICC(WA)'s
Geo Political Special
 ONLINE EVENT 2022

featuring
Mark Sofer
 Former Israel Ambassador to Australia

speaking on
“After the War was Over”

The AICC(WA) presents this special webinar briefing by former Israel Ambassador to Australia Mr Mark Sofer, sharing perspectives on the longer-term economic and geopolitical ramifications of the current Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Thursday 28 July 2022
COMPLIMENTARY WEBINAR
 3.00 to 4.00pm AWST OPEN TO ALL

Australia-Israel
 Chamber of Commerce (WA) Inc.

AICC(WA)'s Post Event Article

Former Israel Ambassador to Australia, His Excellency Mr Mark Sofer, addressed the AICC(WA) on the topic **“After the War Was Over”**. Introducing the Webinar, Mr John Cluer acknowledged webinar sponsors Mr Ian Green, Mr John Schaffer AM and ChapterOne Advisors, the AICC(WA)'s online platform partners provided by David Tasker.

In opening his address Mr Sofer quoted a well known Talmudic dictum that “Prophecy is the domain of fools and children”, and prequalified his comments with the caution that so much is unknown and hard to predict.

Mr Sofer suggested that in Putin's eyes, Russia will win the war in part due to the intentional lack of clarity on the objectives of the war and its strategy, hence allowing Russia to retrospectively redefine its intentions and to declare victory at any time he deems propitious.

It will take many years before the full impact of the war will pass and for trade and political relationships to resettle. Going into the war a number of European and Middle Eastern countries knew that the war would have substantial economic, social, and moral consequences, many of which are proving insurmountable.

The loss of life and damage to people and property are of course deeply distressing, a dynamic Israel has experienced first-hand and also sees within this conflict through Ukrainian refugees absorbed by Israel.

The political difficulty for Israel relates to balancing multiple strategic relationships and calculating which repercussions would be the most severe. As an example, Mr Sofer cited both historic and current anti-Semitic influences within the Russian regime, and the very recent threat to suspend Jewish Agency activity in Russia. The situation in Syria is also of great concern to Israel, given its geographic proximity. Israel's relationship with Russia (as the only "responsible adult" there) has been

crucial in facilitating Israel some sort of freedom of manoeuvre against increased Iranian influence in Syria and, by extension, Lebanon. The severity of abandoning this dynamic is a potential existential dilemma for Israel, given Iran's hostility and nuclear aggression.

Mr Sofer addressed the diplomatic challenges of Israel's response to the war. To date Israel has voted with Western blocs to condemn Russia, but has also been careful with its use of terminology. The current acting Prime Minister of Israel, Yair Lapid, has been more forthright in his criticism of Russia.

Under previous Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, Israel engaged in mediation between Russia and the Ukraine, which "bought time", but did not stem the conflict or change the situation on the ground.

Mr Sofer acknowledged that if the war drags on, ultimately Israel would almost certainly be forced to choose sides, and would have to morally do so on the side of Ukraine, but not without serious geopolitical consequences.

The situation in Ukraine further complicates the domestic political situation in Israel. There is a caretaker government and looming election, the fifth following a succession of inconclusive mandates from the electorate. The economic impact of inflation, driven in part by the war related supply chain disruption, may well have some influence on voting patterns.

Former WA Governor and AICC member, Malcolm McCusker AC CVO QC, thanked Mr Sofer for his clear exposition of the difficulties facing Israel arising from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, placing it "between a rock and a hard place." He noted that Israel had joined in the UN resolution condemning the invasion and the vote to expel Russia from the Human Rights Commission, and that it had provided humanitarian aid, and a large field hospital to Ukraine as well as accepting Ukrainian refugees. However, as explained by Mr Sofer, to antagonise Russia would jeopardise Israel's security - especially in relation to its neighbour Syria, and Iran - and might foment latent anti-Semitism against Jewish citizens of Russia. For those reasons, Israel has stopped short of supplying arms or its "Iron Dome" and "Iron Beam" anti-missile and anti-drone defence systems to Ukraine, causing some to accuse it of "sitting on the fence."

Mr Sofer responded that the Russian regional threat would likely keep Ukraine out of NATO for some decades.

Concluding the webinar, Mr Sofer noted that having retired from public service, and therefore having the opportunity to express a personal viewpoint, that bold and ambitious movement is needed to somehow find a way towards regional peace which must include negotiation and compromise.

From within Israel and the Palestinian conflict, throughout the Middle East, and between Russia and the Ukraine, we owe stability and security to our future generations.

Mr McCusker thanked Mr Sofer for providing clarity and context on why Israel has delivered neutrality and balance, and shared Mr Sofer's aspiration for a swift and peaceful resolution.