

June 16, 1970

Memorandum for the President, "The Middle East"

Citation:

"Memorandum for the President, "The Middle East"", June 16, 1970, Wilson Center Digital Archive, From the Six Day War to Yom Kipper: Selected US Documents on the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973, a briefing book prepared for the international workshop, "New Evidence on the Arab-Israeli Conflict" (Wilson Center, June 11, 2007).
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/240290>

Summary:

Kissinger provides a historical overview of the current state of the Middle East and the decisions the US has made, and offers a suggested proposal to negotiate peace between Israel and the Arab States while taking the Soviet Union into account.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Original Scan

MEMORANDUMTHE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

June 16, 1970

SECRET/NODIS

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger *HK*

SUBJECT: The Middle East

I have been generally restrained on Middle East issues for obvious reasons. To date, I have confined myself to pointing out pitfalls of recommended policies, making tactical suggestions, and on several occasions helping to modify recommendations which I considered would have had disastrous consequences. For example, if we had not at the last moment altered the State Department approach of a flat turndown on aircraft this past March, our announcement could have had serious domestic effects, especially since it would have surfaced simultaneously with the disclosure that the Soviets had just drastically escalated their role in Egypt's defense.

Since the situation in the area continues to deteriorate and you are now at still another important tactical crossroads, I believe I must emphatically point out the dangers if we continue on our projected course.

Our Policy to Date

We have three principal objectives in the Middle East:

- To prevent Soviet dominance in the area;
- To prevent the spread of Arab radicalism which could pose a threat to Western interests;
- To honor the commitment we have to the survival of Israel.

On all three counts, we have seen our position eroded since January 1969. The Soviets have greatly increased their influence in the region. The moderate Arab states, and even the more radical ones,

SECRET/NODIS

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, Sect. 3.6

Reproduced from the open files
of the Nixon Presidential
Materials Staff

D. K. (U) NARA Date 11/09/01

NIXON PROJECT
NSC COUNTRY FILES -
M.E. Box 645
"M.E. General Vol IV"

SECRET/NODIS

- 2 -

are increasingly subject to Fedayeen pressures. The Fedayeen have become a powerful separate force which may already make it impossible for the Arab governments to accept or enforce any settlement that we could sell to Israel. Israel is becoming increasingly desperate and sees her future survival at stake, with its preemptive capability as its sole remaining asset.

From the beginning, our policy has rested on some basic assumptions:

- That the root problem in the Middle East is the Arab/Israeli conflict over territory;
- That once we settle this dispute by negotiation, the influence of the radical Arabs will dwindle;
- That the Soviet influence in the Middle East can be seen largely in terms of this conflict.

These basic assumptions are all open to question. Even if the Arab/Israeli territorial dispute is solved by negotiation, we will still face the fundamental problems of thriving Arab radicalism and Soviet influence.

Arab radicalism has five components: (1) the Israeli conquests of territory; (2) the very existence of Israel; (3) social and economic objectives; (4) opposition to Western interests; and (5) opposition to Arab moderates. Only the first of these components would be affected by a settlement. The others will remain, maintaining Arab radicalism as an independent force. Israel will still be there for the radicals to erase -- it is precisely because for much of the Arab world the issue is its existence, and not its particular frontiers, that Israel has scant confidence in Arab promises and sees little to gain in a settlement. The causes of social and economic unrest will persist. Western oil and Arab moderates will be prime targets. For example, the recent upheavals in Libya and the Sudan, and the possible coming turmoil in Saudi Arabia are little related to the Arab/Israeli question and would thus be little affected by a settlement. In fact, an Egypt free of its Sinai obsession could then focus on moderate Arab regimes.

Similarly, the expanding Soviet beachhead poses a growing challenge irrespective of the Arab/Israeli dispute. One of our major problems is that the Soviets may emerge as the strongest military power in the

SECRET/NODIS

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, Sect. 3.6

Reproduced from the open files
of the Nixon Presidential
Materials Staff

By KW NARA, Date 11/09/01

NIXON PROJECT
NSC COUNTRY FILES -
M.E. Box 645
"M.E. General Vol IV"
JUNE 1970

SECRET/NODIS

- 3 -

region, directly responsible for the protection of Egypt. In fact, the Soviets have much more to gain through a settlement than we -- return of the lands to the Arabs; the opening of the Canal for Soviet ships to operate in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, and the prospect of Arab radicals freed for concentration against Western interests and Arab moderates.

You inherited a very dangerous situation and faced a painful dilemma. In this complex situation, we have gone down the single track of technical negotiations on the specifics of a peace plan, always out-distanced by events and without a clear strategic conception. Our policy has been punctuated by tactical decisions under largely self-imposed time deadlines. It has consisted of almost compulsive stabs at tactical negotiating initiatives which have been just enough to sweep us up in a negotiating process but not enough to bring about a fundamental change in the situation.

While events have become more dangerous, we have paid a price with each of the three major audiences. We have strained our relations with Israel by moving further and further from her positions; she, in turn, has increasingly relied on military moves to preserve her security. On the other hand, we have not given enough to the Arabs, partially because of our reliance on the formal aspect of the negotiating process. This has made us fall between two stools. The fact of our intervening displeased the Israelis and its formal nature infuriated the Arabs. Finally, our whole approach with the Soviets has been uncertain: rather than making it clear to them that their actions pose a direct threat to our interests, we have always made our representations on Israel's behalf. This was illustrated once again by Secretary Rogers' June 2 meeting with Dobrynin where he told the Soviets only to stay away from the Canal area, in effect acquiescing in the massive Soviet presence already in Egypt.

To understand where we are today, it is useful to recall briefly how we got here. The following review includes first some of the decisions and then some of the major concerns I expressed in memoranda at each of the decision milestones. While I would not normally burden you with this record, I do so in this case to emphasize that my concern is over the fundamental philosophic approach of our Mideast policy rather than any individual tactical decision.

Since January 1969, we have moved from a position of no direct involvement in seeking a Middle East settlement, to exploratory

SECRET/NODIS

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, Sect. 3.0

SECRET/NODIS

- 4 -

talks among the four powers looking toward a set of general principles, to bilateral discussions with the Soviets and presenting of specific American proposals on the terms of UAR/Israel and Jordan/Israel border agreements.

In February 1969, we decided to take the initiative in finding a settlement, changing our previous policy of letting the local forces play themselves out. We entered into exploratory four-power talks to work toward a set of general principles. At the time I emphasized the principal issue: whether by going all out for a general settlement -- which might be impossible -- we would cripple our ability to contain the conflict in the absence of a settlement. We must be sure a settlement was possible before we began negotiating and using up our political capital. Persuading Israel to accept any political arrangement would require a combination of pressure and the enticement of sound U.S. or international guarantees.

In April, we decided to present our positions on specific terms of a UAR-Israel settlement other than borders. The argument was made that the talks, which had concentrated on trying to establish a framework for a UAR-Israel settlement, would reach an impasse unless discussions could become more specific.

At the time I highlighted certain pitfalls in putting forward specific proposals. A proposal that Israel could accept could be countered by more lenient proposals by the other powers which we would have to oppose, and thus be charged with breaking up the talks. A fair proposal would be equally unpalatable to the Arabs and Israelis and we were likely to get the blame from both sides. A proposal that was less than Israel's minimum position would probably be rejected by her -- leaving us the choice of negotiating without Israeli assent or being isolated by holding out for Israeli terms. The first course might tempt Israeli preemption; the second would produce Arab frustrations directed against the U.S.

In October, we put forward in the US-USSR talks our position on the UAR-Israel borders, which we had considered our fallback until then. We were told that this would emphasize to the Soviets that Israel could be pressed to withdraw only if the UAR were pressed to accept arrangements that Israel would regard as giving her security comparable to the present ceasefire lines.

SECRET/NODIS

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, Sect. 3.6

Reproduced from the open files
of the Nixon Presidential
Materials Staff

By KW NARA, Date 11/09/01

NIXON PROJECT
NSC COUNTRY FILES -
M.E. Box 645
"M.E. General Vol IV"
JUNE 1970

SECRET/NODIS

- 5 -

I doubted at the time that a diplomatic move could any longer affect the deep-rooted forces at work in the area, especially the uncontrollable Fedayeen. The Jordanian and Syrian aspects needed to be addressed along with the UAR-Israel problem. The Arab world would not judge us by proposals, only by results. I saw little gain for us in the Arab world if we continued supplying arms and money to Israel after she rejected our position. We were helping to build a case for greater Arab militancy without getting close to a settlement. At the same time we were making it more likely that Israel would rely more heavily than ever on its military strategy. We were doing too little to have a chance of success but enough to divert indigenous forces from reaching their own decisions.

In December, we advanced a proposal on a Jordan-Israel settlement in the four-power talks. The real issue, I pointed out, was not these negotiating tactics but whether we were willing to squeeze Israel. If you were prepared to impose a settlement, I leaned toward conditioning future military and economic deliveries to Israel on their acceptance of our position -- we should do so not by cutting off aid but by promising a generous aid package regulating deliveries by Israel's agreement to a negotiating scenario. My concern was that we were heading for a confrontation with Israel and the American Jewish Community and that if Israel thought it were cut off from outside support, she was likely to strike again to topple Nasser.

In March, as I mentioned earlier, we barely avoided disastrous consequences by our last-minute sweetening of our announcement denying Israel her basic request for aircraft.

If we continue this process, we will wind up being responsible for all the formulas and principles of a Middle East settlement and all the failures, with Israel hysterical, the Arabs belligerent and the USSR contemptuous.

Current Decision

You are now faced with yet another tactical decision on the Middle East under time pressure from the bureaucracy.

Last fall I said that for us to formulate specific negotiating proposals could bring Israeli escalation and push us to the edge of war. This is exactly what has happened. Our October 28 and December 18

SECRET/NODIS

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, Sect. 3.6

SECRET/NODIS

- 6 -

proposals were accepted by no one. They emboldened the Arabs who stepped up their border pressures. Israel began making deep penetration raids which, in turn, caused Nasser to allow a massive influx of Soviet personnel and influence. Israel's preemptive raids are now inhibited by Soviet pilots and air defenses; and she faces the prospect of slow attrition.

I believe the proposal that the State Department has suggested[✓] at this juncture would continue to take us down the same path and would not produce a settlement. The State plan involves a limited commitment of six Phantoms now, pending outcome of a new effort to get a ceasefire and negotiations, coupled with a clearly implied promise of 16 Phantoms and 16 Skyhawks to be shipped during the fall. (At Tab A[✓] is a detailed look at the State scenario.)

I don't believe this combination of a minimal commitment at this time and an ambivalent earmarking of additional planes for the future will work to produce the ceasefire and settlement it seeks. In order to sell the overall proposal to Israel, she would have to feel practically certain that she will get the 32 additional planes. The Arabs, on the other hand, would find the proposal palatable only if they were convinced that Israel would not get more than the six planes. Unless there were a major breakthrough by September, we are bound to disappoint one of the two sides at the time.

Furthermore, we would send the wrong signals to each of our three audiences. For Israel the aircraft earmarking suggestion will not induce her to negotiate, whether or not she interprets it as a firm commitment. If Israel does not believe that she will get the follow-on planes in the fall, she will take our decision as giving her only six planes, or only three more than was already promised her in March. It is absurd to think that on this basis she would yield her total position on boundaries that she has maintained for three years. The Israelis will not contemplate withdrawals unless they are assured of the equipment necessary for their security behind less defensible borders than they have now.

The State approach would have us force the Israelis back to the pre-war borders while they get no further planes after the summer. They would be asked to give up both elements of their security at the same time -- their territorial buffers and the prospect of more aircraft. As peace with more vulnerable frontiers approached, their aircraft inventory would drop.

SECRET/NODIS

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, Sect. 3.6

Reproduced from the open files
of the Nixon Presidential
Materials Staff

By KW NARA, Date 11/09/01

NIXON PROJECT
NSC COUNTRY FILES -
M.E. Box 645
"M.E. General Vol IV"
JUNE 1970

SECRET/NODIS

If, on the other hand, Israel believes that she will get the larger aircraft package if negotiations are going badly, she will have no incentive to make negotiations go well. She would prefer the planes to the promise of a settlement which can only be negotiated at the expense of the assets which the territories represent.

The ceasefire element in the package is another disincentive for Israel. Once she has obtained a halt to all Arab military pressures, she can sit securely on her captured territories, blunt negotiating progress and look forward to 32 more planes.

The response of the Arabs turns on the position of Nasser. His actions depend on how decisive we are and how serious he thinks we are in squeezing Israel back to her former borders, the one incentive for him to negotiate. Nasser would interpret our action as a halfway move. He would seriously doubt that we could really press Israel to withdraw on the basis of six aircraft and perhaps others later on. He would think that only a threat of a cut-off or the promise of substantial support after withdrawal would be sufficient to move Israel. For him, the prospect of Israel's having six more aircraft and staying along the Canal is more uninviting than Israel's getting a greater number of planes and withdrawing to her former borders. He would be asked to negotiate more or less directly with Israel in exchange for her commitment only to the "principle of withdrawal," not interpreted as complete withdrawal. Since he would have no reason to think we would succeed in moving Israel back, Nasser will pursue his tactical moves and the other Arabs will follow suit.

To the Soviets, the State Department proposal would be a weak gesture in the face of their continued expansion of influence. Our formula would be of too little military consequence and too hesitant to convince them that we are prepared to match their escalation in the area. They considered our March announcement uncertain; they will read this one the same way. Moreover, this course rests on direct U.S. approaches to the parties, principally Nasser, which the Soviets might read as attempting to squeeze them out of Egypt as well as the negotiations.

Thus, I believe that the State Department proposal will only serve to accentuate present dangerous trends. Israel, particularly if she thinks she is only getting the six aircraft, will border on hysteria, in light of continuing American hesitation, growing Soviet involvement, and increasing Arab pressures. We will face the likely radicalization of the American Jewish community and the loss of their support -- or at least restraint -- on our Southeast Asian policies. At best, the Arab reaction will be to continue their current policies. And the Soviets can only be induced to become more bellicose and inch closer toward the Canal.

SECRET/NODIS

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, Sect. 3.6

SECRET/NODIS

- 8 -

Even if we reach a settlement, we would have demonstrated that threats against the United States and blackmail against our oil interests pay off.

I should point out again that a settlement would hardly erase our problems in the region. Arab radicalism is not just a product of the Arab-Israeli impasse. It has its own ideological roots and will still be present to attack Western interests after a settlement. The Suez Canal will be opened for the Soviet fleet to operate in the Persian Gulf and Egyptian forces will be free to move against friendly Arab states like Saudi Arabia. Radical Arab nationalists will still be prone to attack our oil interests.

If you choose to accept the State Department plan, the only palliatives that I can suggest would be the following:

- Deliver the six aircraft plus replace the three that the Israelis have lost, making for a total of nine through this summer.
- Make our commitment for the other 32 as clear as possible. The two-stage formula of the State Department proposal is a tricky course to navigate and could get us into trouble in September.

A More Promising Course

Rather than the State Department approach, I believe a more promising course would be the one that I outlined as the third option in my June 9 memorandum to you.

We would offer a larger number of aircraft to Israel (25 Phantoms and a substantial number of its requested Skyhawks over 12 months) with the thought of withholding delivery unless Israel cooperates in a diplomatic approach. We would require Israel's assurance that it would return essentially to her prewar borders, in exchange for Arab commitments and an enforceable peace. We would tell both the Soviets and Nasser that Soviet combat personnel would have to be withdrawn after an agreement. We would go to Nasser and state that we would do everything in our power to get Israel back to her former borders if he will cooperate in the negotiations. We would make clear to Nasser that we are the

SECRET/NODIS

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, Sect. 3.3

Reproduced from the open files
of the Nixon Presidential
Materials Staff

By KW NARA, Date 11/09/01

NIXON PROJECT
NSC COUNTRY FILES -
M.E. Box 645
"M.E. General Vol. 10"
JUNE 1970

SECRET/NODIS

-9

only government that can get Israel to withdraw and that he cannot expect us to squeeze Israel and withhold aid at the same time. If he uses the provision of aircraft to Israel as the pretext for encouraging attacks on American installations elsewhere, then we will give the planes to Israel without pressing her to withdraw. (A fuller description of this proposal is at Tab B.)

This approach recognizes that the only way we can produce a settlement is to combine great pressure on Israel to withdraw with great reassurance that we will supply her the means for her security. We would combine the sticks of diplomatic pressure and withholding aircraft deliveries with the carrot of a large number of planes as a settlement is reached. The Arabs themselves should understand that only such reassurance to Israel will cause her to withdraw.

This could be a decisive move for all three of our audiences. It would give Israel an incentive to negotiate while making clear that we will not back a strategy which could lead to US-USSR confrontation. It would show Nasser and the Arabs that we are determined to move toward a settlement and give promise of pressures on Israel to withdraw. And it would be a firm move versus the Soviets who would see both that we are prepared to match their escalation with a well-supplied Israel and we are ready to move toward the escape hatch of a settlement acceptable to their Arab clients.

It thus could weave together the three essential strands of a Mideast settlement. The large number of aircraft would meet Israeli security concerns (whereas State's few planes would aggravate these concerns) - she might then opt for negotiation. Our decisive move and our clear commitment to pressure Israel would hold out for the Arabs a good prospect of regaining their territories (whereas the State proposal won't convince them we can move Israel) - they might agree to negotiations. And our proposal would give the Soviets both a sense of danger and an escape route which should give back to the Arabs their territories (whereas the State scenario would seem indecisive to them) - they might support negotiations.

There are, of course, serious risks in this course as in any other for the Middle East. The promise of this large aircraft package for Israel could hardly be kept secret for long. No matter how the deliveries are conditioned on Israeli performance on withdrawal, a

SECRET/NODIS

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, Sect. 3.6

SECRET/NODIS

- 10 -

violent reaction in the Arab world is conceivable. The Arabs might see our formula as merely emboldening Israel and doubt our willingness to withhold delivery of the planes if Israel does not move on withdrawals. We will face sticky timing decisions on aircraft deliveries as negotiations proceed. Engineering the removal of Soviet combat personnel from Egypt will be especially difficult. And even if a settlement is achieved, we will be back to the 1967 situation, with both sides militarily stronger and the Fedayeen a new disruptive factor.

Despite these problems, I believe this course holds out better hope for a settlement than the one proposed by State. It would, of course, have to be carefully managed and I would envisage that we would go with our proposal to Israel, the Soviets and Nasser in that order.

Conclusion

This approach, with all its inherent risks, is the most likely way to halt a deteriorating situation. But it would require a disciplined effort by us, bureaucratically as well as diplomatically. I frankly do not believe that we have the kind of governmental framework necessary to do the job. Shortly after our Cambodian experience, you would have to override the recommendations of your top Cabinet advisers, and impose a wholly different policy upon a very reluctant bureaucracy, which would then be charged with implementing it.

The only alternative would be (1) to shift control of the negotiations out of State to the White House, or (2) to let State go with its approach, while I dealt with Dobrynin, telling him that we were just marking time. Either of these alternatives, of course, raises tremendous problems.

There is the further factor that Secretary Rogers has almost certainly laid out the State Department proposal to Dobrynin. Joe Sisco, in his June 12 talk with Dobrynin, further locked us in by indicating that our general strategy would follow this line.

In these circumstances and given the existing bureaucratic framework, I believe that you have little choice but to pursue the State Department route, perhaps cutting the risks somewhat with the modifications I have suggested.

SECRET/NODIS

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, Sect. 3.0

Reproduced from the open files
of the Nixon Presidential
Materials Staff

By KW NARA, Date 11/07/01

NIXON PROJECT
NSC COUNTRY FILES -
M.E. Box 645
"M.E. General Vol IV"
JUNE 1970