

June 7, 1961

**Ambassador Harman's Record of
Ben-Gurion/Kennedy Meeting, with attachment on
the 'Atomic Reactor' (and transcript), sent with
cover letter by Mordechai Gazit to Israeli Foreign
Ministry**

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Summary:

Israeli record of conversation between Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and President Kennedy in New York.

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EMBASSY OF ISRAEL
WASHINGTON, D.C.

סודי ביותר
למען בלבד

מדינת ישראל
ושינגטון

ושינגטון, כ"ג בסיון תשכ"א
7 ביוני 1961

מב/ט/339

7/24/61
150-00

מדינת ישראל



Handwritten notes:
מ/ט/339
מדינת ישראל

Handwritten signature

א ל: מר ג. אבנר, מנהל סמ"ח
סמ"ח: ואיר, ושינגטון

חלוון: - שיחת רוח"ם עם נשיא ארה"ב

השיחה נרשמה על ידי הסגרים ורמן ואלמלא נמצא
עוז בבית החולים לרגל ענין פעוט, אפשר ויהי מוסף
כח הערות לרואי.

מכל מקום נראג להסלים את הדיווח בהודמנות
חראשונה - אך בינתיים רציתי למנוע דחוי בהעברת
הפרוטוקול של השיחה.

בשעתו הרעבר העחק לרוח"ם אך למען חסדר הנני
שולח לו העחק בוסף.

בג"ר כח
מדינת ישראל
מ. גזית

העחקו רוח"ם
ש"ח

השגריר, אנטבה
השגריר, לונדון
השגריר, סאריס

סודי ביותר - למען בלבד

2/17 1910

MEETING OF PRESIDENT KENNEDY AND PRIME MINISTER BEN-GURION
TUESDAY MAY 30th WALDORF ASTORIA HOTEL, SUITE 28A - 4:45 - 6:16 P.M.

PRESENT: The President
The Prime Minister
Mr. Meyer Feldman; Special Assistant - White House
Mr. Philip Talbot; Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asia - State Department
Mr. Abraham Harman; Ambassador of Israel.

Following the taking of photographs the Prime Minister and the President exchanged brief courtesies.

The President told the P.M. that Krushchev had told the American Ambassador last week that he was going to raise the question of Berlin.

The Prime Minister said that he had a number of matters that he wished to raise and he would begin with the security of Israel. (As far as the Atomic Reactor was concerned was concerned - see attached report).

On the subject of security the Prime Minister stated that there was a big gap in manpower between the UAR and Israel. It was a gap of 2 million to 30 million or 1 to 15. In so far as arms were concerned there was a big gap in both quantity and quality. The UAR was securing arms from the Soviet Union, three times the quantity of what Israel had and also of superior quality. The only advantage that Israel possessed was the superior quality of its manpower, however, it should be noted that the Egyptians were improving the quality of their manpower. They had 200 Russian instructors at their disposal.

It is the officially declared aim of Nasser - whether he means it seriously or not I don't know - but what he tells his people and officers is that his aim is to destroy Israel. The security problem of Israel is unparalleled throughout the world. What is at stake is not the independence of Israel or the control of its territory but the very lives of its people. For if Nasser were to defeat Israel he would do to the people of Israel what Hitler did to the 6 million Jews in Germany.

If Nasser were to attack Israel now he would be defeated, but it would cost Israel a great deal. In our army the officer does not order his men to advance but says to them "follow me". But even if we were to defeat Egypt, Egypt would still remain. If we were to be defeated we would be through. The gap in quantity is growing and the gap in quality of our manpower and that of Egypt is narrowing.

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The Prime Minister continued that last year when he had visited President Eisenhower he had called on the Secretary of State and had been given to understand that it would be a fair assumption for him to take back with him that the Hawk would be supplied. He had told President Eisenhower that he understood that the U.S. would not be a principal supplier of arms to Israel. This he accepted, but there were a few things which were available only in the U.S. and he was thinking particularly of air defense weapons. The air was decisive for our security. The UAR has 26 airfields as against our 3. Israel is a very small narrow country.

The Hawk missile is a defensive weapon and it is only in the U.S. that we could secure this anti-aircraft missile. If we get it we are more or less safe.

Before the UAR got the MIG 19 we were better off because we could rely on the superiority of our pilots. But we have nothing against the MIG 19 or the MIG 21.

President - What about the Mirage?

P.M. - We will get it only in 1962.

President - How many MIG 19s have they got?

P.M. - It is certain that they have 20.

President - We have been over the documents of how this matter was handled in this past administration and it seems to have tapered off. There is no doubt that the Hawk missile is defensive, but it is a missile. The U.S. has tried to remain out of this area as a major supplier of arms. The danger of supplying a missile, even a defensive missile, is that the other side would get missiles, too, and there would be a danger of missile escalation. The situation would be different if you were to be at a disadvantage which would imperil you - but you have these new planes coming and you are getting an electronics system. We are very anxious that you should not be at a disadvantage. I cannot give you an affirmative answer at this time. Of course we don't want to bring missiles into this area. This would lead to the other side bringing in missiles, and perhaps ground to ground missiles.

We need an understanding on the extent of the danger that you face. If there is danger that is one thing, but if there is parity that is another thing. We have not yet given the Hawk even to all NATO countries.

P.M. - I want to make it clear that I am raising this question not on the basis of what I was told last year would be a fair assumption. I have raised this matter because in the last few months the position in the M.E. has become more acute than it was in this respect.

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At this point the President asked his aides to show him the figures that they had on the UAR military strength.

Asst. Sec. Talbot produced a rather fat loose-leaf folder in which there appeared to be a number of position papers. He turned up the relevant page.

The President looked at the figures and said "I see that they have more heavy tanks than you have although you seem to have more light tanks. Of course the artillery depends on the strength." The President read off a list of figures of UAR planes which as far as I could note then included 20 MIG 19, 96 MIG 17, 30 MIG 15., and 50 IL 28. The President then said - How many Mirages do you have on order? Its 60 isn't it?

P.M. - We will get two Mirages this year and the rest next year. The UAR has at least 300 planes.

President - We should continue to watch this count very carefully. Our interests are very closely involved with yours. We want to make sure that you will not be open to attack. An attack against you would be an attack on the U.N. and it would be an attack against the Tripartite Guarantee. We would be involved by that.

P.M. - What I am talking about is a purely defensive weapon.

President - That is so but it is a missile and the next missile would be ground to ground. We have asked the Canadians to accept from us air to ground missiles with a nuclear warhead with a range of only one mile and they have turned it down because it is a nuclear missile even though it is obviously a defensive one.

However, I want to make it clear that our interests are very much in accordance with yours.

P.M. then moved to the next subject, namely, the question of a joint U.S. - Russian declaration in regard to the M.E.

P.M. - When Khrushchev was in London with Bulganin in 1956 he issued with Eden a declaration supporting the integrity and independence of all the countries in the Middle East. In May 1960 a similar declaration was issued with the French. A declaration on the M.E. which the Russians issued on their own in 1956 contained a specific mention of Israel as one of the Middle Eastern countries. If it were possible to get the Russians to issue a joint declaration with the U.S. on these lines it would not in itself guarantee peace, but it would reduce tension.

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President - The reason why I asked this question is because I wonder whether Khrushchev would do anything which would displease Nasser at the time when he is playing the Arab card. He is playing the Nasser card so strongly that if Nasser objected to such a joint declaration - on the grounds that such a declaration would guarantee the present borders to which the Arabs object - then Khrushchev would not do it.

P.M. - That would depend on whether he really wants a relaxation or not.

President - Judging by his attitude on Berlin, Laos and nuclear testing I don't think he does. What is your judgment of Nasser's relations with Khrushchev?

P.M. - They are very close. Nasser is not a communist and he suppresses the Communist Party as he did the Muslim Brotherhood, but he relies on Khrushchev and Khrushchev relies on him because he brings Russia into Africa.

President - I agree. I think this was clear in the case of the support of Lumumba and Gizenga.

P.M. - I have never been to Africa but I have met many African leaders in Israel. I don't think that Sekou Toure is a Communist although he is a pro-Communist. The Malis are not Communists. But Nasser brings the Russians into Africa and the Russians work hard. They have a mutual interest. There won't be hot war because the Russians do not want to risk that.

President - We cannot be moved out of Berlin without breaking the Atlantic Alliance. We do not intend to do that.

P.M. - While the West accepts the status quo even in Hungary in 1956 the Russians do not accept the status quo. Khrushchev, even while he was in the U.S. said that you were doomed.

President - The doom would be hastened if we were to get run out of Berlin. What use would a declaration on our part be to you if we were to get run out of Berlin? I am not so sure that our problems are not as great as yours.

P.M. - The difference is that we are the remnant of a people struggling for its last hold on existence. Israel is our last stop. If we were to be defeated Nasser would leave no Jews in Israel, because as long as there are Jews in Israel there is a danger from his point of view. But Nasser will not risk his regime, for after we have beaten him in the past, another defeat for Nasser, though it would not mean the end of Egypt, would mean the end of Nasser.

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President - How do you measure the tension in the last four or five months?

P.M. - It has been more or less quiet. I was worried about the Straits of Aqaba because there was some talk of Egyptians moving in police there, but I met Secretary General Hammarekjold and he reassured me on this point. This is a vital question for us. Jordan, the Lebanon and Iraq are living in fear of Egypt. Hussein is a very brave young king but if he is killed then Jordan is finished. These Arab countries are more worried about Nasser than we are. I realize that it is a big "if" but if you can get such a joint declaration out of Khrushchev it would spread assurance. Nasser is making all kinds of declarations such as about the Turkish territory of Alexandretta.

President - I would like to ask you about the PCO. The commission has to report to the General Assembly next Fall. This may be one of the opportunities to do something.

P.M. - President Eisenhower sent Anderson to Jerusalem and Cairo. After he first saw Nasser he came to Jerusalem and apparently felt that Nasser was reasonable. However, when he had visited Nasser for the second time he came back and said that Nasser was hopeless. Apparently, the first time Nasser had thought that I was not serious, but when Anderson made it clear to him that I meant business Nasser retracted. Everything depends on Russia.

President - Even on the refugees?

P.M. - Yes, for the M.E. as a whole.

President - Well, I don't think Khrushchev will make life easier for us.

P.M. - The decisive question is will the free world win in Asia and Africa. Today I could add Latin America. Will the free world realize that for these people freedom does not mean what it means to you and me. What these people want is a better society, a better standard of living, health and education. Above all they want to be treated as equals. Even when you give help you do not always become popular because just as important as what you give is how you give it.

The Peace Corps is a great idea and you will succeed in this if your people will go to it with a pioneering spirit and not with a spirit of superiority. The psychological point is more important than money or help. I am saying this on the basis of our own experience in working in these countries.

President - We were always suspects in Latin America, because we are a big power.

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P.M. - We are small country and they are not afraid of us. But also, because we are a young country, we have no hide-bound traditions. We do everything to solve our own needs. Even our army is not primarily for defense but for educating our citizens and for pioneering. Also half of our immigrants are from Asia and Africa.

P.M. mentioned Nachal and continued: Ghana wanted something like this and they built the Builders Brigade. Also Burma, they sent some officers who learnt Hebrew for two months and then worked for a year on our farms. Back in Burma they built three villages based on their experience gained in our settlements. Now we have another 100 Burmese officers in Israel. There are many Africans in our settlements. We have an Afro-Asian Institute for cooperation in which they are very interested. Also we teach them elementary health needs.

The P.M. then referred to Gedna. Our whole spirit is not careerism but the pioneering spirit. Although we have no relations with India hundreds of Indians have come to see our settlements.

President - Why won't Nehru recognise you?

P.M. - I don't know. I can tell you what his excuse is. It is that he wants to mediate between us and the Arabs. I question this, but Nehru is a great man and a great man is entitled to be mistaken. India is the only big democracy in Asia and this is due to Nehru; I am ready to pardon him.

The Africans cannot do what you are doing. It is too big. They come to us and our people go to them. In our own army we have officers of all different countries of origin. It is the same feeling of equality that we try to bring to Africa. An illiterate man who joins our army gets an education and after 2 1/2 years he leaves quite a different man. If you win over the African peoples the free world will win. The slogan of liberty alone is not enough. What these people want is dignity.

President - I have talked to our people about your work in Africa. It is most helpful.

P.M. - We could do more but we have our own problems.

President - You talked about the kibbutzim. How about Meyer Foldman - it would do him no harm to go to a kibbutz. After all you want all the Jewish fellows to go over there.

P.M. - We want only the best to go.

President - I think anyway that Foldman should stay here.

Foldman - This is a rather doubtful compliment.

President - Your point about Africa is a good one. Perhaps in our public statements we emphasize the freedom part of it too much and do not put enough emphasis on the development side of it. Though we do of course emphasize the matter of national independence. Surely they want independence.

P.M. - Independence, yes. Khrushchev is now trying to invest a body of pro-colonialism. He cannot accuse you of being colonialists so he exploits such things as Alabama and Little Rock. The fact is that Russia is today the only imperialist power in the world. They are oppressing their Moslems in Asia and the European countries they have taken over. In the art of propaganda they are very good. Everything which helps communism is honest. The West must be more united and know more what the uncommitted world wants and needs. I was in Belgium last year, a month before the Congo became independent. They told me that 12,000 Belgians were staying on in the Congo to help the government. I asked myself how could people who for years had been used to giving orders help these people to be independent.

President - About the PCC. This body will soon be making approach to the countries in the area for a solution to the Arab refugee problem which will include some repatriation, resettlement in the Arab countries and the migration of Arab refugees to countries outside the Arab world. The PCC has approached the Secretary General who has been looking for some neutral person who will go to the area and report back. If the PCC cannot report progress we will get the troika. This PCC is better than any we could get.

P.M. - Any commission will fail. This present PCC or any other, because the Arab states do not care about the refugees.

President - The UAR?

P.M. - Yes. They don't care what happens to the refugees. They regard them simply as the best weapon to fight us. If they can succeed in getting the refugees back into Israel it would create a critical situation. We are surrounded on all sides and they can destroy us. This is what they want. If this settlement of the refugee problem is done as part of a peace settlement, then yes. We have received as many Jewish refugees from the Arab countries as there were Arab refugees from Palestine. These Arab refugees were refugees from Palestine and not from Israel. The P.M. detailed how the Arabs left Haifa, Tiberias and Safed, and also Jaffa 2 days before the State was proclaimed. When we proclaimed the State they were gone. Then there came the Arab invasion. The British told them that they would finish us in 10 days, but they were wrong. We have taken $\frac{1}{2}$ million Jews from the Arab countries. I wish Morocco would let the Jews out. 150,000 Jews from Iraq came.

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Although they had lived in the country for 2500 years they were told to leave. The same happened in the Yemen. In 1951 we began to be responsible for the Arab refugees which were in Israeli territory, but the Arab States don't worry or care for their refugees.

President - Possibly they won't agree to anything realistic, but I would prefer that the responsibility for a failure should not appear to rest on Israel. Let's see what the Arabs say before you reject. We have trouble in the Congress on this problem. We provide 70% of the total UNRWA funds, but all we get is animosity against us. I fully recognize the problems but may be it is worth making a trial.

P.M. - Its always good to try.

President - Blessed is the peace maker.

P.M. - With peace it would be easy.

President - We have been attacked by the UAR Press especially on Cuba and I wrote to President Nasser explaining to him what the Cuban situation means to us. We are well aware of the difficulties. Maybe we cannot succeed. Then we will have a new PGO and we will have to reconsider our contribution.

President - I shall sum up what we have discussed:

1) On the missiles it is our desire not only because of our friendship for Israel, but as a matter of our interest, that Israel should not come into a position which will encourage aggression or invite attack. The situation needs continuous examination and I can assure you that we will do that.

2) On the guarantees I will see what the atmosphere is in Vienna. We may very well not get off the Berlin question. I will inform you if I see a genuine desire to lessen tension. One of the things I have in mind is to raise the question of limiting shipments of arms to Africa. We have a continuous interest in your work in Asia and Africa and we will continue to support that.

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P.M. - If I may I would like to raise some other questions not only about Israel but also Turkey and Persia. In Persia there is a delicate situation. There is a strong feeling for the monarchy but there is a great deal of corruption. Now they have a new government which apparently feels that they do not get enough support from you, not only material but political and spiritual support.

President - The last administration and our new administration have been spending a lot of time on Persia. They have an army of 200,000 whose sole function in my opinion, is to protect internal security. Obviously it cannot be used against Russia. If the Russians were to cross the frontier that would mean world war. Two weeks ago when they had some demonstrations there was even some question whether the army would respond favourably. Still, they always ask for more equipment for the army. Amini has decided to come out against corruption and realizes the need for land reform. This Amini government represents the last hope. I completely agree in this. We shall do everything we can for him. We have discussed this in the National Security Council and we are making emergency funds available.

P.M. - Can I tell him that?

President - Yes, you can. I want the relations between our countries to be harmonious and I hope there will be less tension. We are very desirous of playing a helpful role.

P.M. - Let me say that I am not an anti-Arab. I want you to help them.

President - We want to retain our influence so that there would be less tension. There were attacks on the U.S. when we voted in the U.N. on this question of the property.

P.M. - Are you afraid of attacks?

President - Oh, no. We just want to do all we can to be helpful.

The last few moments of the conversation were held while the P.M. and the President were standing preparatory to saying goodbye. The name of de Gaulle was mentioned and there were some exchanges about him. The P.M. presented a gift to the President consisting of an old Latin book of travels on the Holy Land written by a member of the Radziwil family, the family to which the sister of Mrs. Kennedy is married. The President expressed great pleasure at this gift and asked the Prime Minister's permission to present it as a gift to the daughter of his sister-in-law whose christening he would be attending in London. He said that he would keep the dedicatory letter from the Prime Minister and asked the P.M. to write his name in the book so that the child would know from whom it

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had come. This the P.M. did.

The conversation ended after an hour and a half and the President accompanied the P.M. to the elevator.

THE ATOMIC REACTOR

Zell. About the Atomic Reactor, I had intended to say something on this, but meanwhile you have sent your people and I suppose you have their report. But if you have any questions on this I am ready to answer.

PRESIDENT - The report was very helpful. But a woman should not only be virtuous, she should appear to be virtuous. We must take away any excuse for the argument that what you are doing is connected with the proliferation of nuclear arms.

Zell. I made a statement on this in the Knesseth. Our biggest problem is water. Even after we get the water of the Jordan we will not have enough water. The only way is the desalination of the sea and for that we need cheap economic power. In Israel today power is more expensive than here. We have no coal and as yet not much oil. After ten or fifteen years, atomic power, which is now more expensive than conventional power, will be cheaper. I have discussed this with people like Babha of India and Blackett of England and they have told me that it will take ten years. But we must be ready for it. We must have the scientific know-how.

We were helped by the French Government in building this reactor. We are asked whether it is for peace. For the time being the only purposes are for power. Not now but after three or four years we shall have a pilot plant for separation, which is needed anyway for a power reactor. There is no such intention now, nor for 4 or 5 years. But we will see what happens in the U.S. It does not depend on us. May be Russia won't give bombs to China or Egypt, but may be Egypt will develop them herself.

PRESIDENT - I appreciate the desalination matter. While we are very involved with you in the U.S., we don't want it to appear that Israel is preparing for atomic weapons. If that were to appear, the U.A.R. would not permit it to exist at that, but would try to do the same herself. Perhaps in the next five years atomic weapons will proliferate, but we don't want it to happen. The report of your people is a fine report and it would be helpful if we could get this information out.

Zell. - You are free to do what you like with it. On the contrary, we are interested in your doing so.

PRESIDENT - The Arabs know that the U.S.A. and Israel are very close friends. It would be useful if we could have a report from a neutral scientist.

Zell. - What do you mean by neutral?

PHYSICIST - Do you think like Krushchev that no man can be neutral. Take Hebra.

Zell. - Yes Hebra is neutral, though after his experience with China he is not so neutral.

PRESIDENT - Is Switzerland or Sweden, or Denmark, would you object to our sending such a neutral scientist?

XXX - Yes, if you wish.

Copy of Official Document from Israel's State Archives, declassified in May 1992, file:
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TOP-SECRET
For Addressee Only

Meeting of President Kennedy and Prime Minister Ben Gurion, Tuesday, May 30th, Waldorf Astoria Hotel, Suite 284, 4.45--6.16 pm

Present: The President
The Prime Minister
Mr. Meyer Feldman: Special Assistant, White House
Mr. Philip Talbot: Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asia--
State Department
Mr. Avraham Herman: Ambassador of Israel

These minutes were taken by Mr. Herman

The Atomic Reactor

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P.M. Yes, Nehru is neutral, though after his experience with China he is not so neutral.

PRESIDENT -- Yes. or Switzerland or Sweden , or Denmark. Would you object to our sending such a neutral scientist?

P.M. Yes, if you wish.