



May 30, 1961

Memorandum of Conversation, 'President Kennedy, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, Ambassador Avraham Harman of Israel, Myer Feldman of the White House Staff, and Philips Talbot, Assistant Secretary, Near East and South Asian Affairs'

Citation:

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Summary:

US memorandum of conversation of Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and President Kennedy's discussion in New York.

Credits:

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Original Language:

English

Contents:

Original Scan

In my humble, JFK
did superb job.

Concur

WGI
Yes, and so did PT

Origin of visit

Diamond reactor
no proliferation
assurances

Security guaranteed
BG concern over Arab arms-plans
US not want involv in arms race.
Arabs not consider Isr bounds final
JFK not respond to bid for Sov-US assur.

Refugees

Isr. coop hoped for
BG not see much hope for success
Worth trying
no agreement on solutions as BG implied
No US I commitment.

W.H.F.
May 30, 1961*PT is cleaning up his memo
& a new edition will be out
for pouching.*

President Kennedy, Prime Minister BenGurion,
Ambassador Avraham Harman of Israel, Myer
Feldman of the White House Staff, and Phillips
Talbot, Assistant Secretary, Near East and
South Asian Affairs, at the Waldorf Astoria,
New York, 4:45 p.m. to 6:15 p.m.

The Prime Minister extended the best wishes of the President and the people of Israel to President Kennedy for the difficult times ahead. The President thanked the Prime Minister and expressed his pleasure at seeing him.

Plunging into the substantive discussion, the President raised the matter of Israel's dimona reactor and expressed his pleasure that two American scientists had the opportunity to see the reactor and had given him a good report on it. On the theory that a woman should not only be virtuous but have the appearance of virtue the President said that our problem is how to disseminate the information so as to take away any doubt there might be as to the peaceful nature of the reactor.

The Prime Minister said he wanted to talk about the reactor in the context of Israel's problems.

The biggest problem, and an almost insolvable one,
is an

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is an adequate water supply. Even when they bring in the Jordan River, there will not be enough for the southern part of Israel. The only solution to this, he said, is desalinization of sea water. A process which is technically possible but economically practicable only with very cheap power. Israel's hope is that atomic power, which is now expensive, will become much cheaper and will make it possible to desalinate sea water. This would meet a most vital need. In consultation with Dr. Bhabha of India and with the scientists from England, the Israeli government had been advised that this might be possible within ten or fifteen years but in the meantime Israel should gain the necessary scientific knowledge to make these developments possible.

"Our main -- for the time being -- and only purpose is this", the Prime Minister said. He added that after three or four years Israel might also want to develop a pilot plan for plutonium separation, which is needed for atomic power, but there is no intention to develop weapons capacity now. (The Prime Minister spoke rapidly and in a low voice at this point and some of his words were missed by the rapporteur; the preceding two sentences appear to represent the sense of his comments on this point, however.)

The Prime Minister added that he does not believe that Russia wants to give atomic capacity to Egypt now, but that in ten or fifteen years the Egyptians could presumably achieve it themselves.

The President commented that while this might be true we do not want to initiate tension in the Middle East by our own actions. "We are much involved with you in the Middle East. It is to our common interests that no one thinks that Israel is involved in the proliferation of atomic weapons. Obviously the U.A.R. would not permit Israel to go ahead in this field without getting into it itself."

The President

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The President then asked again whether, as a matter of reassurance, the Arab states might be advised of findings of the American scientists who had viewed the dimona reactor. In reply, the Prime Minister said, "you are absolutely free to do what you wish with the report. If you feel you should publish it, we have no objection."

The President expressed his appreciation of the Prime Minister's willingness to agree to this action. He added that of course the United States is sometimes suspect in matters dealing with Israel, "because we are close friends", and asked whether it would not be helpful to let neutral scientists also observe the reactor. Ben-Gurion asked who really are neutralists these days? The President commented that Khrushchev says that no man is neutral, but there are, after all, neutrals as the Scandinavians and the Swiss. The Prime Minister said he would have no objection to this. The President expressed his satisfaction at the Prime Minister's reply. He was pleased that he would feel that Israel would agree to going ahead with this.

Prime Minister Ben-Gurion then raised the question of Israel's security. He said that the deficit was increasing in Israel's arms as compared to U.A.R. military equipment. The U.A.R. has planes and tanks he said, and now they have two hundred Russian instructors. This means that while the gap in quantity is growing the gap in quality is being narrowed. Nasser's declared aim, the Prime Minister added, is to destroy Israel. It is not only that the Arabs want to defeat the Israelis but "if we are defeated that will do to the Jews what Hitler did". He asserted that the Arabs do not value human life and that this makes the problem more difficult.

Prime Minister Ben-Gurion referred to his visit last year with President Eisenhower and said that he had then asked the United States for weapons, especially for defensive weapons because the U.A.R. has 26 air fields and Israel has four. When he last saw President Eisenhower,

"he said:

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"he said: 'can I leave the United States with the assumption that we will get these weapons', he said 'it's a fair assumption'". Presumably the Prime Minister was referring to Hawk's. He said he still does not see why Israel cannot get these weapons. As to time then, it would be more or less safe because they are defensive weapons. The President commented that we before found records which provide a firm conclusion about what was committed by the previous Administration, but that the problem, as we see it, is that while the Hawk is a defensive weapon it is also a missile and as missiles come into the Middle Eastern area, military weaponry will escalate fast. This is a matter to which we will continue to address ourselves, because we do not want to see Israel at a disadvantage. But we are reluctant to introduce missiles into the Middle East; the other side might then introduce ground-to-ground missiles. He repeated that as Israel was faced with a critical break-through of weapons on the other side, we would have our views of what to do but we hesitate to introduce missiles into the region.

The Prime Minister explained that he was not asking for these weapons on the basis of a commitment made by the previous Administration but on the merits of the case. Acknowledging this, the President observed again that what we are concerned about is introducing missiles into the region.

There followed a brief discussion of tanks and planes available to the U.A.R. and to Israel, with figures taken from the briefing book that the President had at hand. The Prime Minister said that Israel has ordered 60 Mirages from the French. The first of which may be delivered by the end of this year but which will take more than 12 months to be delivered in full. Commenting on the performance capability of the missile, the President commented that we cannot eliminate the hazard but we want to make sure that Israel is not in such a position of inferiority that an attack on it would be

encouraged.

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encouraged. The Prime Minister again suggested that the Hawk, a defensive weapon, would be the best way to avoid this danger at the present time and could not threaten any other country.

Summing up this aspect of the conversation, the President said that the Hawk had been given to only a few other countries and that if it were introduced into Israel the next development on the other side might be an air-to-ground or ground-to-ground missile. He said we will watch this matter with care and added, "you don't feel that this is a satisfactory answer to your request, but you can be assured that we will continue to watch the situation. This is not a matter that we have finally settled."

Turning to another subject, Prime Minister Ben Gurien said that now as the President was going to see Premier Khrushchev, in 1956 Khrushchev and Bulganin and Prime Minister Eden had issued a declaration for the integrity and independence for all the states in the Middle East and last year the French, on a visit in Moscow, had issued a similar declaration on May 19th. If a joint declaration like those of 1959 and 1960 could be issued by the President and Premier Khrushchev it would be helpful.

The President asked what in the Prime Minister's judgment would be the response in Arab countries to such a declaration. To this the Prime Minister answered that several small countries such as Jordan and Iraq would accept the declaration gladly because it would protect them against Nasser. The President then asked whether Russia would be likely to do anything now to displease Nasser. Prime Minister Ben Gurien agreed that this was unlikely but if Khrushchev would be willing to do this it would be helpful. The President suggested that Nasser probably would object to this declaration, because he

thinks that

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~~that the present borders between Israel and the U.A.R. are not fast and he asked whether in this circumstance Khrushchev would belikely to accept such a declaration.~~
The Prime Minister said that he doubted that Khrushchev would do this but it would be a test case to see whether Khrushchev is really interested in relaxing world tensions.

Khrushchev is pushing hard on other issues, the President said. He expressed interest in the Prime Minister's view of Nasser's relations with Russia. These are very close, Ben-Gurion answered. "Nasser is not a Communist, but he relies on Russia, gets Russia's suggestions to get into Africa. The African leaders are not Communists either -- even Sekou Toure -- but they are pro-Communist and Nasser is working very hard at these countries and bringing the Russians into them."

In reference to broader strategy the President and the Prime Minister agreed that while the American people don't want war, nor do the Russian people. If the Russians should attempt to force us out of Berlin, Europe might no longer associate itself with us in NATO and there would be heavy pressure to force us out of Europe, but "we don't intend to be pushed back to our own shores". It is difficult, the Prime Minister pointed out, when one side accepts and defends the status quo and the other side tries to break it.

Not?
Relating the Berlin situation to Israel's problems the President asked what interest Israel would have in a guaranty from us if we should fail to stand fast in Berlin and commented that he was not sure that our security problems were ^{not} as great as Israel's security problems. Ben-Gurion responded that the difference is that "we are the only remnants of a people who have been fighting for 4,000 years. If Nasser defeats us we are not just defeated, we are destroyed."

The prime

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The President, with the Prime Minister, escalated current tensions in the area of Israel. The borders are more or less quiet, the Prime Minister responded, but the dangers remain in such places as Jordan and Iraq where the regime depends upon the life of a single man and therefore, the situation is crucial because Nasser could, at any time, send someone to assassinate the leader. A declaration or guaranty would give more confidence to all of the smaller Arab states and even to such countries as Turkey. The President said he had wanted to ask the Prime Minister about the Palestine Conciliation Committee. As the Prime Minister knows, we are obligated to make a report in the fall, we hope there may be an opportunity and wonders what Israel feels about it. The Prime Minister recalled that some years ago President Eisenhower had sent a messenger named Anderson to the Middle East. He had been optimistic on his first trip but discouraged on the second visit because Nasser had not agreed. "All questions in the Middle East depend upon Nasser." The President responded that we may have to assume that Nasser will make our life difficult in the negotiation.

The Prime Minister observed that this would be true unless pressure is generated among his people for peace. He said that all the people in the uncommitted world are watching the U.S. and other Western countries. For these people, freedom does not mean what it does to us. What makes an impression is better standards of living and health and education. It is not just money they want; they want to feel that they are treated as human beings. "If you will succeed with the Peace Corps idea -- with Americans going out not as superior human beings but to help others -- this psychological factor will be more important than the large amounts of money you give away".

The Prime

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The Prime Minister then described how Israel has brought Asians and Africans into its population and has made its Army an educational institution, which is of great interest to other countries such as Ghana that are trying to develop themselves. He spoke of the Afro-Asian Institute in the University where Asians and Africans are taught cooperation and of other programs that attract many people to learn in Israel. Hundreds of Indians are coming to Israel, he said, although Nehru will have no relations with Israel.

Continuing his comments on the general world situation, the Prime Minister observed that the only imperialistic country that exists now is Russia, which keeps under its domination many Muslim countries in Asia, former parts of China and many countries in Europe. Yet in the war of propoganda they win because they go against the status quo in other countries. Unless the West can provide what other countries need, we will lose.

Returning to the subject of the Palestine Conciliation Commission, the President stated that its new efforts need a sympathetic hearing because if they fail we may get a "Troika" commission. In response, the Prime Minister commented that any commission would be likely to fail in this effort. "They -- the U.A.R. and any Arabs -- don't care what happens to people. They regard the refugees as the best weapon at hand. If they could get hundreds of thousands of Arabs into Israel we would have those and still be surrounded by many millions of other Arabs." He then recapitulated the events immediately following Israel's independence when after several quiet days, the Arabs left Israel in large number and in succeeding months Israel had to accept many hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from other countries.

The President observed that maybe the Arabs would not agree to any realistic plan that the P.C.C. might put

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put forward but we would rather have the responsibility of disagreement on them. We are likely to have our troubles with our Congress if the U.S. continues paying 70% of the UNRWA costs for caring for refugees. If it appears that Israel is constructive, it will make the problem easier.

"Yes, it is always worth trying", the Prime Minister responded. "But until there is peace between Israel and the Arabs I don't see much chance of success."

The President said that although we had been attacked by the press in the U.A.R. on Cuba and other matters, we want to do our best to see if this P.C.C. effort can succeed. The Prime Minister recalled the recent Bandung Congress at which representatives of many states, including Communist China, attacked the U.S. He said that Israel had sent the U.S. information about this Congress about the way the people think and speak.

In summary, the President said that the conversation had covered several topics: on missiles "I expressed a desire to continually review the missile situation. We are reluctant to give Israel missiles and you understand that, but we would be disturbed if Israel should get into a situation that would invite attack. We will keep the matter under continuing review in our Administration, I can assure you."

On the question of the security guaranty, "I'll see what the atmosphere is. We guess that Khrushchev will not wish to lessen the tension. We will have to feel our way through this. The problem probably will be that we won't get agreement on various issues. If we should, we might try to get an agreement limiting arms to all Africa also."

Before

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Before ending the conversation, the Prime Minister said he wished also to take note of the fact that Israel has good relations with Persia and Turkey. Turkey is the more stable and can take care of itself. In Persia there is a very difficult situation; while the people are monarchists, there is corruption and much difficulty. It would help if the U.S. could give them a little more help and encouragement. In response the President said that we, and the previous administration, have devoted more attention and effort to Iran than to almost any other country in that region. Iran has a large Army. During the recent riots some of our people had questioned whether the Army would support the Shah. There has been a good deal of corruption and there are even stories about the royal family. However, I think this Government represents the last best hope and we will go through everything to support it. We are for this Government and the new Prime Minister 100%. The Prime Minister said he was delighted to hear this.

In conclusion the President observed that he and the Prime Minister had had previous conversations, in 1951 in Israel and now here. He wanted the Prime Minister to know that we wish relations between our two countries to be close and harmonious and that we want to be helpful in the Middle East. It was for this reason that he had recently written to Nasser. Responding, the Prime Minister assured the President that he does not hate Arabs, that he regards them as human beings and that "we want you to help them". The President said he felt that we want to maintain some influence with them.

As the Prime Minister rose to leave he handed to the President, as a gift, a book written in Latin, published in 1960. This book, he said, was recorded in the Holy Land by the author, Radzivilli, who was a forebearer of Prince Radziwill, the husband of President Kennedy's sister-in-law. Accepting the book with gratitude, the President said he was going to the Christening of Radziwill's child in London next week and, with the Prime Minister's

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Minister's permission, would present this book to the child.

The President and the Prime Minister parted with mutual expressions of respect.