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The Lost Peace: Great Power Politics and the Arab-Israeli Problem, 1967-1979

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in Political Science

by

Galen Jackson

2016

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

The Lost Peace: Great Power Politics and the Arab-Israeli Problem, 1967-1979

by

Galen Jackson

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Marc Trachtenberg, Chair

In the aftermath of the June 1967 Six-Day War, both the United States and the Soviet Union had powerful incentives to achieve a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli dispute. With each superpower concerned that the conflict's continuation would jeopardize its regional interests and, more significantly, worried that it could ultimately lead to a direct U.S.-Soviet confrontation that might conceivably escalate to the nuclear level, strategists in Washington and Moscow were intensely interested in solving the problem via negotiation. Moreover, the superpowers wielded substantial influence with the parties to the dispute. From a power political standpoint, thus, one would expect that the two sides would have cooperated to settle the matter. Yet, in the end, precisely the opposite occurred. This deeply puzzling outcome is the heart of this dissertation; in its simplest terms, my goal is to show what prevented Washington and Moscow from working together to solve the Arab-Israeli problem and, in so doing, I use the Middle East as a window to

explain what drove the continuation of the Cold War as a time when a lessening of superpower tensions seemed possible. Utilizing a mass of primary source—and especially archival—evidence, I show that this result was primarily attributable to two variables. First, American domestic political factors consistently constrained U.S. decision-makers in their formulation of Middle East policy and thereby limited their ability to pursue a cooperative approach with the Soviets on the issue. Second, it turns out that the United States was simply not interested in settling the conflict in conjunction with Moscow. Despite the Kremlin's willingness to contribute helpfully to the achievement of a stable Arab-Israeli settlement, U.S. officials' deeply anti-Soviet views led them to eschew superpower collaboration and, in fact, resulted in their making the reduction of USSR influence in the Middle East a top priority. In short, the United States throughout this period pursued a strategy in the region that was profoundly inconsistent with power political considerations, an approach that was bound to contribute to the undermining of détente in the late 1970s.

The dissertation of Galen Jackson is approved.

Francis Gavin

Steven Spiegel

Marc Trachtenberg, Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

For My Family

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No scholar can get to this point without the benefit of impactful mentors. I first became interested in the Middle East and American foreign policy during the fall semester of my junior year as an undergraduate at Williams College. At the time, I still hoped to study neuroscience, but two professors—James McAllister and Magnus Bernhardsson—completely changed the way I viewed history and political science. Professor McAllister first showed me how much leverage one can get over major conceptual issues in international relations through the use of primary documents; opened my eyes to the complexities and importance of security studies, as well as awakened my fascination with such issues; provided invaluable guidance to me when I first began doing serious research in this area; and encouraged me to pursue a career in political science. For his part, Professor Bernhardsson challenged me to learn everything I could about the Middle East and instilled in me a drive to get to the bottom of historical puzzles; was as supportive as any undergraduate thesis adviser has ever been; and refused to accept my work until he was satisfied that it represented my best effort. Both men encouraged me to combine my understanding of history and political science, which to this day has allowed me to occupy an exciting space intellectually. When I spent a year getting my M.A. in international relations from the University of Chicago, I was fortunate enough to work closely with a third mentor, Michael Reese. Anyone who has studied with Professor Reese knows that he cares, above all else, about the progress of his students, and that their future success is his top priority. During my year in Chicago, I learned more about international relations theory and research design from him than most students learn during their entire time in a Ph.D. program, and I am eternally grateful to him. He continues to read drafts of my working papers, has stayed involved in my career, and has become a friend. I feel extremely blessed to have had the opportunity to work so closely with these top-notch scholars and teachers. I would not have gotten here without them.

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I could not have asked for a better doctoral committee. Frank Gavin, who offered to supervise my work on the first day that I met him, was instrumental in bringing me to MIT for a year and has stimulated my interest in nuclear-related topics. Professor Gavin has never been anything but supportive of the type of work that I do and has reinforced my belief that history and political science can be used in conjunction to shed light on critically important issues in international relations. I am a better scholar for having worked with him. Likewise, I am grateful

to Deborah Larson for everything she has done to help me improve professionally. Professor Larson has written me countless letters of recommendation; read drafts of everything I have ever had published; always kept herself available to answer my questions; never stopped pushing me; and set a great example for how to be a more effective teacher. I am extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity not only to work with her on my research, but also as a teaching assistant for multiple classes. I have also been lucky to have Steven Spiegel as a committee member.

Professor Spiegel knows more about U.S. Middle East policy than just about anyone else and has invested huge amounts of time and effort in reading my papers and answering my questions, both in his office and on the telephone. Despite his busy schedule, he has always found time to help me. Moreover, he has contributed significantly to my growth as a teacher by allowing me to develop and deliver several of the lectures for his class on the great power politics of the Middle East. Most importantly, Professor Spiegel has been one of the most open-minded individuals with whom I have ever interacted. While we may not always agree, he considers my arguments with great care, makes suggestions about how I can improve them, and has taken an active interest in my research. He has taught me to always admit when I am wrong—perhaps the most valuable lesson I have learned in graduate school—and continues to help me develop as a scholar. I have also had the great benefit of having Robert Trager on my committee. Professor Trager has always found time to discuss my questions with him and has given me countless suggestions on how to improve my grasp of conceptual issues. I can only hope to one day possess the sort of abilities in this area that Professor Trager has exhibited during the time I have known him.

I would like to conclude by offering my enormous gratitude to Marc Trachtenberg. There are literally no words to describe what I owe him or the extent to which he has shaped my

understanding of international relations and contributed to my development as a scholar. I am quite confident when I assert that no graduate student has ever been as fortunate as I have been in selecting a faculty adviser and dissertation chair. From the moment I met him, Professor Trachtenberg has done everything in his power to help me become a better scholar and person. My first publication, which originally developed out of a course paper I wrote for his first-year seminar, went through eleven preliminary drafts, all of which he read. He devoted the same sort of time and attention to my later publications, and walked me through every step of this dissertation. He has never stopped challenging me to improve in the areas where I am weakest. Indeed, it is difficult to describe just how much I have learned from him, particularly during the countless sessions I spent talking with him in his office, which oftentimes lasted a whole afternoon. When I think of my time at UCLA, I think of how special it was to be Professor Trachtenberg's student, and I will always regard my decision to go to UCLA as the best choice relating to my education and professional career that I have ever made, because of him. Professor Trachtenberg exemplifies what it means to bring a deep passion to one's work, is truly one of the best people in the business, and has been almost impossibly generous with his time and support for me. Those who have not had the chance to work closely with him have truly missed out. I am absolutely convinced that I would never have come close to reaching this point without him. My only regret is that I no longer can simply walk the length of a hallway to get to his office, although I of course know that I can call him with questions any time. I hope in the future that I have the opportunity to mentor a student in the same way he has mentored me. If I do half of what he has done for me for that student, I will consider it a major success.

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Introduction

In the summer of 1969, George Ball argued in an article in *Foreign Affairs* that the maintenance of international peace and security still depended largely upon the interactions of the United States and the Soviet Union. “All but the wildly romantic,” he wrote, “are agreed that we will never achieve a workable universal system until the two global powers are prepared to follow parallel, if not common, lines of action on a reasonably broad spectrum of policies.” The idea, Ball added, that the superpowers were unable, even jointly, to help settle local disputes by wielding their considerable influence was “a dangerous misconception.” Heading into the decade of the 1970s, he stressed, the international system remained “polarized,” and “the best hope for peace continues to depend on the ultimate broadening of common interests between the superpowers.” Thus, Ball expressed hope that the United States and the USSR would “find an increasing number of relatively small areas where the common interests of our two countries overlap, even though they may not be completely congruent. As this occurs, a wise diplomacy will build an expanding base for a negotiated modus vivendi compounded of limited settlements.” In short, Ball concluded, the world was “likely to be a far more hazardous place if the United States either fails to maintain an effective power balance with the Soviet Union or ceases its efforts to resolve local quarrels when they arise in strategic areas of the world.”¹

The question of what to do about the Arab-Israeli conflict, Ball contended, was of particular importance. The Middle East, he wrote, was too consequential an area strategically to be ignored. The region was rich in oil, a center of U.S.-Soviet competition, and home to America’s Israeli ally. With so much at stake and the parties to the dispute incapable of reaching

¹ George W. Ball, “Slogans and Realities,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (1969), pp. 625, 632, 637, 639.

a settlement on their own, he added, the United States had a powerful incentive to forge a compromise with the Soviet Union to resolve the problem. The United States and the USSR, he wrote, needed to deal with the problem in the same way that the Concert of Europe had handled such matters a century earlier. It was an “eminently sensible view,” Ball explained, “that in the rare situation when the United States and the Soviet Union can reach agreement on a solution for a major problem which the members of the [United Nations] Security Council accept as within the principles of the Charter, they should not be condemned to helplessness—watching with impotent dismay while the temperature of a whole strategic area of the world moves nearer to the flash point.” The superpowers, therefore, needed to think about how they could concert their actions to bring about an “[i]mposed peace,” even though the phrase had an “unpleasant ring, with distasteful historical antecedents.” Thus, Ball asserted: “The best—and perhaps the only—hope for peace is that, through firm and patient negotiation with the Soviet Union, we may be able to hammer out between us the concrete terms of a settlement that would safeguard the interests of both Israel and its Arab neighbors.”²

Ball’s strategic conception of the Arab-Israeli problem was underpinned by a compelling power political logic, for both superpowers had a substantial interest in seeing the conflict resolved. The United States, after all, was throughout the period that followed the June 1967 Six-Day War deeply uncertain about its ability to protect Israel in a crisis, particularly because of its concomitant, heavy involvement in the Vietnam War. As one high-ranking Defense Department official remarked, the Middle East was “an awkward place for the U.S. to operate militarily.” Consequently, “[I]n the final analysis we would have to rely on our nuclear power, and that is the

² Ibid., pp. 627-631.

last thing we want to fall back on.”³ And with the advent of strategic nuclear parity, it was questionable whether American threats to meet a Soviet challenge could be made credible.⁴

It was also the view of U.S. officials that Israel’s *own* interests required a settlement. Jerusalem’s policy of maintaining control of the territories it had occupied during the June 1967 War, they believed, was neither sustainable nor consistent with the objective of assuring its security over the long term. “In a historical perspective,” National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger remarked at one point, “[there is] no way 3 million people can survive in the midst of 60 million hostile people unless they can change that hostility.”⁵ “[P]ermanent security,” Kissinger’s successor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, concurred, “cannot be based on the retention of territory and the forcible control of a hostile minority.” A settlement with its Arab neighbors, he emphasized, was therefore “essential to Israel’s survival.”⁶

Moreover, American strategists hoped to maintain a balanced policy on the Arab-Israeli question, so as to avoid significant damage to Washington’s strategic position in the area. A polarization of the region along Cold War lines, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) reported in the immediate aftermath of the June 1967 War, “would be most detrimental to US interests in the Middle East.” The area, they claimed, would become increasingly radicalized and unstable, and

³ Memorandum (Memo) for the Record, “Subject: NSC Meeting, Wednesday, June 10, 1970—Middle East,” June 10, 1970, in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969-1976*, Vol. 23: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1969-1972* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2015), p. 427.

⁴ On the strategic problems the United States encountered as a result of the loss of its nuclear superiority, see Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 104-119; Marc Trachtenberg, “Robert Jervis and the Nuclear Question,” in James W. Davis, ed., *Psychology, Strategy, and Conflict: Perceptions of Insecurity in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 101-120; and William Burr, “The Nixon Administration, the ‘Horror Strategy,’ and the Search for Limited Nuclear Options: Prelude to the Schlesinger Doctrine,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2005), pp. 34-78. See also Jeremy Suri and Scott D. Sagan, “The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in October 1969,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2003), pp. 150-183. For a conceptual framework on this issue, see Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 35-125.

⁵ Minutes of a National Security Council (NSC) Meeting, “Middle East,” September 11, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 170.

⁶ Memo from Brzezinski to Deputy National Security Adviser David Aaron and William Quandt of the NSC Staff, “Subject: Fireside Chat on the Middle East,” March 27, 1978, folder: Middle East, 1-3/78, box 50, Country File, Zbigniew Brzezinski Donated Papers, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

the Soviet position in the Arab world would be greatly enhanced at Washington's expense. "As a result," the JCS concluded, "the United States would be placed in the position of becoming deeply involved by providing direct political, economic, and military support to Israel or having to abandon its policy toward the continued existence of Israel."⁷ Relatedly, the Americans believed that a settlement was necessary to secure Western energy interests. Without a resolution of the dispute, war would become increasingly likely, and if a military conflict could not be averted: "[T]he leaders of even the Arab moderate states would find it very difficult to resist public demands to embargo direct as well as indirect oil sales to the United States and other countries supporting Israel."⁸ "[O]ne of the dividends of having a successful negotiation," President Richard Nixon stated publicly, "will be to reduce the oil pressure."⁹

For their part, the Soviets also had a number of compelling reasons to want a settlement of the Arab-Israeli problem following the crushing Arab defeat in June 1967. To bolster its great power position in the Middle East, Moscow needed to demonstrate to its clients its ability to deliver their principal diplomatic requirements, namely, the return of the territories lost in that conflict. Without a political solution, however, the only method available for the achievement of this objective was the opening of its arms pipeline to the Arabs. Such an approach, of course, would raise significantly the potentiality of a dangerous war in the region. "The present situation," one scholar wrote at the time, "is not exactly ideal for Moscow." Without a final

⁷ Memo JCSM-374-67 from the JCS to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, "Subject: US Military Interests in the Near East (U)," June 29, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19: *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2004), pp. 589-590.

⁸ Department of State Briefing Paper, "Arab Economic Actions," undated, folder: Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, 1/14/75—Middle East (3), box 18, U.S. NSC Institutional Files, 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁹ Quoted in Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 244. On U.S. energy interests and the Middle East during this period, see also Andrew Scott Cooper, *The Oil Kings: How the U.S., Iran, and Saudi Arabia Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011); and Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

agreement, the Soviets risked either a “loss of control” or a “loss of influence.” It was, therefore, quite understandable that the Kremlin had consistently refused to supply its clients with its most advanced weapons, unless they were directly manned and supervised by USSR personnel. And in any case, “The only thing which could definitely sink or destroy Soviet influence in the Middle East would be the disappearance of the state of Israel.” Moscow’s chief goal, in other words, was merely to gain acknowledgement of its “right to have a say in the area.”¹⁰

Above all, the Arab-Israeli issue made the Middle East a part of the world where a direct U.S.-Soviet confrontation was a real possibility. While Vietnam represented the United States’ “most anguishing problem,” Nixon declared at one point, it was not its “most dangerous. That grim distinction must go to the situation in the Middle East with its vastly greater potential for drawing Soviet policy and our own into a collision that could prove uncontrollable.”¹¹ The Kremlin leaders held similar views. General Secretary of the USSR Communist Party Leonid Brezhnev, for instance, was well aware that an Arab-Israeli military conflict could escalate to the nuclear level. The situation was, therefore, “extremely dangerous,” and characterized by “explosiveness.”¹² The Middle East dispute, he repeatedly stressed, directly involved the superpowers’ respective interests and in the absence of a settlement, U.S.-USSR relations would “be subject to risk with insuing [*sic*] unpredictable consequences.” A solution, therefore, was needed to “remove a source of dangerous tension.”¹³

¹⁰ Stanley Hoffmann, “A New Policy for Israel,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (1975), pp. 421-422.

¹¹ Nixon’s Second Annual Report to Congress on United States Foreign Policy, February 25, 1971, American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=3324>. On the pathways to unintended escalation, see Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect for Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 82-94; and Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹² Letter from Brezhnev to Nixon, May 3, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15: *Soviet Union, June 1972-August 1974* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), p. 328; and Letter from Brezhnev to Nixon, May 13, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 461.

¹³ Note from Brezhnev to Nixon, March 27, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14: *Soviet Union, October 1971-May 1972* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2006), pp. 232-233.

More fundamentally, the period that followed the Six-Day War coincided with the beginnings of an improvement in superpower relations. The early 1970s, of course, represented the high-water mark of U.S.-USSR détente and seemed to preface a significant mitigation of the rivalry between Washington and Moscow. The two sides, after all, had demonstrated their ability to cooperate on a number of issues which they mutually deemed crucial to international security, as when they worked jointly to reach a political settlement in postwar Europe and to gain support for the 1968 Nonproliferation Treaty.¹⁴ As National Security Adviser Walt Rostow observed, American-Soviet discussions relating to the negotiation of the treaty had been “fascinating,” for they had demonstrated “how intimately the U.S. and USSR can work when they have isolated an issue in which both countries feel they have a substantial national interest.”¹⁵ And, as Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin later put it, a genuine détente between the two sides “not only would have charted the relations between us but would have profoundly affected all international relations whenever the two superpowers threw their weight on the same side of any issue.”¹⁶

Given the powerful strategic logic that underlay Ball’s ideas, as well as the generally favorable trends in superpower relations, it is quite surprising that the United States and the Soviet Union did not join efforts on the Arab-Israeli question. A settlement would have terminated a long-standing dispute—the consequences of which had persistently jeopardized U.S. and Soviet interests in a geopolitically crucial region—and removed an important potential cause of confrontation. And because the two sides more or less agreed on the terms of a deal, there did not exist any reason why the political obstacles that had prevented the Arabs and

¹⁴ On postwar diplomacy in Europe, see Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Memo from Rostow to President Lyndon Johnson, May 21, 1968, folder 5, box 225, Europe and USSR Country File, National Security File, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas. On U.S.-USSR cooperation in the field of nonproliferation policy, see Francis J. Gavin, “Strategies of Inhibition: U.S. Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Nonproliferation,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2015), pp. 11, 17-18, 42.

¹⁶ Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents, 1962-1986* (New York: Times Books, 1995), p. 259.

Israelis from negotiating would necessarily be shifted to the superpower level. In short, the structural conditions that shaped the politics of the Middle East dispute at this time would lead one to believe, based on mainstream realist theory, that the United States and the Soviet Union would have cooperated to make the resolution of the conflict the touchstone of détente.¹⁷

This, of course, was not the ultimate outcome. Although Washington and Moscow discussed the problem with tremendous frequency throughout the period from the June 1967 War to the March 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, the superpowers were never able to sustain a common position aimed at pressuring their respective clients into accepting a peaceful solution. The Americans and Soviets may have wielded potent leverage with the parties to the dispute; agreed on the terms of a settlement; and believed it to be in their mutual interests to terminate the conflict but, in the end, that did not lead to their cooperating in the Middle East. To the contrary, by the end of the 1970s, the Arab-Israeli question had developed into a leading cause of détente's *demise*, rather than an issue contributing to a strengthening of U.S.-USSR relations.

This puzzle is the heart of this dissertation. In its simplest terms, my goal is to explain why the superpowers did not join efforts to resolve the Middle East conflict during the period from 1967 to 1979. Was this a missed opportunity, not only to clinch Arab-Israeli peace but also to mitigate the dangers of the broader U.S.-Soviet global rivalry? And given that the superpowers had demonstrated their ability to work together on other important political problems, what was unique about this dispute that precluded the sort of approach that people like Ball had advocated?

¹⁷ On realist theory, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1978), pp. 167-214; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Marc Trachtenberg, "The Question of Realism: An Historian's View," *Security Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2003), pp. 156-194; and Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). On "offensive realism," see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001). See also Randall L. Schweller, "Neorealism's Status Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1996), pp. 90-121; and Stephen G. Brooks, "Dueling Realisms," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (1997), pp. 445-477.

In short, I use the Middle East as a window to understand what drove the continuation of the Cold War at a time when a major reduction in international tensions seemed possible.

To answer these questions, I explore four main variables. First, many scholars claim that U.S.-USSR cooperation on this issue would have been impossible because, *détente* notwithstanding, Moscow was basically uninterested in reaching a political accommodation with Washington during this phase of the Cold War. Western efforts to relax tensions with the Kremlin, Stephen Sestanovich asserts, “amounted to the realization of *all major Soviet military and diplomatic desiderata*,” but such concessions were simply insufficient to alter their underlying hostility toward the United States.¹⁸ Once the USSR leadership had concluded in the middle 1970s that the global balance of power had shifted in its favor, Adam Ulam writes, it was hardly realistic to expect the Soviets “to abide by the same obligations and cautions they had pledged to observe on the earlier occasion.”¹⁹ “Until [Mikhail] Gorbachev,” Ambassador Jack Matlock later recalled, “we had a leadership that lied and cheated and they were almost impossible to deal with.... They simply weren’t willing to negotiate.”²⁰

Scholars have applied these arguments with equal, if not greater, vigor to the specific case of the Middle East. The USSR, one historian contends, “aimed to delegitimize Israel’s right to exist.” Had the Soviet Union achieved its goals, he concludes: “[T]he likely result would have been the destruction of the state of Israel in the 1970s or 1980s and with it the expulsion of almost two million Jews from the region.”²¹ It “may well have been the most important

¹⁸ Stephen Sestanovich, “Did the West Undo the East,” in Nikolas K. Gvosdev, ed., *The Strange Death of Soviet Communism: A Postscript* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2008), p. 38 (emphasis in original).

¹⁹ Adam B. Ulam, “The World Outside,” in Robert F. Byrnes, ed., *After Brezhnev: Sources of Soviet Conduct in the 1980s* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 353. See also William Odom, “The Pluralist Image,” in *The Strange Death of Soviet Communism*, pp. 147-149.

²⁰ Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and his Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 125.

²¹ Jeffrey Herf, “‘At War with Israel’: East Germany’s Key Role in Soviet Policy in the Middle East,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2014), pp. 129-130. For a similar interpretation of Soviet policy, see David

consideration for Soviet leaders,” Alvin Rubinstein posits, “to keep Egypt from negotiating a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict lest this eliminate from the Middle East the festering problem that helped the Soviet Union intrude itself into the politics of the region.”²² An attitude of this sort, of course, would have ruled out any possibility for joint American-Soviet action.

Alternatively, small states can in some circumstances resist pressure from great powers, even in the context of dependent patron-client relationships. “Alliances,” Robert Keohane writes, “have in curious ways increased the leverage of the little in their dealings with the big.” Whereas major powers like the United States and the Soviet Union have foreign policy considerations on a global scale, small countries are free “to concentrate on a narrow range of vital interests and ignore almost everything else.”²³ Despite its commanding superiority in national capabilities in nearly every significant dimension, Richard Betts asserts, the United States failed to achieve its objectives in Vietnam because the conflict represented “a competition in resolve.” The “critical factor” in the outcome, thus, was the “fundamental asymmetry of national interests.”²⁴ And because asymmetric alliances typically focus on regional matters, Stephen Walt observes: “[T]he client will usually have a far greater stake in the outcome. Thus the asymmetry of motivation will usually favor clients even when they are extremely dependent on external support.”²⁵

Kimche, *The Last Option: After Nasser, Arafat and Saddam Hussein—The Quest for Peace in the Middle East* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), pp. 7-28.

²² Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile: The Soviet-Egyptian Influence Relationship since the June War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. xvi.

²³ Robert O. Keohane, “The Big Influence of Small Allies,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 2 (1971), pp. 161-163. Note also Thomas Schelling’s conclusion that weakness can potentially augment bargaining leverage. See Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 22-23, 37, 52, 158.

²⁴ Richard K. Betts, “Interests, Burdens, and Persistence: Asymmetries between Washington and Hanoi,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (1980), pp. 520, 523.

²⁵ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p. 138. See also Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, “Alliance Strategy: U.S.-Small Allies Relationships,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1980), pp. 202-216; Michael I. Handel, “Does the Dog Wag the Tail or Vice Versa? Patron-Client Relations,” *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1982), pp. 24-35; and Arthur A. Stein, “Recalcitrance and Initiative: US Hegemony and Regional Powers in Asia and Europe after World War II,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2013), pp. 147-177. Note also the view held by some international relations scholars that clients can on occasion drag their senior alliance partners, unwillingly, into military conflicts. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 167; and

Such logic might conceivably have applied to the Arab-Israeli question during the period from 1967 to 1979. “In conflicts where memory, identity, and history figure prominently,” one former U.S. Middle East official writes, “a great power—especially a great power from far away—has far less at stake in a particular outcome than does a small power in the heart of the contested region.... And the locals’ dependence on America doesn’t necessarily guarantee American influence.”²⁶ It is, thus, rather unsurprising that both U.S. and USSR leaders at times expressed frustration with the difficulties involved in delivering Israeli and Arab concessions. As Nixon summarized a Hebrew proverb to Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko at one point, God had created Adam out of soft earth, whereas Eve had emerged from Adam’s hard rib. “If the Minister had ever met [Israeli Prime Minister] Golda Meir,” the president said, “he would recognize the truth of this saying.”²⁷ One need only review what Soviet officials frequently said about the Arabs to conclude that Moscow at times had similar difficulties with its own clients.²⁸

Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1990), pp. 137-168. For a skeptical assessment of this argument, see Michael Beckley, “The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts,” *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2015), pp. 7-48. Some scholars have further theorized that junior partners are better positioned to gain disproportionate shares of alliance benefits. See Mancur Olson and Richard Zeckhauser, “An Economic Theory of Alliances,” *Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (1966), pp. 266-279. By contrast, see James D. Morrow, “Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (1991), pp. 904-933.

²⁶ Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land: America’s Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2008), pp. 37, 64. See also Abraham Ben-Zvi, *The United States and Israel: The Limits of the Special Relationship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 1-27; Alan R. Taylor, *The Superpowers and the Middle East* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), pp. xii, 42, 194; Bernard Lewis, “The Great Powers, the Arabs and the Israelis,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (1969), pp. 651-652; and Thomas R. Wheelock, “Arms for Israel: The Limit of Leverage,” *International Security*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1978), pp. 123-137. Note also Barry Posen’s statement: “The state of Israel may be the most problematic reckless driver allied with the United States.” See Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 44.

²⁷ Memo for the President’s File, “Subject: President Nixon’s Meeting with USSR Foreign Minister Gromyko on September 29, 1971, from 3:00 p.m. to 4:40 p.m. in the Oval Office of the White House,” September 29, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13: *Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), p. 1041.

²⁸ Note for example Gromyko’s later musings about Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. See Gromyko, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), pp. 269-274. See also Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), p. 282.

Mistrust and misperception can also create barriers to international cooperation. Leaders, one international relations scholar argues, “often fail to agree because they have incorrectly estimated the other side’s motives and intentions.” In particular, partially due to psychological biases: “In entrenched conflicts, mistrust is not easily overcome.”²⁹ If relations between states have been especially strained in recent history, policymakers might ultimately construct an “enemy image” of their negotiating partner. “These images,” it has been theorized, “quickly become resistant to disconfirmation.... The image becomes more and more ingrained, and the responses associated with it more and more automatic.”³⁰ Thus, as perhaps the leading scholar of this issue has written: “[I]t is often impossible to explain crucial decisions and policies without reference to the decision-makers’ beliefs about the world and their images of others.”³¹

Anyone who has studied the middle Cold War must consider seriously the possibility that three decades of geopolitical and ideological rivalry had conditioned U.S. and USSR officials to view one another with considerable suspicion. The legacy of mistrust generated by this competition, in fact, might have resulted in a number of missed opportunities for American-Soviet cooperation on arms control throughout this period.³² Certainly many U.S. strategists—including Nixon, Kissinger, and Brzezinski—harbored major doubts about USSR intentions

²⁹ Deborah Welch Larson, “Trust and Missed Opportunities in International Relations,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1997), pp. 703-704. On trust in international politics, see also Aaron M. Hoffman, “A Conceptualization of Trust in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2002), pp. 375-401.

³⁰ Charles A. Duelfer and Stephen Benedict Dyson, “Chronic Misperception and International Conflict: The U.S.-Iraq Experience,” *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2011), p. 96.

³¹ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 28. On misperception and international politics, see also Robert Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception,” *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1968), pp. 454-479; Arthur A. Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate: Circumstance and Choice in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 55-86; Arthur A. Stein, “When Misperception Matters,” *World Politics*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (1982), pp. 505-526; and Deborah Welch Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

³² Deborah Welch Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust: U.S.-Soviet Relations during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

when they took office.³³ While less is known about the Soviet side, suspicion of Washington's intentions seems to have influenced similarly Moscow's decision-making.³⁴

Finally, many scholars of U.S. foreign relations have observed that domestic politics play an important role in shaping American statecraft.³⁵ Public opinion in the United States can sometimes constrain the White House in its conduct of diplomacy, as can the actions of Congress.³⁶ Presidents also must consider how their actions abroad might affect their prospects for reelection and, consequently, the electoral cycle can influence how the executive branch approaches certain foreign policy choices.³⁷ Likewise, the media frequently impacts domestic

³³ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Hal Brands, *What is Good Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994); Keren Yarhi-Milo, "In the Eye of the Beholder: How Leaders and Intelligence Communities Assess the Intentions of Adversaries," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2013), pp. 22-26; and Charles Gati, ed., *Zbig: The Strategy and Statecraft of Zbigniew Brzezinski* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

³⁴ Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007). On the views of the Soviet military, see Dale R. Herspring, *The Soviet High Command, 1967-1989: Personalities and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

³⁵ This is not to say that domestic politics were necessarily epiphenomenal to the Soviet foreign policy decision-making process. An analysis of this issue, however, is beyond the scope of this dissertation. On the idea that leaders in autocratic regimes must also take such considerations into account, see Jessica L. Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve," *International Organization*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (2008), pp. 35-64.

³⁶ On American public opinion and foreign policy, see Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1992), pp. 49-73; and John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973). On Congress, see James M. Lindsay, "Congress and Foreign Policy: Why the Hill Matters," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 107, No. 4 (1992-1993), pp. 607-628. On the interaction between elite preferences and public opinion, see John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); John Zaller, "What Nature and Origins Leaves Out," *Critical Review*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2012), pp. 569-642; Adam J. Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Elizabeth N. Saunders, "War and the Inner Circle: Democratic Elites and the Politics of Using Force," *Security Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2015), pp. 466-501; and John G. Bullock, "Elite Influence on Public Opinion in an Informed Electorate," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (2011), pp. 496-515.

³⁷ William B. Quandt, "The Electoral Cycle and the Conduct of Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 101, No. 5 (1986), pp. 825-837; and Nikolay Marinov, William G. Nomikos, and Josh Robbins, "Does Electoral Proximity Affect Security Policy?" *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (2015), pp. 762-773. A president's margin of victory in an election, one scholar claims, might also affect the White House's freedom of maneuver. See Philip B.K. Potter, "Electoral Margins and American Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (2013), pp. 505-518.

debates on international issues.³⁸ If this were not enough, U.S. decision-makers must sometimes contend with the influence of ethnic lobbies.³⁹ In short, the White House maneuvers within a domestic environment that can limit its freedom of action from many directions.⁴⁰

Again, one must consider the possibility that this variable affected the great power diplomacy of the Middle East during the period with which this study is concerned. A number of scholars have argued that Americans' generally favorable disposition toward Israel has generated strong public opinion constraints on any president who has sought to exert serious pressure on Jerusalem.⁴¹ In addition, at least one former U.S. official has written that Congress can affect Middle East policy without even taking any action, due to the White House's anticipation of how the legislative branch will treat its proposals.⁴² Moreover, there is significant evidence to suggest that presidents have been limited in their ability to devote significant political capital to the

³⁸ Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, "The Relationships between the Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 11 (2008), pp. 39-65.

³⁹ There now exists a vast literature on this topic. For a sampling of works on this issue, see Charles Mathias, Jr., "Ethnic Groups and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 5 (1981), pp. 975-998; Stephen A. Garrett, "Eastern European Ethnic Groups and American Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 92, No. 2 (1978), pp. 301-323; Patrick J. Haney and Walt Vanderbush, "The Role of Ethnic Interest Groups in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Case of the Cuban American National Foundation," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (1999), pp. 341-361; Yossi Shain, "Ethnic Diasporas and U.S. Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 109, No. 5 (1994-1995), pp. 811-841; Jonathan C. Smith, "Foreign Policy for Sale? Interest Group Influence on President Clinton's Cuba Policy, August 1994," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1998), pp. 207-220; and Pat Choate, *Agents of Influence: How Japan's Lobbyists in the United States Manipulate America's Political and Economic System* (New York: Knopf, 1990). Scholars working in this area tend to derive their conclusions from the fact that organized groups enjoy asymmetric advantages in overcoming collective action problems. On this concept, see Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

⁴⁰ For more general treatments of this issue, see Melvin Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy: The Impact of Domestic Politics on U.S. Foreign Policy, 1789-1994* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Fredrik Logevall, "Domestic Politics," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, Third Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); and Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (1988), pp. 427-460.

⁴¹ Michael J. Koplow, "Value Judgment: Why Do Americans Support Israel?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2011), pp. 266-302; Jerome Slater, "The Two Books of Mearsheimer and Walt," *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2009), pp. 56-57; Michael N. Barnett, "Identity and Alliances in the Middle East," in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 400-447; and Walter Russell Mead, "The New Israel and the Old," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (2008), pp. 28-46.

⁴² William B. Quandt, *Decade of Decisions: American Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1976* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), p. 20. See also Dan Fleshler, *Transforming America's Israel Lobby: The Limits of Its Power and the Potential for Change* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac, 2009), pp. 43-45, 97-100.

Arab-Israeli dispute because of their concerns about the American electoral clock.⁴³ One expert has likewise argued that media coverage of the Middle East conflict in the United States has been heavily skewed in Jerusalem's favor, at least in more recent years.⁴⁴ And most importantly, a number of scholars—most notably political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt—have asserted that the “Israel lobby” has effectively prevented Washington from pursuing an evenhanded approach to the Arab-Israeli problem.⁴⁵

There are, thus, four main reasons that might explain the failure of the superpowers to cooperate in the Middle East. Was a joint approach by Washington and Moscow infeasible due to the hostile nature of Soviet policy? Were the Arabs and Israelis, despite their dependence on the great powers, able to offset their relative inferiority in capabilities and thereby block a U.S.-USSR solution? Or was the outcome primarily a product of misperception, which resulted from the legacy of suspicion generated by the initial period of the Cold War? And what role, if any, did American domestic politics play in this story?

⁴³ William B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1986), pp. 6-29.

⁴⁴ Jerome Slater, “Muting the Alarm over the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: *The New York Times* versus *Haaretz*,” *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2007), pp. 84-120.

⁴⁵ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007). For a sampling of other works on this issue, see Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, pp. 75-124; Edward Tivnan, *The Lobby: Jewish Political Power and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Robert H. Trice, *Interest Groups and the Foreign Policy Process: U.S. Policy in the Middle East* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976); Mitchell Geoffrey Bard, *The Water's Edge and Beyond: Defining the Limits to Domestic Influence on United States Middle East Policy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1991); John B. Judis, *Genesis: Truman, American Jews, and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014); Anatol Lieven, *America, Right or Wrong? An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 173-216; Keohane, “The Big Influence of Small Allies,” pp. 177-178; Shlomo Ben-Ami et al., “The War over Israel's Influence,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 155 (2006), pp. 57-66; Robert C. Lieberman, “The ‘Israel Lobby’ and American Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2009), pp. 235-257; Walter Russell Mead, “Jerusalem Syndrome: Decoding the Israel Lobby,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 6 (2007), pp. 160-168; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “Is It Love or the Lobby? Explaining America's Special Relationship with Israel,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2009), pp. 58-78; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Blind Man and the Elephant in the Room: Robert Lieberman and the Israel Lobby,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2009), pp. 259-281; Connie Bruck, “Friends of Israel,” *New Yorker*, September 1, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/01/friends-israel>; and Michael Massing, “The Storm over the Israel Lobby,” *New York Review of Books*, June 8, 2006, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2006/jun/08/the-storm-over-the-israel-lobby/?page=1>.

The argument I advance to answer these questions is straightforward. The basic claim is that by as early as 1970, and certainly by 1973, there was a real opportunity for the superpowers to cooperate in the Middle East. Contrary to what most scholars have argued, the Soviets were by this time intensely focused on this objective. Aside from its desire to consolidate its position with its clients, Moscow wanted a settlement because of the tremendous importance it attached to improving its relationship with Washington. Fearful that a war in the Middle East would damage its détente policy, result in another defeat for the Arabs, and possibly lead to a confrontation, the USSR was eager to work with the Americans to find a solution that would preserve both superpowers' legitimate interests in the area.

But if the problem was not related to the shape of Soviet policy, what explains the outcome of non-cooperation?

I argue that two principal factors on the American side were of fundamental importance to the result. First, domestic political considerations consistently limited the ability of White House decision-makers to pursue the sort of agreement that Moscow and its Arab clients would have been willing to accept. Already on the defensive at home because of his handling of the Vietnam War, President Lyndon Johnson chose not to make the Middle East a priority in the aftermath of the June 1967 War because of the expenditure of political capital that such an effort would have demanded. Similarly, Nixon feared that pressing for an Arab-Israeli settlement might jeopardize his administration's ability to maintain domestic support for its Vietnam policy. More importantly, when the Soviets approached the president in September 1971 with a major peace offer—one he found quite attractive—he felt that he could not afford to move on the problem until after the 1972 presidential election. Although Nixon clearly hoped to make progress in the Middle East by working in conjunction with the Soviets in his second term, the Watergate

scandal that ultimately crippled his presidency prevented him from doing so. And when President Jimmy Carter attempted to cooperate with the Kremlin leaders in 1977, the result was a swift and forceful backlash that caused a further erosion of domestic support for a White House already struggling to gain backing at home for its Arab-Israeli policy.⁴⁶

The second factor was more substantive. Despite the USSR interest in a settlement, the deeply anti-Soviet views held by key U.S. officials mitigated sharply the structural pressures that, according to realist theory, should have played a more powerful role in shaping American Middle East diplomacy. Even though the Kremlin repeatedly made clear its willingness to concert with Washington and took more or less the same position on the issue, White House strategists made the exclusion of the Soviet Union from the peace process a top priority. In particular, Kissinger, who due to Watergate was in command of Middle East policy, preferred to sideline the USSR and thereby make “gains” at its expense. Kissinger’s strategy, in fact, arguably placed this objective above all others. In short, although from a purely structural standpoint it would have made the most sense for Washington to welcome the Kremlin’s interest in Middle East peace, in practice the Americans pursued a very different approach after 1973.

Yet, to say that U.S. diplomacy was the result of mistrust and misperception would be an oversimplification. To be sure, part of the hesitance of people like Johnson, Rostow, Nixon, Kissinger, and Brzezinski to accept a collaborative framework derived from their inherent suspicion of Soviet intentions. Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that by 1971 American strategists correctly understood the Kremlin’s policy in the Middle East and moved to exclude Moscow from the diplomacy anyway. Indeed, one gets the sense that U.S. officials would not have been interested in cooperating with the Soviet Union no matter how great an effort USSR

⁴⁶ As will be discussed, the American domestic political context also limited opportunities for U.S-Soviet agreement by forcing the United States to approach the Arab-Israeli problem through a “step-by-step” approach.

representatives made to persuade them of their genuine desire for an agreement. When viewed in this way, American policy is quite puzzling.⁴⁷ One is left with the conclusion that U.S. policy was simply not being formulated in a manner consistent with realist principles and that this basic fact potentially contributed to a missed opportunity for peace.

These findings are important in empirical terms. To be sure, I am not the first scholar to claim that the superpowers lost a chance to resolve the Middle East dispute during this period of the Cold War. “As a result of Kissinger’s misinterpretation or misrepresentation of [the] Soviet position, which hardly could be accurately characterized as wedded to ‘the maximum Arab program,’” Jerome Slater has written, “the early 1970s became a tragedy of lost opportunities, first to avoid the 1973 war, later to use the war to bring about a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.”⁴⁸ To my knowledge, however, no researcher has yet put forward this argument on the basis of primary source, and especially archival, records.⁴⁹ In fact, many scholars have argued that one cannot even study the domestic side of this question using documentary evidence.⁵⁰ And because I am concerned primarily with the great power aspect of

⁴⁷ One could argue that U.S. strategists like Kissinger were simply behaving as “offensive realists.” See Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Even this theory, however, probably would not predict an outcome of non-cooperation in cases where great powers share a major interest in seeing local disputes terminated.

⁴⁸ Jerome Slater, “The Superpowers and an Arab-Israeli Political Settlement: The Cold War Years,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 105, No. 4 (1990-1991), pp. 574-575.

⁴⁹ Historian Craig Daigle has utilized primary sources to study this issue. See Daigle, *The Limits of Détente: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012). My argument, however, is at odds with Daigle’s.

⁵⁰ Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy*, p. 165; Slater, “The Two Books of Mearsheimer and Walt,” p. 13; and Elizabeth N. Saunders, “Transparency without Tears: A Pragmatic Approach to Transparent Security Studies Research,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2014), p. 693. For a somewhat more optimistic view, which nevertheless accepts the idea that American officials will be reluctant to discuss domestic political considerations even privately, see Logevall, “Domestic Politics,” pp. 154, 163. Note also the claim made by some scholars that case studies are generally an ineffective or insufficient method for studying the influence of domestic politics on U.S. foreign policy. See Trice, *Interest Groups and the Foreign Policy Process*, pp. 23-25, 51, 72-73; John Zaller, “Strategic Politicians, Public Opinion, and the Gulf Crisis,” in Lance Bennett and David Paletz, eds., *Taken by Storm: The News Media, U.S. Foreign Policy, and the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 254, 270; and John Zaller, “Coming to Grips with V.O. Key’s Concept of Latent Opinion,” in Michael B. MacKuen and George Rabinowitz, eds., *Electoral Democracy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 320. Note as well that Mearsheimer and Walt rely on open sources in their empirical analysis. See Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 20; and Massing, “The Storm over the Israel Lobby.”

this issue, my conclusions contribute to the growing debate over what caused the reversal of détente and an intensification of the Cold War in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁵¹

On a conceptual level, this story underscores the close connection between domestic politics and statecraft. While my view is distinct from that held by scholars like Mearsheimer and Walt, who claim that special interest group pressure more or less determines on its own the choices U.S. officials make with regard to the Arab-Israeli dispute, my conclusions nonetheless highlight the fundamentally important role that politics at home play, in a variety of ways, in shaping American diplomacy in the Middle East. One of the major policy lessons that emerges from this study is the need for White House strategists to employ appropriate tactics for managing their domestic base on this issue. Given the continued salience of this matter, this is a takeaway that should not be underestimated.⁵²

Perhaps more significantly, this story contributes to the major theoretical and policy debate among international relations experts on the whole question of realism. Détente's ultimate failure, and the exacerbation of U.S.-USSR tensions that ensued, led many observers to conclude that a strategy grounded in power political considerations was both unworkable and suboptimal. Americans in particular began to reject more forcefully the idea that foreign policy could or should, in the final analysis, be geared toward promoting national interests based on calculations about the incentives created by systemic forces at the international level. If one needed a reason

⁵¹ My basic view on this issue is informed by Georges-Henri Soutou, "Georges Pompidou and U.S.-European Relations," in Marc Trachtenberg, ed., *Between Empire and Alliance: America and Europe during the Cold War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), pp. 181-182.

⁵² If anything, the American domestic context has probably become a more important factor shaping U.S. Middle East policy since the end of the Cold War. See Daniel C. Kurtzer et al., *The Peace Puzzle: America's Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace, 1989-2011* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 276. See also William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 417-419.

to oppose a power political approach, it was necessary to look no further than the failed U.S. attempt to apply such a strategy toward the Soviet Union during the middle Cold War period.⁵³

The implication of my argument, however, points to a wholly different conclusion. Despite their reputations as prominent realist statesmen, what stands out from a careful historical analysis of the time during which individuals like Nixon, Kissinger, and Brzezinski were in office is that American strategy in the Middle East and toward the Soviet Union was *not* crafted to meet structural and power political requirements. Domestic political factors continually intruded into the foreign policy decision-making process in ways that encumbered Washington's task of achieving Arab-Israeli peace. And even when politics at home represented a more minor constraint, the United States was unwilling to move jointly with the Kremlin. The fact that American officials well understood USSR intentions and basically agreed with Moscow on the contours of a settlement—yet nevertheless adopted a policy of seeking to exclude the Soviets from the peace process—leaves the realist perplexed. Indeed, one is left with the inescapable impression that Washington was simply uninterested in solving the problem with the Soviets, even though structural forces had generated powerful incentives to pursue just such an approach. U.S. policy, in other words, came close to what Robert Jervis has termed “pseudo-Realism,” and his analysis of what this sort of policy typically leads to applies with great force to this case. “To act only on what gives one's country competitive advantage—to interpret the prescriptions of Realism crudely,” he observes, “is to court great dangers.” Indeed, “The failure to consider the other side's alternatives is shortsighted because it often leads to unnecessary conflicts; it also is immoral in that it treats others as though they had no legitimate interests, as though they had no hopes and fears, as though there was no way to build common interests.”⁵⁴ With this in mind, the

⁵³ On realism's unpopularity in the United States, see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

⁵⁴ Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, pp. 126-128.

major flaw in U.S. Middle East strategy from 1967 to 1979 was that it was far too often inconsistent with mainstream realist principles. Had the United States pursued an alternative diplomacy—one that took into consideration the core, legitimate interests of the Israelis, Arabs, and Soviets—the outcome, both in the region and in broader Cold War terms, might have been fundamentally different.

Chapter 1: Patrons and Clients

There is nothing so dreadful as a great victory, except of course a great defeat.
—Walter Laqueur¹

There is very small chance for [a] settlement unless we push on the Israelis and the Russians push on the Arabs. Even if this were done, a settlement is doubtful because the two sides are so far apart. This is a sad prognosis.
—George Ball²

On the morning of June 10, 1967, President Lyndon Johnson received an urgent message from Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin via the Washington-Moscow hotline. The Soviet leader, the communication stated, was upset that Israel, which was at that very moment completing its conquest of the Syrian Golan Heights, had “completely ignored” the resolutions that had passed the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) calling for an end to the hostilities that had erupted between Jerusalem and its Arab neighbors six days earlier. “A very crucial moment has now arrived,” Kosygin warned, “which forces us, if military actions are not stopped in the next few hours, to adopt an independent decision.” Although the Soviet leader understood that such a course might well result in “a clash” between the superpowers that could “lead to a grave catastrophe,” the message nevertheless conveyed a not-so-subtle threat. Unless the Israelis halted their advance, it stated: “[N]ecessary actions will be taken, including military.”³ In the event, Israel quickly completed its takeover of the Golan Heights, bringing the crisis to an abrupt end.

Accounts differ as to how seriously Kosygin’s threat was taken in Washington, but the potential for a superpower confrontation had not simply been ignored.⁴ The atmosphere in the

¹ Walter Laqueur, *The Road to War: The Origin and Aftermath of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1968* (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 294.

² Summary Notes of the 591st Meeting of the National Security Council (NSC), September 25, 1968, in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1964-1968*, Vol. 20: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1967-1968* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2001), p. 517.

³ Message from Kosygin to Johnson, June 10, 1967, 8:48 a.m., in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19: *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2004), p. 409.

⁴ Some U.S. officials later claimed not to have been overly concerned. See Transcript, Arthur J. Goldberg, Oral History Interview I, March 23, 1983, by Ted Gittinger, Internet Copy, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas (LBJL); Memorandum of Conversation (Memcon), “Subject: The Hot Line Meetings and the Middle

Situation Room, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Richard Helms recalled, had been “tense,” with top U.S. officials speaking in extremely low voices.⁵ The U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, Llewellyn Thompson, had similar memories: “June 10 was a time of great concern and utmost gravity.”⁶ For his part, Johnson considered the situation serious enough to order the U.S. Sixth Fleet into the Eastern Mediterranean as a precautionary measure, and American officials took steps to ensure that the Israelis abided by the ceasefire.⁷

The Middle East, it was clear, had become a real source of danger to international security. The superpowers were, after all, arrayed against one another—with the United States aligned with Israel and the Soviet Union backing the Arabs—meaning any conflict in the region could conceivably escalate to involve them directly. And given the unsettled state of affairs that prevailed following the Six-Day War, such a scenario was by no means purely theoretical.

The situation, however, was not hopeless. The same factors that made the Arab-Israeli dispute a Cold War threat, after all, would facilitate the achievement of a settlement in the

East in New York,” November 7, 1968, folder: Arab-Israel, 1/168-1/20/69 [1 of 2], box 7, Harold H. Saunders Files, National Security File (NSF), LBJL; and Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 151.

⁵ Memorandum (Memo) for the Record, “Subject: Hot Line Meeting June 10, 1967,” October 22, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 410.

⁶ Memcon, “Subject: The Hot Line Exchanges,” November 4, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 414.

⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), pp. 301-303; Memcon, “Subject: Israel-Syria Cease Fire,” June 10, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, pp. 417-418; and Patrick Tyler, *A World of Trouble: The White House and the Middle East—from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), p. 101. The Soviets had no actual intention of intervening. Rather, the June 10 message had been motivated by a desire to shore up Moscow's position with its Arab clients and its concern about the Israeli threat to Damascus. See Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents, 1962-1986* (New York: Times, 1995), p. 161; Raymond L. Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2001), pp. 214-215; Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Presidio, 2003), pp. 295-299; Galia Golan, “The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the June 1967 Six-Day War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2006), pp. 13-15; Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War II to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 64-65; Jon D. Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs: The Soviet Union and War in the Middle East* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 57-63; Fred Wehling, *Irresolute Princes: Kremlin Decision Making in Middle East Crises, 1967-1973* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), pp. 50-51, 60-61, 65-66; and Douglas Little, “The Cold War in the Middle East: Suez Crisis to Camp David Accords,” in eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 2: *Crises and Détente* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 315.

Middle East. Given the compelling leverage that Washington and Moscow possessed with their respective clients, a joint American-Soviet approach to the problem would generate potent pressures on the parties to the conflict to accept a stable agreement. Indeed, now that the Israelis had gained a major bargaining chip to offer their Arab neighbors, namely, the territories they had seized, a deal negotiated by the superpowers on the basis of the principle of “land for peace” seemingly offered a path out of this predicament. With the United States and the Soviet Union both considering taking steps that would help mitigate their broader global rivalry, moreover, the Arab-Israeli problem represented an attractive issue on which the two sides could cooperate.

One would think, given the structure of the Middle East dispute and its salience in great power political terms, that the Soviets and Americans would have quickly joined forces to resolve the matter, but this, of course, was not to be the outcome. Washington and Moscow, in the event, proved extremely reluctant to exert their influence in the area; by the end of 1968, the peace negotiations had completely deadlocked. To be sure, the two sides had in November 1967 succeeded in working out mutually acceptable language, which led ultimately to the passage of UNSC Resolution 242, to this day the basis for Arab-Israeli negotiations. Even in this respect, however, the two countries’ capacity for cooperation had proved ephemeral. The overall tone of U.S.-USSR discussions on the issue had, in fact, been basically conflictual.

How is this result to be understood? The superpowers shared major interests in the Middle East—above all, the need to avoid a direct showdown in the area—and possessed ample influence to move the Arabs and Israelis toward a reasonable agreement. Why, then, was so little progress made? How, with the dangers created by the problem so readily apparent, was the conflict left to fester? What, in short, had prevented the U.S. and USSR from cooperating?

The American Interest in Arab-Israeli Peace

Johnson administration officials understood that the continuation of the Middle East conflict was, for a number of reasons, harmful to the United States in power political terms. First, American strategists desired a balanced policy, one that would avoid the region's division into Western and Soviet camps. U.S. officials, in fact, had been worried about this problem for some time. "We have learned over the years," Secretary of State Dean Rusk had written Johnson as early as January 1964, "that the key to a constructive Near Eastern policy is maintaining a balance in our relationships with the Arabs and Israel." Becoming too closely identified with Israel—especially in terms of military supply—the administration reasoned, "would not only destroy the influence we need to maintain with the Arabs but stimulate closer Arab-Soviet ties and reduce our ability to bring about an eventual peaceful solution to the Arab-Israel dispute."⁸

Abandoning Washington's restrained Middle East arms policy and establishing a closer relationship with Jerusalem, a February 1965 memorandum Rusk forwarded to the president had similarly concluded, would jeopardize the American objective of "preventing a polarization of the Arab-Israeli dispute along Cold War lines." An impartial approach was needed, the document argued, to avert "a *polarization* that would identify us wholly *with Israel* and unite the *Arabs in alliance* with the *Soviets* and [*Chinese Communists*] against us."⁹ The United States' "greatest single liability" in the Middle East, National Security Adviser Walt Rostow agreed, was the Arabs' "sincere belief that the 'Zionists exercise a veto on US policy.'"¹⁰

⁸ Memo from Rusk to Johnson with Enclosure, "Subject: Arab-Israel Problems—1964," January 16, 1964, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 18: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1964-1967* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2000), pp. 17, 19.

⁹ Memo from Rusk to Johnson with Enclosure, "Subject: Jordan Arms Request—Impact on Near East Policy," February 1, 1965, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 18, pp. 283, 284 (emphasis in original). See also Zach Levey, "The United States' Skyhawk Sale to Israel, 1966: Strategic Exigencies of an Arms Deal," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2004), pp. 255-276.

¹⁰ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, "Subject: Israeli Aid Package," May 8, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 18, p. 818. American strategists had actually been concerned about the implications of an overly close U.S.-Israeli relationship even before Johnson had become president, which explains Washington's reluctance to offer Jerusalem

Such thinking, in fact, had influenced the manner in which the administration had managed the May-June 1967 crisis. If the United States intervened directly, U.S. officials had believed, the likely result would be the deterioration of the American position in the Arab world, to the ultimate benefit of the Soviet Union. Johnson, therefore, had acquiesced to Israel's decision to strike preemptively in part because the administration felt that such an outcome would be less damaging to Washington's position with the moderate Arabs.¹¹ The United States, Harold Saunders of the National Security Council (NSC) staff had argued as early as May 22, needed to minimize to the extent possible Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's "cheap political victory" by "*not identifying ourselves any more closely with Israel than necessary*. The more we so identify, the more we contribute to his victory and make it a victory over us."¹² The United States, he believed, was probably going to be "the sure loser" of the crisis because, despite twenty years of resistance to the idea of establishing a "special relationship" with Israel, it appeared as if Washington was going to be unable to maintain a balanced policy now. "We ought to consider," he therefore suggested, "admitting that we have failed and allow fighting to ensue. I know this may fly in the face of the President's own feelings about Israel. But the

a formal security guarantee under his predecessor, John F. Kennedy. As one State Department official argued as early as May 1961, "The Arabs would interpret such a gesture as an American attempt to coerce them into making peace with Israel and as an abandonment of an impartial attitude on the part of the United States." See Memo from Assistant Secretary of State Phillips Talbot to Rusk, "Subject: Suggested Reply to Memorandum of Israeli Ambassador [regarding] Arab-Israel Situation," May 1, 1961, in *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vol. 17: *Near East, 1961-1962* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1994), p. 94.

¹¹ On Johnson's likely approval of an Israeli preemptive attack via private channels, see William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 25-41, 49, 52; William B. Quandt, "Lyndon Johnson and the June 1967 War: What Color Was the Light?" *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (1992), pp. 198-228; and Jonathan Haslam, *Russia's Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 237.

¹² Memo from Saunders to Rostow, "Subject: Looking Ahead on Arab-Israel: Our Public Posture," May 22, 1967, folder: Arab-Israel, 4/1/66-12/31/67 [2 of 3], box 7, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL (emphasis in original).

question is whether we can help Israel more in the long run by alienating ourselves from the Arab world or by backing off just enough to keep our hand in there.”¹³

With this in mind, a core U.S. objective in the postwar diplomacy was to avoid becoming too closely aligned with the Israelis. The administration’s “overriding consideration,” Clark Clifford, who would soon become secretary of defense, believed, “must be our avoiding a polarization of the Middle East in which a small Israel, backed by a U.S. with an ambiguous commitment, faces the Arabs, led by extremists and backed by a determined USSR.”¹⁴ Allying with three million Israelis against 80 million Arabs, Saunders argued in the wake of the conflict, would be “strategically unsound—even if our whole interest were to protect the 3.”¹⁵

In addition, the Americans had few options for defending Israel in a crisis. Because U.S. strategists wanted to avoid an alignment between the United States and Israel, they were unable to offer Jerusalem a security guarantee. Providing Israel with such an assurance, a March 1965 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) had observed, “might lead toward a more pronounced polarization of the Arab-Israeli dispute to include the Soviets and Arabs on one side, and Israel and the West on the other.”¹⁶ With this in mind, the administration felt it had little choice but to acquiesce to Jerusalem’s request that the United States become its principal arms supplier, which, of course, undercut its efforts to maintain a balanced political stance in the Middle East.¹⁷ Thus, only a settlement would allow Washington to maintain a balanced posture in the area.

¹³ Memo from Saunders to Rostow with Attachment, “Arab-Israel: Where We Are and Where We’re Going,” May 31, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 211.

¹⁴ Quoted in Telegram from Rostow to Johnson, January 6, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, p. 71.

¹⁵ Memo from Saunders to Rostow and Special Presidential Assistant McGeorge Bundy, “Subject: A New US Policy for the Middle East,” July 3, 1967, folder: New Basic Policy, 4/1/66-1/20/69, box 8, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁶ NIE 30-65, “The Arab-Israeli Problem,” March 10, 1965, folder 30, box 6, NIEs, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁷ This was why the Americans made frequent attempts to persuade the Soviets to agree to a joint arms limitation agreement for the region.

And even in the absence of such factors, U.S. decision-makers would have faced serious dilemmas when thinking about how to provide for Israeli security against potential Arab and Soviet threats. The United States, after all, was still heavily preoccupied militarily in Southeast Asia, which diminished significantly its ability to project power to another distant theater of operations. It had, after all, been principally American involvement in Vietnam, coupled with insufficient support from Congress for yet another major U.S. military mission, which had limited Johnson's ability to support Israel during the May-June crisis. In any case, the fact that Moscow had by this time more or less erased Washington's strategic nuclear superiority complicated the administration's task of making any threat to intervene on Jerusalem's behalf credible, and made it easier for the Soviets to run risks. The USSR, one strategy paper argued, might now be "more prone to take advantage of opportunities to intervene in local conflicts or may be more readily drawn into such conflicts and, once involved, may be less willing to withdraw.... At present, this seems most likely to occur in the Middle East or Africa."¹⁸

It was the feeling of most American experts, moreover, that Israel's own interests would require it to negotiate a deal with the Arabs. It was Washington's belief, Rostow noted at one point, that "sitting on its present real estate won't bring long-term security to Israel."¹⁹ Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, the Americans felt, perhaps understood that the postwar situation was not sustainable, but lacked the political strength to take risks for peace: "It may not be overdramatic to describe him as a man who knows that what is best for his country may not be best

¹⁸ Paper Prepared in the Department of State, "Changing US-Soviet Strategic Relationships," December 18, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 14: *The Soviet Union* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2001), p. 610. The administration's concerns about this problem were based in part on the idea of the "stability-instability paradox." On this concept, see Glenn Synder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror," in Paul Seabury, ed., *The Balance of Power* (San Francisco, CA: Chandler, 1965), pp. 184-201.

¹⁹ Memo from Rostow to Special Presidential Assistant Harry McPherson, February 2, 1968, folder: Israel, 11/1/67-2/29/68 [1 of 3], box 17, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

for him.”²⁰ Washington, Rostow indicated in a memorandum, believed that Jerusalem needed to take advantage of its favorable bargaining position before circumstances changed: “We can’t agree that time is now on Israel’s side.... Israel’s future is too important to leave to legalisms.”²¹

Foremost in the minds of U.S. policymakers, however, was their awareness that, as Kosygin’s missive had portended, the Arab-Israeli problem could drag the superpowers into a direct showdown. Johnson, one high-ranking State Department official noted, considered the Middle East “in many ways... a more dangerous crisis than Vietnam, because it can involve a confrontation with the Russians, not the Chinese.”²² “As you know,” Rostow wrote in a prepared statement for the president to use in a meeting with Congressional leaders, “I have always regarded the potential danger in the Middle East as at least as great—if not greater—than in Southeast Asia, because of the potentiality of a U.S.-Soviet direct confrontation. We had a good, strong smell of that confrontation in the war of last June.”²³ The administration, Johnson later wrote, had been “reasonably sure” that the war in Vietnam could be contained, but the situation in the Middle East “was something else.” There was, the president felt, an ever-present risk that any border incident in the region could lead to a direct American-Soviet conflict.²⁴

So Johnson administration officials considered an Arab-Israeli settlement a major U.S. national security objective, but they did not think that the United States could achieve that aim purely on its own. USSR assistance with the Arabs, they felt, would be crucial in any negotiation. To be sure, the Americans did not believe that they could in a strict sense “impose” a solution. “It is something of an illusion,” Johnson wrote British Prime Minister Harold Wilson

²⁰ Memo from Saunders and John W. Foster to Rostow, “Subject: What It’s Like to be Levi Eshkol,” January 5, 1968, folder: Visit of Prime Minister Eshkol of Israel, January 7-8, 1968 [1 of 3], box 3, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

²¹ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, “Subject: Ambassador Harman’s Farewell Call, Tuesday, February 6—11:00 a.m.,” February 5, 1968, folder: Israel, 11/1/67-2/29/68 [1 of 3], box 17, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

²² Quoted in Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 151.

²³ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, August 23, 1968, folder 9, box 16, Walt W. Rostow Files, NSF, LBJL. See also Memcon, May 24, 1968, folder: 1/1/68-1/20/69 [1 of 3], Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

²⁴ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, pp. 287-288.

days after the June War, “that the four powers have the capacity to design and impose successfully a peace plan on the Near East. The states of the area have made it abundantly clear that they are not subject to effective control from outside.” The great powers, the president added, could only “try to create a climate in which the nations of the area themselves might gradually settle their affairs on a peaceful basis.”²⁵

But these assessments did not mean that the administration was opposed to working in conjunction with Moscow to reach an agreement, only that the United States would not relieve the Arabs of their obligation to commit to peace with Israel directly. “U.S.-USSR understandings, quietly achieved,” Rostow had written Johnson even in the midst of the war, “could play an important role” in moving the parties toward peace.²⁶ “Quiet collaboration with the Soviet Union in getting behind the next phase of the [Gunnar] Jarring [special UN] mission,” argued, “could be important and useful.”²⁷ The United States, Saunders suggested at one point, might consider “forgetting about negotiations altogether and attempting to arrange a settlement ourselves or with the USSR.”²⁸ The process, he felt, would go nowhere without “more direct help from us and the Soviets.”²⁹ Rusk made the point with even greater force. “We must try,” he said, “to get additional muscle behind Ambassador Jarring’s mission so we can draw reluctant people on both sides more toward a serious peaceful solution.” The superpowers, he conceded, could not “settle this situation among themselves in positive form,” but given the Middle East’s

²⁵ Telegram from Johnson to Wilson, June 16, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, pp. 507-508.

²⁶ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, June 7, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 340.

²⁷ Information Memo from Rostow to Johnson, November 8, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, p. 617.

²⁸ Memo from Saunders to Assistant Secretary of State Lucius Battle, “Subject: Katzenbach Exercise—Our Arab-Israel Course,” April 19, 1968, folder: Arab-Israel, 1/1/68-1/20/69 [1 of 2], box 7, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

²⁹ Quoted in Telegram from Rostow to Johnson, December 31, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 747-748.

strategic importance: “[W]e could hope that all outside powers, including the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. and others would bring [all?] their influence to bear that they could on the parties.”³⁰

The assumption held by the administration, then, was that the path to an Arab-Israeli settlement would run through Moscow. So what did Soviet policy in the Middle East look like? Was the Kremlin thinking along similar lines? Would the USSR leaders be willing to work with the Americans on the problem?

Picking up the Pieces: The June War and Soviet-Arab Relations

Nearly half a century later, the principal drivers of Soviet policy on the eve of the Six-Day War remain a subject of great debate. In recent years, two scholars have even gone so far as to claim that Moscow had intentionally sparked the conflict as part of an “inept conspiracy.” The war, they assert, was the result of “a successful Soviet-Arab attempt to provoke Israel into a preemptive strike,” with the aim of creating a pretext for a USSR preventive military attack on the nuclear reactor at Dimona. This, the authors argue, was “a central objective” for Moscow.³¹

The dominant view among scholars, however, is quite different. The idea that the Soviets had deliberately started a war in the Middle East to keep Israel from acquiring an independent atomic capability, one expert writes, is based “on highly circumstantial evidence, and the authors fail to make their case convincingly.” The argument is founded at times on “mere speculation” and is “highly dismissive of the importance of documentary evidence to historical research.”³²

What seems far more likely based on the latest information is that if Moscow had contributed to the eruption of the June 1967 War, it had, *at the very worst*, been through somewhat maladroit statecraft, rather than by a deliberate effort to instigate an Israeli preemptive

³⁰ Notes on Meeting, “President Johnson’s Notes on Meeting in the Cabinet Room,” December 4, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, p. 667 (brackets in original).

³¹ Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *Foxbats over Dimona: The Soviets’ Nuclear Gamble in the Six-Day War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 7, 27, 32.

³² Craig Daigle, Book Review, *Cold War History*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2009), p. 528.

strike against the Arabs. The responsibility for the escalation of the crisis that had preceded the conflict, as well as its outbreak, lay mainly with regional actors, especially Egypt. The overall thrust of USSR diplomacy during this period had, in fact, been characterized by marked restraint.

To be sure, Soviet efforts to tamp down the regional tensions that eventually caused the war had arguably not been forceful enough. The Kremlin had, of course, frequently repeated Syrian allegations of Israeli military buildups on the northern front during the months preceding the Six-Day War.³³ It was just such an alert, which in the end proved to have been exaggerated, that had precipitated the May-June crisis. And even when the Israelis attempted several times to assuage USSR concerns by proposing that Soviet representatives inspect the Syrian border, the Politburo had chosen to refuse the offers.³⁴

In addition, Moscow's declaratory policy during the weeks preceding the June 5 Israeli strike had been problematic. Even after Nasser had chosen to block the Gulf of Aqaba, a dangerous action which the Soviets had opposed, the Kremlin leaders were reluctant to press their client publicly. The day after the announcement of the Straits' closure, the USSR released a statement that could hardly be read as a call for restraint. "[T]hose who engage in unleashing aggression," the Soviet leaders had declared, "would encounter not only [the] united force of [the] Arab countries, but also decisive counter-action on [the] part of [the] USSR and all peace-loving states." As Thompson pointed out, such a statement was "remarkable for its complete whitewashing of Arab actions and for its charge, barely veiled, that it is [the] United States

³³ Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 27-31, 43-46; Walter Laqueur, *The Struggle for the Middle East: The Soviet Union in the Mediterranean, 1958-1968* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 49-50, 87-92; Alexei Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East: From Messianism to Pragmatism* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1993), pp. 63-66; Tyler, *A World of Trouble*, p. 77; and Audrey McInerney, "Prospect Theory and Soviet Policy towards Syria, 1966-1967," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1992), pp. 269-272. It should be noted that not all of these allegations were necessarily false, a fact that takes on added importance in any discussion of the May crisis that preceded the Six-Day War.

³⁴ Abba Eban, *Personal Witness: Israel through My Eyes* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1992), pp. 353-355; Wehling, *Irresolute Princes*, pp. 46, 49, 65, 136, 144-145, 148; and McInerney, "Prospect Theory and Soviet Policy," p. 274.

which by its direct and indirect support is responsible for Israel's aggressive behavior." More importantly, the ambassador had noted, the declaration could "easily be read by Arab leaders as [a] justification if not support for [the] course they are following."³⁵ The Kremlin, a Foreign Ministry official subsequently admitted, had refused to alter its public stance "because we were afraid of antagonising [Nasser]."³⁶ "If Moscow saw [Nasser's] saber rattling as risky," Jonathan Haslam writes, "its passivity did nothing to cool the atmosphere. It appeared to be a situation that could be exploited at little or no expense."³⁷ Thus, even former Premier Nikita Khrushchev later claimed that the Soviet Union bore "a large share of responsibility for what happened" because its efforts to restrain Egypt had been insufficient.³⁸

Even so, the Soviets had in no way set out to start a war. Kremlin rhetoric notwithstanding, the USSR had attached relatively little importance to the ideological struggle between "progressive" and "imperialist" forces in the Middle East prior to the conflict. "[A] strictly ideological line was never present," Soviet diplomat Georgy Kornienko recalled. After all, he observed, Moscow's Arab clients persecuted systematically "our brethren communists, but we still did not break with those leaders, and we still tried to have as good interstate relations as was possible."³⁹ Nasser, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev reportedly told Warsaw Pact leaders just a month prior to the beginning of the crisis, "was highly confused on ideological questions," but Moscow had nonetheless determined that it could "rely on him.... If we... want to achieve progress, then we must also accept

³⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, May 24, 1967, folder 10, box 15, Rostow Files, NSF, LBJL.

³⁶ Quoted in Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East*, p. 72.

³⁷ Haslam, *Russia's Cold War*, p. 235.

³⁸ Quoted in Wehling, *Irresolute Princes*, p. 41.

³⁹ Transcript from a Workshop at Oslo, Norway, "US-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy toward the Middle East and Africa in the 1970s," October 1-3, 1994, Odd Arne Westad, ed., p. 54.

sacrifices. One sacrifice we bear is the persecution of Egyptian Communists by Nasser.” The Soviets would accept this price, he had said, as the latter was “of inestimable value to us.”⁴⁰

With this in mind, it is clear that the Kremlin had not attempted, due to ideological considerations, to exploit the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam by precipitating a conflict in the Middle East aimed at Israel’s destruction. “We acknowledged the nation of Israel and we are not going against it,” Brezhnev informed Polish officials soon after the war. “One must say that the tendency of the Arabs to eliminate Israel was not correct.” Had the Arabs actually succeeded in conquering Israel, the general secretary had stressed, the United States would have intervened “and we would then be much closer to a third world war, since we would have to react as well. Then not a single stone would remain standing in Egypt, especially in Cairo.”⁴¹ “[C]ontrary to what was broadly believed in the West,” Kornienko said years later, “the Soviet Union was never interested in confrontation—any confrontation in the Middle East. We were always afraid to have conflicts, to have wars in that area, and to be involved in that war. We did absolutely nothing, at least consciously, for starting the war in 1967.” There had, in fact, been no effort “to organize a new Vietnam for the United States in the Middle East. Nothing of that kind.” Nor, he said, had there ever been a single moment “when we would be sorry about our role in creating Israel.... We were always for the existence of [an] independent Israeli state alongside... independent Arabs states, including a Palestinian state.”⁴²

More importantly, the Politburo had in the years preceding the Six-Day War begun to distance itself from the Arabs’ more radical tendencies. As early as September 1965, when

⁴⁰ Quoted in Erwin Weit, *At the Red Summit: Interpreter behind the Iron Curtain* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 153.

⁴¹ Record of Conversation between Polish Politburo Member Zenon Kliszko and Soviet Leader Leonid Brezhnev, Moscow, June 24, 1967, Cold War International History Project, (CWIHP), <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113621>.

⁴² Transcript, “US-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy,” pp. 53-54.

Nasser had visited the Soviet Union, USSR-Egyptian relations had been seriously strained by Kosygin's refusal to continue Moscow's generous aid policies toward Cairo.⁴³ The Kremlin had then further tightened the purse strings in the subsequent two years, so much so that even during the May 1967 crisis, the USSR ambassador in Cairo warned that if Egypt wanted more arms it would need to find the financial means to pay for them. When Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko had visited the month before, moreover, serious differences between the two countries had arisen over Egypt's extended military involvement in Yemen.⁴⁴

The general outline of Soviet Middle East strategy, in fact, fit nicely into the broader emerging trend in Moscow's foreign policy. "On the whole," Gromyko wrote in a key January 13 memorandum, which the Politburo ultimately approved, "international tension does not suit the state interests of the Soviet Union and its friends.... In the conditions of détente it is easier to consolidate and broaden the positions of the Soviet Union in the world." The USSR, the foreign minister argued, needed to focus to a much greater degree on its domestic financial situation, while seeking to secure a stable relationship with the United States. Relatedly, the Kremlin would have to adjust its approach to dealing with clients like Egypt and Syria, "so as to build our economic and trade cooperation with them increasingly on the principle of mutual benefit and commerce. Considering the experience of Vietnam and the Middle East," he added, "we should take timely measures to relax tension in the ganglions in the three continents where sharp conflicts are possible which, in turn, can combine to lead to an 'acute situation.'" Specifically, Gromyko concluded: "In this connection we should, while supporting the Arab countries in their

⁴³ Nasser was reportedly so upset about the outcome of the trip that he told his aides that he would soon move to eliminate entirely Soviet influence from Egypt.

⁴⁴ Guy Laron, "Stepping Back from the Third World: Soviet Policy toward the United Arab Republic, 1965-1967," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2010), pp. 104-110.

struggle against Israel's expansionist policy, flexibly dampen the extremist trends in the policy of certain Arab states, [for example] Syria, orienting them toward the domestic consolidation."⁴⁵

Thus, Moscow's motive for informing the Egyptians that Israel had mobilized a significant number of its forces along the Syrian border, though overstated, had been defensive in nature. In early April, of course, Israeli interceptors had engaged Syrian MiGs and downed seven such aircraft over the Golan Heights. More importantly, the Israelis had in fact been planning at least a "limited retaliatory raid" against the Damascus government, and on May 12 had publicly stated that unless Syria ceased its provocative actions, they would be forced to conduct a "military operation of great size and strength."⁴⁶ As even Saunders subsequently acknowledged, the Soviets' assessment of the situation had actually not been "far off, although they seem to have exaggerated the magnitude. The Israelis probably were planning an attack—but not an invasion."⁴⁷ Based on the information available, one scholar observes, Moscow "might have had a point."⁴⁸ The Kremlin leadership appears to have been genuinely concerned about the threat to its client and probably believed that the intelligence it had provided was accurate.⁴⁹ And in any

⁴⁵ Excerpts from Gromyko's Foreign Policy Memo, Approved by the Politburo, January 13, 1967, in Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 640-642. On the overall trajectory of Soviet foreign policy toward peripheral regions during this period, see also Laron, "Stepping Back from the Third World." Note also the observation of a May 1966 U.S. intelligence estimate that Moscow had been exhibiting "greater caution about commitments to [Egypt] than Nasser would have liked." See NIE 36.1-66, "The Outlook for the United Arab Republic," May 19, 1966, folder 36.1, box 6, NIEs, NSF, LBJL.

⁴⁶ Quoted in William B. Quandt, *H-Diplo* Review Article, April 5, 2007, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-diplo&month=0704&week=a&msg=iWwtwewAv8nbhAHR9rCMuA&user=&pw=>.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 356 n. 52. See also Memo from Nathaniel Davis of the NSC Staff to Rostow, "Subject: A Scenario of the Soviet Role," June 2, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, pp. 258-259.

⁴⁸ Roland Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly into the Six-Day War," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2006), p. 287.

⁴⁹ In his postwar address to the Plenum of the Central Committee, Brezhnev claimed that Moscow had "received reports that Israel was preparing a military attack against Syria and other Arab countries.... Subsequently, the Politburo decided to warn both [Egypt] and the Syrian government." See "On Soviet Policy following the Israeli Aggression in the Middle East," June 20, 1967, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112654>. "It looks," one scholar concludes, "as if the Soviets were convinced that the intelligence available to them unquestionably proved Israeli aggressive intentions." See Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly into the Six-Day War," p. 287. See also Memcon, "Aspects of World Affairs," October 27, 1967, folder: USSR, Vol. 17, Memos [2 of 2], 11/67-12/67, box 224, Europe and USSR Country File, NSF, LBJL.

case, Moscow had coupled its report to the Egyptians with a warning to Cairo to avoid taking any provocative steps so that the Kremlin could move to defuse the situation.⁵⁰

And once events began to spiral out of control, due to independent actions taken by Nasser, the Kremlin had moved to calm the situation. “[T]he thrust of Soviet policy” for the remainder of the crisis, one perceptive observer notes, “was to try to prevent the outbreak of war.”⁵¹ Nasser, Brezhnev said in a speech to the Central Committee after the Israeli victory, had taken “a number of ill-advised steps” without first getting Moscow’s approval, in particular his decisions to expel the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) from Sinai and to blockade the Straits of Tiran. The Politburo, Brezhnev explained, had subsequently urged Cairo and Damascus “to act cautiously and avoid further provocation which might spur Israel to wage war.... We warned the Arabs that their belligerent rhetoric and calls for a war of annihilation against Israel might set fire across the Middle East.”⁵² Nasser, after all, had been made aware by his own military advisers by May 15 that the intelligence received from Moscow had been exaggerated. As one scholar thus observes, “[T]he intelligence report was a pretext, rather than the reason, for Egypt’s decision to ignite the crisis.... Far from being the hapless victim of a

⁵⁰ Laron, “Stepping Back from the Third World,” p. 111. On the Soviet warning, see also Anwar el-Sadat, *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 171-172; Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Arab World* (London: Williams Collins Sons, 1978), pp. 171, 174-175; Tyler, *A World of Trouble*, pp. 78-79; Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East*, p. 71; Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York: Vintage, 2001), pp. 304-305; Golan, “The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the Six-Day War,” pp. 6-8; Richard B. Parker, “The June 1967 War: Some Mysteries Explored,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (1992), pp. 180-182; and McNerney, “Prospect Theory and Soviet Policy,” pp. 266-267, 272-274. Moscow, moreover, had initially gone to the Israelis directly with their concerns that Jerusalem was imminently planning to attack Syria, which, as Roland Popp observes, casts doubt on the idea that the Kremlin had set out to stoke a crisis. See Popp, “Stumbling Decidedly into the Six-Day War,” p. 290 n. 30. It is additionally worth noting that the Soviets seem to have believed genuinely that the United States had as one of its objectives in the Middle East the destabilization of the “progressive” regimes in Syria and Egypt, with Israel as its main instrument for accomplishing that aim.

⁵¹ Quandt, *H-Diplo* Review Article, April 5, 2007. See also Popp, “Stumbling Decidedly into the Six-Day War,” pp. 289-290.

⁵² “On Soviet Policy following the Israeli Aggression in the Middle East,” June 20, 1967.

conniving Moscow, [Egypt] initiated the crisis to serve its own regional interests and ignored Moscow's plea to let Soviet officials defuse the crisis by diplomatic means."⁵³

Indeed, when they met with Nasser's emissary, Shams Badran, on May 25-26, Kosygin and Gromyko had pressed Cairo forcefully to exhibit restraint, going so far as to suggest that the Egyptians end the blockade of the Gulf of Aqaba.⁵⁴ Likewise, the Soviets reached out to the Americans, with Kosygin urging Johnson on May 27 to hold off the Israelis in return for the Kremlin's cooperation with the Arabs.⁵⁵ Nasser, a USSR representative later recollected, had resisted calls from his top advisers for military action as late as June 4, in great part because he believed that Moscow would "never support us if we start that." The Egyptian leader's handling of the crisis could not, of course, be justified, but he had been "motivated by nationalist Arabs and his image in the Arab world," not by the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ In addition, the Soviets showed considerable caution once hostilities actually erupted.⁵⁷ So strong was the aversion of top USSR

⁵³ Laron, "Stepping Back from the Third World," pp. 111, 118. See also Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly into the Six-Day War," p. 294.

⁵⁴ Protocol of the Meetings between Egyptian Minister of War, Shams Badran, and Soviet Premier, Alexei Kosygin, May 25-26, 1967 (in Arabic, translated by author), CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114310>. See also Laron, "Stepping Back from the Third World," pp. 111, 114; and McInerney, "Prospect Theory and Soviet Policy," pp. 274-275.

⁵⁵ Letter from Kosygin to Johnson, May 27, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, pp. 159-160. The Soviets had also manipulated their arms deliveries to the Arab states to ensure that Cairo and Damascus had only a limited offensive capability. If the USSR were looking to encourage a conflict, their decision to supply the Egyptians and Syrians with mostly defensive weaponry would be illogical. See Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, pp. 22-64.

⁵⁶ Meeting between Soviet Academic and Envoy to Israel, Yevgeni Primakov and Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, August 30, 1971, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114295>. Relatedly, it is important to note that there are compelling reasons to doubt the theory, formulated most forcefully by historian Michael Oren, that Egypt had contemplated a preemptive strike on May 26-27. See Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 116-119. See also Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar*, pp. 179, 181-182; and Morris, *Righteous Victims*, p. 307. In any case, most scholars argue that the Soviets had moved to restrain Nasser at this point in the crisis, but Popp's careful research reveals that no such Egyptian strike plan had actually existed and that Oren's account is premised in many instances upon faulty data. See Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly into the Six-Day War," pp. 293-306. Note also that the Americans had received reports from the French as early as May 23 that the Soviets had told the Syrians that they would not be able to count on unlimited USSR support if hostilities commenced. See Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, "Subject: Mideast Crisis," May 23, 1967, folder 10, box 15, Rostow Files, NSF, LBJL. See also Memo from Rostow to Johnson, May 24, 1967, folder 10, box 15, Rostow Files, NSF, LBJL.

⁵⁷ Golan, "The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the June 1967 War," pp. 12-15; Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, pp. 52-57; Haslam, *Russia's Cold War*, pp. 237-238; and Popp, "Stumbling Decidedly into the Six-Day War," p. 290.

decision-makers to war that Kosygin at one point was overheard shouting: “And what if they use atom bombs against us? Is it worth it?”⁵⁸

In short, the Kremlin may have contributed marginally—and inadvertently—to sparking the crisis, but it was local actors, especially Nasser, who had moved to escalate it.⁵⁹ Apart from its declaratory policy, the Soviet Union had exhibited restraint during the crisis and had gone to great lengths to help reverse Nasser’s deliberate intensification of the situation.

When viewed in this context, Soviet postwar diplomacy appears far more moderate than many scholars have claimed. To be sure, Moscow’s declaratory policy remained rather hardline. In his June 19 address to the UN General Assembly (UNGA), Kosygin, although he made clear the Kremlin’s recognition of Israel’s right to exist and expressed support for a political solution, called for a resolution that would simultaneously condemn Jerusalem’s actions and endorse an unconditional withdrawal from the territories it had taken during the war.⁶⁰ Likewise, when he met with Johnson in Glassboro, New Jersey, the Soviet premier refused to discuss any aspect of the dispute until after the territories had already been evacuated. Only then, Kosygin said, could the other issues be worked out “through prolonged discussions and debates.”⁶¹

The Soviets’ true preferences, however, diverged significantly from their publicly stated position. The Kremlin leadership, of course, regarded the war as a humiliating defeat not only for its clients, but for the Soviet Union as well. The conflict, moreover, had left a clear residue of bitterness between the USSR and the Arabs.⁶² It was, therefore, quite natural that the Politburo

⁵⁸ Quoted in Laron, “Stepping Back from the Third World,” p. 116.

⁵⁹ In this respect, Popp’s conclusions are also of fundamental importance, for he shows convincingly that the Israelis were not necessarily interested in de-escalating the crisis. See Popp, “Stumbling Decidedly into the Six-Day War.”

⁶⁰ “Partial Text of Kosygin’s Speech Before U.N. General Assembly,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 20, 1967, p. 9. See also David A. Korn, *Stalemate: The War of Attrition and Great Power Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1967-1970* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992), pp. 24-25.

⁶¹ Memcon, “Subject: Middle East, NPT, Cuban Subversion, Viet-Nam,” June 25, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 14, p. 546.

⁶² Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar*, p. 185; Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 272; and Wehling, *Irresolute Princes*, p. 59.

leaders would, once the fighting had stopped, begin searching for ways to not only recoup their losses with the Arabs, but to try to recover from the hit they had suffered to their prestige. As even President Richard Nixon later wrote regarding postwar USSR strategy, the Soviets “were looking for a face-saving formula that would lessen the risk of confrontation in the Mideast.”⁶³

Thus, Moscow’s approach to the problem behind the scenes was quite different. To be sure, the Politburo decided almost immediately after the war had ended to resupply the Arabs militarily. The Kremlin, however, was careful to manipulate its arms deliveries so as to deprive its clients of the weaponry necessary for a realistic military option. The meetings between Nasser and the chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Nikolai Podgorny, who visited Cairo soon after the war, were tense, mainly because the latter resisted Egyptian requests that the USSR take over the country’s air defense program and for a mutual defense pact.⁶⁴ The Soviet Union, Brezhnev informed the leaders of several East European states on July 11, was willing to help rebuild the Egyptian army, but only to the extent that it would “be able to repel imperialists’ attack.” Moscow, he said, had made it clear to Nasser that USSR aid was not intended “to make the Middle East the center of a new war. Our general line is to assist maximally the progressive Arab states, contribute to their strength, their capacity to prevent new blows from imperialism... but not to get the USSR involved in a new war.” The Politburo’s objective in resupplying the Arabs, he emphasized, was “only for defense, not to attack Israel.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), p. 345. See also Report, “Subject: USSR/Eastern Europe/Middle East,” August 10, 1967, folder: USSR, Vol. 16, Memos [2 of 3], 7/67-10/67, box 224, Europe and USSR Country File, NSF, LBJL.

⁶⁴ Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile: The Soviet-Egyptian Influence Relationship since the June War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. xi, 6-9, 17-19; Korn, *Stalemate*, pp. 53-57; Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, pp. 68-69; Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, pp. 66-68; Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan* (New York: Quadrangle, 1975), pp. 38-40, 44; and Mahmoud Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East* (London: Quadrangle, 1981), pp. 42-45.

⁶⁵ Polish Record of Meeting of Soviet-bloc Leaders (and Tito) in Budapest (excerpts), July 11, 1967, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113622>. See also Polish Record of Meeting of Soviet-bloc Leaders (and Tito) in Moscow, November 9, 1967, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113629>. The

More importantly, contrary to some scholars' skepticism of Soviet intentions during the immediate postwar period, Moscow was deeply disenchanted with the attitude of its clients with respect to a political settlement. As early as July 1, a high-ranking East German official reported after meeting with Syrian representatives that despite the extreme views held by the latter on the issue of an agreement with the Israelis, USSR, East European, and Syrian Communist Party efforts had brought Damascus to a "more realistic assessment of the balance of forces." "[T]he most difficult task," he added, "may consist in making clear to the Syrian leadership that it must come to terms with the existence of Israel."⁶⁶ Moscow, Brezhnev stressed, wanted the Arabs to "grasp the situation realistically." There was, the general secretary believed, no way for them to regain their lands other than to agree to a termination of the state of belligerency: "The Arabs will not regain those territories through war, and a political solution will not be possible without the participation of [the] Arabs themselves." "Why," he asked rhetorically, "should we stand up to Israel with war? After all, we do not say that we do not recognize Israel as a state."⁶⁷

Thus, it should come as no surprise that in private the Kremlin leadership clashed with the Arabs. When they met Presidents Houari Boumediene and Abdel Rahman Aref, the respective leaders of Algeria and Iraq, Kosygin and Brezhnev pushed back against their belligerence. In response to Boumediene's accusation that Moscow's policy of peaceful coexistence was compromising its support for national liberation movements, the latter rejoined:

consensus of those in attendance was that the Arabs would not be militarily ready for another conflict for three to five years, given their massive inferiority in qualitative factors like training and organization. It would, consequently, be risky to provide Egypt with significant quantities of sophisticated equipment, which might then again fall into the hands of the Israelis. The Soviets and their East European allies, however, do seem to have been genuinely convinced that the United States was intent on using Israel as its proxy to destroy the "progressive" regimes in Egypt and Syria, with the aim of dominating the Middle East, which explains, in part, why the Kremlin felt it necessary to extend defensive weaponry to its clients following the war.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Jeffrey Herf, "At War with Israel': East Germany's Key Role in Soviet Policy in the Middle East," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2014), p. 142.

⁶⁷ Polish Record of Meeting of Soviet-bloc Leaders (and Tito) in Budapest (excerpts), July 11, 1967.

“What’s your opinion of nuclear war?”⁶⁸ Was it not a contradiction, the general secretary asked, for the Arabs to demand the return of their territories while simultaneously refusing to recognize even informally Israel’s right to exist or to agree to a cessation of the state of war? After all, Kosygin stressed, the Arabs had no military option, which meant that their current pursuit of “a completely inflexible policy” only benefitted the Israelis and Americans.⁶⁹ So clearly did the Politburo’s preferences depart from those of its clients that by August, Nasser declared: “[T]he Soviets are now allowing the Americans to fulfill their goals in this region.”⁷⁰

Indeed, USSR decision-makers had seemingly reached a favorable agreement with the United States in July, but Arab opposition had foiled their efforts. The U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Arthur Goldberg, along with the Soviet ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, had negotiated language that would have called explicitly for a full Israeli withdrawal in exchange for a commitment from the Arabs to terminate the state of war with Jerusalem, which, given the circumstances, was the best offer Moscow’s clients could have hoped to receive. The Soviets, as a result, had considered the rejection foolish. “Unfortunately,” Brezhnev commented, “the Arab leadership at that moment... did not detect the possibility, which such a resolution created and did not show appropriate realism.” The Arabs, he argued, had “overlooked an important political chance prepared by all of us.”⁷¹ For the first time in more than a decade, Nasser therefore related to Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito, the Soviet Union was “pressuring [Egypt] so that [it] would accept a political solution.” Moscow, he felt, was interested only in

⁶⁸ Quoted in Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile*, p. 14 n. 13.

⁶⁹ Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar*, pp. 186-188; Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan*, pp. 40-41; Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 49-50. See also Memo from Rostow to Johnson, “Subject: Soviet Party Official Summarizes Moscow’s Middle East Policy,” August 4, 1967, folder: USSR, Vol. 16, Memos [2 of 3], 7/67-10/67, box 224, Europe and USSR Country File, NSF, LBJL.

⁷⁰ Notes on Yugoslav-Egyptian Talks, August 11, 1967, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113628>.

⁷¹ Polish Record of Meeting of Soviet-bloc Leaders (and Tito) in Moscow, November 9, 1967. See also Memcon, July 26, 1967, folder 1, box 16, Rostow Files, NSF, LBJL.

negotiating a settlement with the United States, and was reluctant to provide Cairo with additional support unless Egypt accepted the Soviet-American resolution.⁷²

In the end, of course, the Kremlin proved incapable of getting its clients to sign on to this sort of deal, which would come back to haunt the Arabs in later years. At the Arab summit at Khartoum in August, the latter famously decided upon the “three noes”; there would, they agreed, be no peace with Israel, no negotiations with Israel, and no recognition of Israel, their weak bargaining position notwithstanding.⁷³ In addition, Nasser seemed more intent on revitalizing Egypt’s military option than on a diplomatic solution.⁷⁴

Rather than abandon the Arabs, however, the Soviets seem to have concluded that they would have a better chance of influencing their clients’ negotiating behavior through continued support. Egypt and Syria, Moscow calculated, would refuse to make concessions from a prostrate position, and the Kremlin could perhaps strengthen its leverage by nurturing their increased dependence on the USSR. “[L]et them still improve their position,” Brezhnev said in the

⁷² Notes on Yugoslav-Egyptian Talks, August 11, 1967. Note also Nasser’s deep concern about the possibility of a successful U.S.-USSR approach to the problem: “If the two superpowers agree on something else, then it would be impossible to change that. . . . It is necessary to act politically, because if the USSR and US continue to exert pressure on this region then many things could get even more complicated. . . . [W]e are not capable of withstanding the pressure especially if [it] is coming from friends, such as the Soviet Union.” With this in mind, the idea that, as one scholar has argued, Soviet policy “became a hostage of Arab radicalism and demands” and that Cairo during this period “remained impervious to Soviet political influence,” is invalid. See Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 200, 224.

⁷³ On the Khartoum Conference, see Yoram Meital, “The Khartoum Conference and Egyptian Policy after the 1967 War: A Reexamination,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (2000), pp. 64-82. See also Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 321-323; and Morris, *Righteous Victims*, pp. 345-346.

⁷⁴ One scholar has claimed that Nasser was pursuing a dual-track policy of searching for a political solution while simultaneously holding a military option in reserve. See Laura M. James, “Military/Political Means/Ends: Egyptian Decision-Making in the War of Attrition,” in Nigel J. Ashton, ed., *The Cold War in the Middle East: Regional Conflict and the Superpowers, 1967-1973* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 92-112. My own reading of the evidence is that even though Nasser probably understood that a military solution did not exist for the Arabs, he felt too weakened politically in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat to pursue seriously a peaceful settlement.

aftermath of the Khartoum resolutions. “Nationalistic elements are still dominating there, but such meetings are moving forward the problem of the Middle East.”⁷⁵

In short, Soviet strategists had failed to alter the Arab position, but that did not mean that the Kremlin was satisfied with the postwar state of affairs in the Middle East. Having just experienced a near-confrontation with Washington over the issue, Moscow was reluctant to rearm its clients, which, in turn, was creating strains on its position in the area. Furthermore, it was clear to the Politburo that a military solution would be neither desirable nor possible, which meant that the results of the June War could only be reversed via a diplomatic settlement. USSR decision-makers’ desired outcome, consequently, was an agreement negotiated with the United States, one which would involve the Arabs’ informal recognition of Israel and an end to the state of war, in return for the territories lost during the conflict.

Doubts in Washington

Had U.S. decision-makers understood accurately the USSR conception of the problem, they likely would have concluded that significant space for great power cooperation existed.

It was not as though, after all, the Americans saw eye to eye with Jerusalem on the terms of a settlement. Despite Johnson’s reputation for being sympathetic to Israel—in the words of one scholar, the president was “the principal architect” of the special relationship—his administration had experienced major frustrations dealing with the Eshkol government even before serious differences arose between the two sides in the postwar peace negotiations.⁷⁶

“Given Israel’s small size and lack of strategic importance,” a February 8 State Department

⁷⁵ Polish Record of Meeting of Soviet-bloc Leaders (and Tito) in Moscow, November 9, 1967. It is important to note that U.S. officials basically agreed with the USSR assessment of the Khartoum decisions. The declaration that emerged from the summit was of course highly problematic, but the more radical Arab line had not prevailed. See Memo from Saunders to Rostow, “Subject: Nasser’s November 23 Speech and the Mood of the Arabs,” December 4, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 17-19; and Note from Saunders to Rostow, December 11, 1967, folder: UAR, 4/1/66-12/31/67 [1 of 4], box 32, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL. For a similar reading of the Khartoum conference, see Meital, “The Khartoum Conference and Egyptian Policy.”

⁷⁶ Alan R. Taylor, *The Superpowers and the Middle East* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), p. 32.

paper had claimed, “our support over the years can only be described as massive.” Nevertheless, “In terms of tangible *quid pro quos*, there is little to cite in the way of returns for this support.”⁷⁷

The U.S.-Israeli relationship, American strategists continued to think in the war’s aftermath, had become too much of a one-way street. When one considered the matter closely, Saunders felt, it became clear “*how little Israel is prepared to do on the serious issues that concern the President the most.*”⁷⁸ Certain members of the administration, he told Ephraim Evron, a minister at the Israeli Embassy, were beginning to wonder whether the time had come for the United States to withdraw its “blank check. There is some feeling that Israel is happy because we are letting Israel do pretty much what it wants. There is, most important, some feeling that Israelis feel they have us ‘in their pockets’ and therefore feel they can easily ignore our requests and suggestions.” Washington, Saunders had added, was deeply frustrated that the relationship had developed into “a one-way street—us to them.... We are troubled.”⁷⁹

Given the two countries’ disparate views on the issue of a settlement, it was inevitable that such tensions would only intensify once the fighting had stopped.⁸⁰ The Americans, of course, hoped to take advantage of the conflict to reach a comprehensive agreement. To be sure, Johnson had expressed concern over the potential consequences of what had occurred. “[B]y the time we get through with all the festering problems,” he had told the National Security Council on June 7, “we are going to wish the war had not happened.”⁸¹ Even so, U.S. officials believed that Israel’s territorial gains could be used to their benefit. As early May 19, even before

⁷⁷ NEA/IAI, “U.S.-Israel Relations,” February 8, 1967, folder 3, box 140, Israel Country File, NSF, LBJL.

⁷⁸ Memo from Saunders to Rostow, “Subject: Comment on ‘American Jewry and Israel,’” April 20, 1967, folder 2, box 140, Israel Country File, NSF, LBJL (emphasis in original); and Preliminary Draft of Memo for Johnson, “Subject: 1968—American Jewry and Israel,” undated, folder 2, box 140, Israel Country File, NSF, LBJL.

⁷⁹ Memo for the Record, “Subjection: Discussion with Mr. Evron,” March 19, 1968, folder: Israel, 3/1/68-4/30/68, box 17, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

⁸⁰ Even while the war was ongoing, there were already indications that Washington and Jerusalem were on divergent paths. See Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 254-255.

⁸¹ Memo for the Record, “Subject: National Security Council Meeting, Wednesday, June 7, 1967,” June 7, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 348.

Nasser's closure of the Straits, Saunders had surmised that a decisive Israeli triumph could help catalyze a diplomatic process. Perhaps the United States stood to gain, he argued, from "delaying our response long enough to allow a clear Israeli military victory (assuming they're able)."

Washington, he had added, could potentially gain "from a blowup in the form of settling borders and, maybe even refugees."⁸² Such an outcome, Johnson had attempted to persuade Rostow in the midst of the war, "would mean that we could use the de facto situation on the ground to try to negotiate not a return to armistice lines but a definitive peace in the Middle East."⁸³

The administration, of course, had no desire to compel an unconditional Israeli withdrawal from the captured territories. As senate majority leader, Johnson had opposed even President Dwight Eisenhower's decision to force Israel to leave the Sinai in the wake of the 1956 Suez Crisis. The president, therefore, could hardly justify putting pressure on Jerusalem in this instance. As Assistant Secretary of State Lucius Battle explained, "[T]he situation in 1967 was different from that in 1957. The rights and wrongs were clearer in 1957 and the failure of the arrangements negotiated at that time were a major reason for our present difficulties."⁸⁴ The United States, Johnson would later write, refused to "accept the oversimplified charge of Israeli aggression. Arab actions before the war started... made that charge ridiculous."⁸⁵ Even Rusk, perhaps the member of the administration least sympathetic to Israel, claimed subsequently that if there was ever a case of justifiable preemption, it was the June 5 strike against Egypt.⁸⁶

⁸² Memo from Saunders to Rostow, "Subject: Discussion of Arab-Israeli Crisis with the President," May 19, 1967, folder: Arab-Israel, 4/1/66-12/31/67 [2 of 3], box 7, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL. See also Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 253-254; and Douglas Little, "The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and Israel, 1957-68," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (1993), p. 578.

⁸³ Quoted in Haslam, *Russia's Cold War*, p. 237.

⁸⁴ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Jordan, August 7, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, p. 453.

⁸⁵ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, p. 297.

⁸⁶ Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), p. 387.

Nevertheless, there existed severe differences between Washington and Jerusalem with respect to the terms of an overall settlement. Even the Israeli Cabinet's June 19 decision to endorse a full evacuation of the Sinai and Golan Heights had not dealt with the West Bank or the Gaza Strip. Moreover, it is now clear that the motion had been approved only as a negotiating ploy, the goal of which was to decrease the likelihood that the superpowers would reach an agreement. The proposal, in fact, was never presented to the Soviets or Arabs. As one Israeli scholar has written, this "generous peace offer" amounted to "a diplomatic maneuver," and the idea that the Eshkol government had made a major effort to negotiate such a deal is a "myth."⁸⁷

Indeed, U.S. and Israeli views diverged across every dimension relating to a Middle East settlement. The American position on the fate of Jerusalem, for starters, was clear from the beginning. Israel's decision to alter unilaterally the city's status at the end of June, American officials believed, had jeopardized the chances for an agreement with Jordan. In the State Department's view, it was "highly probable that no peace settlement between Israel and Jordan would be accepted by the world community unless it gives Jordan some special position in the Old City of Jerusalem." If negotiations with Amman were to have any possibility of succeeding, therefore, the Israelis would need to "be ready to face [the] issue of Jerusalem with far more flexibility than they have yet displayed."⁸⁸ "Although I recognize the explosiveness of this issue before this audience," Saunders wrote in preparation for an address by Johnson to B'nai B'rith, "someone has to talk sense to Israelis and Jews about it because it's the crux of a Jordan settlement."⁸⁹ While the administration was willing to live with whatever the Eshkol government

⁸⁷ Avi Raz, "The Generous Peace Offer that was Never Offered: The Israeli Cabinet Resolution of June 19, 1967," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2013), pp. 85-108.

⁸⁸ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, August 9, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, pp. 765-766.

⁸⁹ Memo from Saunders to McPherson, "Subject: B'nai B'rith Speech Draft," September 5, 1968, folder: B'nai B'rith Speech (September 10, 1968), box 37, Harry McPherson Files, LBJL.

and Hussein found mutually acceptable, U.S. officials did insist that the Jordanians be afforded a legitimate status in the city, beyond merely custodianship of the Muslim holy areas.

The differences between the United States and Israel on the question of the nature of peace were even starker. Despite the Eshkol government's objections, the Americans took the position that the Arabs would not be required to recognize Israel formally or to accept full normalization of relations in exchange for a restoration of the prewar boundaries. The Arabs, Johnson wrote Tito, would of course have to renounce contractually and directly the state of war, as well as guarantee Israel's right to use the Straits of Tiran and Suez Canal, but they would not be forced to go further. "[A]n abandonment of claims of belligerency would not require [Egypt], for example," Johnson clarified, "to extend recognition to Israel or to establish diplomatic relations with it, normal and desirable as both our governments regard this to be." External guarantees, the president wrote, could not substitute for the Arabs' acknowledgement of Israel's right to exist, but he went no further: "We do agree with you, however, that the Arabs would not need for this purpose to recognize Israel formally."⁹⁰ If the Arabs met this obligation, Goldberg thus stated: "[W]e may have to part with the Israelis on formulation."⁹¹

Thus, Washington and Jerusalem clashed repeatedly on this aspect of the problem in their private sessions. In a "fairly tough conversation" with Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin, Rusk took issue with the Eshkol government's demands for "real peace" and "open boundaries and full recognition." "We do disagree," Rostow wrote Johnson in a summary of the discussion, "with [the Israelis'] definition of 'peace.' They seem to be holding out for a complete Arab 'change of heart' whereas we have thought more of the step-by-step evolution of peace through a series of

⁹⁰ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Yugoslavia, August 9, 1967, *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 762; and Letter from Johnson to Tito, September 15, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 828.

⁹¹ Notes of an NSC Meeting, "Subject: National Security Council Meeting in the Cabinet Room Wednesday, September 13, 1967," September 13, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 825.

practical arrangements.” The U.S. preference, he added, was to create “a framework within which peace could evolve”; the Israeli position, by contrast, would inevitably lead to deadlock.⁹² To be sure, Rostow assured Rabin and Evron, the United States was “not going to repeat the ‘Rube Goldberg chewing gum and tape’ operation of 1957,” but Washington was not “talking about what the Israelis seem to have in mind—something akin to the Congress in Vienna in 1815 ‘with striped pants, a big peace treaty, and all the trimmings.’” A satisfactory arrangement, he felt, could “be achieved in any one of a number of different ways.” Jerusalem’s desire to know where it was headed was certainly “legitimate,” but Washington “could not sympathize with any request from Israel to have the Arabs ‘like Huck Finn prick their fingers and sign in blood before talks could begin that they would sign a big peace treaty at the end of it.’”⁹³

Nowhere was the separation more clear-cut, however, than on the issue of withdrawal.⁹⁴ The administration had originally been rather sanguine about this part of the problem, perhaps due to the misleading June 19 Israeli Cabinet decision.⁹⁵ The United States, Rostow said less than a week after the fighting had ended, was taking “at face value” Jerusalem’s statements that it had “no territorial ambitions.” Indeed, he at first was rather optimistic: “[A] process of realism is beginning to set in in Tel Aviv just as the initial rigid Arab position is beginning to show some cracks. With time and patience on our part... something constructive might still emerge.”⁹⁶

By the fall, however, the administration had shifted its assessment. Israel’s insistence on direct negotiations, full peace treaties, and territorial acquisitions, Battle felt, demonstrated that Jerusalem had “come a long way from its position in June.” The Eshkol government’s new

⁹² Information Memo from Rostow to Johnson, “Subject: Secretary Rusk’s Talk with Ambassador Rabin,” September 19, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 509-510.

⁹³ Memcon, May 17, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 347-348.

⁹⁴ I thank William Quandt for discussing this aspect of U.S. policy with me.

⁹⁵ Raz, “The Generous Peace Offer that was Never Offered.”

⁹⁶ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, June 16, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 439; and Memo from Rostow to Johnson, June 15, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 483 n. 1. See also Memo from McPherson to Johnson, June 11, 1967, folder: Mideast, box 42, McPherson Files, LBJL.

formulations, he wrote, represented “a profoundly disturbing development.” If Israel failed to adjust its position, “I fear we do indeed face the prospect of permanent Israeli occupation of the Arab territories now held.” The two sides, he concluded, were pursuing “divergent courses.”⁹⁷ “Frankly,” Saunders similarly wrote in an October 19 memorandum, “we are suspicious of Israel’s motives.... I think there is room for honest US uncertainty about Israeli intentions.... Right now we’re not sure [Israel] recognizes its obligation to do anything.”⁹⁸ The Eshkol government, the CIA concluded just two days after Resolution 242 had passed, was now seeking to draw “permanent and radically altered borders.”⁹⁹

There were, then, major differences between Israel and the United States on the territorial question. While a total withdrawal, Goldberg assured Jordan’s King Hussein, would not be possible, the United States backed the idea of “mutuality in adjustments. If Jordan makes an adjustment along the Latrun salient there ought to be some compensatory adjustment for it.”¹⁰⁰ The administration, Undersecretary of State Eugene Rostow clarified, was not opposed to boundary changes. Nevertheless, “[W]e expected [the] thrust of [a] settlement would be toward security and demilitarization agreements rather than toward major changes in [the] Armistice lines.” “The United States as a matter of policy,” Goldberg reiterated on November 6, “does not envisage a Jordan which consists only of the East Bank. The United States is prepared to support a return of the West Bank to Jordan with minor boundary rectifications.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Information Memo from Battle to Rusk, “Subject: Israel’s Peace Aims,” November 17, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, pp. 1043-1045.

⁹⁸ Memo from Saunders to Rostow, “Subject: Tactics with Eban,” October 19, 1967, folder 7, box 140, Israel Country File, NSF, LBJL.

⁹⁹ CIA Office of National Estimates Special Memo No. 11-67, “Some Implications of the Arab Defeat by Israel,” November 24, 1967, folder 6, box 160, United Arab Republic Country File, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁰⁰ Telegram from the Mission to the United Nations to the Department of State, November 4, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 983.

¹⁰¹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, November 5, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 995.

This divergence soon became overwhelmingly clear. The United States, Goldberg—the man who had personally negotiated Resolution 242—wrote in a June 1968 proposal to Johnson and Rusk, would ultimately have to support essentially a full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai and West Bank to break the diplomatic logjam. Even if boundary rectifications proved necessary, he added, Amman would need to be compensated, possibly through the establishment of a Jordanian port on the Mediterranean.¹⁰² Any settlement, another paper agreed, would have to “take into account the demarcation lines before June 5, with whatever reciprocal adjustments may be agreed upon for essential security purposes.” The boundaries could be altered, but “those changes need not be extensive. If the West Bank is demilitarized, and Jordan and Israel reach a general accommodation, anything more than minimal changes in the armistice lines calls into question our support for the territorial integrity and political independence of Jordan.”¹⁰³

By the end of Johnson’s presidency, a major rift had developed between Israel and the United States on this issue. Any border changes, Johnson declared in a September 10 speech, “cannot and should not reflect the weight of conquest.”¹⁰⁴ Jerusalem’s proposal that it be allowed to maintain its presence at Sharm el-Sheik, as well as an overland route to that strategic location, was, Rusk informed Eban and Rabin on November 3, a “non-starter.” An Israeli force in the area would, the secretary of state argued, serve as a “point of infection such that there would be

¹⁰² Memo from Goldberg to Johnson and Rusk, “Subject: Middle East—Proposal for Breaking Present Impasse,” June 24, 1968, folder 1, box 2, Rostow Files, NSF, LBJL. Goldberg maintained this position well after he had left his post as UN ambassador. See Memcon, “Subject: Middle East,” April 3, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1974-1976* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2012), p. 616; and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), p. 96.

¹⁰³ PMI/G-3, “Scope Paper: Problems of Peace and Security,” January 4, 1968, folder: Visit of Prime Minister Eshkol of Israel, January 7-8, 1968 [2 of 3], box 3, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁰⁴ Johnson’s Remarks at the 125th Anniversary Meeting of B’nai B’rith, September 10, 1968, American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29109&st=&st1=>.

tension thereafter and hard to see how there could be peace.”¹⁰⁵ If the Arabs agreed to non-belligerency, Undersecretary Nicholas Katzenbach told Rabin, Washington would have to come out publicly in support of a full Israeli withdrawal. “We had never meant that Israel,” he said, “could extend its territory to [the] West Bank or Suez if this was what it felt its security required.” The U.S., he continued, could only advocate for “really minor” adjustments in the Jordanian border, ones for which Amman would have to be compensated. The administration, Katzenbach concluded, “had always thought [the] new map would look very much like [the] pre-war map but with Israel’s security assured.” If it was the Eshkol government’s intention to expand its territory, then, Washington and Jerusalem “would be on divergent courses.”¹⁰⁶

The American and Soviet views on the terms of an Arab-Israeli agreement, then, differed in no meaningful way. The Johnson administration, while it opposed in principle the idea that Israel should withdraw unconditionally, nevertheless believed that if the Arabs could be brought to sign a contractual agreement that directly bound them to terminate the state of war, by which they would recognize informally Israel’s right to exist, Jerusalem would have to carry out close to a full withdrawal in exchange. And because U.S. strategists had come to the conclusion that Moscow’s assistance with its clients would be needed to move the parties toward a settlement, the stage seemed to be set for the superpowers to join their efforts to achieve such an outcome. With this in mind, why were Washington and Moscow unable to come to an understanding?

¹⁰⁵ Telegram from Rostow to Johnson, November 4, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 601-602. It was for this reason that on the previous day, Rusk had told Egyptian Foreign Minister Mahmoud Riad that the United States supported a full Israeli withdrawal from Sinai as part of a final settlement. See Telegram from Rusk to the Department of State, November 3, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 589-597. Note also Rusk’s bitter remark in his memoir that because the Americans had continually assured the Arabs in earlier years that it would not tolerate Israel’s expansion of its borders, Jerusalem’s new policy had “turned the United States into a twenty-year liar.” See Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 388.

¹⁰⁶ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, November 13, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 633-637. See also Memcon, November 18, 1968, folder: Israel, 10/1/68-1/20/69 [1 of 2], box 18, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

In part, the problem was that U.S. decision-makers harbored serious doubts regarding Soviet intentions in the Middle East. Even prior to the May-June 1967 crisis, American analysts had considered USSR behavior suspect. The Arab-Israeli issue, U.S. intelligence officials felt, offered especially favorable ground for the extension of USSR influence. “The Soviet leaders,” one estimate produced on the eve of the war had asserted, “almost certainly view the Arab-Israeli conflict as promoting their interests.... Thus, we believe that the Soviets have no interest in seeing the Arab-Israeli dispute resolved.... Arab fear of Israel provides a convenient excuse for supplying arms to the Arabs and gaining influence and position thereby.” In short, “[T]he Soviets probably feel that their interests would be better served by keeping the pot simmering.”¹⁰⁷ “The Soviet activists,” Rostow had said in March, “are propelled by an almost bureaucratic impulse to exploit opportunity wherever it appears.” With the British withdrawal from Aden and the unstable situation in Syria, he added, Moscow saw advantages to be exploited.¹⁰⁸

Such thinking had been substantially reinforced by the way U.S. officials interpreted how the diplomacy of the May-June crisis had run its course. To be sure, the Americans felt that the war had resulted mainly due to Soviet missteps, rather than a deliberate attempt on Moscow’s part to bring about a conflict. Still, it was the general consensus among administration officials that one of the Kremlin’s key objectives had been to damage Washington’s strategic position in the Middle East. The USSR leaders, Helms had argued at May 24 NSC meeting, were hoping “to bring off a propaganda victory as in the 1950’s with them as the peacemakers and saviors of the Arabs, while we end up fully blackballed in the Arab world as Israel’s supporter.”¹⁰⁹ The Politburo, he contended, was aiming to divide the region along Cold War lines: “If the Soviets

¹⁰⁷ NIE 30-67, “The Arab-Israeli Dispute: Current Phase,” April 13, 1967, folder 30, box 6, NIEs, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁰⁸ Memcon, March 31, 1967, folder 6, box 140, Israel Country File, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁰⁹ Memo for the Record, “Subject: Record of National Security Council Meeting held on May 24, 1967 at 12 noon—Discussion of Middle East Crisis,” May 24, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 91.

can permit the crisis to go to the brink and the United States can be maneuvered into an open position of political and military collusion with a warlike Israel, the Soviets will have set the stage for a new polarization in the area consisting of a reconstituted Arab bloc versus Israel.”¹¹⁰

Thompson seemed to agree, going so far as to speculate that Moscow might stand to benefit from a major Arab defeat: “[T]he Soviets might calculate that the hatred this would engender for the West would enable them to reestablish their position in the Arab world.”¹¹¹

The administration, consequently, was reluctant to proceed in collaboration with the Soviets. Even in the midst of the war, Rostow had asserted that it was unlikely that the Kremlin could be convinced of the utility of great power cooperation. “[I]t is clear,” the national security adviser had written, “that the outcome in our interest is directly contrary to Soviet strategy over the past years; they have suffered a setback of the first order of magnitude; and they will only react in ways consistent with our interests if the political forces on the spot, as well as the military situation, leave them no other realistic alternative.”¹¹² The USSR, one Pentagon official similarly contended, would have no interest in a joint approach. Without a settlement, the United States would come “under great pressure, generated by our real interest in creating the preconditions for a fresh start in the Middle East and by our domestic political situation,” to provide Israel with “large infusions” of economic and military assistance. The only way such a situation could be avoided, he continued, was to achieve “Soviet cooperation,” whereby “Moscow would press [Egypt] into a basic settlement embodying most of Israel’s demands (or at least to avoid the kind of salvage operation that would encourage intransigence).” Unfortunately, “The likelihood... is that the Soviets will not cooperate. They will probably continue to espouse

¹¹⁰ Memo from Helms to Rostow, “Subject: Soviet Intentions in the Current Middle East Crisis,” May 24, 1967, folder: 570th MSC, TG—5/24/67—Middle East Crisis, box 31, Bromley K. Smith Papers, NSF, LBJL.

¹¹¹ Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, May 25, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 99.

¹¹² Memo from Rostow to Johnson, June 7, 1967, p. 340.

the Arab cause in an effort further to polarize the political situation, putting the US behind Israel and the USSR behind the Arab world.”¹¹³

Nor was the administration at all convinced of the Arabs’ commitment to a peaceful solution. If Nasser had shown a disinclination to accept Israel’s existence before the war, it was improbable, U.S. analysts reasoned, that he would be any more willing to do so after suffering a major defeat. The Egyptian president, one intelligence estimate observed, was now faced with “clear limits to his freedom of maneuver.” As a result, “Any move to come to terms with the Israelis... would run counter to his efforts to recoup his stature among Arab nationalists generally, and would thus tend to weaken him within Egypt.”¹¹⁴ It would, an NIE therefore asserted, “probably be some time before [Nasser] feels able to undertake any very firm policy initiatives.”¹¹⁵ The Arabs, Rostow had determined, were, at best, “confused, humiliated, [and] looking for revenge in part of their minds. But they have no long-term plan.”¹¹⁶ As for the Syrians, it would be another six years before they would even accept Resolution 242.

In short, despite the significant overlap between the Soviet and American positions and each superpower’s substantial interest in a Middle East settlement, the Johnson administration was unconvinced in the aftermath of the June War that Moscow would be willing to cooperate for a reasonable agreement, and its assessment of Arab intentions was even bleaker. As one State Department official later observed after being presented with evidence that Soviet policy had been significantly more moderate than he had believed at the time: “It is good to know the Soviets saw [the] Arab reaction more or less as we did. If they had not been so convinced that we

¹¹³ Memo I-23560/67 from Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Townsend Hoopes to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, “Subject: Fundamental Problems Relating to an Armistice/Political Settlement in the Near East,” June 8, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, pp. 384-385.

¹¹⁴ Memo from CIA Board of National Estimates to Helms, “Nasser’s Prospects for Survival,” June 15, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 501.

¹¹⁵ Special NIE 36.1-67, “The Situation and Prospects in Egypt,” August 17, 1967, folder 36.1, box 6, NIEs, NSF, LBJL.

¹¹⁶ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, December 6, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, p. 18.

were out to get Nasser, and we were not so persuaded that they were plotting to impose Nasser on Arabia and the Gulf, we might have had a more cooperative, less antagonistic, relationship.”¹¹⁷ If this barrier could be overcome through repeated signaling, however, the structure of the conflict would generate potent pressures for the United States and the Soviet Union to work together for its resolution.

A Problem for the Next President

Even if USSR and U.S. decision-makers had more accurately comprehended one another’s objectives, the Johnson administration would have confronted major obstacles domestically in its pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace. With the Vietnam War still raging, the White House faced major opposition at home, especially after the February 1968 Tet Offensive.

More importantly, taking a firm line with Jerusalem would have been politically difficult in any case, especially in an election year, due to the influence of its American supporters. As early as May 1964, the administration had complained about the “repeated pressure from Israel and its friends which poses such a dilemma for us in the Middle East.”¹¹⁸ The U.S. ambassador in Tel Aviv, Walworth Barbour, was, Deputy Chief of Mission William Dale later claimed, under special instructions from Johnson, because by the mid-1960s: “[T]he Israeli lobby was powerful.” The president, Barbour had indicated, had told him at the outset of his tour: “I don’t care of what happens to Israel, but I care a lot about the American Jews. Whatever you do in Israel, keep one eye peeled for the American Jews and do nothing which would get them on my back.” Johnson’s principal concern, he had emphasized, was “the political ramifications

¹¹⁷ Quoted in James G. Hershberg, “The Soviet Bloc and the Aftermath of the June 1967 War: Selected Documents from Polish and Romanian Archives,” CWIHP e-Dossier No. 13, July 7, 2011, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-soviet-bloc-and-the-aftermath-the-june-1967-war>.

¹¹⁸ Memo from Robert Komer of the NSC Staff to Johnson, May 28, 1964, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 18, p. 151.

domestically in the United States.”¹¹⁹ “The existence of a large, well-organized group of Israeli sympathizers within the U.S. body politic,” an NEA paper similarly observed, “obviously puts a limit on the degree to which the [United States government] might contemplate a different policy.” The key question for the White House, therefore, was “*whether, within these realistic limits, we can or should be attempting to moderate the degree of our support for Israel.*”¹²⁰

In addition, the American public was broadly supportive of Israel and identified much more strongly with that country than with the Arabs, a trend which had been reinforced by the May-June crisis. “This is not centrally a matter of the Abe Feinbergs or even the Arthur Krims,” Johnson’s adviser, McGeorge Bundy, wrote in a June 26 memorandum. “It is a matter of the considered choice of Presidents, on wider grounds of national sympathy and interest.”¹²¹ “Let’s be frank about our relationship with Israel,” a set of talking points drafted by Saunders stated. “Our common religious heritage, the image of Israelis as pioneers, American sympathy for the minority—all create American support for Israel. This is not just a matter of Jewish votes; it’s a broad popular feeling. The Arab viewpoint is not as well understood.”¹²² Johnson, Saunders observed at one point, had “more than a purely political interest in *preserving* Israel’s existence.

¹¹⁹ William N. Dale Oral History Interview, September 19, 1988 and November 21, 1988, by Henry E. Mattox, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, <http://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Dale,%20William%20N.toc.pdf>. Dale added that Israel’s American supporters were influential in altering Goldberg’s position on the issue of withdrawal during the negotiations at the United Nations in the second half of 1967. Johnson’s assistant, Harry McPherson, similarly stressed that as a “national Democrat,” Johnson “would have been pro-Israel and therefore sensitive to Jewish issues.” See Transcript, Harry McPherson Oral History Interview VII, September 19, 1985, by Michael L. Gillette, Internet Copy, LBJL.

¹²⁰ NEA/IAI, February 8, 1967 (emphasis in original). With this in mind, the paper posed the question, “Would a high level briefing of the principal contributors to the Zionist-Israel establishment on the political realities in the Near East reduce pressures occasionally mounted against policy?” On this issue, see also the series of proposals submitted by Rabbi Elmer Berger of the American Council of Judaism, enclosed in Letter from Rodger P. Davies to Howard Wriggins of the NSC Staff, January 7, 1967, folder: Israel, 1965-1968 [1 of 3], box 49, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

¹²¹ Memo from Bundy to Johnson, “Subject: Bundy’s Return to Ford, and Related Subjects,” June 26, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 567. Johnson and many of his advisers were known to admire and sympathize personally with the Israelis.

¹²² Memo from Saunders to McPherson with Attached Talking Points, “Meeting with Arab Ambassadors,” October 3, 1967, folder: Mideast, box 42, McPherson Files, LBJL.

We as a nation feel close to Israel—maybe because of the Biblical heritage; maybe because Israel is an attractive underdog; maybe because it looks like a nation of pioneers; maybe because it’s mainly a Western nation like ours.... The President himself feels this way.”¹²³ It was not especially surprising, therefore, that U.S. officials were “repeatedly being urged to support Israel because it is ‘a bastion of democracy’ in the Middle East.”¹²⁴

These factors would have made it difficult for Johnson, had he so desired, to emulate what Eisenhower had done in 1957. A coercive strategy, Saunders noted, would have been problematic for the president “because of the domestic reaction.”¹²⁵ Bringing any sort of pressure to bear on Jerusalem to make diplomatic concessions, therefore, would be no easy task, unless the White House could credibly demonstrate the Eshkol government’s responsibility for the impasse in the peace process. In the words of one American diplomat, “No US administration could pursue an anti-Israel policy, unless Israel should behave in an inexcusably aggressive manner.”¹²⁶ “American words and actions which will have at least a constructive effect in knocking [the president] off the top of the Israeli polls,” Bundy recognized, might be necessary. “The trick,” however, “will be to achieve that result without any parallel impact at home.”¹²⁷

¹²³ Memo from Saunders to Rostow and Bundy, “Subject: A New US Policy for the Middle East,” July 3, 1967, folder: New Basic Policy, 4/1/66-1/20/69, box 8, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL (emphasis in original).

¹²⁴ Memcon, February 1, 1968, folder: 11/1/67-2/29/68 [1 of 3], box 17, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

¹²⁵ Memo from Saunders to Rostow and Bundy, July 3, 1967. Furthermore, Saunders pointed out: “The President is winning the American Jewish community’s praise for the contrast between his handling of this crisis and President Eisenhower’s 1956-57 pressure on Israel to withdraw.” One question the administration studied in the months following the June War, therefore, was whether Eisenhower had enjoyed public backing for his policy. “The proposition to be tested here,” one paper noted, “is that it was hard enough to move Israel with moderately favorable public opinion—if so.” See “Research Projects,” August 3, 1967, folder: US Position—Discussion [1 of 2], box 13, Files of the Special Committee of the NSC (FSC), NSF, LBJL. Note also Bundy’s initial willingness to vote for a Latin American draft resolution prior to 242’s passage because of his belief “that the American Jewish community is just not exercised over the resolution. Therefore, we could vote with little fear of drawing violent domestic reaction.” Saunders was less sure, writing: “Of course, it remains to be seen whether the community might turn around if the [Israeli government] pulled out all the stops.” See Memo from Saunders to Rostow, “Subject: Chat with Mac Bundy,” November 21, 1967, folder 6, box 140, Israel Country File, NSF, LBJL.

¹²⁶ Memo from Ambassador Charles W. Yost to Battle, “The Near Eastern Situation—June 1967,” June 13, 1967, folder: US Position—Discussion [1 of 2], box 13, FSC, NSF, LBJL.

¹²⁷ Memo from Bundy to Johnson, “Subject: The Middle East as we Approach the Weekend,” July 21, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 709.

The administration, then, could not simply threaten Israel bluntly. Rusk, in fact, had at one time attempted such a ploy. If Jerusalem continued to complicate the U.S. position in the region, he had warned, “it would be necessary for us to consider most seriously whether to involve ourselves any longer in the problems of Near Eastern security. There should be no misunderstanding that the obligation of the United States Government is to act on the basis of the interests of 190 million Americans.” Continued actions that were contrary to U.S. interests, the secretary of state had informed the Eshkol government, would “force upon us a fundamental reexamination of our role in the Near East.” It was doubtful, however, that the administration could maintain such a line. As one NSC official had pointed out at the time, threatening to “turn against [the] Israelis if they don’t play ball” was “not too credible.... Nor can we say too loudly we’ll withdraw from [the] Middle East and let [the] chips fall where they may.”¹²⁸

None of this, however, meant that the United States lacked decisive influence with Jerusalem. To the contrary, American strategists well understood that the Eshkol government would be extremely reluctant to undertake actions that would damage its U.S. connection. The Israelis, an April 1968 NIE pointed out, would be hesitant “to follow a course that [they] thought would jeopardize the relationship.”¹²⁹ Jerusalem’s awareness that its close association with the United States was crucial to its security, Rusk had written as early as May 1965, provided the administration with “compelling leverage.”¹³⁰ “The only counter big enough to sway Eshkol, I suspect,” Rostow had written before the war on the issue of Israel’s nuclear program, “will be the US-Israeli relationship itself.”¹³¹ “We firmly believe,” the national security adviser wrote on

¹²⁸ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, March 1, 1965, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 18, p. 367; and Message from Komer to Bundy, March 1, 1965, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 18, p. 371.

¹²⁹ NIE 35-68, “Israel,” April 11, 1968, folder 35, NIEs box 6, NSF, LBJL.

¹³⁰ Memo from Rusk to Johnson, “Subject: Preventing Nuclear Proliferation in the Near East,” May 10, 1965, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 18, p. 455.

¹³¹ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, “Subject: Your Meeting with Mr. Feinberg at 11:30 a.m.,” April 20, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 797.

another occasion, “that the US has the substantive ideas and the diplomatic gifts to promote [a fair] settlement. . . . We are either unduly modest or self-deceptive if we say [the United States Government] doesn’t have the capability of devising a just and equitable settlement.”¹³²

And the Americans recognized that at some point a U.S.-Israeli confrontation would be necessary to move Jerusalem to accept a realistic settlement. The “tough question” for the administration, Rostow wrote prior to Resolution 242’s adoption, would arise if the Arabs could be brought to accept “an honest settlement.” The United States had already provided assurances that in exchange for such concessions it would support a restoration of essentially the June 4 lines, “But we all know that could lead to a tangle with the Israelis.”¹³³ “[T]aking on the Israelis,” Saunders agreed, would cause them to “explode in our faces.”¹³⁴ At some point, Bundy recognized, Johnson would, to obtain a settlement, need to link U.S. backing to diplomatic concessions: “We have some very major issues to settle with the Israelis when they come in for new major military agreements, and I have already warned Abba Eban that you are not the sort of man who will wish to separate fundamental questions of Israeli defense from political issues in which we have a legitimate interest—like Jerusalem and the refugees.”¹³⁵

¹³² Telegram from Rostow to Johnson, June 16, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, p. 378.

¹³³ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, “Subject: Your Talk with Arab Ambassadors—Wednesday, October 4,” October 3, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 869. During a meeting earlier that day Rusk had likewise stated, “In my opinion we are going to have to wrestle with Israel.” See Memcon, October 3, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 861.

¹³⁴ Memo from Saunders to Rostow, June 24, 1968, folder: Arab-Israel, 1/1/68-1/20/69 [1 of 2], box 7, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

¹³⁵ Memo from Bundy to Johnson through Rostow, “Subject: Pending Middle Eastern Decisions,” July 11, 1967, folder: Mideast, box 42, McPherson Files, LBJL. Note also U.S. strategists’ concern that providing Israel with additional military assistance would enhance the Eshkol government’s ability to resist pressure for a settlement. While the United States had an interest in Israel’s being able to defend itself, Saunders observed: “[T]here’s a delicate line between that and going too far toward creating a regional super-power. We don’t generally agree with the Israelis in their tactics for handling [the] Arabs and creating a lasting peace, and *creating this super air force may be in about the same category as the policy of some Israelis to insure Israel’s security by holding all the conquered territories.*” The United States, he wrote, could not tie itself to a “fortress Israel.” See Memo by Saunders, “Subject: Summary of State-Defense Positions on Israeli Aircraft Request,” November 22, 1967, folder 6, box 140, Israel Country File, NSF, LBJL (emphasis in original); and Memo from Saunders to Rostow, “Subject: Rough Sketch of the Package for Eshkol,” December 29, 1967, folder: Visit of Prime Minister Eshkol of Israel, January 7-8, 1968 [1 of 3], box 3, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

The United States, in other words, would have to use its influence to achieve peace. Unless Johnson became personally involved, one NSC staffer wrote just days after the war had ended, the result would be “a long and stormy stalemate during which the Russians will more than make up for what they have temporarily lost. And it will be at our expense.”¹³⁶ Or, as one State Department official put it as Johnson’s presidency neared its end: “The United States has great power. By holding that power in abeyance in the Middle East we help create instability in the area and invite blame from all sides during times of instability.” Washington, therefore, needed to “take a clear, firm stand on the Arab-Israel issue... or we will lose disastrously.”¹³⁷

The problem was that the White House was simply not going to make such an effort unless the necessary expenditure of political capital it would involve could be justified. “I think there is... agreement that if we use our full influence, we can greatly affect the readiness of the government of Israel to move in this direction,” Bundy had argued as early as July 1967. “But what is not clear is whether we are ready to apply our full influence in this direction, in the light of the depth and strength of the feelings of the people of Israel and of their supporters in the United States.” There would almost certainly be no settlement if the Americans played a passive role, but “the worst course of all would be for us to embark on a course which requires pressure on Israel if in fact at the moment of truth we are likely to conclude that it is unwise to apply such pressure.”¹³⁸ Because “the odds seem against a settlement,” Saunders agreed, many U.S. officials believed that “we shouldn’t invest too much more in pressing the parties—especially Israel in an

¹³⁶ Memo from Wriggins to Rostow, “Subject: Today’s Thoughts on Arab-Israel Problem,” June 12, 1967, folder: Arab-Israel, 4/1/66-12/31/67 [1 of 3], box 7, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

¹³⁷ Memo from an Unknown State Department Official to Saunders, November 22, 1968, folder: Arab-Israel, 1/1/68-1/20/69 [2 of 2], box 7, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

¹³⁸ Memo from Bundy to Johnson, July 17, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 684 n. 2; and Paper Prepared by Bundy, July 18, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, pp. 682-684.

election year—toward a settlement.”¹³⁹ There was an argument to be made, given the bleak circumstances, that the administration “*would be foolish to invest heavily in trying to bring [a settlement] about*—especially in a US election year because at some point a fair settlement might require us to press Israel pretty hard.... [A] lot of people here... doubt we have the heart to try when it means leaning on Israel.”¹⁴⁰ Although Johnson would be willing to suffer political costs for peace, Saunders emphasized to the Egyptians, there was no reason for the White House “to look for a confrontation with Israel unless there is something fairly specific to talk about.”¹⁴¹

Moreover, the White House saw no reason to undertake a major effort unless the likely reward was to be a comprehensive agreement. It was for this reason that Saunders recommended against pursuing a bilateral Israeli-Jordanian deal. To achieve such an objective, the United States would need to convince the Eshkol government to accept a solution on Jerusalem that could satisfy both Hussein and Saudi Arabian leaders, something that would “require a major US-Israeli showdown.” And, “if we are going that far anyway,” he asked, “why not try to get Nasser into a settlement? The only answer is that we should make a maximum effort for a settlement that involves Nasser. That, too, will require a US-Israeli showdown.”¹⁴²

What this complex of considerations added up to was that the Johnson administration was simply not going to do what was necessary to secure an agreement until it had received a compelling peace offer from the Soviets and Arabs. The United States, Bundy had written as

¹³⁹ Memo from Saunders to Rostow, December 4, 1967, p. 17. Saunders nevertheless advocated making a major effort with the Israelis, even though the consequence would be that Jerusalem would probably “start cranking up the Jewish community right now.” See Memo from Saunders to Rostow, “Subject: Your Preparatory Meeting on the Eban Talks,” October 20, 1967, folder 6, box 140, Israel Country File, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁴⁰ Memo from Saunders to Rostow, “Subject: The Choice Ahead in the Middle East,” December 5, 1967, folder: UAR, 4/1/66-12/31/67, box 32, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL (emphasis in original).

¹⁴¹ Memo for the Record, “Subject: Conversation with the Egyptian Minister,” February 16, 1968, folder: UAR, 1/1/68-1/20/69 [2 of 3], box 32, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁴² Memo by Saunders, “A Moderate Solution for the Middle East,” May 8, 1968, folder: Arab-Israel, 1/1/68-1/20/69 [1 of 2], box 7, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL. A bilateral Israeli-Jordanian deal was also considered risky and perhaps unsustainable, given that a separate agreement might undermine Hussein’s already precarious position at home, and in the Arab world more broadly.

early as July 31, certainly had disagreements with Israel, but that did not automatically imply that the Americans would use their influence with Jerusalem: “Unless the Arabs make a drastic change in their bargaining position, we have no practical way of opposing this Israeli position.”¹⁴³ “[N]o US administration,” Johnson’s envoy to Egypt, John McCloy, informed Nasser, “would take action [to] compel Israel [to] withdraw without assurance for Israel’s security and without convincing simultaneous action on [the] part of [Egypt].”¹⁴⁴ There was, Undersecretary Rostow told Dobrynin at one point, no point in pursuing the matter “in the abstract.”¹⁴⁵ It was at least worth considering, Saunders believed, whether taking a firm line with the Israelis was the correct course when it was unclear if doing so would achieve any results. It was uncertain, after all, whether Jerusalem even had a negotiating partner. When added to the fact that such an approach would “get the Israelis (and the Jewish Community) unnecessarily riled up,” the expenditure of political capital simply did not seem worth it.¹⁴⁶

Thus, it was simply not true that U.S. decision-makers felt completely impotent in their dealings with Israel. Contrary to one Egyptian official’s later claim, Rusk had never told the Arabs to “not ever believe that any future American administration will put pressure on Israel.”¹⁴⁷ The secretary of state, in fact, had made a different point entirely. Rather than plead helplessness, he had merely said “that [the] US could not exert 100 percent influence in Israel when [Egypt] did not give [the] US any influence in [Egypt].”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Memo from Bundy to Johnson, “Subject: The Middle East at the End of July,” July 31, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 739.

¹⁴⁴ Telegram from the U.S. Interests Section in Egypt to the Department of State, April 15, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, p. 283.

¹⁴⁵ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union, July 4, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, p. 400.

¹⁴⁶ Memo from Saunders to Rostow, October 19, 1967. See also Memo from Saunders to Rostow, October 20, 1967.

¹⁴⁷ Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, p. 92.

¹⁴⁸ Telegram from Rusk to the Department of State, November 3, 1968, p. 597. See also Memo No. 1367/67 Prepared in the CIA, “Main Issues in a Middle East Settlement,” July 13, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, pp. 650-652.

But in the administration's view, neither the Soviets nor Arabs appeared ready to negotiate the sort of agreement U.S. strategists had in mind. The idea, promoted by one U.S. ambassador, that the administration should attempt to break the deadlock with "a muscular sense of urgency" through the exertion of "public pressure" on Israel and Egypt, consequently, would have to await the inauguration of Johnson's successor.¹⁴⁹ As Barbour reasoned, such a move might encourage greater Arab intransigence for only marginal improvements. Even though U.S. influence in Jerusalem was "theoretically limitless and overwhelming," he wrote: "I question whether as a practical matter we would or should exert such maximum measures as probably would be necessary to achieve a halfway step which might or might not move the parties toward an ultimate solution." A settlement that would protect U.S. interests, he added, would have to await "a genuine US-Soviet détente."¹⁵⁰ As Rusk argued, however, there might come "a time, as when issues have crystallized into [a] clear bargaining situation, when [the] diplomatic support of the US and others may be necessary to bring [the] parties to [an] agreement."¹⁵¹

The Power of Structural Forces and the Beginnings of U.S.-USSR Convergence

By mid-1968, the Soviet leadership had come to understand not only that a settlement would not be possible without the Americans, but also that attracting U.S. interest in a cooperative solution would not be possible unless the Arabs could be brought to a more moderate position. Given Moscow's deep concern about the possibility of another war breaking out in the Middle East, as well as its belief that without movement Israel would move to solidify its control over the

¹⁴⁹ Telegram from the Embassy in Jordan to the Department of State, "Subject: Next Steps in Moving Toward Arab-Israel Settlement," December 19, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 697-701. Rusk did acknowledge in reply that such an approach had growing appeal in Washington, but stated that time had run out on the Johnson presidency. See Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Jordan, December 24, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 714-715.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Telegram from Smith to Johnson, July 4, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 401-404. See also Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, December 26, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 724-725.

¹⁵¹ Circular Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Posts, December 7, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, p. 21.

territories it had taken in June 1967, the Kremlin was bound to take steps designed to attract the Johnson administration's interest in a joint U.S.-Soviet approach. The only other alternatives, of course, would be to rearm the Arabs—a move that would only increase the chances that a conflict would break out—or increased tensions between Moscow and its clients.

Thus on September 4, Dobrynin delivered to Rusk a moderated Soviet peace plan. To be sure, the proposal failed to outline a realistic basis for settling the dispute. Aside from its openly anti-Israeli tone, the document was vague regarding the issues about which the United States and Israel were most concerned. Yet, the paper also stated that the territories could be returned in phases and proposed that on the day that Israeli troops began to withdraw, the parties could deposit a declaration at the UN “on the cessation of the state of war, on respect for and recognition of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of each state in the region and their right to live in peace, within safe and recognized borders.” Such a pledge, the offer added, could go into effect “either through the instrumentality of the Security Council or through the signing of a multilateral document,” with the great powers guaranteeing its enforcement. For good measure, Dobrynin informed Rusk that the Soviet Union would be prepared to discuss an arms limitation agreement for the Middle East with the United States in the context of an overall agreement.¹⁵² As a whole, the paper was insufficient, but it represented a real effort on Moscow's part, especially when one considers that the USSR was being asked to deliver Arab concessions when the Americans and Israelis had provided no indication that the Eshkol government would countenance a full withdrawal.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Memcon with Attachment, “Subject: The Middle East,” September 4, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 478, 480-481.

¹⁵³ Administration officials understood that this situation made the Soviet task of influencing the Arabs immeasurably more difficult. For example, see Information Memo from Rostow to Johnson, September 18, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, p. 503; Memo from Rostow to Johnson with Attachment, “Subject: US and Soviet Positions on Mid-East Resolution,” October 12, 1967, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 893; Memo from Saunders to Rostow, “Subject: Your Farewell Talk with Evron—10:15 a.m. Friday,” June 28, 1968, folder: Israel, 5/1/68-

More significantly, the Politburo decided to send Gromyko to Cairo in December to convince Nasser to take more seriously a diplomatic solution. The Egyptians, Moscow feared, were looking to reactivate the Sinai front. It was the Soviet foreign minister's task to persuade Nasser to hold off while the Soviet Union attempted to negotiate an agreement with the United States that could prevent another war.¹⁵⁴ As a result of these consultations, on December 30, the Soviets submitted a second proposal to Washington. Although similar to the September 4 note, this version acknowledged that any final deal would have to be negotiated as a "package," thereby further distancing Moscow from the Arab position that Resolution 242 was self-enforcing. The plan, though still falling short of what would be necessary to clinch Middle East peace, represented another small step in the direction of a permanent settlement.¹⁵⁵

And U.S. strategists seemed to understand that the Soviets were trying to meet the United States halfway. To be sure, the Americans remained hesitant to take any steps that might obviate the need for the Arabs to commit directly to peace. "The nub of the problem," Rostow felt, "is the fear of our Middle East experts that if we get into a negotiating posture with the Soviet Union, the Arabs will draw back from Jarring and leave the task for the U.S. and the USSR, which is just what they want in the first place." There would at some point, therefore, need to be direct contacts between the parties, while "we and, we hope, the Russians will be trying to be helpful from the rear."¹⁵⁶

But the administration recognized that the Kremlin was seeking to remove the Middle East as a source of tension in superpower relations. As early as August 1967, a special NIE had

9/30/68 [1 of 3], box 17, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL; and Memo from Saunders to Bundy, August 15, 1968, folder: Jarring Mission, April 1968-January 1969, box 21, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁵⁴ Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile*, pp. 72-76. See also Laqueur, *The Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 82.

¹⁵⁵ Telegram from Rostow to Johnson with Attachments, December 31, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 741-745.

¹⁵⁶ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, September 17, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, p. 502 n. 2. See also Memo from Saunders to Bundy, August 1, 1967, folder: Arab-Israel, 4/1/66-12/31/67 [2 of 3], box 7, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL; and Memo from Rostow to Rusk, September 18, 1968, folder 10, box 16, Rostow Files, NSF, LBJL.

concluded not only that Nasser was now far more dependent on the Soviets than he had been prior to the war, but that the USSR was “using its influence to encourage [Egyptian] moderation toward Israel.”¹⁵⁷ The Soviets, U.S. intelligence sources had learned, had grown increasingly anxious about the Middle East, with one high-ranking official calling the region “[t]he point of maximum danger” in the world. Because Moscow concerned about its economic weaknesses and was hoping to pull back from the Third World, the Americans had been informed, the Soviets were looking for compromises with the United States. This, Washington was told, was the reason why the Soviets had clashed with Boumediene when he had visited Moscow after the war.¹⁵⁸

The Kremlin, the Americans now recognized, had grown increasingly aware of “the restrictive limits within which it must work in the Middle East.”¹⁵⁹ For the first time since the Six-Day War, a July 1968 intelligence estimate asserted: “[T]here are hints that Moscow’s hard pro-Arab line may give way to a more flexible diplomacy and some parallel efforts with the US.” The USSR, it continued, had “no desire to align itself with Arab intransigence aimed at the destruction of the Israeli state.” Because the Kremlin well understood that without diplomatic progress its clients would continue to demand arms and seek direct USSR support in another war, “perspectives which cannot be congenial to Moscow,” the Soviet leadership would look to cooperate with the United States. The Politburo, the assessment thus concluded, now appeared to have a genuine interest in bringing “the Middle East hotbed under some degree of control.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Special NIE 36.1-67, August 17, 1967. See also NIE 35-68, April 11, 1968. Even during the Six-Day War, Zbigniew Brzezinski, then a member of the State Department’s Policy Planning Council, had surmised that Moscow might want to tamp down tensions in the Middle East due to the crushing defeat of its clients. See Memo by Brzezinski, “Subject: Sinai and Saigon—Should the Two be Linked?” June 7, 1967, folder: Mideast, box 42, McPherson Files, LBJL.

¹⁵⁸ Memo from Rostow to Johnson, August 4, 1967.

¹⁵⁹ Draft Paper, “The US and Communist Powers in the Middle East, 1964-1967,” September 7, 1967, folder 36, box 6, NIEs, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁶⁰ Memo from the Deputy Director of the Office of National Estimates John Huizenga to Helms, “Subject: Some Signs of Change in Soviet Policy,” July 15, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 14, pp. 661, 663. Both Helms and Rostow, after reading the paper, wrote Johnson that they considered it a solid piece of analysis. See also See Special

And the Americans interpreted correctly the purpose of Gromyko's visit to Cairo. The Kremlin, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) estimated, had probably "concluded that forward movement in the Arab-Israeli settlement effort might ease the danger of a sudden escalation in [Egyptian]-Israeli military clashes, or that it might help stem the decline in Nasser's authority at home and his prestige as an Arab regional leader." It was plausible, therefore, that Moscow now desired to cool the situation: "The possibility cannot be ruled out that the Soviets have concluded that it is time to push hard for an Arab-Israeli accommodation in order to limit the area's explosiveness. The Soviets may calculate that although the instability in the area since June 1967 has been advantageous to them, the situation has now altered and could become dangerous to Soviet interests."¹⁶¹

And, intelligence analysts surmised, if Moscow had evidence that Israel could actually be brought to evacuate the lands taken during the conflict, it might support a genuine settlement of the dispute. The best way for the Soviets to improve their standing in the Arab world, a CIA memorandum observed, was to help deliver a settlement acceptable to Cairo. "[H]aving Arab-Israeli forces at flash point," it argued, "does not serve their purposes, and they would like to be credited with any agreement which eventually leads to an Israeli troop withdrawal." Moscow, however, would be reluctant "to get in front of the Arab bargaining position, and it can be

NIE 11-13-67, "Probable Soviet Objectives in Rearming Arab States," July 20, 1967, folder: Intelligence Reports, July 19-December 1, 1967, box 14, FSC, NSF, LBJL; and Memo to Bundy and Rostow, "Subject: An ISA study on agreed arms limitation in the Near East," July 13, 1967, folder: Arms Limits [1 of 2], box 9, FSC, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁶¹ INR Memo from Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research Thomas L. Hughes to Rusk, "Subject: Gromyko Visits Cairo to Discuss Arab-Israeli Impasse," December 27, 1968, folder: UAR, 1/1/68-1/20/69 [2 of 3], box 32, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL. See also INR Research Memo RSE-4 from Hughes to Rusk, "Subject: The New Soviet Initiative in Middle East Settlement Diplomacy," January 6, 1969, folder: USSR, Vol. 22, Cables and Memos [2 of 2], October 1968-January 1969, Europe and USSR Country File, box 227, NSF, LBJL; and Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, December 1968, folder: USSR, Vol. 22, Cables and Memos [1 of 2], October 1968-January 1969, Europe and USSR Country File box 227, NSF, LBJL.

expected to exercise no pressure on the Arabs until it is convinced that the US can ensure some sign of conciliation from Israel, such as a pledge of withdrawal.”¹⁶²

The Americans, moreover, found aspects of the Soviet proposals constructive. The Kremlin’s idea that the parties would deposit a multilateral agreement at the UN, with the great powers undertaking its enforcement, was particularly intriguing, for it demonstrated benign USSR intent. “If the Soviet aim is to perpetuate tension in the Middle East,” Rostow informed Rabin, “it seems highly unlikely that the Soviet Union would invite the US to guarantee whatever settlement develops.” To the contrary: “If the Soviets were not serious about a final settlement, the last thing they would want would be a US commitment to make the details of a settlement stick.”¹⁶³ Moscow’s revised plan, Undersecretary Rostow felt, included “significant innovations responsive to [the] US insistence on [the] need for [an] agreement among [the] parties to [the] conflict. This could be [an] important development.” The Kremlin, he added, seemed to want “early movement toward [a] settlement, perhaps because of concern about [the] risks of [the] military build-up in [the] area, and of [a] situation they could not control.”¹⁶⁴

Thus, the United States and the Soviet Union seemed to be moving, however slowly, in the direction of a more cooperative relationship in the Middle East, for each understood that an understanding between them would powerfully impact the parties to the conflict. U.S. officials in particular, despite their earlier suspicions of Soviet intentions, appeared to be shifting their views on the idea of joint action with Moscow. The Arabs and Israelis, after all, had proven completely

¹⁶² CIA Intelligence Memo No. 2041/68, “Soviet Political Strategy in the Middle East,” September 30, 1968, folder 5, box 226, Europe and USSR Country File, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁶³ Memcon, September 25, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 518-519. See also Memo from Rostow to Johnson, September 13, 1968, folder 2, box 12, Rostow Files, NSF, LBJL; and Memo from Undersecretary Rostow to Rusk, “Subject: Sisco-Battle Memorandum of September 10 on Suggested Scenario for Jarring Mission,” September 10, 1968, folder: Jarring Mission, April 1968-January 1969, box 21, Saunders Files, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁶⁴ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, January 2, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1969-1972* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2015), pp. 1, 4. See also Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Soviet Union, “Subject: Jarring Mission,” January 1969, folder: USSR, Vol. 22, Cables and Memos [1 of 2], October 1968-January 1969, box 227, Europe and USSR Country File, NSF, LBJL.

incapable of resolving their differences themselves, and the area appeared to be heading towards another conflict. And, because the USSR had indicated a greater willingness to press the Arabs, the Washington evidently felt that it might be time to try to concert with the Kremlin.

Johnson administration officials, in fact, began warning the Israelis that a more detailed U.S. peace plan could be in store. The United States, Rusk had told Rabin on September 19, had “no reason whatsoever to believe the USSR wants to see the destruction of Israel.” Although the September 4 note was a “mixed bag,” Washington “could not reject out of hand an approach by a major power which avowed an attempt to cooperate in bringing peace to the area.” Because the Eshkol government had failed to express its views on the substance of a settlement, moreover: “[I]t was going to be necessary for the [the United States] to become more specific in interpreting the President’s Five Points and the Security Council Resolution.”¹⁶⁵ A joint French-British-Soviet-American effort to resolve the Middle East conflict, Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Sisco similarly informed the ambassador, “would have considerable attraction,” and “to [the] extent there [was] no progress by [the] parties, there will be growing stimulation of [the] 4-power approach.”¹⁶⁶ Thus, as Johnson prepared to leave the White House and hand over authority to President-elect Nixon, the structure of the Arab-Israeli dispute seemed to be pushing forcefully the United States and the Soviet Union to cooperate for its resolution.

¹⁶⁵ Memcon, “Subject: A Near East Peace Settlement,” September 19, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 506-507; and Information Memo from Rostow to Johnson, “Subject: Secretary Rusk’s Talk with Ambassador Rabin,” September 19, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, p. 509. See also Memo from Battle and David H. Popper to Rusk through Katzenbach, “Subject: Your Meeting with Israeli Ambassador Rabin on Wednesday, September 18, 5 p.m.,” September 18, 1968, folder 5, box 142, Israel Country File, NSF, LBJL. The reference to Johnson’s five points came from the president’s address of June 19, 1967, in which he had outlined the basic principles the United States believed should guide an overall settlement. For the text of the speech, see Johnson’s Address at the State Department’s Foreign Policy Conference for Educators, June 19, 1967, American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28308>.

¹⁶⁶ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, September 14, 1968, in *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 20, pp. 497-498. See also Telegram from the Department of State to Various Posts, “Subject: Soviet Approach on [Middle East],” September 18, 1968, folder 6, box 226, Europe and USSR Country File, NSF, LBJL.

Chapter 2: Toward an “Era of Negotiation”?

Frankly, Bill, nothing really can happen [in the Middle East]. It just can't happen, that's all.
—Richard Nixon¹

I don't want to save the face of the USSR; they aren't trying to help us anywhere. I don't see why we should help them.... In developing our position, let's not give them a chance to claim credit for getting everything back for the Arabs. [It would be a] [m]istake to “allow them to look too good.”
—Richard Nixon²

Nixon took office with a thorough understanding of both the global and regional dynamics of the Arab-Israeli dispute. The president viewed the Middle East as an area of major concern, one in which the chances of a superpower confrontation were uncomfortably high. In addition, he believed that American interests in the Arab world had been dealt a significant setback as a result of the Six-Day War and that Washington's position in the area would continue to deteriorate if it failed to help bring about a settlement. More importantly, Nixon felt that an agreement would not be possible in the absence of U.S.-Soviet cooperation. When one considers that the American and USSR negotiating positions were substantively quite similar, the inauguration of the new administration seemed to augur well for a joint superpower effort in the Middle East.

There could have perhaps been no better way to relax global tensions and to mitigate the dangers of U.S.-USSR rivalry than for the United States and the Soviet Union to cooperate on the Arab-Israeli dispute. If both sides were serious about creating a more stable international security architecture, a settlement in the volatile Middle East should have been a high priority in Washington and Moscow. Indeed, one would think that the superpowers would have been bound to cooperate due to the intense pressures for such an approach systemic forces had generated.

¹ Telephone Conversation (Telecon), April 19, 1971, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWzYRUWU47g>, at 1:31-1:36.

² Minutes of a National Security Council (NSC) Meeting, “Middle East,” September 11, 1969, in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969-1976*, Vol. 23: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1969-1972* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2015), p. 169.

Yet within two years of Nixon taking office, the Arab-Israeli problem had become an even graver threat to international security. Although Washington and Moscow had held countless talks on the issue almost from the moment of the president's inauguration, by the end of 1970, the situation in the Middle East had deteriorated dangerously. Driven by what it perceived as a major threat to its interests, the Kremlin had chosen to intervene directly in the conflict, which increased significantly the potentiality of a superpower clash. And rather than cooperation, superpower interactions in the region had degenerated into competition.

How is this outcome to be understood? Why, given the nature and potency of the structural pressures involved, did conflict rather than cooperation define American-Soviet relations in the Middle East? Was the United States uninterested joint action, or did USSR policy make this sort of approach unworkable? Did the superpowers simply lack the capabilities to overcome the obstinacy of their respective clients? Or did the problem lie elsewhere, and have mainly to do with decision-makers' perceptions and domestic political concerns?

Nixon's Strategic Conception of the Middle East

From the start of his term in office, Nixon considered a Middle East settlement an important national security objective. Having served as Eisenhower's vice president and observed first-hand the intricacies involved in formulating Arab-Israeli policy during the Suez Crisis, the president had thought about the problem a great deal and come to the conclusion that, for key power political reasons, a diplomatic solution was needed to protect American interests.³

To begin, the United States was without attractive military options for managing a crisis in the region. Compared to a decade earlier, the Americans could no longer uncontestedly project

³ Like Johnson, Nixon had considered Eisenhower's decision to compel the Israelis to withdraw from the Sinai a mistake, though for quite different reasons. See Memorandum (Memo) for the Record, "NSC Meeting, Wednesday, June 10, 1970—Middle East," June 10, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 429-430; and Memo from Nixon to Secretary of State William Rogers, May 26, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 856-857.

conventional power in the Mediterranean theater. Unlike in 1958, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger pointed out, it would not be possible to conduct “another ‘Lebanon operation.’” Aside from the fact that Washington would lack both operating bases and the requisite forewarning for such a mission, the expanded USSR naval presence in the area had upset the balance of capabilities.⁴ “By the facts of Soviet power,” Nixon agreed, “the risks of confrontation in the Middle East or elsewhere are unacceptable.”⁵

Nor did the White House believe that it would enjoy support at home for a major military operation in the Middle East, given the heavy U.S. involvement in Vietnam.⁶ The administration, Nixon said at an early NSC meeting, had to consider its “political problem in the US.” Even in a crisis, “[W]e just can’t tote that.” It would, he said, be “[e]xtremely difficult for us to move in to save Israel.”⁷ Taking into account the shifting military balance in the region, Nixon argued: “I don’t think we should leave the impression that—in the event of a protracted war—the US will help.” Although the American people were sympathetic to Israel, the president felt that “the US public would not support US intervention to save Israel.”⁸ “[E]ven a US commitment,” Kissinger concurred, “would be highly doubtful given the current mood of the United States.” Discussing

⁴ Minutes of a Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG) Meeting, “Subject: Berlin, Sino-Soviet Hostilities, and the Middle East,” October 21, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 193. See also Minutes of an NSC Meeting, “The Middle East,” December 10, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 239. For other discussions of U.S. contingency planning in this area, see Minutes of an NSC Meeting, “NSC Meeting on Middle East,” February 1, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 14-17; and Memo for the Record, “Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, San Clemente, August 25, 1969,” August 25, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 154-155. Note also Kissinger’s claim that the United States was “inferior” at the conventional level in the Middle East. See Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 277.

⁵ Memcon, “Subject: Meeting at Junta Geral, Angra do Heroismo, Terceira, Azores,” December 13, 1971, in William Burr, ed., *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top-Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow* (New York: New Press, 1998), pp. 39-40.

⁶ The legacy of the June 1967 War undoubtedly shaped the administration’s thinking on this issue.

⁷ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, February 1, 1969, p. 19.

⁸ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, September 11, 1969, p. 170. “Does Moscow think they’re going to have [a] confrontation with [the] US?” Nixon asked during this meeting. “You know damn well we’re not and they know it.” See p. 167. Note also Nixon’s concern with fostering the proper attitude among the American public to justify a major intervention in the Middle East. See Memo from Nixon to Kissinger, March 17, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 338-340; Editorial Note on Israeli Memcon, May 22, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 393; and Memcon, August 17, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 505-509.

such an assurance was, therefore, “a waste of time.... The Israelis would be ‘crazy’ to believe that we could make good on such a commitment.”⁹

Washington, moreover, had by this time lost the ability to rely on its strategic atomic arsenal to deter regional USSR military actions. The Soviet Union’s erasure of American nuclear superiority meant that U.S. threats of extended deterrence were inherently less credible than they had been previously. Consequently, quite apart from the reality that the Soviets now had the “capability to project force overseas as they did not five years ago,” Kissinger early on in the administration during a discussion of contingency planning for the Middle East felt compelled to raise the question of “whether we could repeat our approach to [the] Cuban missile crisis.”¹⁰ With this in mind, the United States might have to consider the highly risky course of resorting to limited nuclear options to defend Israel against a Soviet-backed Arab assault.¹¹

Most significant, however, was the American belief that offering Jerusalem a security guarantee would jeopardize the U.S. ability to negotiate a political settlement and maintain a balanced posture in the Middle East. “A defense treaty with Israel,” Kissinger argued, “would call on us to pay too high a political price in the Arab countries.”¹² It would not be in Washington’s interest, one strategy paper written soon after Nixon had taken office similarly asserted, to provide the Israelis with a formal guarantee: “We should avoid any open-ended

⁹ Memo for the Record, “Meeting of the NSC Special Review Group [SRG] on the Middle East,” May 28, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 396-397. See also Editorial Note on Israeli Memcon, April 20, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 819.

¹⁰ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, February 4, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 27. See also Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 999. On the role of nuclear weapons during the Cuban missile crisis, see Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 235-260.

¹¹ One of Kissinger’s first directives was to have Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and JCS Chairman Earle Wheeler draw up contingency plans for such a scenario. See William Burr, “The Nixon Administration, the ‘Horror Strategy,’ and the Search for Limited Nuclear Options, 1969-1972: Prelude to the Schlesinger Doctrine,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2005), p. 50. For Kissinger’s thinking in this area, see also Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 258-259.

¹² Memo for the Record, May 28, 1970, p. 397.

commitment because it would subordinate the United States to Israeli concepts of defense and security, and because it would polarize the area between us and the USSR.”¹³

The sum result of these considerations was that, just like during the Johnson administration, the Americans opposed strongly the idea of formally committing to provide for Israel’s security.¹⁴ “[A]nyone who had lived through 1967,” Helms said at one point, “never wants to hear the word ‘guarantee’ again.”¹⁵ A pledge to defend Israel directly with American forces, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird forcefully argued in a memorandum to Nixon, was “*unacceptable*. We cannot overstate the importance of this reservation.” There was, he claimed, “inherent in the present Arab-Israeli conflict a very real potential for a US-Soviet nuclear confrontation. We consider it imperative that the US avoid such a confrontation, and avoid undertaking any additional commitments to Israel which would increase that danger.”¹⁶ So robust was the White House’s reluctance to give Jerusalem a security guarantee that to a certain extent it welcomed Israel’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. It might be wise, Kissinger claimed, for the administration to “avoid direct confrontation with Israel” on the matter, in part because it

¹³ Paper Prepared by the Interdepartmental Group for Near East and South Asia, NSCIG/NEA 69-2A (Revised), “Further Studies on Middle East Policy,” February 20, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 32-33. An earlier draft of the paper had added that a formal American commitment “would probably embolden Israel dangerously.” See Memo from Sisco to Kissinger, “Subject: Arab-Israeli Settlement,” February 20, Presidential Directives Collection, Part II (PR) 00345, Digital National Security Archive (DNSA).

¹⁴ This finding contradicts one political scientist’s claim that “the United States and Israel have never signed a military alliance because there has never been a question that the United States would provide military assistance to Israel in a crisis.” See James D. Morrow, “Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (1991), pp. 906-907.

¹⁵ NSC Review Group Meeting, “Subject: Persian Gulf,” June 5, 1970, Kissinger Transcripts Collection (KT) 00146, DNSA.

¹⁶ Memo from Laird to Nixon, “Subject: Proposed US Peace Initiative in the Middle East,” June 5, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 408-409 (emphasis in original). On the U.S. reluctance to offer Israel a formal security guarantee, see also Memcon, March 14, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 52; Memcon, December 8, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 664; Paper Prepared by the NSC Staff, “Analytical Summary: Guarantees of an Arab-Israeli Settlement,” January 23, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 706-713; Minutes of an SRG Meeting, “Subject: Middle East Guarantees,” April 14, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 802-809; and Editorial Note of Nixon’s Handwritten Notes and Television Interview, January 3, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13: *Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), p. 246. This had actually been an issue in American-Israeli relations since the 1950s. See Zach Levey, “Israel’s Quest for a Security Guarantee from the United States, 1954-1956,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1/2 (1995), pp. 43-63.

would lessen U.S. responsibilities. Forcing Jerusalem to roll back programs that it deemed “essential for security,” he believed, would place the Americans in “a situation where Israel could well demand that we provide compensation.”¹⁷

Thus, a Middle East crisis could confront the United States with excruciating dilemmas. Washington might have to watch as an important client state lost a war to USSR proxies or, even more disturbingly, have to take enormous risks to save Israel from its destruction.

The United States could, alternatively, try to address the problem by providing Israel with significant levels of military assistance on a long-term basis, but such an approach would undercut Washington’s ability to develop a more balanced policy, an objective to which Nixon assigned great importance. To be sure, the president, despite being what one historian has termed “a cultural anti-Semite,” had considerable admiration for the Israelis.¹⁸ U.S. interests, he wrote, were “basically pro-freedom and not just pro-Israel because of the Jewish vote. We are *for* Israel because Israel in our view is the only state in the Mideast which is *pro* freedom and an effective opponent to Soviet expansion.” The United States, Nixon stressed, “would stand up for them when the crunch comes basically because we admire them for their character and their strength and because we see in Israel the only state in that part of the world which will not become an abject tool of Soviet policy the moment the Soviet [Union] begins to flex its muscles.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Memcon, “Subject: Review Group Consideration of Response to NSSM-40,” June 26, 1969, KT00030, DNSA. See also McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 512; and Avner Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel’s Bargain with the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 2.

¹⁸ Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 170. For other discussions of Nixon’s anti-Semitic sentiments and feelings toward Israel, see pp. 169-171, 250; Leonard Garment, *Crazy Rhythm: My Journey from Brooklyn, Jazz, and Wall Street to Nixon’s White House, Watergate, and Beyond* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2001), pp. 199-201; William Safire, *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 564-577; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 202-203; and Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 30.

¹⁹ Memo from Nixon to Kissinger, March 17, 1970, p. 339 (emphasis in original).

In addition, Nixon felt that the United States had a moral obligation to do all it could to ensure Israel's survival. "[N]o American president," he later wrote, "will let Israel go down the tubes [because] Israel is a haven for millions whose families endured incredible suffering during the Holocaust."²⁰ In a memorandum to Secretary of State William Rogers, which, in the words of one historian, represents "perhaps the most clear expression of his thinking on the Middle East during his entire presidency," Nixon made the point with even greater emphasis.²¹ While he believed that U.S. policy had "gone overboard in support of the State of Israel against their neighbors," the president considered this posture partially "justified on humanitarian grounds. After all, the Jews were horribly persecuted during World War II and it was the responsibility of all decent people to go an extra mile to rectify that blot on the conscience of mankind."²²

Moreover, Nixon on occasion claimed that Israel represented an effective client for the advancement of U.S. interests. "When you look at the whole situation," he told Kissinger, "we really have a ploy going where we, in supporting Israel, are doing what is in our interest because it screws the Russians."²³ Although "Even Handedness" was "the right policy," Washington's interests, in the final analysis, required a strategy that gave "the Soviet[s] the most trouble— Don't let [the] Arab-Israeli conflict obscure that interest."²⁴ Given USSR backing for the Arabs, Nixon wrote Rogers: "There are times when the national security interests of the United States

²⁰ Quoted in Michael C. Desch, "The Myth of Abandonment: The Use and Abuse of the Holocaust Analogy," *Security Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2006), p. 108.

²¹ Craig Daigle, *The Limits of Détente: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 179.

²² Memo from Nixon to Rogers, May 26, 1971, p. 857. Nixon, however, was troubled by the lack of a similarly sympathetic U.S. attitude toward the Arabs. "But," he added, "speaking in humanitarian terms we have almost totally closed our eyes to the terrible condition of Arab refugees." When he had raised the problem after a trip to the Middle East in 1957, he claimed: "The whole Jewish community in this country jumped down my throat and probably have never forgiven me for mentioning the issue."

²³ Telecon, May 22, 1970, Kissinger Telephone Conversations (KA) 02973, DNSA. See also Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, "Subject: The Israeli Position," September 25, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 177 n. 2.

²⁴ Quoted in Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 563.

will be served by siding with Israel.” Doing so, he argued, would not only allow Jerusalem to defend itself, but would also help “deter further Soviet encroachments in the area.”²⁵

Nevertheless, devising a more balanced position on the Arab-Israeli question was among Nixon’s foremost objectives in the Middle East. The nuances of the president’s thinking notwithstanding, the great bulk of the evidence reveals the high priority the president assigned to improving the U.S. position in the Arab world. Even before his inauguration, Nixon had sent former Pennsylvania Governor William Scranton to the region as his personal emissary. The latter had declared that U.S. interests would be served by adopting “a more evenhanded policy.” Although assuring Israel’s security remained a major U.S. interest, Scranton said: “I think it is important for the United States to take into consideration the feelings of all persons and all countries in the Middle East and not necessarily espouse one nation over some other.”²⁶

Nixon attached major importance to the development of a more impartial Middle East policy mainly for two reasons. First, the simple reality was that Israel was a small country of limited strategic significance to the United States, whereas the Arab world was much larger geographically and in terms of population.²⁷ As Saunders observed, pursuing a strategy of

²⁵ Memo from Nixon to Rogers, May 26, 1971, p. 857. See also Patrick Tyler, *A World of Trouble: The White House and the Middle East—from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), p. 112; Alan R. Taylor, *The Superpowers and the Middle East* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), pp. 32, 46, 82-83, 114-115, 127-131; and Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), pp. 528-529.

²⁶ Quoted in George Lenczowski, *American Presidents and the Middle East* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 120.

²⁷ Early on in Nixon’s presidency, the relationship of the Middle East’s oil reserves to Western economic stability and energy interests was not yet as clear as it would ultimately become. The Arab oil-producing states, the president said in June 1970, could not “drink their oil and must have a market.” Nonetheless, Nixon acknowledged even at this early date that the loss of the Middle East’s energy resources “would be a serious turn of events, especially from Europe’s point.” See Memcon, “President’s Meeting with his Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board,” June 5, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976, Vol. 24: Middle East Region and Arabian Peninsula, 1969-1972; Jordan, September 1970* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2008), p. 80. See also Minutes of an NSC Meeting, December 10, 1969, p. 245. On the administration’s thinking about this aspect of the problem during this period, see also James E. Akins, “The Oil Crisis: This Time the World is Here,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (1973), pp. 462-463; and William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 61.

exclusively supporting Jerusalem “would leave the US as Israel’s ultimate defender against more than 60 million Soviet-backed enemies.”²⁸ And because Washington had been “cast in the role of a friend of Israel,” Undersecretary of State Elliot Richardson argued, the United States was now “in the worst state of relationships with the Arabs in the Middle East than in recent decades.”²⁹ With this in mind, Nixon felt that the Americans “just cannot continue to sit in there supporting Israel alone against 100 million Arabs, against the British, against the French.”³⁰ To the contrary, the president desired “a totally even-handed policy. As a matter of fact, the interest of the United States will be served in this case by tilting the policy, if it is to be tilted at all, on the side of 100 million Arabs rather than on the side of two million Israelis.”³¹

Even more central to Nixon’s thinking, however, was his belief that by identifying too closely with Jerusalem, Washington had opened the door to the expansion of USSR power in the Middle East. Even in the midst of the Six-Day War, Nixon had urged Rusk to promote the idea that the Soviet Union had been and remained responsible for the absence of peace in the region. “My fear in the present circumstances,” he had written, “is that unless we can demonstrate that our attachment to peace is impartial, we will have given the Soviet Union an unparalleled opportunity to extend its influence in the Arab world to the detriment of vastly important United States and free world interests.”³² The president, in fact, was wholly dismissive of the belief held by some American officials that the June War had represented a Soviet defeat. “It was *not*,” he wrote vehemently in the margin of a memorandum from Kissinger. “They became the Arabs’

²⁸ Memo from Saunders to Kissinger, “Subject: Where We Stand in the Middle East,” October 22, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 197.

²⁹ Telecon, October 30, 1969, folder: Telecons, October 1969, box 104, Papers of Elliot Richardson, Library of Congress Manuscript Division (LOC), Washington, D.C.

³⁰ Conversation among Nixon, White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman, and Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs John Ehrlichman, May 10, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 854.

³¹ Memo from Nixon to Rogers, May 26, 1971, p. 858.

³² Quoted in Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 56.

friend and the U.S. their enemy. Long range this is what serves their interest.”³³ “[The] June war,” he said at an early NSC meeting, “netted out as [a] great help to [the] USSR.”³⁴ Moscow, Nixon believed, was succeeding in its efforts to portray Washington as “Israel’s puppet.”³⁵

And it was the feeling of most U.S. strategists that without movement toward a settlement, this trend would only worsen. Disengaging from the peace process and relying on Israel’s military superiority was not a viable option, for such a course would likely “lead to stepped up preparations for the next military round, to a strengthening of Arab liberation movements, a weakening of the remaining moderate governments, a diminution of our influence in the area, and a corresponding increase for the Soviets. The area would probably become more polarized.”³⁶ Given that the absorption of the Arab world “into the Soviet orbit would present a serious long-term threat to the American position in the world,” the Americans had tremendous incentive to find a solution to the problem. Without one, the remaining “elements of strength” in Washington’s place in the Middle East would “become rapidly wasting assets and our potential for playing a decisive role in the area will be seriously diminished.”³⁷

And quite aside from these considerations, the administration considered an agreement necessary to protect Israel’s own long-term security interests. Given the country’s small size, the Arabs’ overwhelming numerical superiority, and the assumption that Jerusalem could not hold the territories it had occupied in 1967 indefinitely, there was a nearly unanimous feeling among U.S. decision-makers that Israel needed to reach a settlement while the balance of negotiating power was in its favor. “It seems axiomatic,” Kissinger said during a discussion of Israel’s

³³ Quoted in Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 564 (emphasis in original).

³⁴ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, April 25, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 95.

³⁵ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, September 11, 1969, p. 167. Note also Nixon’s comment that the June War had been “a tremendous victory for Israel and [the] USSR.” See also Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 176.

³⁶ Paper Prepared by the Interdepartmental Group for Near East and South Asia, “The Arab-Israeli Dispute: Principal US Options,” January 24, 1969, PR00288, DNSA.

³⁷ Paper Prepared by the Interdepartmental Group for Near East and South Asia, NSCIG/NEA 69-1B (Revised), “Basic US Interests in the Middle East,” January 30, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, pp. 3, 6.

nuclear capability, “that a nation of three million people confronted by 100 million with any technological capacity at all would not over an historical period have a chance of surviving.”³⁸

The Middle East problem, Laird argued, had “*no acceptable military solution.*” Assistance in this area would neither change the fact that Israel was a small country that could not afford high numbers of casualties, nor “assure perpetual control of a captive and restive Arab population.”³⁹

With this in mind, the administration viewed Jerusalem’s diplomacy in dismal terms. “Israeli judgment of the best way to maintain their security is sadly mistaken,” Ambassador to the United Nations Charles Yost believed. Israel, he argued, simply could not withstand suffering to the same degree that its Arab neighbors could.⁴⁰ While he sympathized with the dilemma the country faced, Kissinger nevertheless “felt that Israeli policy since 1967 had been disastrous.”⁴¹

And, importantly, Nixon was probably more forceful about this point than any other individual in the U.S. government. Exerting pressure for a settlement, the president believed, was in the Israelis’ “own best interests.... We’re doing what’s best for them.”⁴² Although Jerusalem’s position, he explained, was for the moment “unassailable,” it was “long range disastrous.”⁴³ The idea that Israel’s interests might be better served by having radicals in power in its neighboring Arab states because using military force against them could then be justified more easily, he said, amounted to “a death wish. They must not be given any encouragement.”⁴⁴ So strong was the president’s opinion on this matter that he contemplated the idea of using coercive methods

³⁸ Memo for the Record, “Subject: NSC Ad Hoc Review Group Meeting, Friday, June 20, 1969, on NSSM 40—Israeli Nuclear Program,” June 20, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 118.

³⁹ Memo from Laird to Nixon, June 5, 1970, p. 408 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁰ Letter from Yost to Kissinger, August 11, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 153. See also Telegram from the Mission to the United Nations to the Department of State, April 22, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 78-79.

⁴¹ Memo for the Record, May 28, 1970, p. 396.

⁴² Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, August 2, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 1033.

⁴³ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, September 11, 1969, p. 170. See also Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: The Middle East—Where We Stand,” November 11, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 219.

⁴⁴ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, February 1, 1969, p. 19. Note also the administration’s belief that Israel’s retaliatory policy toward Jordan and Lebanon “would be in [the] long run a political disaster.” See Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, November 6, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 213.

against the government of Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir because he reasoned that doing so would be to Jerusalem's ultimate benefit. "I am beginning to think," he wrote late in 1969, "we have to consider taking strong steps unilaterally to save Israel from her own destruction."⁴⁵

More crucial than any of these factors to Nixon's thinking, however, was his concern that the instability generated by the Arab-Israeli problem could cause a clash between Washington and Moscow. The president, one historian writes, "seemed obsessed" with this possibility.⁴⁶ In Nixon's view, the region was "an international powder keg, that, when it exploded, might lead not only to another war between Israel and its neighbors, but also to a direct confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union."⁴⁷ The tensions engendered by the conflict, he stated at a press conference on January 27, made the Middle East "very explosive. It needs to be defused." If another war broke out, he added, it "could involve very well a confrontation between the nuclear powers, which we want to avoid."⁴⁸ The situation in the area, Kissinger remarked in June, "is now the most dangerous we face."⁴⁹ There was, Nixon concluded, "a 50 percent chance [that the United States would] be dragged in" if hostilities again erupted. And because it was unclear whether the Soviets would stay out of such of a conflict, the president argued that there was "[g]reater danger each time Mid-East fighting comes around."⁵⁰

Thus, there were potent strategic reasons for the administration to desire an Arab-Israeli settlement, the U.S. goal of avoiding a superpower confrontation foremost among them.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 372-373.

⁴⁶ Lenczowski, *American Presidents and the Middle East*, p. 120. Nixon, William Quandt notes, "repeatedly used the pre-World War I Balkans analogy" when discussing the Middle East. See Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 60.

⁴⁷ Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), p. 343.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 63. See also Memcon, March 14, 1969, p. 50; and Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 24. This remained Nixon's view well after he had left office. See Karen Elliot House, "Nixon Advises Reagan to Move Quickly on Foreign Policy, Focus on Few Issues," *Wall Street Journal*, November 13, 1984.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 175.

⁵⁰ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, February 4, 1969, p. 27. See also National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 33, "Subject: Contingency Planning for the Middle East," March 21, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 59.

But the White House did not think that the United States could achieve such a result on its own. Because he recognized that Moscow possessed substantial influence in the Arab world and he wanted the Soviets to share the political burden of delivering an agreement, Nixon reasoned that Middle East peace would be an unattainable objective without U.S.-USSR cooperation. In Nixon's mind, the Arab-Israeli conflict represented a problem that could only be resolved through the combined efforts of the great powers.

Specifically, Nixon's preferred approach to dealing with the issue was for Washington and Moscow to compel the Israelis and Arabs, respectively, to accept a reasonable political solution. "The real powers" in the Middle East, the president believed, "are the US and USSR." Although the United States would have to focus on how to "deliver the Israelis," what the Americans did "vis-à-vis the Russians" represented "the heart" of the problem.⁵¹ Indeed, he claimed: "An imposed settlement in the Mid-East—not in terms of the formality but in terms of the skill of our negotiation—is what has to be done." It was, he said, "[m]ost important to move talks along with [the] Russians."⁵² "There is," he said on another occasion, "no question that there will be no settlement unless it is imposed. It is not useful for the U.S. to talk that way publicly, but there should be no misunderstanding about this fact around the NSC table."⁵³ In Nixon's mind, it was obvious that there would "be no settlement without U.S. and Soviet agreement." Such a deal, he emphasized, "must be imposed.... The only solution would be one imposed by the United States and the Soviet Union."⁵⁴ Although the problem was an intractable one, Nixon believed that the Middle East might be "one area for concrete US-USSR agreement. I think we must assume the leadership role here—subtly. Any settlement will have to be

⁵¹ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, February 1, 1969, p. 23.

⁵² Minutes of an NSC Meeting, February 4, 1969, pp. 25, 26.

⁵³ Memo for the Record, June 10, 1970, p. 426.

⁵⁴ Memcon, June 5, 1970, pp. 79-80.

imposed—without calling it that. Overhanging this is US-USSR relations.”⁵⁵ In short, there is no question as to the veracity of Kissinger’s later assertion that “what [Nixon] deep down wanted to do was to impose a comprehensive settlement sometime during his term in office.”⁵⁶

The White House, for its part, understood that it could not *persuade* the Meir government to accept this sort of approach. It was “clear,” Kissinger remarked at one point, “that the Israelis did not want to withdraw.”⁵⁷ “The basic fact,” the national security adviser recognized very early on, “is that we know that Israel is determined to change the lines and we cannot dissuade here.”⁵⁸ Jerusalem’s reaction to a U.S. plan that called for essentially a full evacuation to the 1967 lines, Rogers concurred, would be to “make an all-out effort to stop us from going ahead.”⁵⁹ It was highly questionable, in Sisco’s view, whether Meir “was the person to lead Israel to peace—he thought she was looking backward, not forward.”⁶⁰ The prime minister herself, in fact, later boasted that “intransigent” would ultimately become her “middle name.”⁶¹ It was for this reason that Nixon frequently complained that the Israelis “make friendship awfully tough.”⁶²

What this meant, of course, was that the United States would have to precipitate a major confrontation with Israel to reach the type of settlement that Nixon envisioned. Because, an early

⁵⁵ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, April 25, 1969, pp. 93-94. See also Editorial Note on Nixon’s Handwritten Notes and Television Interview, January 1-4, 1971, pp. 245-247.

⁵⁶ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 202.

⁵⁷ Memo for the Record, “Subject: Meeting of Special NSC Review Group on Israeli Assistance Requests,” January 26, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 283.

⁵⁸ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: The Mid-East Talks with the USSR So Far,” March 30, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12: *Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2006), p. 112.

⁵⁹ Memo from Rogers to Nixon, “Subject: Next Steps on Arab-Israeli Dispute,” April 23, 1969, PR00346, DNSA.

⁶⁰ NSC Special Review Group Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” August 12, 1970, KT00172, DNSA. See also Telecon, April 21, 1971, KA05552, DNSA; and Telegram from the Embassy in Italy to the Department of State, May 8, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 847.

⁶¹ Quoted in Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), p. 284.

Because he was viewed as the main proponent of a full withdrawal, Kissinger observed that Rogers had become “the most hated man in Israel.” See H.R. Haldeman Diary Entry, September 10, 1970, in H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1994), p. 192.

⁶² Memo by Deputy National Security Adviser Alexander Haig for the President’s Files, “Subject: Meeting with the President, Secretary of Defense Laird, Secretary of the Treasury Connolly, Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Moorer, Henry A. Kissinger and Brigadier General Alexander M. Haig, Jr.,” March 26, 1971, Kissinger Conversations, Supplement (KC) 00144, DNSA.

staff study indicated, Jerusalem “would resist the entire concept of a plan drawn up by third parties” and would be required to make “substantial” concessions, pursuing such a course would cause “an early crisis between us.” As the Americans discussed the problem with the Soviets, “increasing strains in US-Israeli relations” would surely develop.⁶³ If the administration received what it considered a reasonable offer from the Soviets or the Arabs, Sisco observed, Nixon would “be faced with some hard decisions with respect to US-Israeli relations and a peace settlement in the Middle East.”⁶⁴ Trying to move Jerusalem “toward the Arab (or even the U.S.) position on territory,” Saunders wrote, would lead to a “serious U.S.-Israeli confrontation.”⁶⁵

Consequently, the White House would need to resort to coercive methods to achieve its objectives. An agreement based on the 1967 frontiers, Kissinger believed, could only be reached with intensive American pressure. “If we are not prepared to impose a settlement,” the national security adviser asserted, “it will not happen.... Only strong US pressure, if that, has a chance of moving Israel away from [its] position.”⁶⁶ Given that the Israelis preferred to “stay where they are,” he said, the United States would “have to become involved to get them to give up anything.”⁶⁷ In short, Jerusalem “would have to be forced back.”⁶⁸

Nixon, however, was quite willing, in principle, to implement a policy of compellence with the Meir government. The president agreed wholeheartedly with Treasury Secretary John

⁶³ Paper Prepared by the Interdepartmental Group for Near East and South Asia, February 20, 1969, pp. 34, 37.

⁶⁴ Memo from Sisco to Nixon and Rogers, “Subject: *Report on Moscow Talks on Middle East*, July 14-18, 1969,” July 21, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 140.

⁶⁵ Paper Prepared by the NSC Staff, “Diplomatic Options in the Face of a Negotiating Deadlock,” February 3, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 731.

⁶⁶ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: The Next Step in the Middle East—NSC Meeting Thursday, September 11,” September 10, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 159. See also Minutes of an NSC Meeting, September 11, 1969, p. 170; Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, November 11, 1969, p. 219; and Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: The Middle East,” June 16, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 442. Note also Sisco’s comment that any settlement would “certainly require maximum pressure on Israel.” See Minutes of an SRG Meeting, April 14, 1971, p. 807.

⁶⁷ Minutes of an SRG Meeting, April 14, 1971, p. 805.

⁶⁸ Memcon, “Subject: Dr. Kissinger’s Discussion with Mr. Thompson,” December 10, 1970, KC00133, DNSA.

Connally's sentiment that the White House had to be "a little tougher on the Israelis."⁶⁹ Jerusalem, Nixon insisted, could not take U.S. support for granted. "*Barbour must not leave [the] Israelis under [the] impression they can do anything they want,*" he declared at an April 25 NSC meeting. "While we're for Israel, what they hear from their friends in the US is not true.... Barbour must not give Eban a veto—he must give Eban some sense of our determination to go ahead and do what we can for a settlement. Israel cannot count on us to be with it no matter what it does."⁷⁰ The Israelis could rest assured that he would "lean as far as I can in being generous with them," Nixon said on another occasion. "But I cannot continue to say that Israel can have all it wants and have them do nothing in return.... [T]here must be no assumption here that we will help Israel regardless of what Israel does. We sure as hell will not." The Meir government, he believed, had concluded "that the U.S. will see them through regardless of what they do." The president made it abundantly clear, however, that this presupposition was "not true."⁷¹

Yet since he and, probably to an even greater extent, Kissinger, viewed the problem through the lens of the Cold War, and because he demanded a fair price for pressing the Israelis to withdraw, Nixon refused to exercise Washington's leverage with Jerusalem in the absence of politically meaningful concessions from the Soviets and their Arab clients. The Americans, the president recognized, "would have to use a big stick with Israel." Nevertheless, he emphasized: "In good conscience we cannot use that stick with Israel unless we are as sure as we can be that

⁶⁹ Memo by Haig for the President's Files, March 26, 1971. Connally also wanted Nixon to "make the point to the American Jewish community that Israel represented a gold flow problem of 2.5 billion dollars each year and that the time had come to eliminate this drain on our economy." Given the president's concerns about the weaknesses in U.S. international monetary policy during this period, he likely agreed with Connally. On the Nixon administration's strategic thinking on this issue, see Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958-1971* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 187-196.

⁷⁰ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, April 25, 1969, p. 93 (emphasis in original).

⁷¹ Memcon, "Subject: National Security Council Meeting—The Middle East," February 26, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 761-762.

the other side is going to do its part in making a settlement stick.”⁷² “[A] [s]ettlement which is painful to both sides and the Soviets sell to [Egypt] would be in our interest,” Kissinger agreed at the April 25 NSC meeting. “From [the] point of view of our overall relationship, we want a settlement that is unpalatable to [Egypt] and [the] Soviets have paid the price of selling it.”⁷³ If the United States was going to seek an agreement in conjunction with the USSR, the national security adviser told Richardson: “[W]e should ask the Soviets to be prepared to do to the Arabs what we are supposed to do to the Israelis.” A joint approach was appropriate, he stressed, but only “so long as we don’t have to make all the proposals and deliver all the parties.”⁷⁴

Thus, the key factor that would determine the extent to which the Nixon administration would press the Israelis and exert efforts to achieve Middle East peace was Moscow’s preparedness to do the same with the Arabs. “Looking at this from the Soviet viewpoint,” the president offered during a December 10 National Security Council meeting, “if we save [Egypt’s] bacon, the Soviets would gain by our act. In my view, Soviet-U.S. relations are the overriding concern. Therefore, the overriding question is: Who gains?” If the Americans were going to “squeeze Israel,” he reasoned, “then I think we must expect the Soviets to squeeze [Egypt].” Moscow, Nixon stressed, “should not come out ahead. The Arabs played a substantial role in bringing on the [1967] war, and the Soviets should pay some price for picking up the pieces.”⁷⁵ In short, the president was willing to work with the Kremlin, but only for an agreement that was “not to the liking of either Israel or the Arabs.”⁷⁶

⁷² Memo for the Record, June 10, 1970, p. 426. See also Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 361-362.

⁷³ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, April 25, 1969, p. 92 (emphasis in original).

⁷⁴ Telecon, January 9, 1970, folder: Telecons, January 1970, box 105, Richardson Papers, LOC. Note also Kissinger’s comment that if Nasser ever abandoned his USSR connection, “then the principal restraint on [the United States] pressing Israel vis-à-vis Egypt will disappear.” See Telecon, May 18, 1971, KA05698, DNSA. See also Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 202.

⁷⁵ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, December 10, 1969, pp. 254, 256. See also Minutes of an NSC Meeting, September 11, 1969, p. 169; and Telecon, September 27, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 261.

⁷⁶ Memcon, June 5, 1970, p. 80.

The White House, therefore, decided early on that it had to determine the degree to which the Soviets were ready to cooperate with the United States. As Sisco later recalled, Nixon's objective at the outset of his term was to conduct a "genuine test" of USSR intentions in the area.⁷⁷ Because U.S. officials assumed that the feasibility of a great power approach to the problem would "depend on whether we and the USSR are prepared to influence [Egypt] and Israel," it would be necessary to pursue "further explorations and testing of the Soviets [to] help determine more precisely whether they and [Egypt] are genuinely interested in arriving at some form of accommodation."⁷⁸ The purpose of Washington's participation in discussions with Soviet representatives, Nixon wrote Meir, was "to test the USSR's intentions and its willingness and capacity to induce [Egypt] to enter into a real commitment to negotiate a peace settlement."⁷⁹

So what was USSR policy in the region during this period? To be sure, the Kremlin leaders had hinted strongly in late 1968 that they were interested in moving matters forward on the Arab-Israeli issue, but did that mean that the Soviets would be willing to press their clients, in particular Nasser, to accept a reasonable deal? And assuming they were, did Moscow possess the requisite influence in Cairo to deliver such an arrangement? Or was the USSR essentially opposed to a deal because it believed that continued tension would facilitate the further expansion of its influence in the Middle East?

"A lot to Ask": Moscow's Struggles with Nasser

The Kremlin, it turns out, was equally, if not more, hopeful than Washington that an Arab-Israeli settlement could be worked out, and for many of the same reasons. To be sure, the outcome of

⁷⁷ Transcript, Joseph J. Sisco, Oral History Interview (Sisco Oral History Interview), March 19, 1990, by Michael Sterner, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/mss/mfdip/2004/2004sis02/2004sis02.pdf>.

⁷⁸ Paper Prepared by the Interdepartmental Group for Near East and South Asia, February 20, 1969, pp. 34, 37.

⁷⁹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, June 19, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 111.

the June 1967 War had allowed Moscow to enlarge significantly the scope of its influence in the Middle East, but that did not mean that the USSR leadership was comfortable with the tenuous political situation that the conflict had created in the region. And Soviet decision-makers insisted, quite forcefully, that any final agreement would need to guarantee Israel's right to exist.

The Politburo leaders were, of course, anxious to consolidate the USSR position in the Middle East. The idea, however, that for this reason Moscow preferred a condition of "no war, no peace," is without foundation. The Kremlin, in fact, viewed the problem in exactly the opposite terms; so long as they were unable to return the territories taken by Israel in 1967, the Soviets reasoned, their position in the area would continually deteriorate, as the Arabs would ultimately begin to question the utility of having the Soviet Union as a patron, and could conceivably turn to the United States as an alternative. As Nasser's adviser on foreign affairs Mahmoud Fawzi told Kissinger as early as April 10: "[T]he Soviets seemed to have reached a point of diminishing returns. When a friend can't help his friend either by making peace or by the use of force, then he gradually loses his credibility."⁸⁰

Nor was it at all clear that Moscow's participation in the negotiation of an agreement would lead to the reversal of its political gains in the Arab world or undermine the Soviet Union's global position. Working with the Americans to secure peace in the Middle East, one scholar observes, would enhance the USSR's international prestige and help satisfy its desire for equal status with the United States. And by removing the primary source of tension from the region, Moscow could secure for itself a more stable influence relationship with its clients.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Memcon, April 10, 1969, KT00023, DNSA.

⁸¹ George W. Breslauer, "Soviet Policy in the Middle East, 1967-1972: Unalterable Antagonism or Collaborative Competition?" in Alexander L. George, ed., *Managing U.S.-Soviet Rivalry: Problems of Crisis Prevention* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1983), pp. 68-69.

More crucially, just as Nixon worried that another Arab-Israeli war could result in a direct superpower confrontation, so the Politburo leaders feared this potentiality. It was important, Deputy Foreign Minister Vasili Kuznetsov wrote Dobrynin on February 28, “not to drag out the process of reaching a settlement, since the situation in the Middle East is tense and does not permit delay.”⁸² Moscow, after all, had been forced to watch as its clients suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of an American ally in June 1967 and, as a result, might find it more difficult to follow a similarly cautious course if war once again broke out, which would risk a nuclear showdown with the United States. Given that the coming of the Six-Day War had demonstrated the limits of the Soviet Union’s ability to control events in the Middle East, the Politburo, as one historian has written, must have been intensely concerned with avoiding “this nightmare scenario.”⁸³ The fact that Israel had by this time acquired an independent nuclear arsenal must have made the situation all the more worrisome from Moscow’s perspective.⁸⁴

And because the USSR’s primary basis of influence with the Arabs was its arms pipeline, a political solution was clearly its desired outcome. Provisioning its clients with additional military supplies would, of course, only increase the likelihood of the very confrontation that the Soviets hoped to prevent, which created a dilemma whenever the Kremlin considered weapons deliveries to Egypt and Syria.⁸⁵ The Soviets tried hard, for precisely this reason, to persuade Nasser throughout 1969 to limit his War of Attrition with Israel, which had escalated along the

⁸² Telegram from Kuznetsov to Dobrynin, February 28, 1969, in United States Department of State, *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2007), p. 26. See also Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Diplomatic Posts, April 3, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 61.

⁸³ Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 15.

⁸⁴ Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War II to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 97-98; and Jeffrey Herf, “‘At War with Israel’: East Germany’s Key Role in Soviet Policy in the Middle East,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2014), p. 146. This was the view held by most U.S. officials. See Minutes of an NSC Meeting, April 25, 1969, pp. 91-92; and National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) 11-69, “Basic Factors and Main Tendencies in Current Soviet Policy,” February 27, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 81.

⁸⁵ Galia Golan, “The Cold War and the Soviet Attitude towards the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” in Nigel J. Ashton, ed., *The Cold War in the Middle East: Regional Conflict and the Superpowers, 1967-1973* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 61.

Suez Canal. “You must try to cool the situation,” Kosygin reportedly wrote the Egyptian leader during the summer. Cairo, he urged, could not afford to “let the situation get out of hand.”⁸⁶ At the same time, adopting this sort of stance inevitably caused strains between the Soviets and the Arabs, for the latter felt that in the absence of movement toward a political settlement, they should be afforded a realistic military option. As the Hungarian defense minister reported, the Egyptians had begun making “exasperated and negative comments” because of this disagreement, and their “attitude towards us was growing cold.” It was, he noted, quite possible that this would “have a negative influence on political relations too.”⁸⁷

Related to—and probably more important than—these considerations was the Kremlin’s deep interest in bettering its overall relationship with the United States. Despite Nixon’s reputation as an anti-Communist hardliner, the Politburo was intrigued by the president’s call to move from “a period of confrontation” to an “era of negotiation.”⁸⁸ In July, Gromyko reported to the Supreme Soviet that despite their differences: “[W]hen it comes to the preservation of peace, the Soviet Union and the United States can find a common language.”⁸⁹ A joint effort by the superpowers to solve the Arab-Israeli problem, the Kremlin leaders wrote Nixon soon after this inauguration, would “greatly contribute to the general relaxation of international tensions.”⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Arab World* (London: William Collins Sons, 1978), pp. 194-195. See also Anwar el-Sadat, *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 196; Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile: The Soviet-Egyptian Influence Relationship since the June War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 81-82; and Fred Wehling, *Irresolute Princes: Kremlin Decision Making in Middle East Crises, 1967-1973* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997), p. 82.

⁸⁷ Report for the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party Politburo on Weapons Exports to the UAR and Syria by Minister of Defense Lajos Czinege, October 21, 1969, Cold War International History Project (CWIHP), <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/122518>.

⁸⁸ Nixon’s First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1969, American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=1941>.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents, 1962-1986* (New York: Times, 1995), p. 202.

⁹⁰ Note from Soviet Leaders to Nixon, February 17, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 45.

The USSR, moreover, was at least somewhat optimistic about how the new administration would approach Middle East policy. Although Nixon informed Dobrynin that he had “little faith” that an agreement could be concluded rapidly and the ambassador thought that the White House would continue to “look over its shoulder at Israel,” the fact that the president was a Republican meant that he might be more receptive to the Arab viewpoint.⁹¹ And even though Kissinger considered Moscow’s December peace plan “an obvious nonstarter,” Nixon and Dobrynin agreed during their first meeting to make the Middle East a top priority.⁹²

It should come as no surprise, then, that the Soviets quickly stepped up their efforts to moderate their clients’ negotiating position. The Kremlin’s vision for a settlement was, of course, significantly more balanced than that of the Arabs. Contrary to the claim frequently made by Kissinger, both while in office and after, Moscow was by no means wedded to “the maximum Arab position.”⁹³ “We should,” the Hungarian Foreign Ministry argued, “continue to distance ourselves from certain radical terrorist attacks committed by Palestinian groups [and] from declarations of propaganda concerning the ultimate destruction of Israel.”⁹⁴ Thus, the principles

⁹¹ Telegram from Dobrynin to USSR Foreign Ministry, March 13, 1969, in *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 40-41. More recently, U.S. backing for Israel has become more of a core issue in Republican Party politics. See Peter Baker, “For G.O.P., Support for Israel Becomes New Litmus Test,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2015.

⁹² Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 349; and Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 198. Note Kissinger’s sense of optimism about the Middle East prior to this meeting. See Haldeman Diary Entry, February 15, 1969, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 30.

⁹³ Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1288. This is a major theme in all three volumes of Kissinger’s memoirs. The Soviet position, he writes in the second installment, was “identical with the Arab program.” See Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 202. “Soviet diplomacy,” he claims in the final part, “gave all-out support to the maximum program of most Arab states.” See Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), p. 352.

⁹⁴ Hungarian Foreign Ministry Memo on the Palestine Liberation Movement in 1970 (excerpts), August 10, 1970, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/122520>. Note also Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov’s reference to the “more peculiar views” and “extreme policy” positions held by Damascus. See Minutes of Todor Zhivkov-Indira Gandhi Meeting, Delhi, January 24, 1969, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110065>; and Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the Bulgarian Central Committee, the State Council, and the Council of Ministers, on the Situation in the Middle East, 1972, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113430>.

that would govern a settlement offered by Moscow in 1969, one scholar writes, “represented an unprecedented degree of Soviet dissociation from the maximal Arab position.”⁹⁵

In fact, the basic elements of the USSR’s plan for peace were nearly identical to those advocated by Washington.⁹⁶ Like the Nixon administration, the Kremlin leaders accepted the necessity “of a reciprocally binding agreement between the parties, as a package, and signed by the parties.” While Rogers considered Moscow’s position “insufficiently explicit” on the question of the nature of peace, the Americans themselves did not believe full normalization of relations an achievable goal at this time.⁹⁷ In any case, already by April the Soviets had made it clear that they supported “a *complete cessation of the state of war* and the settlement of all questions connected therewith.”⁹⁸ In addition, Moscow accepted the principle of limiting weapons shipments to the Middle East as part of an agreement.⁹⁹ And to help satisfy Jerusalem’s security concerns, Dobrynin told Rogers on March 8, the USSR leadership approved the idea of great power guarantees and was “flexible on this question.”¹⁰⁰ The only disagreements between the two sides, thus, were relatively minor, involving procedural issues like the need for face-to-face negotiations and the exact size and location of demilitarized zones.

⁹⁵ Breslauer, “Soviet Policy in the Middle East,” p. 83.

⁹⁶ This was certainly the perspective of the Arabs, who were disappointed in Moscow’s readiness to separate itself from its clients. See Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar*, pp. 195-196.

⁹⁷ Memo from Rogers to Nixon, “Subject: Soviet Counterproposal on Arab-Israeli Dispute,” June 20, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 114. On U.S. policy on the nature of peace, see Paper Prepared by the Interdepartmental Group for Near East and South Asia, February 20, 1969, p. 31; Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, March 13, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 47; and Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 149, 159. Note also Kissinger’s admission: “Dobrynin is hard to disagree with when he says Moscow can go no further in defining ‘peace’ than to point out that the collection of practical arrangements worked out on each of the major issues will define the Arab-Israeli relationship that will exist. We have said much the same to the Israelis ourselves.” See Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, March 30, 1969, p. 111.

⁹⁸ Memo from Saunders to Kissinger, “Latest Sisco-Dobrynin Conversation (April 17),” undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 136 (emphasis in original).

⁹⁹ Letter from Kosygin to Nixon, May 27, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 170.

¹⁰⁰ Memcon, “Subject: Middle East,” March 8, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 92.

The key issue obstructing an agreement from the Kremlin's perspective was, therefore, the U.S. and Israeli unwillingness to commit to the principle of essentially a full withdrawal to the 1967 lines.¹⁰¹ The Soviets insisted that the November 1967 resolution was clear on the territorial question. Washington's refusal to be specific about this issue exasperated Gromyko. "They're nothing but cheats," the foreign minister reportedly said when he heard the U.S. view that this question remained up for negotiation.¹⁰² If the superpowers could agree on this point, Moscow repeatedly stressed, all other aspects of a settlement would fall into place.

But again, the USSR position on the matter of withdrawal did not really differ in any significant way from American policy. To be sure, Nixon and Kissinger occasionally discussed the need for territorial changes, particularly on the Golan Heights.¹⁰³ The weight of the evidence, however, points to the conclusion that the White House would support the restoration of basically the 1967 lines to secure an agreement.¹⁰⁴ "We are convinced," Nixon told the UN General Assembly in September, "that peace cannot be achieved on the basis of substantial alternations in the map of the Middle East."¹⁰⁵ The U.S. position on a settlement, Saunders told

¹⁰¹ Like the Americans, the Soviets were not opposed to minor boundary adjustments and actually explored this possibility with Nasser in early 1969. See David A. Korn, *Stalemate: The War of Attrition and Great Power Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1967-1970* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992), p. 152.

¹⁰² Quoted in Victor Israelyan, *On the Battlefields of the Cold War: A Soviet Ambassador's Confession* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), p. 161.

¹⁰³ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, September 10, 1969, p. 159; Editorial Note of Telecon, December 4, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 238-239; Editorial Note of Memcon, February 27, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 764; Telecon, February 28, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 770-771; Editorial Note of Israeli Memcon, April 20, 1971, pp. 818-819; Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, August 2, 1972, p. 1034; and Garment, *Crazy Rhythm*, p. 190.

¹⁰⁴ If the Arabs were willing to countenance more significant territorial changes, of course, the United States would have no objection. On the West Bank, where the Soviets were uninvolved in the negotiations, this was a possibility, as King Hussein had informed Kissinger that he could accept "fairly substantial" rectifications if Israel was more forthcoming on Gaza. See Memcon, April 8, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 65. The Allon Plan, however, remained, in Sisco's words, a "non-starter with Hussein." See Minutes of an NSC Meeting, February 1, 1969, p. 21.

¹⁰⁵ Nixon's Address before the 24th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, September 18, 1969, American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=2236>. See also Paper Prepared by the Interdepartmental Group for Near East and South Asia, February 20, 1969, pp. 31-32; Telegram from Department of State to the Mission to the United Nations, "Subject: Four-Power Consultations on [the Middle East]," March 22, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 60; Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, June 16, 1970, p. 441; Telegram from the Department of State

Rabin, had been formulated “on the assumption—confirmed by Israeli statements—that Israel had no territorial aspirations.”¹⁰⁶ “The settlement we envisage,” Rogers stated, “must be based on a map not very different from the one that existed before the 1967 war.”¹⁰⁷

More important, however, was the fact that because the superpowers shared a substantial interest in seeing the Middle East dispute settled, even the territorial issue was not a major point of contention between Washington and Moscow. Assuming the Arabs could be brought to agree to peace, the Americans had no incentive to support enlarged borders for Israel, and a great deal to gain from an agreement.¹⁰⁸ The United States, Kissinger indicated to Nixon, had “no interest in supporting Israeli expansionism” and “no stake in where the lines are drawn.” The U.S. position on the territorial question, he added, did “not differ greatly from British, Soviet, and French views.” Washington and Moscow were, consequently, “closer than we might have expected on the substance of a settlement,” and their principle disagreements were primarily a function of the stances taken by their respective clients.¹⁰⁹ The differences among the great

to the Interests Section in the United Arab Republic, January 14, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 699; Telegram from the Department of State to the Interests Section in the United Arab Republic, January 27, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 722; Paper Prepared by the NSC Staff, “Options in Breaking the Impasse,” March 2, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 776-777; and See also Letter from Nixon to Hussein, June 2, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 865. Note also Nixon’s acknowledgement to Meir that it was true that U.S. and Israeli “perceptions differ[ed] as to what may be possible in a final settlement.” See Letter from Nixon to Meir, December 3, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 652.

¹⁰⁶ Memcon, June 20, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 126. Rabin replied that the Americans had been “justified” in taking this view. See also Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Middle East,” December 30, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 269-270; and Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Diplomatic Posts, June 19, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 448.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Salim Yaqub, “The Politics of Stalemate: The Nixon Administration and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973,” in *The Cold War in the Middle East*, p. 36.

¹⁰⁸ With this in mind, Sisco informed Gromyko that the United States could include Syria in a settlement “if it ever changes its tune.” See Memo from Sisco to Nixon, July 21, 1969, p. 138. See also Memo from Sisco to Kissinger, February 14, 1969. Rabin, likewise, implies in his memoirs that Nixon’s views on the Syrian front were more ambiguous than others have claimed. See Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, pp. 132, 153. Furthermore, in later years, once they had determined that the Arabs were willing to accept peace with Israel, both Nixon and Kissinger backed the principle of an Israeli withdrawal to essentially the 1967 lines.

¹⁰⁹ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, March 30, 1969, pp. 112-113, 116.

powers, Yost observed, were by no means “irreconcilable.... If the decision rested solely with them, they could probably come to agreement rather rapidly.”¹¹⁰

The Soviets, however, confronted enormous encumbrances while attempting to pressure Nasser into accepting a political settlement. Aside from the fact that the Egyptian leader’s commitment to a peaceful solution was questionable at best, he insisted on a comprehensive resolution of the conflict at a time when Syria had not yet even accepted Resolution 242. In addition, the Americans had repeatedly refused, even in private, to specify their view on the matter of final borders, and seemed reluctant to press the Israelis. “[T]he Soviet client,” Nixon told Dobrynin in October, “had lost the [1967] war, had lost the territory, and was in no position to be extremely aggressive.” It was therefore incumbent upon the USSR, the president argued, to deliver the Arabs before the United States began urging the Israelis to withdraw to the prewar frontiers.¹¹¹ Moscow, in other words, was being asked to convince its clients to agree to peace; make concessions relating to navigation rights and security arrangements; accept a compromise on the refugee issue; and, at some point, hold face-to-face talks with the Israelis, all without the benefit of being able to assure them that they would then get back their territory in return. As one former U.S. official later wrote, for the USSR, this was “a lot to ask.”¹¹²

Thus, the eventual breakdown of the U.S.-Soviet bilateral talks on the Middle East was not a consequence of Moscow’s intransigence or opposition to a peaceful solution. Contrary to the claims made by one scholar, it was simply not the case that the Kremlin believed that a bargaining failure “could only redound to its advantage” and that “[t]he net thrust of Soviet

¹¹⁰ Telegram from the Mission to the United Nations to the Department of State, April 22, 1969, p. 76.

¹¹¹ Memcon, October 20, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 280. See also Memcon, May 13, 1969, KT00020, DNSA; and Letter from Yost to Kissinger, August 11, 1969, p. 152 n. 2.

¹¹² Korn, *Stalemate*, p. 152.

policy was not negotiation, but polarization.”¹¹³ Rather, the outcome reflected the limits of USSR influence with the Arabs in the absence of compelling evidence that the United States would exercise its leverage with Israel, as well as the Politburo’s unwillingness to press for what it deemed a one-sided agreement. In short, Moscow was seriously interested in a solution to the problem, but it could not overcome the opposition of its clients without some indication from Washington that the prewar boundaries would be reestablished.

Given the USSR’s clear desire to reach an accommodation with the Americans, the close similarity of views on the terms of an agreement between the two sides, and their mutual interest in resolving the dispute, why was the Nixon administration so reluctant to make concessions that would have facilitated the negotiation of a common approach to the problem? The White House, after all, understood that it could hardly expect further Soviet assistance with the Arabs if it did not undertake a major effort with Israel. As Sisco had admitted to Dobrynin on March 18, the negotiation was “a two-sided process.”¹¹⁴ What, then, accounts for the White House’s hesitancy to pressure Jerusalem? If Nixon was serious about détente and attached such importance to working with Moscow on the Middle East, why did he not pursue a more assertive policy?

The White House’s Suspicious Outlook

Despite his interest in promoting a less confrontational relationship with the Soviet Union, Nixon entered office deeply skeptical of USSR intentions. The president was in many respects a consummate cold warrior, known for his strong anti-Communist sentiments and hardline foreign policy views during his years as Eisenhower’s vice president.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile*, pp. 97, 102.

¹¹⁴ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union, March 18, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 57.

¹¹⁵ Other U.S. officials harbored even stronger anti-Soviet views. For example, see Memo from Helmut Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger, “Subject: Out Soviet Policy,” January 7, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 264-269.

This suspicion manifested itself with particular force in the case of the Middle East. The Kremlin, Nixon believed, supported the Arabs because it was through such backing that the Soviets could gain what they “had always wanted—land, oil, power, and the warm waters of the Mediterranean.” The difference between the objectives of Washington and Moscow in the area, he told Rogers, was “very simple but fundamental. *We* want peace. *They* want the Middle East.”¹¹⁶ The administration, he explained to Rabin, had “no preconceived notions as to Soviet goodwill.” The USSR, to his mind, was “the main cause of Middle East tensions.”¹¹⁷

Due to this mindset, administration officials frequently subscribed to the theory that Moscow’s goal was to preserve the situation of “no war, no peace.” Because it was making gains in the Arab world, Kissinger said at one point, the Politburo’s aim was to perpetuate a “constant little war.”¹¹⁸ Although he recognized that the Kremlin did not want to see a repeat of 1967 or risk a confrontation, Nixon felt that the Soviets could “have influence while [the] situation simmers.” It was not clear, therefore, why they would want to “change the situation.”¹¹⁹ The president wondered whether it was “fair to say that Soviet interests can only be served by tension. I know it is sometimes said that the Soviets are uncomfortable in the present situation. But I sometimes have trouble understanding why.”¹²⁰ Nixon was not sure “what kind of role [the

¹¹⁶ Nixon, *RN*, p. 477 (emphasis in original). There was “no question,” one NSC study similarly claimed, “that the Soviet objective is to undercut U.S. influence in the Middle East and to become the major outside influence.” See Paper Prepared by the NSC Staff, February 23, 1970, p. 304. See also Special NIE 11-9-69, “Current Soviet Attitudes toward the US,” July 17, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 210; and NIE 11-6-70, “Soviet Policies in the Middle East and Mediterranean Area,” March 5, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, pp. 414-432.

¹¹⁷ Memcon August 17, 1970, pp. 508, 509. See also Memcon, September 18, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 550.

¹¹⁸ Report on the Talk between Henry Kissinger and Mirko Tepavac held on an Airplane en route from Zagreb, October 5, 1970, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110827>.

¹¹⁹ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, September 11, 1969, p. 167.

¹²⁰ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, December 10, 1969, p. 246. The Soviets, Nixon said on another occasion, “probably are delighted with a status quo since they are exploiting it with greatly increased influence.” See Memcon, June 5, 1970, p. 79.

Soviets] would like to play—whether they would like to mess the situation up or what.”¹²¹ While the Kremlin might not want to see Israel “go down the tube,” that was perhaps only because the USSR leaders considered Jerusalem a useful “burr under the U.S. saddle,” and he therefore questioned whether Moscow was committed to “a real settlement.” The “basic point that militates against a settlement,” the president remarked at a June 1970 NSC meeting, was the key question: “What is in it for the Soviets?”¹²²

The White House’s skepticism of USSR intentions was also evident from its assessments of why the Politburo might be interested in an agreement. “In fact,” Kissinger argued, “the Soviets have much more to gain through a settlement than we—return of the lands to the Arabs, the opening of the [Suez] 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.”¹²³ Middle East peace, he contended, would free Moscow to pursue its objectives in a less dangerous environment, open up the Indian Ocean to the Soviet fleet, and leave the situation unstable enough to allow the Kremlin to extend its influence.¹²⁴ In short, there would remain “enough tensions between Arabs and Israelis after a settlement for [the] USSR to exploit.”¹²⁵

The administration’s misperception of Soviet intentions manifested itself with especial intensity during the crisis that erupted in Jordan in September 1970. Contrary to the narrative promoted by Nixon and Kissinger, there is no evidence to support the claim that the USSR had encouraged Syria to order its tanks into the north of Jordan.¹²⁶ The Kremlin, one Russian scholar points out, had not been prepared to intervene, in part because USSR leaders were “repelled by

¹²¹ Memo for the Record, “Subject: NSC Meeting on the Middle East and South Asia,” July 16, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 887-888.

¹²² Memo for the Record, June 10, 1970, pp. 424, 431.

¹²³ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, June 16, 1970, p. 436.

¹²⁴ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, September 10, 1969, p. 162.

¹²⁵ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, April 25, 1969, p. 92. The Soviets, Kissinger argued, were in effect asking the Americans “to restore their client’s (Nasser’s) losses so he can go on with his with his pro-Soviet policy.”

¹²⁶ Nixon, *RN*, pp. 483-485; and Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 594-631.

the extremism of the Palestinians.”¹²⁷ As Hafez al-Asad—who at the time was the head of the Syrian Air Force and the man responsible for making the final decision to not escalate the conflict—later pointedly informed Kissinger: “I ordered the intervention and was there.... The Soviets had no hand in our intervention.... They learned about it from the radio.... It was not the business of the Soviets.... They didn’t know about it until we reached the border.” And, his later claims notwithstanding, even Kissinger admitted: “I believe that now.”¹²⁸

That the national security adviser would make such an acknowledgement in private is not all that surprising, given that the predominant view among even U.S. intelligence experts during the crisis had been that the Kremlin had played no role in Syria’s contemplation of a military intervention. “Moscow’s involvement in fomenting the crisis did not exist to the best of our knowledge,” the head of the State Department task force charged with managing the situation recalled. “In fact, we had reliable intelligence reports indicating that the Soviets sought to restrain Syria.”¹²⁹ Even during the conversation in which Kissinger told Nixon that Moscow was reportedly encouraging Damascus’s encroachment, he confessed that the intelligence upon which the claim was based was “not very reliable.”¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Alexei Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East: From Messianism to Pragmatism* (Reading: Ithaca, 1993), p. 86.

¹²⁸ Memcon, March 1, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1974-1976* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2012), p. 143. Note also Tito’s comments to Nixon on this matter. See Report on the Conversation between Tito and Nixon in Belgrade, September 30, 1970, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111644>. This evidence contradicts reports that USSR military advisers had accompanied Syrian tank units to the Jordanian border, which, in Quandt’s words, had constituted “[t]he most damaging evidence of Soviet complicity in the intervention.” See Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 451 n. 71.

¹²⁹ Quoted in Yaqub, “The Politics of Stalemate,” p. 56 n. 22. See also Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” September 22, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, pp. 878-879; and Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” September 23, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, p. 896.

¹³⁰ Telecon, undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, p. 793. Nor is there any evidence to support the idea that Moscow’s caution during the crisis stemmed from the tough stand taken by the United States and Israel. According to Nixon, the Soviets would have had “no incentive to hold the Syrians” if they had been unaware that Jerusalem was contemplating a major military intervention to save King Hussein. See Minutes of an NSC Meeting, “Subject: Jordan,” September 21, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, p. 865. See also Conversation between Nixon, Haldeman, and Billy Graham, February 1, 1972, in Douglas Brinkley and Luke A. Nichter, eds., *The Nixon Tapes, 1971-1972* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), p. 360; and Abraham S. Becker, “The Superpowers in the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1970-1973,” in Becker, Bent Hansen, and Malcolm H. Kerr, eds., *The Economics and*

Top administration officials, however, looked upon the crisis as a Soviet Cold War challenge. The Kremlin's protestations that it was not attempting to escalate the situation, Nixon believed, were merely designed to "keep us quiet and threatened and so forth. In the meantime, they say, 'Stir it up, boys; give them trouble; give them trouble. Face them down.' That's what they're going to do."¹³¹ It was doubtful, Kissinger claimed, that "the Syrians could have moved 200 tanks without Soviet blessing." "The Soviets," Sisco agreed, "have influence if they will exert it."¹³² What was happening in Jordan was "a typical Soviet exercise," Kissinger's assistant, Alexander Haig, asserted. Moscow's "game plan," Kissinger concurred, had been "to use the peace talks to overthrow the King and in the meantime strengthen the Egyptians." Thereafter, the Kremlin would have been free to "really put the squeeze on the Israelis."¹³³

Thus, rather than seek cooperation with Moscow to control the situation, the Americans took an extremely tough line to uphold U.S. credibility. "If the King of Jordan wins," Kissinger said on September 19, "then events of the last week are a plus because it gave us an opportunity for a show of strength which was badly needed and the Soviets who have been insolent on violations have been very gentle on this one since we started moving forces in there."¹³⁴ The "real stake" in the crisis, the national security adviser told White House Chief of Staff H.R.

Politics of the Middle East (New York: American Elsevier, 1975), pp. 82-86, 95-97. By American officials' own accounts, however, the Soviet preference was to prevent the civil war in Jordan from getting out of hand. Even hardliners, like Kissinger's assistant Helmut Sonnenfeldt, believed that the Kremlin probably wanted "to see the King remain in power." See Memo from Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger, "Subject: Additional Comments on the Soviet Position on Jordan," September 19, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, pp. 762-763. See also Memo from Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger, "Subject: Soviet Reaction to US Involvement in Jordan," September 18, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, pp. 741-743; and Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Jordan, September 17, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, p. 698.

¹³¹ Telecon, undated, p. 793. See also Telecon, September 17, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, pp. 730-732.

¹³² Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, "Subject: Middle East," September 20-21, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, p. 805. Nixon also expressed skepticism that the Soviets had been unaware of what Syria was doing. See Minutes of an NSC Meeting, "Subject: Jordan," September 21, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, p. 833.

¹³³ Telecon, September 21, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, p. 821. See also Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, "Subject: Middle East," September 21, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, p. 853.

¹³⁴ Telecon, September 19, 1970, KA03754, DNSA.

Haldeman, had been “Nixon[’s] credibility with [the] Soviets.”¹³⁵ One of the key objectives for the United States, he reiterated on September 21, had been “to face [the Soviets] down.”¹³⁶

Given this suspicion, it was probably inevitable that the White House would misperceive Moscow’s difficulties with Nasser as unwillingness to sacrifice its newfound influence in the Middle East to reach an agreement. “Joe, the goddam Russians don’t seem to want a settlement,” Nixon reportedly said with exasperation after Sisco’s talks in Moscow in July 1969 with Gromyko and Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Vinogradov yielded no results.¹³⁷ While he continued to think that no deal would be possible without the USSR’s cooperation, the United States could only negotiate “at a time and under circumstances in which the Soviets feel it is in their interest to do so. They do not feel this way at present.”¹³⁸ Arab-Israeli peace, the Americans assumed, would require the Kremlin leaders “to consider the cost to their position in the Arab World.... It is unlikely that they have faced the hard decisions on the Middle East, since they do not seem to share our concern over the recent deterioration of the situation.”¹³⁹

That misperception affected U.S. negotiating strategy seems clear from the fact that administration officials understood the challenging task Moscow had in delivering meaningful Arab concessions. “The Soviets have some of the same problems with [Egypt] that we have with Israel,” Rogers observed at the December 10 NSC meeting. “They cannot just walk in to Nasser’s office and gain his acceptance of any proposition they may put to him.”¹⁴⁰ The Kremlin,

¹³⁵ Haldeman Diary Entry, September 20, 1970, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 195.

¹³⁶ Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” September 21, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, p. 857. See also Minutes of an NSC Meeting, “Subject: Jordan,” September 21, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 24, pp. 865-866.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Korn, *Stalemate*, p. 156. See also Garment, *Crazy Rhythm*, pp. 185, 189. For Sisco’s report of the negotiations, see Memo from Sisco to Nixon and Rogers, July 21, 1969, pp. 135-141.

¹³⁸ Memcon, June 5, 1970, p. 80. See also Memo for the Record, June 10, 1970, p. 431.

¹³⁹ Memo for Nixon, “Subject: The View from Moscow,” May 22, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 164. See also NIE, February 27, 1969, pp. 81-82.

¹⁴⁰ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, December 10, 1969, p. 246.

Helms noted, could not simply “call the shots” in the Middle East.¹⁴¹ USSR negotiators, Nixon admitted, were having “as much difficulty with [Egypt] as we have with Israel.”¹⁴²

The Americans, moreover, recognized that their position made the Soviets’ job much more difficult. It was obvious to Moscow, Saunders confessed at one point, that Washington was attempting to get the Soviets and Egyptians to accept direct negotiations with Israel “in hope that the U.S. will make the key concessions on boundaries in return.... I will be surprised if the Egyptians and Soviets let us get away with it. We are asking them to play their key card with no more than a hint that we might play ours in return.”¹⁴³ The Nixon administration, Kissinger acknowledged in May 1970, had “never given the Soviets a clear shake to make a settlement.”¹⁴⁴

And U.S. strategists comprehended that there were important reasons for Moscow to be interested in a successful negotiation. Aside from the fact that their clients were expected to lose the next war, the administration understood that the status quo would eventually lead to the diminishment of the Soviets’ influence. This fundamental reality, in fact, formed the entire basis for Kissinger’s strategic thinking about the area. The Kremlin, he argued, likely had “interest in [an] Israel-[Egypt] settlement because continued occupation of Sinai demonstrates USSR impotence.”¹⁴⁵ Perhaps due to this realization, Rogers by September had “changed [his] mind” about Moscow’s intentions. “While the USSR and [Egypt] may not be ready to make peace

¹⁴¹ Memo from Helms to Rogers, “Subject: Gromyko’s Review of Current Soviet Foreign Policy,” July 14, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 202.

¹⁴² Quoted in Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 177.

¹⁴³ Memo from Saunders to Kissinger, “Subject: Soviet Response to Middle East Initiative,” July 2, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 543. Note also Saunders’s point that Rusk’s November 1968 proposal to Riad had been more specific and forthcoming on the territorial question than anything the Nixon administration had since offered. See Memo from Saunders to Kissinger, “Subject: Sisco-Dobrynin Meeting, May 19,” May 21, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, pp. 158-160. In addition, Saunders acknowledged in mid-1969 that the Soviets had come “a long way from their position six months ago.” See Memo from Saunders to Kissinger, “Subject: The Soviet Counterproposal on the Middle East,” June 20, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 187.

¹⁴⁴ Telecon, May 22, 1970, folder: Telecons, May 15-30, box 106, Richardson Papers, LOC. Strangely, the DNSA copy of this transcript omits this quotation. See Telecon, May 22, 1970, KA02975, DNSA.

¹⁴⁵ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, September 11, 1969, p. 168. See also Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, November 11, 1969, p. 220; Memo for the Record, February 25, 1970, p. 319; and Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 368-369.

entirely on Israel's terms," the secretary of state said, "he believed that they do seriously want a solution." Gromyko, he emphasized, "had even indicated that the Arabs have no other choice."¹⁴⁶

Thus, misperception, which likely stemmed from the legacy of Cold War tensions, played a contributory role in the failure of the initial U.S.-USSR talks on the Middle East. Although they at times indicated their understanding that many of the same considerations that led Washington to seek an agreement also probably affected Moscow's thinking about the Arab-Israeli problem, U.S. officials, especially Nixon and Kissinger, were deeply influenced by the idea that the Kremlin's ultimate goal was to strengthen its power position in the area at the expense of the United States. Because the prevailing state of affairs in some ways promoted that objective, the White House misinterpreted the Soviets' inability to deliver greater Arab flexibility as refusal to sacrifice their newly acquired influence for the sake of peace and stability. It was not until overall U.S.-USSR relations began to develop in a more positive direction with the coming of détente that this obstacle became more manageable.

Saving the "Big Gun": Nixon and Domestic Politics

At first glance, domestic political considerations might be expected to have impacted Nixon's Middle East strategy only marginally. A.F.K. Organski, perhaps the leading proponent of the theory that U.S. support for Israel is a function of strategic factors rather than of political pressures in the United States, builds his argument around his administration. "Nixon," he writes, "appears the least likely President of the United States to respond to the pressure of the Jewish community leaders." Nevertheless, it was during his time in office that American military and

¹⁴⁶ Memcon, September 25, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 182. Note also that the administration was well aware that the purpose of Gromyko's visit to Cairo in June had been to elicit greater flexibility from Nasser for use in the USSR's negotiations with the United States. See Intelligence Note No. 452 from Hughes to Rogers, "Subject: USSR-Middle East—Gromyko Probably in Cairo to Clear New Soviet Position for US-USSR Talks on Middle East," June 11, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, pp. 175-175; and Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, "Subject: Memorandum of Conversation with Ambassador Dobrynin, June 11, 1969," June 13, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 179.

economic assistance to Israel first began to increase dramatically. With this in mind, Organski claims: “[T]he pressure of the Jewish community on the U.S. government and the support the government extended to Israel were coincidental but not causally related.”¹⁴⁷

A careful examination of the relevant primary source evidence, however, demonstrates that this sort of correlational analysis is much too simplified. To be sure, Nixon owed little in political terms to Israel’s supporters and delighted in telling his advisers that, as a result, politics at home were entirely irrelevant to thinking. “Under no circumstances will domestic political considerations have any bearing on the decisions I make with regard to the Mideast,” he wrote Kissinger and Rogers in February 1969. “The only consideration which will affect my decision on this policy will be the security interests of the United States.”¹⁴⁸ “If the U.S. Jewish groups go for McGovern,” he even wrote on the eve of the 1972 election, “that gives us a freer hand to do what is *right* for [the] U.S.—as distinguished from internal Jewish political interests.”¹⁴⁹

Nixon’s vehement claims about his political insulation in this area notwithstanding, the president and his advisers frequently discussed the domestic constraints related to Middle East policy. “I think,” he wrote Rogers in May 1971, “as a result of the enormous influence of the

¹⁴⁷ A.F.K. Organski, *The \$36 Billion Bargain: Strategy and Politics in U.S. Assistance to Israel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 24, 26-27. Note also the argument advanced by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt that the pro-Israel lobby in the United States played a less critical role in shaping Middle East policy during the Cold War. See Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), pp. 15, 51-58.

¹⁴⁸ Memo from Nixon to Kissinger and Rogers, February 22, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 40. See also Minutes of an NSC Meeting, September 11, 1969, p. 169; Memcon, June 5, 1970, p. 80; Memo from Nixon to Rogers, May 26, 1971, pp. 856-858; Memo for the Record, July 16, 1971, p. 886; Nixon, *RN*, p. 435; Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 559, 564; and Ismail Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 49. Nixon regularly claimed that he would never be able to expand his share of the Jewish vote. See Memo from Kenneth Cole to Leonard Garment, September 29, 1969, folder: White House Memoranda, box 3, Papers of Leonard Garment, LOC; Memo from Nixon to Rogers, May 26, 1971, p. 858; Haldeman Diary Entry, January 8, 1970, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 117; Haldeman Diary Entry, July 13, 1970, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 181; Haldeman Diary Entry, November 3, 1971, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 370; Haldeman Diary Entry, September 21, 1972, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 507; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 202; and Yaqub, “The Politics of Stalemate,” pp. 37-38.

¹⁴⁹ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Soviet Jewry,” October 5, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15: *Soviet Union, June 1972-August 1974* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), p. 212 n. 4 (emphasis in original).

Jewish lobby in the United States—not only through its financial contributions to Congressmen and Senators but even more because of its enormous influence through the media—we have often subordinated U.S. security interests to the interests of Israel.”¹⁵⁰ Nixon claimed to know “how ‘this lobby’ [Zionist] works.... Israel plays a shrewd, ruthless political game.”¹⁵¹ Kissinger regularly expressed similar thoughts on the issue. When asked what Egypt could do to develop a relationship with the United States similar to the one enjoyed by Israel, the national security adviser quipped: “They can emigrate five million Egyptians.”¹⁵²

Top U.S. strategists understood that exerting serious pressure on Jerusalem for diplomatic concessions would create domestic problems for the administration. Suspending aircraft deliveries to the Meir government, Kissinger believed, would “have profound consequences domestically and abroad. The domestic implications are apparent.”¹⁵³ A confrontation with Israel, the president concurred, would precipitate “a considerable broadside from the Jewish community... since many of the media is heavily weighted to the Jewish point of view.”¹⁵⁴ The

¹⁵⁰ Memo from Nixon to Rogers, May 26, 1971, p. 856. Note also Nixon’s reference to what he considered “the terrible problem arising from the total Jewish domination of the media.” See Haldeman Diary Entry, February 1, 1972, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 405; and Conversation between Nixon, Haldeman, and Billy Graham, February 1, 1972, p. 359.

¹⁵¹ Memo for the Record, July 16, 1971, p. 887 (brackets in original).

¹⁵² Memcon, September 19, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 1048. The administration was additionally constrained by American public opinion, which was not only generally sympathetic to Israel, but also volatile due to the Vietnam War. Moreover, Congress was strongly supportive of Washington’s special relationship with Jerusalem. And despite his denials, Nixon was keenly interested in gaining a larger share of the Jewish vote in 1972, which led the White House to court this group assiduously. On these points, see Quandt, *Peace Process*, pp. 60-61; Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America’s Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 169, 454 n. 11, 459, n. 156; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, pp. 275, 357, 410; and Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, p. 131. It is also worth noting that the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress throughout Nixon’s time in office and that he had been elected with only a plurality of the popular vote in 1968. The president, in other words, would not have been in a particularly strong position domestically in any case, aside from these other constraints.

¹⁵³ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Economic and Military Assistance to Israel,” undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 320. See also Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, June 16, 1970, p. 434.

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 220.

White House, one U.S. official emphasized at the first NSC meeting on the Arab-Israeli issue, would as a result need “to develop maximum public understanding in [the] US.”¹⁵⁵

Such factors were the all more significant because of the White House’s intense preoccupation with managing opposition at home to the war in Vietnam. That the conflict in Southeast Asia—and the domestic political considerations connected to it—took clear priority over the Arab-Israeli issue was evident from Nixon and Kissinger’s frequent attempts to link Soviet concessions in Vietnam to more forthcoming American offers in the Middle East. Although they did not always say so explicitly, Dobrynin informed Moscow in October 1969, it was obvious that White House officials were making progress in the Arab-Israeli negotiations “contingent” on USSR assistance in Vietnam.¹⁵⁶ As Kissinger later put it, Nixon viewed the Middle East early on primarily as “a lever to pry loose some Soviet cooperation on Vietnam.”¹⁵⁷

The fact that, in Nixon’s view, many of Israel’s supporters were the same individuals who opposed the administration’s policy in Southeast Asia made the president more cautious about potentially stirring up domestic opposition to his Arab-Israeli diplomacy. The United States, Rogers argued, could not, in the pure sense of the word, “impose” a solution in the Middle East, in part because it was doubtful whether the White House could “defend such a line here at home without jeopardizing support from certain elements of public opinion of our stance on Vietnam.”¹⁵⁸ Taking a position on the issue of boundaries, Kissinger argued, would create a

¹⁵⁵ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, February 1, 1969, p. 20.

¹⁵⁶ Telegram from Dobrynin to the USSR Foreign Ministry, October 10, 1969, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 81. See also Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, June 13, 1969, p. 179; Memcon, October 20, 1969, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 92; Telecon, December 9, 1969, folder: Telecons, December 1969, box 105, Richardson Papers, LOC; Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Whether to Present a Jordan Paper in Four Power Talks,” December 17, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 259; and Memcon, December 22, 1969, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 104.

¹⁵⁷ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 352, 355, 559.

¹⁵⁸ Memo from Rogers to Nixon, “Subject: Middle East Settlement Efforts,” November 16, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 224. Note also Quandt’s observation that “an imposed settlement... would be unfavorably received in [the United States].” See Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 446 n. 14.

“major political reaction in the US that the Israelis would have stirred up.” Being specific, he believed, “would provoke a major domestic political storm—including increased opposition on Vietnam and on defense.”¹⁵⁹ Attorney General John Mitchell, whose views on the Middle East Nixon valued highly, agreed: “Looking at our domestic interest, if we took away [the] negotiating base of [the] Israelis, it would take away [the] base for your position on Vietnam and a lot of other issues.... [I]f we undercut [the] Israelis, ‘we’re going to catch hell all over this country.’” Nixon’s dilemma, therefore, was to consider “how this affects Vietnam.”¹⁶⁰

And it is clear that the president’s awareness of this connection impacted his handling of the negotiations with the Soviets on the issue. The war in Southeast Asia, Kissinger informed Dobrynin, would inevitably “affect our attitude on many subjects, including the Middle East.” Although Nixon was “freer than any other President” because he had been elected without the support of the American Jewish community, as long as the conflict in Vietnam went on “he did not want to alienate people with so much influence in the mass media. Therefore, the key to our attitude on the Middle East would be found in the Soviet attitude toward Vietnam.”¹⁶¹ While it was “true that, unlike the Democratic presidents who preceded me, I am not dependent on the Jewish vote,” Nixon similarly told the Soviet ambassador, he did not want to needlessly stir up domestic opposition. “[U]nless it is absolutely necessary,” the president emphasized, “I don’t want to anger the Jews, who hold important positions in the press, radio, and television, from which they can exert a powerful influence on other groups of American voters.” Nixon was wary of expending political capital on the Middle East, as Israel’s supporters were “the main critics of

¹⁵⁹ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, September 10, 1969, p. 161. See also Memo from Saunders to Kissinger, October 22, 1969, pp. 196-197; Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, November 11, 1969, p. 219; and Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, June 16, 1970, p. 440.

¹⁶⁰ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, September 11, 1969, p. 169. See also Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 176; and Kissinger *White House Years*, p. 369.

¹⁶¹ Memcon, April 9, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 472.

our Vietnam policy and will undoubtedly step up this criticism if it seems to them I am ‘selling out’ Israel, although I have no intention of doing so.”¹⁶²

The president, moreover, believed that a Middle East settlement could not be easily achieved. On his first trip abroad after taking office, he had told French President Charles de Gaulle that he was “somewhat pessimistic on the Middle East.” Even if a settlement were reached, he said, “[r]adical [f]orces” could torpedo the arrangement.¹⁶³ Focusing on the Middle East, he advised his aide Donald Rumsfeld in March 1971, would not be to his advantage in career terms. “People think it’s for the purpose of catering to the Jewish vote,” Nixon said. “And anyway, there’s nothing you can do about the Middle East.”¹⁶⁴ “I have a feeling,” he remarked similarly in late 1969, “that there isn’t a thing we can do about ‘that place.’ I think anything that we do will fail.”¹⁶⁵ It might be more worthwhile to concentrate on a partial agreement, he surmised at the April 25 NSC meeting, as “[a]n overall settlement may take years.”¹⁶⁶ “The Middle East,” he stated as late as February 1973, “will never be totally settled.”¹⁶⁷

What this constellation of factors meant was that Nixon was not prepared to spend substantial political capital on the Arab-Israeli conflict in the absence of compelling evidence that progress could be achieved. Given the president’s other priorities, Vietnam foremost among them; his awareness of the domestic costs involved in pursuing an activist policy in the Middle East; and his relative pessimism about the issue, there was in his mind little incentive to tackle the problem. As his assistant Leonard Garment later put it, “Nixon saw the Mideast as a colossal

¹⁶² Memcon, June 10, 1970, in *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 150-151. See also Memcon, June 10, 1970, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 161.

¹⁶³ Quoted in Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 114.

¹⁶⁴ Quoted in James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 16.

¹⁶⁵ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, December 10, 1969, p. 254.

¹⁶⁶ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, April 25, 1969, p. 93 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶⁷ Memcon, February 13, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976, Vol. 25: Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), p. 50.

political pain in the neck.”¹⁶⁸ Consequently, the president chose to task the State Department with formulating policy in the area. Because, Kissinger later wrote, Nixon felt that “any active policy would fail” and “would almost certainly incur the wrath of Israel’s supporters,” he decided “to get the White House as much out of the direct line of fire as possible.”¹⁶⁹

It was not, therefore, the United States’ lack of influence with the Meir government that deterred Nixon from dealing with the matter, but his insistence that the political costs he would suffer for doing so be justified by tangible results. Administration officials recognized that once they had received what they considered a fair proposal for a settlement, Washington would possess the coercive leverage necessary to achieve an agreement. “Exerting pressure on Israel would make life politically difficult for us ‘for a little while,’” Laird observed at the December 10 NSC meeting. “But I believe that Israel will go along—they do not have anyone else to turn to. They have fewer friends in Europe and certainly in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union. Israel is isolated and is going to have to make some sort of settlement.”¹⁷⁰ “Israel,” Kissinger later noted, “is dependent on the United States as no other country is on a friendly power.”¹⁷¹ Even Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan acknowledged the point. No matter how “distasteful” he might find any U.S. peace initiative, “[H]e was realistic enough to recognize that they would eventually have to yield to it. He would wait until the last moment but then give in.”¹⁷²

Nixon, then, was willing and able to confront the Meir government if there was an actual opportunity to clinch a settlement. “If there is a chance for a break through [*sic*],” he said, “we

¹⁶⁸ Garment, *Crazy Rhythm*, p. 185.

¹⁶⁹ See Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 348. When asked during the National Security Council’s first consideration of the Middle East what he planned to do about the Israelis, Nixon joked: “Leave that to [the] Secretary of State.” See Minutes of an NSC Meeting, February 1, 1969, p. 23.

¹⁷⁰ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, December 10, 1969, p. 253.

¹⁷¹ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 483.

¹⁷² Memcon, April 2, 1969, KT00015, DNSA.

should go ahead. But it all boils down to who goes first, who sticks [his] neck out.”¹⁷³ There was little point, he said, in pressing Israel “until we have got something that is really worthwhile.” He understood that he could not “use the big gun very often but I’m prepared to do it.”¹⁷⁴

Nixon’s position on the issue was most apparent during the negotiations that preceded and followed the issuance of what ultimately became known as the Rogers Plan. It was the belief of State Department officials, most importantly Rogers and Sisco, that the administration’s refusal throughout 1969 to back the principle of a full Israeli withdrawal, at least from Sinai and the West Bank, was hurting the U.S. position in the Arab world, to the ultimate benefit of the Soviet Union. It was crucial, Rogers argued, for the United States “to make clear that it [has] basically a balanced position not simply a carbon copy of Israeli views.”¹⁷⁵

Thus on December 9, the secretary of state laid out in a speech the United States’ vision of what it considered a reasonable agreement. On the key issue of territory, Rogers, in effect, reiterated what Rusk had privately offered the previous November. Although the final borders would have to be agreed upon by the parties, he said: “[A]ny change in the pre-existing lines should not reflect the weight of conquest and should be confined to insubstantial alterations required for mutual security. We do not support expansionism.”¹⁷⁶ Then on December 18, the United States seemingly made good on its claim that it was not seeking a separate peace between Egypt and Israel when it tabled a proposal for a Jordanian agreement, similar in its substance to what the Americans had suggested for a Sinai settlement. By appearances, the White House had authorized a major effort for Arab-Israeli peace on the basis of a full Israeli evacuation.

¹⁷³ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, April 25, 1969, p. 91.

¹⁷⁴ Telecon, undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 381.

¹⁷⁵ Memo from Rogers to Nixon, November 16, 1969, p. 225.

¹⁷⁶ Rogers’s Address to the Galaxy Conference on Adult Education, December 9, 1969, Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/rogers.html>. The Americans had already made the offer to the Soviets privately on October 28. See Paper Prepared in the Department of State, “Joint US-USSR Working Paper: Fundamental Principles,” undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 198-201.

The reality of the situation, however, was altogether different. Simultaneous to his approval of Rogers's address, Nixon had instructed Garment and Mitchell to communicate to American Jewish leaders that he did not support the State Department initiative. The president, Kissinger later revealed, "implied strongly" that he would make sure that the proposal would not succeed. Similarly, when Nixon permitted U.S. negotiators to table the proposal for a settlement with Jordan, he asked Garment to assure Meir that the United States would make no more concessions and not press its views.¹⁷⁷ The president himself later admitted that he had authorized the proposal purely for the sake of appearances. "I knew that the Rogers Plan could never be implemented," Nixon writes in his memoir, "but I believed it was important to let the Arab world know that the United States did not automatically dismiss its case regarding the occupied territories or rule out a compromise settlement of the conflicting claims."¹⁷⁸

Even on its own, this evidence would be enough to show that the White House had effectively undercut the State Department's efforts, but Nixon actually did much more to ensure that the Rogers Plan would fail. The president was well aware that the proposal would "probably enrage Israel" and require substantial U.S. pressure on Jerusalem.¹⁷⁹ As a result, he chose to actively encourage opposition to the initiative. "As you requested, I told Len Garment to organize some Jewish Community protests against the State Department's attitude on the Middle East situation and Len promised to take prompt action," Kissinger wrote Nixon on October 2.¹⁸⁰ Similarly, Nixon had told Meir when they met in September that he sympathized with her concerns. "If he were in our position he would take the same approach," the president had said,

¹⁷⁷ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 372, 376. See also Telecon, December 17, 1969, KA01800, DNSA; and Memcon, January 9, 1970, KC00034, DNSA.

¹⁷⁸ Nixon, *RN*, pp. 478-479.

¹⁷⁹ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, December 10, 1969, p. 247.

¹⁸⁰ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, "Subject: Middle East Situation," October 2, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 186.

and “it wouldn’t hurt if [Meir] were to even publicly mention that [Israel has] disagreements [with the State Department’s proposals].” The prime minister understood that “what the president wanted was not for us to change our positions but to tone down the criticism expressed towards [the White House], especially here, in the US.”¹⁸¹ The president, Kissinger had told Sisco on September 27, wanted “to avoid a confrontation on this.”¹⁸²

Likewise, following the release of the December 18 plan for an Israeli-Jordanian agreement—which caused widespread protests from Israel and its American supporters—the president asked Meir to campaign against the proposal vigorously.¹⁸³ Although State Department officials believed that the backlash would be “counterproductive” for the Israelis and could result in Nixon suspending U.S. military and economic aid to Jerusalem, the White House was actually behind the effort to derail the initiative.¹⁸⁴ In January, Kissinger informed Garment that the president had “a little errand” for him. The president wanted Meir “wherever she goes, in all her speeches and press conferences... to slam the hell out of Rogers and his plan.”¹⁸⁵

In short, the whole idea that Nixon—because he had been elected without the support of American Jewish voters—faced no domestic political constraints related to Middle East policy and that his basic approach to the matter was purely a function of strategic considerations is a rather tenuous claim. The president, in fact, hoped to limit U.S. military assistance to Jerusalem to the extent possible. Even after the Soviet Union and Egypt signed a Treaty of Friendship and

¹⁸¹ Quoted in Boaz Vanetik and Zaki Shalom, *The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Peace Process, 1969-1973: From the Rogers Plan to the Outbreak of the Yom Kippur War* (Chicago: Sussex Academic Press, 2013), p. 49. See also Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, pp. 161-164; and Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 185.

¹⁸² Telecon, September 27, 1969, KA01284, DNSA.

¹⁸³ On the intense reaction from the Israelis and their supporters in the United States to the plan for a Jordanian-Israeli settlement, see Memo from Garment to Kissinger, December 20, 1969, folder 3, box 34, Garment Papers, LOC; and Korn, *Stalemate*, pp. 161-163.

¹⁸⁴ Telecon, December 29, 1969, folder: Telecons, December 1969, box 105, Richardson Papers, LOC.

¹⁸⁵ Quoted in Yaqub, “The Politics of Stalemate,” p. 40. See also Garment, *Crazy Rhythm*, pp. 191-193. Nixon refused to back the Rogers Plan publicly and in January offered assurances to Jewish leaders that he had no intention of attempting to impose a settlement in the Middle East. See Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 187-188; and Peter Golden, *Quiet Diplomat: A Biography of Max M. Fisher* (New York: Cornwall, 1992), pp. 200-204.

Cooperation, which seemingly expanded the scope of USSR military influence and involvement in the Middle East, he wrote Kissinger: “[W]e must not allow this to be a pretext for escalation of arms to Israel. We should assist only in response to incontrovertible evidence of Soviet military aid which we evaluate as significantly changing the balance of power.”¹⁸⁶

Indeed, Nixon’s cognizance that pressing for an Arab-Israeli settlement would likely cause the White House serious political problems at home—most importantly by adding to its domestic difficulties relating to Vietnam—induced great caution on his part. Despite his recognition of the dangers created by the dispute and his belief that the Middle East was one area where a real opportunity for cooperation with the Soviet Union existed, the president was simply not going to risk squandering political capital on what he considered an extremely challenging issue. And because the Israelis maintained a strong edge militarily against their adversaries, the Americans could temporarily afford to pay the matter less attention than it probably deserved. Consequently, U.S. policy during Nixon’s first year in the White House was strongly supportive of Israel and the administration made little effort to move the negotiations forward. The United States had, in effect, taken the position that the Soviets and Arabs would have to make far-reaching concessions before it would get involved in the diplomacy and, in so doing, had more or less acquiesced to the Meir government’s basic strategy.

Soviet Intervention and the Shift in the Balance of Power

Needless to say, the administration’s posture had created a severe dilemma for Moscow. Without at least some indication from Washington that it approved in principle the idea of a restoration of basically the 1967 lines and that it would press Jerusalem to carry out such a withdrawal in return for peace, the Soviets would not be able to elicit additional flexibility from Nasser. The

¹⁸⁶ Quoted in Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1284-1285. Note also Laird’s particularly forceful views on this issue. See Memo from Laird to Nixon, “Subject: Middle East Arms Policy,” June 21, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 873-875.

fact that Nixon and Kissinger had repeatedly implied that progress in the Middle East would not be possible unless the USSR first made certain concessions on the issue of Vietnam only made the problem more difficult for the Kremlin. And, perhaps most significantly, U.S. acquiescence to the Meir government's strategy seemed to indicate that the United States viewed the matter in essentially Cold War terms, rather than as an issue on which the superpowers could cooperate.

The USSR rejection of the Rogers Plan must be viewed in this context. To be sure, Moscow's formal reply to the American proposal was what one scholar correctly terms "somewhat bizarre," and included the "utterly ridiculous statement" that Washington had failed to specify its view on the question of boundaries.¹⁸⁷ The Soviets claimed that the initiative was "one-sided and pro-Israeli," and, in Sisco's words, their response represented "a definite setback," for it retreated in several respects from the Kremlin's earlier negotiating position, most significantly on the issue of the Arabs' willingness to hold direct talks with the Israelis.¹⁸⁸ By appearances, the Politburo had not only abandoned its earlier willingness to collaborate, but had cast aside what seemed like a major U.S. peace offer. And, as William Quandt writes, the administration drew the conclusion "that it had been naïve to assume that the United States would be able to separate the Soviet Union from Egypt during the process of negotiations."¹⁸⁹

Such analysis, however, was shortsighted. Moscow, after all, had at first seemed interested in the U.S. plan. The initial reaction from the USSR to Rogers's address, Kissinger points out in his memoirs, was "a fairly conciliatory statement" saying that the U.S. plan was long "overdue" and that the key would be whether Washington would be willing to pressure

¹⁸⁷ Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, pp. 75-76.

¹⁸⁸ Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Diplomatic Posts, December 24, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 267; and Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Posts, "Subject: Soviet Response to U.S. October 28 Proposal," December 24, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 329.

¹⁸⁹ Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 69.

Israel to withdraw.¹⁹⁰ In the days that followed the speech, the Soviet representative at the United Nations, Yakov Malik, refrained from criticizing its main points, and emphasized that it would have “repercussions around the world.”¹⁹¹ Indeed, George Breslauser is probably correct in thinking that Moscow would have liked to accept the Rogers Plan.¹⁹² Rejecting the plan on substantive grounds, of course, would have run counter to the basic thrust of Soviet policy.

Ostensibly, the USSR-Egyptian dismissal of the Rogers proposal stemmed from Cairo’s opposition to the idea of a separate peace with Israel. To be sure, this explanation accounts partly for the proposal’s rejection.¹⁹³ Cairo, however, had made it clear that it would not allow Syrian intransigence to torpedo a deal that the other key Arab states found reasonable. As early as March 31, Nasser’s adviser, Mahmoud Fawzi, had dismissed the need to include Damascus if its leaders maintained a hardline stance. “If the Syrians do not want to have the Israelis withdraw from the Golan Heights,” he had told Kissinger, “that is the business of the Syrians.”¹⁹⁴ Egypt had “decided long ago,” he reiterated days later, that it “would not allow Syria to have a veto.”¹⁹⁵

True, Cairo took the position that Syria should not have to accept Resolution 242 until Israel had first made it clear that it would be willing to return the Golan Heights, but given the attractiveness of the American offer, it seems unlikely that this objection would have led Nasser to reject it out of hand.¹⁹⁶ In addition, Rogers had tried to assuage the Egyptians on this point when he had stated in his speech that a final settlement would need to include “other States

¹⁹⁰ Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 375.

¹⁹¹ Editorial Note, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 257.

¹⁹² Breslauser, “Soviet Policy in the Middle East,” p. 87.

¹⁹³ Mahmoud Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East* (London: Quartet, 1981), pp. 109-111. This is also Quandt’s view. See Nixon Legacy Forum, “Waging Peace: Nixon and the Geopolitics of the Middle East,” National Archives, Washington, D.C., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXxcBLmbaWg>, at 20:57-21:23. On the decision to reject the Rogers Plan, see also Vanetik and Shalom, *The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Peace Process*, pp. 65-68, 71; Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile*, pp. 99-100; and Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, p. 72.

¹⁹⁴ Memcon, March 31, 1969, KT00013, DNSA.

¹⁹⁵ Memcon, April 10, 1969, KT00023, DNSA.

¹⁹⁶ On Egypt’s demand that Israel make the first move before it would insist on Syrian acceptance of Resolution 242, see Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 134, 140.

which accept the Security Council Resolution of November 1967.”¹⁹⁷ As for the Jordanian front, the American initiative had been extremely favorable to the Arabs, for it had called for essentially a full Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and a civic and economic role for Jordan in Jerusalem, which was the best deal the United States could have been expected to offer.

What seems the more compelling explanation for the Egyptian-USSR rejection of the Rogers Plan, therefore, is that Moscow and Cairo were reluctant to take major risks for peace by accepting an American initiative that they knew lacked White House backing. Nasser, after all, had been aware since early November, based on information he had received from the head of Egypt’s Interests Section in Washington, Ashraf Ghorbal, that Nixon had no intention of supporting the State Department initiative.¹⁹⁸ Thus, as Salim Yaqub points out, the conventional wisdom that Moscow was responsible for the collapse of the superpower negotiations on the Middle East because it was unwilling to press its clients does not account for “the role of the Nixon White House in abetting Israel’s own rejection of the American plan.”¹⁹⁹ “Perhaps the plan might have been accepted,” George Lenczowski agrees, “had the United States chosen to exert pressure on Israel, but that was far from Nixon’s intentions.”²⁰⁰

Arguably of equal importance was the fact that at the time Rogers made his speech, the War of Attrition had begun to turn sharply against Egypt. In July, Jerusalem had decided to commit its air force to the battle to offset Cairo’s superiority in artillery and by December, with its air defense network crippled and Israel in complete command of the skies, Nasser’s government was in danger of collapsing. When Meir and her colleagues chose to intensify the

¹⁹⁷ Rogers’s Address to the Galaxy Conference on Adult Education, December 9, 1969.

¹⁹⁸ Korn, *Stalemate*, p. 159. See also Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 107, 113-115; and Laura M. James, “Military/Political Means/Ends: Egyptian Decision-Making in the War of Attrition,” in *The Cold War in the Middle East*, pp. 99-100.

¹⁹⁹ Yaqub, “The Politics of Stalemate,” p. 40.

²⁰⁰ Lenczowski, *American Presidents and the Middle East*, p. 123.

conflict further by commencing with deep penetration bombings against the Egyptian hinterland in early January, there was real concern that the Egyptian president might fall from power.²⁰¹

Contrary to the claim made by at least two scholars that there exists “no evidence” to suggest that the Nixon administration supported the Israeli decision to escalate the war with the goal of toppling Nasser, it is abundantly clear that, at the very least, the White House had lent its tacit approval to Jerusalem.²⁰² As early as September 19, Rabin had communicated to his colleagues that the administration hoped Israel would intensify its aerial attacks. “There is a widespread feeling here that the Soviets are not willing to make concessions in order to reach agreement with the United States about the conflict in the Middle East,” the ambassador had written. The Americans, Rabin believed, felt that continuing Israeli strikes against Egypt would achieve “far-reaching results. Nasser’s standing could be undermined, and that would in turn weaken the Soviet position in the region. Some sources have informed me that our military operations are the most encouraging breath of fresh air the American administration has enjoyed recently.” Consequently, he concluded: “A man would have to be blind, deaf and dumb not to sense how much the administration favors our military operations, and there is a growing likelihood that the United States would be interested in an escalation of our military activity with the aim of undermining Nasser’s standing.... Thus the willingness to supply us with additional arms depends more on stepping up our military activity against Egypt than on reducing it.”²⁰³

Perhaps Rabin had carried this argument a bit too far, but the White House was in general broadly supportive of the Israeli strategy. After reading a September 25 memorandum from

²⁰¹ On the Israeli decision to escalate the conflict, see Avi Shlaim and Raymond Tanter, “Decision Process, Choice, and Consequences: Israel’s Deep-Penetration Bombing in Egypt, 1970,” *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (1978), pp. 483-516; and Korn, *Stalemate*, pp. 165-176.

²⁰² Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 189; and Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 87.

²⁰³ Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, pp. 151-152. Benny Morris agrees, on the basis of the evidence presented by Rabin, that “Jerusalem had Washington’s backing for the offensive.” See Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York: Vintage, 2001), p. 351.

Kissinger, which noted that one of the Meir government's goals was to remove Nasser from power, Nixon had written in the margin: "Can't [the] C.I.A. handle Nasser?!"²⁰⁴ Likewise, at the December 10 NSC meeting, Nixon had argued, even after Helms had stated that one of Jerusalem's goals was to "topple Nasser," that it was "possible to argue... that if we want the Soviets to help, Israel is producing that result by scaring them. Why should it not be our policy to let Israel scare them a little bit more?"²⁰⁵ "I still can't understand," he said, "why the Israelis can't kick Nasser [and Egypt] harder and Hussein [and Jordan] less."²⁰⁶ Although, Kissinger informed Senator Jacob Javits just days after the Israelis had commenced with their penetration bombing campaign, the administration could not say "we don't care," the White House "suffer[ed] no pain... when the Israelis hit [Egypt] and Syria."²⁰⁷ Even when Nixon informed Eban and Rabin in May that the United States was planning a ceasefire initiative, the president admitted that he had backed the Meir government's escalation: "I told you before to give it to them and to hit them as hard as you can. Every time I hear that you go at them, penetrate into their territory, I am delighted. As far as they are concerned, go ahead and hit them."²⁰⁸

The Soviets, therefore, had been put in an extremely difficult position and felt compelled to intervene to save Nasser's government from a total collapse. A U.S. client state—utilizing American-supplied Phantom aircraft—was systematically humiliating a key Soviet ally. And because the Egyptians lacked the training and means to repel the Israeli attacks, the Kremlin leadership felt it had no choice but to involve USSR military personnel in the fighting directly.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁴ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, September 25, 1969, p. 177 n. 3.

²⁰⁵ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, December 10, 1969, pp. 240, 246.

²⁰⁶ Quoted in Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 179.

²⁰⁷ Memcon, January 9, 1970, KC00034, DNSA. On Syria, see also Yaqub, "The Politics of Stalemate," pp. 41-42.

²⁰⁸ Editorial Note of Israeli Memcon, May 22, 1970, p. 393. See also Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, pp. 172, 175. Note also Nixon's comment that the United States needed to "put Israel in a position that they can be a serious worry to the Soviets." See Memcon, June 5, 1970, p. 80.

²⁰⁹ There is a debate over the exact timing of, and reasons for, the Soviet choice to intervene in the War of Attrition. My reading of the available evidence is that even though Moscow had perhaps decided earlier to place a certain

The claim advanced by one scholar that the intervention was aimed at undermining the pro-American regimes in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, in other words, is wholly without foundation.²¹⁰

As Dobrynin replied to Kissinger, after the latter had complained about the installation of advanced surface-to-air missiles (SAM-3s) on Egyptian soil: “To equate this issue with the piratical raids by Israeli aircraft is like portraying burglars who systematically rob other people’s homes as the injured parties when the homeowner decides to install a lock to keep the burglars out.”²¹¹ The Soviet leaders, he said, “could not permit one of their friends in the Middle East to be totally humiliated and destroyed and there were no other means available to protect them.”²¹²

number of military advisers in Egypt due to global considerations, the scale and purpose of their mission was radically altered by the nature of the military situation in late 1969, as well as by the stalled state of the diplomatic negotiations. For a sampling of the evidence related to this issue, see Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 204; Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan* (New York: Quadrangle, 1975), pp. 77-84; Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, pp. 197-198; Saad el-Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez* (San Francisco, CA: American Mideast Research, 1980), pp. 12-14; Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 104-105, 112-113, 117-119; Isabella Ginor, “‘Under the Yellow Arab Helmet Gleamed Blue Russian Eyes’: Operation *Kavkaz* and the War of Attrition, 1969-70,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2002), pp. 127-156; Dima P. Adamsky, “‘Zero-Hour for the Bears’: Inquiring into the Soviet Decision to Intervene in the Egyptian-Israeli War of Attrition, 1969-70,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2006), pp. 113-136; Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East*, pp. 78, 81-83; and Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile*, pp. 105-106.

²¹⁰ Douglas Little, “The Cold War in the Middle East: Suez Crisis to Camp David Accords,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 2: *Crises and Détente* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 318.

²¹¹ Memcon, March 20, 1970, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 140.

²¹² Memcon, June 10, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, pp. 518-519. Despite their official protests, American officials almost unanimously acknowledged the validity of Moscow’s justifications for its move in their private discussions. As one National Intelligence Estimate noted, the Kremlin had probably been moved to act by Nasser’s argument that the “situation was humiliating both to him and to the Russians and possibly that his position, and therefore theirs, would be jeopardized unless means were found to deny the Israelis freedom of the skies over the heart of Egypt.” Thus, although the Soviets had probably considered their intervention a risky course, they had felt compelled to “reassert their credibility as protectors of the Egyptians.” See Special NIE 30-70, “The USSR and the Egyptian-Israeli Confrontation,” May 14, 1970, Soviet Estimate 00446, DNSA. For additional evidence that the administration understood that Israel’s bombing strategy had forced the USSR’s hand, see Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Further Thoughts on Kosygin Middle East Message—An Inept Performance,” February 4, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 376 n. 3; Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, March 23, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 354; Memcon, April 24, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 365; Telecon, April 28, 1970, folder: Telecons, April 1970, box 106, Richardson Papers, LOC; Memo for the Record, May 28, 1970, p. 395; Memo from William Hyland of the NSC Staff to Kissinger, “Subject: Soviet Intentions in the Middle East and Our Options,” June 8, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 497; Edward R.F. Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger: A Secret History of American Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Reader’s Digest, 1976), pp. 19-20; and Quandt, *Peace Process*, 448 n. 38. Note also Kissinger’s clear recognition that the Soviets had lacked viable military alternatives to direct intervention. See Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Thoughts on Soviet Response to Nasser’s Arms Request,” February 6, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, pp. 380-

The Kremlin had also made its move in order to shift the balance of negotiating power. Already struggling to influence Nasser, the Politburo had concluded that the Israeli air strikes were eliminating any chance it had of influencing Cairo's negotiating behavior, as Nasser would refuse to deal from a position of complete weakness. And because the United States was basically ignoring the problem by relying on Israel's military superiority to maintain its position in the Middle East, the USSR had no viable political path out of its predicament. As even Kissinger acknowledged, "[T]he Israelis have not really offered the Arabs a negotiating position the Arabs could even consider accepting. So the Arabs feel they have no choice but to fight."²¹³

Thus, the Soviet decision to intervene can only be understood, in the final analysis, in Clausewitzian terms. Even before Operation *Kavkaz*—the mission's codename—had begun to be implemented, Dobrynin had encouraged the Kremlin leadership to exploit what he perceived as the White House's anxiety about the potentiality of USSR military involvement in the area. After all, Kissinger had informed the ambassador on February 10 "that the introduction of Soviet combat personnel in the Middle East would be viewed with the gravest concern."²¹⁴ With this in mind, Dobrynin argued that the threat to intervene "could perhaps turn out to be the most effective way to compel Nixon to look seriously at the Middle East situation and at his own U.S. position in this regard." Without pressure, he reasoned, the president would feel free to maintain existing American policy. A letter sent by Kosygin to Nixon on January 31, which had warned the administration of a possible Soviet military response, the ambassador noted, had "obviously troubled the White House, where they are afraid that the active measures of the USSR might force the Nixon administration to depart from its current very convenient position of not having

383; and Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, "Subject: Possible Soviet Moves in Egypt," February 11, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 399.

²¹³ Editorial Note of Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 507. See also Breslauer, "Soviet Policy in the Middle East," pp. 79-81, 86-87.

²¹⁴ Memcon, February 10, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 389.

to worry about Israel's military situation while it can continue, at the same time, to exert diplomatic pressure on the Arab countries by using the military operations that Israel conducts with virtual impunity." The fact that such a posture was "also advantageous in domestic politics because it suits the very vociferous Zionist circles in the U.S. itself" only reinforced the ambassador's logic. The United States, he felt, would have no way of matching the Soviet action and, thus, the USSR would have a free hand. Dobrynin was "not proposing, of course, a policy of direct confrontation with the U.S.," but he was indeed suggesting the "playing [of] a new political card with a greater degree of pressure."²¹⁵

Likewise, once Soviet personnel were deployed, Dobrynin reported that he considered Kissinger's persistent questioning about the matter "noteworthy. It was evident," he argued, "that this issue is now forcing the White House—perhaps for the first time—to take stock of events in the Middle East seriously and with increasing wariness."²¹⁶ Nixon's decision to deny the Israelis their request for additional military assistance in late March, Dobrynin believed, had been "indissolubly linked" to the Americans' concern about the placement of Soviet forces in Egypt.²¹⁷ The Kremlin would be wise, the ambassador argued, to "make use of this issue for political and diplomatic ends, to put pressure on the Nixon administration now."²¹⁸

Moscow, in other words, had taken its bold move for political purposes. As Dobrynin told Rogers and Sisco, as a result of *Kavkaz*: "[M]aybe the situation now is a little more equal in

²¹⁵ Memcon, February 10, 1970, in *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 123-125; and Letter from Kosygin to Nixon, January 31, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, pp. 363-364. While he considered the tone of the message "relatively moderate," Kissinger nevertheless characterized Kosygin's letter as "the first Soviet threat to your Administration." See Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, "Subject: Message from Kosygin," February 1, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 367.

²¹⁶ Memcon, April 10, 1970, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 147.

²¹⁷ Nixon had not in fact decided on a flat turndown of all Israeli assistance requests. The White House agreed to replace secretly Israel's aircraft losses during 1969 and 1970, up to eight Phantoms and 20 Skyhawks. See Memcon, March 12, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 329-334. Nonetheless, this amounted to a restrained arms supply posture.

²¹⁸ Dobrynin to the USSR Foreign Ministry, March 22, 1970, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 140. See also Editorial Note of USSR Memcon, June 8, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 413-414.

the military sense. Perhaps this provides a good opportunity to advance toward a settlement.”

The chances for peace, the ambassador argued, were “not very hopeful if U.S. policy was aimed at maintaining Israel’s military superiority and Israel’s policy of dealing from a position of strength.”²¹⁹ And U.S. officials like Richardson conceded this logic. The Vietnam peace talks, he used as an analogy, might be facilitated if Saigon could improve its position on the battlefield: “There is such a thing as being too weak in negotiating.”²²⁰

That Soviet behavior must be understood in political terms is also clear from the fact that the Kremlin paired its escalatory military steps with major negotiating concessions. On March 10, just a week prior to the revelation that the USSR had begun installing SAM-3s on Egyptian soil, Dobrynin had proposed an informal ceasefire and requested a resumption of Soviet-American talks on the Middle East. More importantly, he informed Kissinger that Moscow now accepted the U.S. formula for the establishment of “a state of peace,” rather than a mere “cessation of the state of war,” and agreed that the Arab states would be required to prevent fedayeen attacks from being launched from their territory against Israel as part of a settlement. The USSR, he added, would support the stationing of a UN force at Sharm el-Sheikh and would be willing to give the United States a veto over its withdrawal to prevent a repeat of the 1967 scenario. Furthermore, Dobrynin stated that Moscow would accept “some formula for direct negotiations.” As even Kissinger admitted, the Soviets had “made a number of significant concessions.” “All these things,” he observed, “seem to me major steps forward.”²²¹

²¹⁹ Memcon, “Subject: Middle East,” June 2, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 487.

²²⁰ Telecon, June 2, 1970, folder: Telecons, June 1970, box 106, Richardson Papers, LOC.

²²¹ Memcon, March 10, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, pp. 435-437. For additional evidence that the Americans were quite pleased with the substance of the Soviet initiative, see Telecon, March 11, 1970, KA02352, DNSA; and Telecon, March 11, 1970, folder: Telecons, March 1970, box 106, Richardson Papers, LOC. It is worth noting that even though the Americans, to protest the installation of sophisticated air defense equipment and deployment of Soviet combat personnel in Egypt, ultimately rejected Moscow’s proposal for an informal ceasefire, Moscow nonetheless instructed its ambassador in Moscow to press Nasser to demonstrate restraint. See Dima P. Adamsky, “Disregarding the Bear: How US Intelligence Failed to Estimate the Soviet Intervention in the Egyptian-

Even as the War of Attrition continued to escalate—by April, Soviet pilots were directly involved—Moscow continued its efforts to persuade the Nixon administration to work with it for a political solution. On June 2, Dobrynin reaffirmed the USSR position on the nature of peace and, for the first time, specified that this aspect of a settlement could be concluded prior to the commencement of Israel’s withdrawal.²²² As one expert on Soviet Middle East policy writes, the offer constituted Moscow’s “most moderate ever, negotiating position.”²²³ Even an INR estimate concluded that the proposal indicated “that the USSR means to convey a signal of its desire to bargain seriously.”²²⁴ And, contrary to what others have claimed, Moscow strongly supported U.S. efforts to bring about a ceasefire during the summer.²²⁵ Vinogradov, now ambassador to Cairo, considered the State Department’s proposal for a halt to the fighting “very positive,” believing it would create “an opportunity to resolve the deadlock regarding the resolution of the crisis.” Whereas Nasser had initially wanted to reject the American initiative, Soviet representatives had “persistently worked on convincing the [Egyptian] leaders” to accept it.²²⁶

Israeli War of Attrition,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (2005), p. 823. Additionally, it seems likely that the Soviets extracted these political concessions from Cairo as the price for increased military assistance. On March 17, Rabin had informed Kissinger that the Israelis had obtained “hard evidence from one highly reliable source” that in exchange for agreeing to Nasser’s plan to use the break in the fighting to move Egypt’s air defense complex toward the Canal zone, USSR officials had gained his permission to make concessions on the nature of peace and fedayeen issues. See Memcon, March 17, 1970, KT00109, DNSA. See also Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, p. 76.

²²² Memcon, June 2, 1970, p. 485.

²²³ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, p. 75.

²²⁴ Memo from Saunders to Kissinger, “Subject: Middle East Dialogue with the Soviets,” June 26, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 536.

²²⁵ For the claim that the Soviets, in particular Brezhnev, were upset about Nasser’s decision to accept the American ceasefire proposal, see Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, pp. 198-199; Wehling, *Irresolute Princes*, pp. 80, 90-91; and Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 118. For other accounts of this issue, see Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan*, pp. 88-94; Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 139-148, 232; Korn, *Stalemate*, pp. 250-253; and Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile*, pp. 122-125.

²²⁶ Hungarian Foreign Ministry Memo on Soviet Ambassador Titov’s Briefing on Soviet Foreign Policy, June 26, 1970, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/122521>. See also Vanetik and Shalom, *The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Peace Process*, pp. 96-98. The Soviets were also careful to discourage offensive Egyptian military operations. See Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, p. 147; Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez*, pp. 18-22; Breslauer, “Soviet Policy in the Middle East,” p. 78; Wehling, *Irresolute Princes*, pp. 93-95, 146; and Jon D. Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs: The Soviet Union and War in the Middle East* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 78-79.

Moscow, then, was using its intervention and the potential it created for a serious military escalation in the Middle East to put pressure on the Nixon administration to negotiate. Whereas prior to the arrival of Soviet personnel the Americans had been able to exploit Israel's superiority, the Politburo's move had altered significantly the balance of forces, which, in turn, had critical implications for the dynamics of superpower bargaining. The entrance of USSR combat forces into the fighting had confronted the White House with a major dilemma.

"A Hell of a Mess": The Origins of a Bargaining Scenario

American strategists were at first confident that there was little the Soviet Union could do to apply pressure in the Middle East, for they doubted that Moscow would intervene directly.²²⁷ As a result, the administration chose to respond to Kosygin's January 31 letter assertively. The United States, Rogers told Kissinger, could not "let [the Soviets] give us these ultimatums."²²⁸ Nixon, therefore, replied to Kosygin with a warning of his own: "While preferring restraint... the United States is watching carefully the relative balance in the Middle East and we will not hesitate to provide arms to friendly states as the need arises."²²⁹ Likewise, the news of the Soviet deployment to Egypt elicited a strong condemnation from Washington. "The move," Kissinger told Dobrynin, "was reminiscent of some tactics employed several years previously on the occasion of the Cuban crisis. The Soviet Government," he went on, "had to learn that the President could not be dealt with on this basis."²³⁰

The Americans' protestations notwithstanding, it was clear that Operation *Kavkaz* had left the United States and Israel extremely vulnerable. The Soviet Union's intervention, a May 7 strategy paper observed, had shifted the Middle East's "*political-military balance*" and "sharply

²²⁷ Adamsky, "Disregarding the Bear."

²²⁸ Telecon, January 31, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 366.

²²⁹ Letter from Nixon to Kosygin, February 4, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 375.

²³⁰ Memcon, March 20, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 447.

increased the dangers in the present situation.” Even if the administration chose to meet the USSR challenge, it would be doing so “over Israel’s enlarged borders, not Israel’s survival,” which meant that Washington would risk the explosion of its position with the Arabs. And because the United States had no “interest in a confrontation with the USSR over Israel’s right to hold occupied Arab territory” and would, as a consequence, lack the necessary domestic support for a major military operation, the Americans would be in serious trouble if the Kremlin decided to escalate further: “The result will be an even more humiliating back-down in the face of dramatic Soviet pressure than would be the case if the U.S. made changes in its position now.”²³¹

Nor could the United States manage the problem simply by providing the Israelis with additional arms, as such assistance would only strengthen Moscow’s influence with the Arabs at the U.S. expense and minimize the chances for progress in the negotiations. Yet if Jerusalem grew sufficiently fearful about its security, it might feel tempted to launch a preemptive strike, as it had only three years earlier. While deferring a decision on the Meir government’s request for supplementary combat aircraft would provide “the best atmosphere for new political initiatives,” it might also lead the Israelis to undertake “desperate military moves.”²³² The introduction of USSR military forces into Egypt, Nixon acknowledged on June 5, made it “difficult to maintain a balance in the Middle East,” and if the United States did nothing in response, “the Israelis may be forced to act.” To the extent that the Americans aligned themselves with Israel, however, the Soviets would “acquire support from the other elements by default.” On the other hand, if Washington continued to delay in the negotiations, the result could be “some flash point with great dangers.” “[T]he main danger today,” Nixon therefore emphasized, “is that Israel may

²³¹ Paper Prepared by the NSC Staff, “Analytical Summary: Diplomatic Options—Arab-Israeli Impasse,” May 7, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 370, 372, 375 (emphasis in original).

²³² Paper Prepared by the NSC Staff, “U.S. Policy Options in the Middle East: Summary,” May 20, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 386.

move militarily and that we will be looking down the barrels with the Soviet Union again.” In short, the USSR’s escalation had, in the president’s words, “put the heat on the United States.”²³³

And even if the administration wanted to pursue a more confrontational strategy, it was doubtful that it would have the ability to do so. The United States remained bogged down in Southeast Asia and was unable to match the Soviet move directly in any meaningful way.²³⁴ As Laird’s deputy, David Packard, put it: “I want to find some way of keeping this thing from escalating. We are in a hell of a mess.”²³⁵

Moscow had effectively turned the tables on Washington. Aside from the danger that regional hostilities could escalate to the superpower level, Helms reported at a meeting of the National Security Council on June 10, the Israeli strategy of relying on its air force and preemptive tactics was now “unworkable.” Jerusalem could not afford high rates of attrition, he added, meaning USSR intervention had created a major new psychological factor. Most worrisomely, if the Kremlin ordered its pilots into the Canal zone: “Israel could be quickly worn down.” The fate of the Middle East balance of power was, thus, firmly in Moscow’s hands.²³⁶

Although U.S. strategists, especially Rogers and Kissinger, disagreed about what an appropriate response would be, Nixon’s concern was abundantly clear. The fact that the Kremlin had put so many combat personnel at stake in a non-Communist country “underscored for him the enormous significance of this recent Soviet step.” More importantly, the president doubted whether Washington could make any pledge to confront the USSR over Israel credible. Although the Soviets might have some concern, he said: “[I]f they look at that proposition coldly, they know as well as we know around the NSC table that the likelihood of U.S. action directly against

²³³ Memcon, June 5, 1970, pp. 79-80.

²³⁴ Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, pp. 105-112.

²³⁵ Telecon, May 19, 1970, folder: Telecons, May 15-30, 1970, box 106, Richardson Papers, LOC.

²³⁶ Memo for the Record, June 10, 1970, p. 421.

them is ‘in doubt.’”²³⁷ Indeed, Nixon must have been quite nervous since, as he said later, he the Soviets could “take Israel any day that they want to take an hors d’oeuvre.”²³⁸

The State Department’s initiative for a ceasefire in the summer of 1970, therefore, must be understood as an attempt by the administration to extricate itself from this quandary. A halt to the fighting would, in theory, allow peace talks to be restarted and hopefully help de-escalate the situation. The United States, Rogers admitted in a June 9 memorandum to Nixon, found itself in a “new ballgame.” Because the Americans had no viable military solutions and would have to limit themselves “largely to diplomatic efforts which are not apt to make much impact on the USSR,” a ceasefire was Washington’s only real option.²³⁹ It was for this reason that State Department officials were ecstatic when they learned that Nasser had accepted the initiative.²⁴⁰

But it was obvious that the ceasefire would prove nothing more than a stopgap measure in the absence of real progress toward a political settlement. A halt to the fighting, though a positive development, could neither establish a basis for Middle East peace nor address the new factor of the Soviet presence in the region. To the contrary, the U.S.-Israeli position was in many

²³⁷ Ibid., pp. 422, 431. For U.S. strategists’ other deliberations on how to deal with the problem caused by Soviet intervention in the Middle East, see Memo for the Record, “Subject: Meeting of the NSC Special Review Group on the Middle East,” May 21, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 387-392; Memo for the Record, May 28, 1970, pp. 394-399; Telecon, June 5, 1970, KA03065, DNSA; NSC Review Group Meeting, June 5, 1970; Minutes of an Ad Hoc SRG Meeting, “Subject: The Middle East,” July 9, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 456-466; and SRG Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” July 20, 1970, KT00164, DNSA.

²³⁸ Conversation among Nixon, Kissinger, and Haldeman, August 9, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 928. Note also the administration’s efforts to convince the Soviets of its willingness to confront Moscow in the Middle East, which, in light of Nixon’s comments, must be viewed as an attempt to cover up the White House’s feeling of vulnerability and to avoid the impression that the United States was making concessions under pressure. See Telecon, June 11, 1970, in *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 148-149; Memo from Sisco to Kissinger, “Subject: Meeting with Ambassador Dobrynin,” July 13, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, pp. 560-562; Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 580; and Vanetik and Shalom, *The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Peace Process*, pp. 94-95.

²³⁹ Memo from Rogers to Nixon, “Subject: Next Steps in the Middle East,” June 9, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 418.

²⁴⁰ Kissinger was alone in opposing State’s plan, but his feelings were primarily a function of his toxic personal relationship with Rogers. See Haldeman Diary Entry, August 17, 1970, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 189; and Memo from Lyndon Allin to Richardson, August 13, 1970, folder: Israel, box 95, Richardson Papers, LOC.

ways weakened when, in violation of the ceasefire provisions, Nasser decided to move his missile defense complex into the Canal zone, thereby offsetting Israeli air superiority.²⁴¹

As a result, top American strategists remained deeply concerned with the question of what to do about the growing number of Soviet forces in Egypt. “Having scored a psychological gain with apparent impunity,” Kissinger argued, “it has generally been the Soviet tactic first to consolidate their gains and then to press forward, testing the ground as they move.... The problem is that the USSR has established a new kind of foothold in [Egypt] and the U.S. has a strong interest in preventing its consolidation and expansion.” It was the Soviet Union’s intention, the national security adviser believed, “to extend its influence as far as possible. The near term Soviet objective in the Middle East is to destroy Western influence.”²⁴² The issue of the USSR presence had, to Kissinger’s mind, become “the heart of the problem.” As he said rather undiplomatically during a press conference on June 26, “We are trying to get a settlement in such a way that the moderate regimes are strengthened, and not the radical regimes. We are trying to expel the Soviet military presence, not so much the advisors, but the combat pilots and the combat personnel, before they become so firmly established.”²⁴³

The Kremlin leaders, of course, had no great interest in seeing their forces stationed in Egypt indefinitely, particularly once they had begun to take part in combat operations. Aside from the fact that such missions created the risk of a clash with the United States, Moscow had only agreed to intervene on a massive scale to prevent the collapse of its client. Once Nasser’s position had stabilized, there was no pressing need to keep Soviet forces in the area, especially

²⁴¹ The question of the extent to which the Soviets were complicit in the ceasefire violations is still not entirely clear. To be sure, USSR personnel were involved in moving SAMs into the standstill zone. There seems to have been some confusion on the Egyptian-Soviet side, however, as to how much time was allotted for additional movement of Cairo’s air defense units into the area prior to the ceasefire going into effect. In any case, the Israelis also violated the agreement’s provisions by fortifying their defensive positions along the Canal. And, as noted earlier, Moscow had genuinely hoped that the ceasefire would facilitate the recommencement of serious settlement negotiations.

²⁴² Editorial Note of Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, pp. 507, 508.

²⁴³ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 578-580. See also Telecon, July 10, 1970, KA03289, DNSA.

because their presence had begun to create tensions with the Egyptians.²⁴⁴ “I wish to make it clear,” Brezhnev reportedly told Nasser during his visit to Moscow in July, “that once the Middle East crisis is resolved, our advisers, experts and pilots will leave Egypt immediately, because we do not believe in occupying the territory of others.” The USSR, Kosygin reiterated in October, hoped that the Egyptians would accelerate their efforts to replace Soviet military experts, as the Kremlin did not want its troops involved if major hostilities recommenced.²⁴⁵

There existed, thus, the potential for a U.S.-Soviet bargain in the Middle East. With the Americans deeply anxious about the presence of USSR forces in the area and Moscow hopeful that its intervention in the War of Attrition could be used to create pressure for an Arab-Israeli settlement, there was an attractive opportunity for the superpowers to make a deal; in exchange for the withdrawal of Soviet military personnel from Egypt, the United States would be more forthcoming on the territorial question and finally agree to exercise its influence with Israel.

Thus, it is unsurprising that Kissinger repeatedly raised the issue with Dobrynin. The Soviet military presence in Egypt, he told the ambassador on June 10, was “a matter of the very gravest consequence which sooner or later would produce a major difficulty with the United States and could perhaps even lead to a confrontation.” Washington, therefore, had “no incentive at all in a settlement which would leave combat personnel in Egypt.” The Kremlin’s forces would need to be removed, he emphasized, if the United States and the Soviet Union were going to collaborate. The Americans, Kissinger added, required assurances that a balance of forces in the Middle East would be guaranteed as part of a final agreement. If Washington received such a

²⁴⁴ Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar*, pp. 212-213.

²⁴⁵ Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 147, 167-168. See also Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan*, p. 110; and Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar*, pp. 216-217.

promise: “[I]t would be easier for the U.S. government, despite all the domestic criticism and Israel’s objections, to proceed with a more detailed discussion.”²⁴⁶

The two men discussed the issue again on July 9. In response to Dobrynin’s assertion that the United States refused to spell out what it viewed as reasonable terms for a political settlement, Kissinger replied: “Do I understand then that if I tell you what we understand by a political settlement, you will tell me that you are prepared to withdraw your troops?” Moscow had to understand, he said, “that the introduction of Soviet combat personnel into Egypt represents serious problems for us, and the more permanent it appears, the more serious the problem grows.”²⁴⁷ Nixon and Kissinger, Dobrynin concluded, were less concerned with the specific details of a Middle East agreement than they were with what would happen after a settlement was reached, particularly with regard to the USSR military presence in Egypt.²⁴⁸

As a result of the administration’s continued queries on the issue, Moscow formalized its position. On July 27, Kosygin wrote Nixon that once a settlement had been reached, the USSR would be willing to discuss the matter of limiting arms shipments to the Middle East and to remove its forces from the region. “At that time,” he informed the president, “the question of ‘military presence’ in that area of the world by non-Mideastern countries could probably also be considered.” He added: “The Soviet side regards its contacts with the American side on the Middle East question as very important ones and sincerely wants these contacts to bring about concrete results in terms of a speediest achievement of a lasting and just peace in the Middle East.”²⁴⁹ Kissinger, as would be expected, was intrigued.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁶ Memcon, June 10, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 519; and Memcon, June 10, 1970, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 162.

²⁴⁷ Memcon, July 9, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, pp. 551, 553.

²⁴⁸ Memcon, July 9, 1970, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 178.

²⁴⁹ Message from Kosygin to Nixon, July 27, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 587.

²⁵⁰ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Soviet Note on the Middle East,” August 4, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, p. 586.

In short, powerful systemic forces were pushing the United States and the Soviet Union to cooperate on an Arab-Israeli settlement. In spite of the Nixon administration's misperception of Moscow's intentions in the Middle East and the White House's domestic political concerns, the danger inherent in the situation, which had increased considerably as a result of Operation *Kavkaz*, had created strong incentives for both sides to seek an agreement. The emergence of a bargaining scenario seemed to portend just such an outcome.

Conclusion

What stands out from this investigation is the tremendous inconsistency between the incentives for great power cooperation created by structural pressures at the international level and the eventual outcome. Both Washington and Moscow, the evidence overwhelmingly indicates, were desirous of an Arab-Israeli settlement, for their own regional interests and because the tensions generated by the conflict and by the nature of the alliance system in the Middle East had produced the possibility of a direct superpower clash over the issue. More fundamentally, the advancement of détente and the turn from a period of confrontation to an "era of negotiation" necessitated the termination of such dangerous local disputes. And because they were basically in agreement on the outlines of a deal, the Americans and Soviets seemed to have an opportunity. Yet, the result was intensified competition, rather than close collaboration.

In the final analysis, this outcome is primarily attributable to two factors. First, even though both Washington and Moscow seemed interested in ratcheting down the tensions that had strained their relationship since 1945, the legacy of the earlier period was not easily set aside. Despite their genuine efforts to elicit concessions from Nasser, U.S. decision-makers, especially Nixon and Kissinger, misperceived Moscow's difficulties as stemming from the Kremlin leadership's relative contentedness with the situation in the Middle East. Overcoming the

mistrust engendered by more than two decades of intense geopolitical rivalry was no easy task and, consequently, administration officials had trouble overcoming their suspicious views.

Second, Nixon's domestic concerns discouraged him from investing substantial political capital in an effort to resolve what he considered an exceptionally difficult problem. A major push for Middle East peace, which would have required the exertion of strong U.S. pressure on Israel, would have been difficult in any case, but the issue was made all the more complex by the opposition the president confronted at home over the Vietnam War. The White House would have needed to overcome resistance in Congress, neither chamber of which was controlled by the Republicans, as well as conduct a major campaign to build support with American public opinion. Doing so, Nixon's domestic consultants believed, would further complicate his already difficult task of managing the politics of his Vietnam strategy. Thus, even though Nixon was not dependent on the support of the American Jewish community, he nevertheless had to contend with major political constraints at home when formulating Middle East policy.

Even so, the power of structural forces could not be ignored indefinitely. Aside from the fact that in the face of continued Soviet willingness to cooperate the White House would have to adjust its assessment of USSR intentions, the perils posed by the Arab-Israeli dispute to international security would have to be addressed to protect U.S. interests. Moreover, it was not that Nixon was totally unwilling to suffer domestic political costs in order to secure an agreement; it was that he could only justify doing so in return for a proportionate payoff. The prospect of the removal of the Soviet military personnel from Egypt, whose presence had placed the United States and Israel in a dangerous predicament, offered just such a reward. And if U.S.-USSR relations could simultaneously develop in an overall positive direction, an additional systemic momentum might be generated for American-Soviet cooperation in the Middle East.

Chapter 3: Forced out of Egypt

[The president] [a]grees with my idea that we should... really charge ahead to accomplish something during [the] first half [of the] second term, our potentially most productive period.... In [the] meantime [we] should gear everything to [19]72, reelection and winning Congress.
—H.R. Haldeman¹

You know that the Russians showed restraint [in the Middle East]; that is why [Sadat] kicked them out.
—Henry Kissinger²

Even more so than when Nixon had first taken office, the structural setting that prevailed in the Middle East in late 1970 offered powerful strategic incentives for the superpowers to cooperate for an Arab-Israeli settlement. The Americans, of course, remained bitter about the ceasefire violations that had been committed during the summer, but they could not refuse to negotiate on that basis indefinitely. With Soviet forces now directly stationed in Egypt and the prospect of renewed fighting in the area, there was serious concern in both Washington and Moscow about the possibility of a direct confrontation. Thus, the Kremlin's offer to withdraw its military personnel as part of an agreement and thereby alleviate American anxiety over the agonizing choices it would face if another conflict erupted was bound to attract the White House's interest.

Moreover, two additional factors had now entered the equation. First, Anwar Sadat's succession of Nasser, who had suffered a fatal heart attack in September, lessened the problem of Egypt's negotiating inflexibility. Almost from the immediate start of his presidency, Sadat signaled his preparedness to accept a political solution to the Arabs' conflict with Israel and would prove far less recalcitrant than his predecessor had been. Second, although American-Soviet relations remained tense and their genuine improvement would require both more time and further instances of successful collaboration, the budding of a broader détente between the

¹ H.R. Haldeman Diary Entry, September 12, 1970, in H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), pp. 193-194.

² Memorandum of Conversation (Memcon), October 4, 1972, in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969-1976*, Vol. 15: *Soviet Union, June 1972-August 1974* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2011), p. 207.

superpowers provided a more favorable context for a joint approach in the Middle East. The memories of the intense rivalry that had characterized their postwar interactions could not, of course, be easily put aside, but misperception would be less of a barrier in such an environment.

There was, however, to be no settlement of the issue. Heading into the May 1972 summit in Moscow, the Arab-Israeli conflict remained arguably the most significant outstanding dispute between the superpowers—and the one most likely to involve them directly in a confrontation—but Washington and Moscow, despite holding frequent talks, were unable to resolve the matter. Even though an agreement would have removed a dangerous source of potential conflict and helped strengthen the positive trend in U.S.-USSR relations, the problem was left to fester.

If structural pressures were so advantageous, what explains this result? Both sides were clearly worried about the issue and held similar views on how to deal with it, so why was no progress made? How, given the superpowers' shared understanding that the Middle East dispute threatened the prospects for a more stable international security system, was the problem more or less ignored? Why, in short, were power political forces insufficient drivers of policy?

The Rise of Sadat and Moscow's Search for a Political Solution

Kremlin officials still hoped to reach a political settlement but they were not about to reduce their pressure on the United States, which they viewed as essential to sustain Nixon's interest in a jointly negotiated solution. The Americans, after all, remained deeply concerned about the potential consequences of another round of hostilities. "With the continued, substantial Soviet presence in [Egypt] and the US commitment to the survival of Israel," a May 1971 JCS study observed, "the danger of great power confrontation in the Middle East is clear."³ With this in

³ JCSM-206-71 Memo from Vice Director of the Joint Staff Mason Freeman to Laird, "Subject: The Suez Canal (U)," May 1, 1971, in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969-1976*, Vol. 24: *Middle East Region and Arabian Peninsula, 1969-1972; Jordan, September 1970* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2008), p. 101.

mind, USSR strategists continued to view their intervention as a crucial bargaining chip. It remained the “central objective of American policy in the Middle East,” Dobrynin wrote, “to weaken the influence of the Soviet Union in this region of the world and, above all else, to ‘eliminate’ [the] Soviet military presence there.” The ambassador, in response, advocated countering U.S. efforts through “the skillful and deliberate use of threatening various actions on our side in the military-political realm.” There was no need to resort to “radical measures,” but utilizing pressure was “a very effective means for influencing the White House.”⁴

Moscow, however, had no desire to keep its forces in Egypt indefinitely. Having achieved its objective of reestablishing a military balance to facilitate peace negotiations, the Kremlin no longer saw a compelling reason to maintain a direct presence in the Middle East, especially because doing so would inevitably lead to increased tensions with Cairo. Indeed, when combined with the arms race, the Soviet involvement in Egypt was “too much of a drain on them. [It caused] [t]oo many problems at home for a drain of [a] protracted period of time.”⁵

More importantly, so long as USSR troops remained in the area, the Soviet Union faced a heightened risk that it could become involved directly in a full-scale Arab-Israeli war, one that might escalate to the superpower level. Aside from the reality that “the situation of neither war nor peace fosters the development of extremist elements,” Moscow’s envoy to Israel, Yevgeni Primakov, told Meir, a continued stalemate would almost certainly lead to a recommencement of

⁴ Telegram from Dobrynin to the USSR Foreign Ministry, February 24, 1971, in United States Department of State, *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2007), p. 300. During a March 15 meeting with Kissinger, Dobrynin threatened subtly that because the situation was unstable, Moscow might have to take more assertive action. “The Soviet Union had been very patient [about the Middle East],” he said, “but if we did not move soon, they would have to do something.” See Memcon, March 15, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13: *Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), p. 407. See also Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Letter from Kosygin on Mid-East,” March 2, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 385-386. Dobrynin later wrote that he wished Moscow had done even more to take advantage of the Nixon administration’s evident concern over the Soviet Union’s military influence in the Middle East. See Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents, 1962-1986* (New York: Times, 1995), p. 222.

⁵ Quoted in Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 275.

hostilities. “I can tell you frankly,” he said, “that we have no wish to be drawn directly in such a conflict.”⁶ Upon hearing the news that Sadat had terminated the USSR military mission in July 1972, Anatoly Chernyaev, a senior analyst in the International Department of the Central Committee, even went so far as to write that it was “for the best—we will not be liable when he tries to wage war against Israel and gets smacked once again.”⁷ Sadat’s decision, he believed, was in the end “a good thing,” for the situation hitherto had been “dangerous for us!”⁸ The Kremlin, Dobrynin observed, “viewed the Middle East situation as extremely alarming.”⁹

Consequently, the Politburo was determined to avoid a Middle East war at all costs. “Our position,” Bulgarian Premier Todor Zhivkov reported after visits to Egypt and Syria, “is that the problems should be resolved by political means.” The Arabs, of course, needed to be prepared, but war “should be waged only when all the political means have been exhausted.” It was crucial, he added, that Cairo and Damascus for the moment had “almost agreed with the concept and the policy pursued by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact members, that first of all a political solution should be sought because the political means have not been exhausted yet. We have a broad range of means on our disposal and we have to use them before waging war.”¹⁰ In

⁶ Meeting between Soviet Academic and Envoy to Israel, Yevgeni Primakov and Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, August 30, 1971, Cold War International History Project (CWIHP), <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114295>, pp. 3-4.

⁷ Anatoly S. Chernyaev Diary Entry, July 22, 1972, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB379/1972%20as%20of%20May%2024,%202012%20FINAL.pdf>.

⁸ Chernyaev Diary Entry, August 11, 1972, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB379/1972%20as%20of%20May%2024,%202012%20FINAL.pdf>. See also Mahmoud Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East* (London: Quartet, 1981), pp. 232-233; and Alexei Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East: From Messianism to Pragmatism* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1993), p. 92.

⁹ Quoted in Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 276.

¹⁰ Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the Bulgarian Central Committee, the State Council, and the Council of Ministers, on the Situation in the Middle East, 1972, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113430>.

any case, Moscow told its clients, Israel would surely defeat the Arabs militarily, and any conflict “could also lead to a confrontation between the Soviets and the Americans.”¹¹

With this in mind, top USSR decision-makers consistently refused to provide their clients with the weaponry necessary to liberate their occupied territories. True, the Soviets continued to deliver significant quantities of surface-to-air missiles to Egypt, to the point where Cairo enjoyed an air defense capability more sophisticated even than that possessed by North Vietnam. Yet as Saad el-Shazly, whose job it was to oversee preparations for a successful crossing of the Suez Canal, later recollected, the Egyptians remained completely outgunned in the air. In addition, Moscow denied Egypt’s requests for mobile SAM-6s which, when combined with its ground inferiority, meant Cairo possessed the wherewithal only for static defense or, at best, a quite limited offensive operation. For the Egyptians to have attempted even a restricted campaign to seize the strategic Gidi and Mitla passes, therefore, would have been “tantamount to suicide.”¹²

¹¹ Remarks by Russian Theoreticians and Politicians on the Draft Programme of the Syrian Communist Party (Excerpts on Palestine), May 1971, in “The Soviet Attitude to the Palestine Problem: From the Records of the Syrian Communist Party, 1971-72,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1972), p. 188.

¹² Saad el-Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez* (San Francisco, CA: American Mideast Research 1980), pp. 18-29, 31, 36-37. Sadat’s visit to Moscow in March, the purpose of which had been to obtain offensive weaponry, was a complete failure, as the Kremlin refused his requests for MiG-23 aircraft and bridging equipment, which would have facilitated a canal crossing operation. The meager four planes that the Soviets did promise, moreover, were to be kept strictly under USSR command; those armaments which were approved for delivery were, in the end, significantly delayed; and the Politburo subsequently withdrew most of its SAM operators from the Canal zone. In part because he had been denied offensive military assistance, Sadat decided to launch his February peace initiative and to extend the ceasefire, rather than recommence with hostilities. See Notes of the Discussion between President Tito and President Sadat, February 5, 1972, CWIHP, <http://www.digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112297>; Anwar el-Sadat, *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 219-221, 279; Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 190-191; Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Arab World* (London: William Collins Sons, 1978), pp. 219-224; Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan* (New York: Quadrangle, 1975), pp. 116-118; Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile: The Soviet-Egyptian Influence Relationship since the June War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 138-139; Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War II to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 77-78; Jon D. Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs: The Soviet Union and War in the Middle East* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 87-88; and Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East*, pp. 88-89. On Moscow’s denial of offensive arms to Egypt throughout this period, see also Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 178-180, 183-185, 207; George W. Breslauer, “Soviet Policy in the Middle East, 1967-1972: Unalterable Antagonism or Collaborative Competition?” in Alexander L. George, ed., *Managing U.S.-Soviet Rivalry: Problems of Crisis Prevention* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1983), pp. 90-91; and Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 63.

Even the vaunted arms deal Sadat struck with the Soviets in October 1971 proved to be of little consequence. The USSR ultimately failed to deliver most of what it had promised and actually diverted equipment and advisers from Egypt when fighting broke out between India and Pakistan in December. Frustrated, Sadat later complained to Tito that Moscow was dragging its feet on arms deliveries, leaving Cairo with pontoon bridges of World War II vintage. The reason for this policy was simple; Brezhnev had been “personally responsible” for the delays, as “he did not want anything to happen in the Middle East prior to Nixon’s visit to the Soviet Union.”¹³

The Kremlin’s restrained arms assistance posture was bound to strain critically its relations with the Arabs, especially Egypt. To ensure that his diplomatic initiatives were taken seriously in Washington and Jerusalem, Sadat felt that he needed to be able to point to a credible military option. And because neither the Americans nor the Israelis had shown any inclination to negotiate on a realistic basis, Cairo was coming to the conclusion that it would soon have to go to war. Indeed, Sadat began proclaiming publicly that 1971 would be “a decisive year.”¹⁴ Given this fundamental strategic disjuncture, so long as the Soviets continued to withhold offensive military assistance, increased tensions in USSR-Egyptian relations could not be avoided.¹⁵

While such friction would have been a cause for concern on its own, the situation was considerably more alarming for Moscow because Sadat had quickly shown himself to be far less loyal than Nasser. The new Egyptian leader made it clear from the outset that he intended to bring more balance to Cairo’s foreign policy. During Nasser’s funeral service, Sadat had asked

¹³ Notes of the Discussion between President Tito and President Sadat, February 5, 1972. See also Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez*, pp. 29, 112-114, 117, 126-129, 310 n. 3; Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, pp. 212, 226-227, 286-287; Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar*, p. 233-235, 237-238; Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 210, 215-218, 227; Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile*, pp. 157-163; Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, pp. 78-79; and Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, pp. 91-93.

¹⁴ Sadat’s Address to the Officers of the Naval Forces, June 22, 1971, Presidential Speeches, Anwar Sadat Archives, <http://www.sadat.umd.edu/archives/speeches/BACI%20Speech%20to%20Naval%20Officers%206.22.71.PDF>. See also Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, p. 210.

¹⁵ Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez*, pp. 100-102; and Ismail Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 5-9, 14-16.

Richardson, who had been designated as the U.S. envoy, to inform Nixon that he regretted the state of American-Egyptian relations.¹⁶ “You would be mistaken,” Sadat subsequently wrote the president, “to think that we are in the sphere of Soviet influence: we are not within the Soviet sphere of influence nor, for that matter, anybody’s sphere of influence.”¹⁷

For the Politburo, of course, Sadat’s evident determination to establish a closer connection with the United States was a disquieting development. Having invested heavily in Egypt, which remained the cornerstone of their strategic position in the Middle East, the prospect that Nasser’s death could lead to its loss to Washington was a source of serious anxiety for the Soviets. As early as October 26, Gromyko had reported that it was obvious that the Americans were seeking to take advantage of the change of leadership in Cairo to bring about “a reversal of [Egyptian] policy in favor of the West.”¹⁸ Thus, Sadat’s coming to power intensified greatly the Kremlin’s interest in reaching a negotiated settlement, for Moscow understood that if it proved incapable of achieving its client’s political desiderata, Cairo could turn to the United States.

The most influential element affecting Soviet Arab-Israeli strategy, however, was the importance the Kremlin attached to cultivating an improved relationship with Washington. By early 1971, the goal of forging a real *détente* with the Americans had emerged as Moscow’s foremost foreign policy objective.¹⁹ A Middle East war would undoubtedly engender serious tension in USSR-U.S. relations and thereby jeopardize this overriding goal. And because they

¹⁶ David A. Korn, *Stalemate: The War of Attrition and Great Power Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1967-1970* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992), pp. 271-272; and Richardson Interview, in Episode 2 of *The Fifty Years War: Israel and the Arabs* (New York: Public Broadcasting Service, 1998), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFNyG-ipMsY>, at 3:00-3:33.

¹⁷ Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, p. 278.

¹⁸ Telegram from Gromyko to the USSR Foreign Ministry, October 26, 1970, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 212. See also Craig Daigle, *The Limits of Détente: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 159-160.

¹⁹ Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 192-226, 339-341.

could not meet the Arabs' demands for arms assistance without risking such an outcome, only a political solution could secure the Soviet Union's interests.

A combination of powerful forces, then, was pushing the USSR leadership to seek an accommodation with the United States. As a result, the Politburo accelerated its efforts to convince the Nixon administration to accept the sort of deal that Kissinger and Dobrynin had begun discussing during the summer. The installment of USSR military advisers in Egypt, the Soviet ambassador told Rogers on March 26, had been undertaken at Nasser's request. "If a solution is achieved," Dobrynin therefore asked, "what need would there be for [our] personnel to stay?"²⁰ And the Soviets hoped to reach an agreement quickly, before the pressure that their military presence in Egypt had placed on the United States became a rapidly wasting asset.

Driving a Wedge: The Suez Canal Negotiations and the Soviet Military Presence

Due to the major strategic dilemmas that the existence of a substantial number of USSR forces in the Middle East had created for them, U.S. officials remained extremely interested in this bargaining scenario. To be sure, the administration was slow to react to Sadat's overtures. Aside from the Americans' frustration over the ceasefire violations, it was uncertain how long the new Egyptian leader would be in power. While Sadat was Nasser's constitutional successor, Saunders had written Kissinger on September 28, there was sure to be further jockeying for position. It was probable, he had added, that "some other military leader would eventually assume the real power since it seems unlikely that a purely civilian leader alone could consolidate control."²¹

²⁰ Telegram from the Department of State to the White House, March 27, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 459.

²¹ Editorial Note on Memo from Saunders to Kissinger, September 28, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 554. See also Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), pp. 1276-1277; Kissinger Interview, in Episode 2 of *The Fifty Years War*, at 8:38-8:51; and William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 453 n. 91.

Nixon's doubts regarding the Soviets' intentions in the Middle East, moreover, had been strengthened due to his perception of USSR policy during the crisis in Jordan and because of the ceasefire violations. The president questioned during a meeting with Tito whether Moscow was "honestly interested in establishing peace in the Middle East. Does he not think," Nixon asked, "that it is more correct to suppose that they are more interested in maintaining their positions in the Arab states, and that these positions are stronger in the messy situation in which Arab states depend on Soviet help?"²² In the president's opinion, it seemed probable that the Kremlin was "less concerned with peace than with maximum support for the new Egyptian leaders."²³

But Sadat's February initiative for an interim agreement, which would involve an extension of the ceasefire and an Israeli pullback from the Suez Canal, coupled with his stated willingness to accept a peace treaty with Jerusalem in exchange for a full withdrawal, got Washington's attention. The proposal, Sisco remarked, was "very good and positive. That's the first time I've ever said that. It meets the principal Israeli private and public conditions that the Egyptians are directly responsive to whether they are or are not willing to make a peace agreement and it gets into specifics for the first time in a clear cut way." Jerusalem, he said, now had "to face the tough decisions."²⁴ "The moment of truth," he commented at a Senior Review Group (SRG) meeting, "has arrived."²⁵ Indeed, State Department officials felt that the time had

²² Report on the Conversation between Tito and Nixon in Belgrade, September 30, 1970, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111644>.

²³ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, "Subject: Soviet Private Note on Middle East Violations," October 15, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 35 n. 14. For further evidence of the administration's mistrust of USSR intentions in the Middle East, see Memo from Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger, "Subject: Soviet Foreign Policy and the 24th Party Congress," March 24, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 447; and NIE 11-72, "Soviet Foreign Policies and the Outlook for Soviet-American Relations," April 20, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14: *Soviet Union, October 1971-May 1972* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2006), p. 472.

²⁴ Telephone Conversation (Telecon), February 17, 1971, Kissinger Telephone Conversations (KA) 04937, Digital National Security Archive (DNSA). See also Telecon, February 8, 1971, KA04892, DNSA.

²⁵ Minutes of a Senior Review Group (SRG) Meeting, "Subject: Middle East, Chile," February 25, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1969-1972* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2015), p. 751.

now come to force a confrontation with Israel, and devised a strategy for doing so, which entailed exerting pressure on Israel to accept a slightly modified version of the Rogers Plan.²⁶

And Nixon basically agreed that the United States would now have to take a more forceful line with Jerusalem. In response to Rogers's assertions that Sadat had "accepted all that Israel has said it wants" and that the Meir government "would have been delighted" if Egypt had proposed such terms in 1967, the president asked with evident frustration: "What do [the Israelis] want? We have provided the aircraft and the financial assistance. What more are they asking for?" The White House had given Jerusalem strong support, "But if any Israeli leader feels that Israel by taking advantage of internal U.S. politics can have both arms and that kind of support from the U.S. and then refuse to act—even to discuss—then he is mistaken." After all, he added, the United States had only agreed to vote for Resolution 242 in the first place because Israel had assured American officials that it would withdraw to the prewar border with Egypt.²⁷

The factor of the Soviet military presence, however, remained uppermost in the minds of White House officials.²⁸ As early as January 21, the Americans had informed Sadat that although they appreciated his desire to improve U.S.-Egyptian relations, as a global power: "[T]he United States cannot ignore what the Soviets do, anywhere in the world."²⁹ "[The Soviets have] got to quit messing around over there," Nixon stressed at the February 26 NSC meeting. "That has to be part of the deal."³⁰ The administration, a March 2 NSC strategy paper observed, needed to

²⁶ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, "Subject: State Department Game Plan on the Middle East," March 9, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 783-787. Kissinger recalls that the State Department was hoping to "impose" an agreement during this period. See Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1279.

²⁷ Memcon of an NSC Meeting, "Subject: National Security Council Meeting—The Middle East," February 26, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 759-761 (emphasis in original).

²⁸ Historian Craig Daigle first highlighted the centrality of this factor to U.S. strategy in an important article. See Daigle, "The Russians Are Going: Sadat, Nixon and the Soviet Presence in Egypt, 1970-1971," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2004), pp. 1-15.

²⁹ Telegram from the Department of State to the Interests Section Egypt, January 21, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 705.

³⁰ Quoted in Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 167.

devise a plan for how to address the twin issues of inducing Israeli negotiating flexibility and convincing Moscow to withdraw its military forces from Egypt. The problems were, of course, related, as the removal of USSR personnel was “essential to a settlement.... The fact remains that the Soviet combat presence in the area is still the issue of paramount concern to us.”³¹

The initial negotiations for an interim Suez Canal agreement were for the United States, thus, basically a time-buying exercise. Nixon was not yet ready for a major diplomatic push in the Middle East, primarily because such an effort would inevitably involve a bruising confrontation with Israel, but given Sadat’s initiative, he did not believe that the United States could afford to do nothing. Although it was perhaps “too delicate a juncture” to raise the factor of the USSR military presence, Kissinger’s assistant, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, pointed out, it was undeniable that the Meir government’s wholly inadequate response to Cairo’s offer had led to Washington appearing as an obstacle to progress.³² Pursuing the interim track would help alleviate this problem by ostensibly showing U.S. responsiveness, and hopefully decrease the probability that fighting would recommence in the Middle East.³³

The White House’s real focus with respect to the Middle East, then, was the Soviet angle. There was no reason, Nixon and Kissinger felt, for the United States to have a showdown with the Israelis unless it could first get something in return from Moscow. For the moment, Kissinger told the president on March 6, the administration would concentrate on a partial deal, but it could simultaneously “move some of the general solutions into a private channel and give the Russians

³¹ Paper Prepared by the NSC Staff, “Options in Breaking the Impasse,” March 2, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 775, 778-779. See also Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, March 9, 1971, p. 787.

³² Memo from Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger, “Subject: Comments on the Soviet Middle East Statements,” March 2, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 387-388.

³³ U.S. officials discounted the possibility that the stalemate could lead to another war in the imminent future, even though the formal ceasefire agreement had expired in early March. See Haldeman Diary Entry, April 22, 1971, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, pp. 277-278. Nevertheless, one of the purposes of exploring such an arrangement was, in Kissinger’s words, “to stabilize the Suez front and reduce the possibility of resumed conflict,” which would “thereby buy time for a prolonged process of reaching an overall settlement.” See Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: State of Play in Middle East,” June 21, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 876.

an added incentive for a Summit.”³⁴ The two men agreed to prevent Rogers and Sisco from precipitating “a brutal public confrontation with Israel” because Washington would “pay a price for nothing.”³⁵ Dobrynin had “been on his knees with me for things like this,” Kissinger reiterated to Haldeman, and it would therefore be foolish to press Jerusalem right away.³⁶

And it is clear that getting the Soviets to agree to withdraw their military forces from Egypt was the White House’s main objective. “[T]he smart way to do it,” Nixon and Kissinger had agreed on February 28, “would be to get [Israeli concessions for an interim agreement] and then to see whether we can broker it with Dobrynin and get something from the Russians for it too.... Because if we could get the Russians to withdraw their troops.”³⁷ The interim arrangement, Kissinger explained to Minister Yigal Allon, was merely “a vehicle for buying time.” Nixon, the national security adviser said, “had no special affection for the Jews,” but he possessed “an exceptionally keen perception of [the] U.S. national interest and, above all, did not want the Soviets in the Middle East.”³⁸ Given the White House’s current priorities, Nixon and Kissinger agreed on April 20, nothing more than a limited Suez deal could be achieved. But whenever the president was “ready to have the deal with the Soviets,” the latter said: “I think we have a good crack at getting the Israelis to be much more flexible with us.”³⁹ Thus, even though Nixon permitted Rogers to visit the Middle East to explore the possibility of an interim

³⁴ Telecon, March 6, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 394-395.

³⁵ Telecon, February 28, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 769. See also Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, March 9, 1971, pp. 783-785.

³⁶ Telecon, undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 380 n. 3. See also Telecon, undated, pp. 380-381 n. 4; Editorial Note, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 390-391; and Haldeman Diary Entry, March 11, 1971, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 256.

³⁷ Telecon, undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 381. Kissinger did not finish his thought but the implication is clear.

³⁸ Memcon, April 20, 1971, Kissinger Transcripts Collection (KT) 00264, DNSA. See also Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, June 12, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 762-763, 767.

³⁹ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, April 20, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 814.

arrangement, he refused to empower his secretary of state to pressure the Meir government to accept such a deal. The visit, in other words, was designed to be essentially a charade.⁴⁰

What Rogers heard from Sadat during his visit, however, led to a shift in Nixon's thinking, for the Egyptian president indicated clearly that he hoped to move closer to Washington. "I don't like the fact that we have to depend on the Soviet Union as much as we do," Sadat had said. "I am a nationalist.... I don't want to have to depend on anyone else. And, the only reason I have is because we were humiliated and I had no place to turn." He had undertaken his February initiative, he stressed, because he wanted "to become much closer with the West.... There's no reason why the Arabs should be closer aligned to the Soviet Union.... My people like the West better." Sadat believed that only the United States could deliver Israeli concessions and offered to reestablish diplomatic relations with Washington if a Suez Canal agreement could be achieved. Egypt, he said, did not "want to bother Israel. I've made my decision. I'll live with them in peace. I'll sign an agreement.... I just want my land back."⁴¹

More importantly, Sadat had made the Americans a seemingly irresistible offer. The Egyptian leader, Rogers reported to Nixon on May 19, had "a hell of a situation there. He's spending his money on his arms. He knows his people can't operate them; can't fly the damn airplanes. He's surrounded with Russians—he doesn't like that very much." The USSR military presence, Rogers had explained to Sadat, was a "complicating factor" for Washington. If Soviet

⁴⁰ The fact that Nixon was not backing Rogers was so obvious that on April 25 the secretary of state was actually forced to ask directly for more public support from the president. Without such assistance, he told Haldeman, the Israelis would simply repeat their standard line: "Yes, we know what you think, Mr. Rogers, but we also know what the White House really thinks about this." See Haldeman Diary Entry, April 25, 1971, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 279. Moreover, Kissinger had sabotaged any hope that Rogers might have had of succeeding by encouraging the Meir government to maintain an intransigent line during his visit. The Israelis would only have to make concessions for an interim deal, he stressed, when Nixon personally intervened in the diplomacy, which would allow the president to reap the political credit for a successful negotiation. See Memcon, April 20, 1971, KT00264, DNSA; Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, April 20, 1971, p. 811; and Editorial Note of Israeli Memcon, April 20, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 814-820.

⁴¹ Editorial Note of Conversation between Nixon and Rogers, May 10, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 829, 831.

forces were withdrawn, the secretary of state had said, the United States could pursue a more balanced line: “We have to supply Israel with arms as long as you’ve got a large number of Russian troops in your country. On the other hand, once that is not the case... it’s a different ballgame.” With this in mind, Sadat had pledged that if the United States could broker an interim arrangement that would allow him to reopen the Suez Canal, he would move to terminate the USSR military presence in Egypt within six months. In Rogers’s view, such a deal would represent “a breakthrough... that will have tremendous importance.”⁴² “If we could pull it off,” the secretary of state said, “it will be a step toward peace that no one thought was possible.”⁴³

Sadat, moreover, had taken tangible steps to demonstrate his earnestness about the matter. Even before Rogers arrived in Cairo, the new Egyptian leader had moved against Vice President Ali Sabri, who was known to be close to Moscow. “Taken as a whole,” the representative of the U.S. Interests Section in Cairo had written on May 3, “this is a victory for the ‘good guys’ in Egypt.”⁴⁴ When Sadat then took further steps to consolidate his position later in the month, his determination to bring more balance to Egypt’s relations with the superpowers seemed clear. As Kissinger noted, it must have been “disquieting” for the Kremlin to have invested so heavily “in a country whose ultimate direction you can’t be sure of... You don’t fire 10 cabinet members and arrest half of them as a stage play.”⁴⁵ The USSR, Kissinger’s aides argued in what he considered a “*1st class*” memorandum, had “undoubtedly suffered a setback,” and was rightly worried about its position in Egypt because of the internal shakeup.⁴⁶

⁴² Editorial Note of Conversation between Nixon and Rogers, May 19, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 831-833.

⁴³ Editorial Note of Conversation between Nixon and Rogers, May 19, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 710.

⁴⁴ Telegram from the Interests Section in Egypt to the Department of State, May 9, 1971, p. 851 n. 7.

⁴⁵ Telecon, May 18, 1971, KA05698, DNSA. See also Editorial Note of Memo from Rogers to Nixon, May 16, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 708.

⁴⁶ Memo from Hyland and Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger, “Subject: Some Thoughts on Soviet Policy,” June 4, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 736 n. 1, 740 (emphasis in original). Sadat’s help in reversing a pro-Communist coup in Sudan in July also signaled his increasing frustration with Moscow. See Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-*

Sensing an opportunity, Nixon felt that a major effort with the Israelis now made strategic sense. The president refused, as he put it, to “play the Jewish game,” especially because he believed that “all they’re trying to do is string us along until the elections next year when they hope to replace us.”⁴⁷ The Israelis, he complained, were “just sitting tight, not doing a damn thing,” which left the United States isolated from its allies as Jerusalem’s only source of international support. “We’ve got to pressure [them],” Nixon told Haldeman and his assistant John Ehrlichman, “and we’re going to.” The Meir government expected the administration to continue providing U.S. military and economic assistance but would then “not do a goddamn thing about opening Suez or anything else. They’re not going to get it.”⁴⁸ Jerusalem, he wrote Rogers on May 26, had “diddled us along through the 1970 election and now are planning to follow the same tactics through the 1972 elections.” And because Sadat had shown an inclination to distance himself from Moscow, it was “essential that no more aid programs for Israel be approved until they agree to some kind of interim action on Suez or some other issue.” When the time was “ripe,” the president added: “I may be able to be the ‘persuader’ in getting Israel to accept what is a reasonable settlement and one which is in the interest of the United States.”⁴⁹

The White House, then, was in effect targeting the Soviet Union’s position in the Middle East. The United States, a paper prepared for the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended, needed to use a deal to reopen the Suez Canal “as a lever in seeking [Egyptian] agreement to reduce the Soviet presence in [Egypt].” Washington, it claimed, would benefit from “an understanding for a

Israeli Conflict: Making America’s Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 206-207.

⁴⁷ Haldeman Diary Entry, May 17, 1971, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 287.

⁴⁸ Conversation among Nixon, Ehrlichman, and Haldeman, May 10, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 853, 854.

⁴⁹ Memo from Nixon to Rogers, May 26, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 857-859. For evidence that the White House had been concerned about how Middle East policy would impact the 1970 midterm elections, see Editorial Note of Telecon, October 21, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 114; and Memcon, October 22, 1970, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 228.

significant reduction of Soviet military presence within [Egypt] in return for US support for a canal reopening.”⁵⁰ If they moved aggressively, Nixon and Rogers believed that they might be able to manage a key shift in the structure of power relationships in the Middle East. Given Egypt’s importance as the leading state of the Arab world and Nixon’s suspicion of the USSR, Sadat’s offer to deal bilaterally with Washington had simply been too enticing for the president to ignore. And that, from the Kremlin’s perspective, was deeply unnerving.

“A Hell of a Concession”

By mid-1971, the Soviets had grown both increasingly frustrated and anxious about U.S. moves in the Middle East. To be sure, U.S. officials had implied that American-Soviet negotiations for an overall Arab-Israeli agreement would inevitably have to be resumed. Although the White House could not sign on to a “formal agreement,” Kissinger had told Dobrynin on May 13, it sought a “mutual understanding” with Moscow. Nixon, the Soviet ambassador was made to understand, cared mainly about “the strategic disposition of forces between the USSR and the U.S. throughout the world, and also—and this is a key point—of the need for a settlement in that important region without drastically disrupting both great powers’ de facto positions there and the overall balance in that area of the globe.”⁵¹ While a final agreement could not be in the strict sense of the word “imposed,” it had always been the U.S. view “that a settlement in the Middle East would sooner or later have to be worked out with the Soviet Union.”⁵²

Washington, however, had done little to respond to Sadat’s February initiative and, subsequently, set out to negotiate an interim Suez Canal deal on its own. As early as December 22, Dobrynin had complained to Kissinger that even though Moscow had successfully pushed

⁵⁰ Memo from Freeman to Laird, May 1, 1971, pp. 101, 102.

⁵¹ Memcon, May 13, 1971, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 358.

⁵² Memcon, March 22, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 428. See also Memcon, December 22, 1970, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 247.

Nasser to make important concessions, the Americans had simply pocketed them and then “decided to go unilateral.”⁵³ The White House, the ambassador noted, was providing only “evasive responses” about the Middle East, and seemed to “not [be] in a hurry” to deal with the problem.⁵⁴ Moscow had, according to a delegation that included Senator Edmund Muskie and Ambassador W. Averell Harriman, grown “negative and even bitter” about the matter. The Kremlin, Harriman said, felt that it had “twisted the Egyptian arm to good effect and wanted the United States to do the same with Israel.”⁵⁵ Consequently, Dobrynin informed Kissinger that Rogers’s visit to Cairo had been “taken very badly in the Soviet Union.” Moscow, he said, was “completely baffled” by U.S. Middle East policy and, the ambassador warned, could always work to obstruct progress in the region if Washington left the Soviets no other choice.⁵⁶

More importantly, Moscow was well aware of what the Nixon administration was up to in its dealings with Sadat. By April, one Soviet diplomat recalls, the Kremlin had grown quite worried about its Cairo connection, as USSR representatives had begun to detect “a certain frostiness” during meetings with their Egyptian counterparts.⁵⁷ More significantly, the Soviets had eavesdropped on Sadat’s conversations with Rogers and therefore were privy to the fact that the Americans were endeavoring to undermine their position in the Egypt.⁵⁸ As Kissinger observed, Moscow had “interpreted the active US diplomacy as an effort to displace them in

⁵³ Memcon, December 22, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 231.

⁵⁴ Memcon, January 28, 1971, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 278. See also Telegram from Dobrynin to the USSR Foreign Ministry, February 14, 1971, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 294.

⁵⁵ Memcon, “Subject: Senator Muskie’s Trip Report,” January 19, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 300, 301.

⁵⁶ Memcon, June 8, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 749-750. See also Memcon, April 23, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 551.

⁵⁷ Victor Israelyan, *On the Battlefields of the Cold War: A Soviet Ambassador’s Confession* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), p. 168. See also Jonathan Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 271.

⁵⁸ Boaz Vanetik and Zaki Shalom, *The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Peace Process, 1969-1973: From the Rogers Plan to the Outbreak of the Yom Kippur War* (Chicago: Academic Sussex Press, 2013), p. 165. See also Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan*, p. 118; and Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar*, p. 226.

Cairo.”⁵⁹ The USSR, U.S. officials learned, was “putting heavy pressure on [the] Egyptians to get [the] interim settlement [negotiations] out of [an] exclusive American context.”⁶⁰ And given their continued refusal to provide Sadat with arms, the Soviets faced a real dilemma.

It is within this context that the signing of the USSR-Egyptian Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in late May must be understood. Although the 15-year pact appeared on the face of it to demonstrate the vitality of Moscow’s relations with Cairo, in reality the reverse was true. Alarmed by Sadat’s advances toward the Americans and perhaps even more so by his dismissal of Sabri, Moscow had sent Podgorny to the Egyptian capital to attempt to arrest the decline of USSR influence with its most important Middle East client. Unwilling to risk the outbreak of another war in the region, and loath to watch passively the squandering of their investment in Egypt, the Kremlin leaders hoped that gaining Sadat’s signature on the treaty would simultaneously avoid a resumption of hostilities and reinforce their position with Cairo. The treaty, however, was essentially inconsequential in political terms.⁶¹

Of equal importance, the agreement was meant to signal to the Nixon administration that the Politburo would not permit Washington to exclude it from the peace process. Contrary to one scholar’s claim that the treaty “demonstrated that Moscow would accept the risks of polarizing the Middle East at the possible expense of détente with the United States,” the Soviets were

⁵⁹ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, June 23, 1971, p. 878.

⁶⁰ Telegram from the Department of State to the U.S. Interests Section in Egypt, May 27, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 859 n. 2.

⁶¹ For the text of the treaty, see “Text of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation Signed by Soviet and Egypt,” May 28, 1971, *New York Times*, p. 2. See also Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 204-205. Sadat had agreed to sign in part because he was led to believe that he would, in return, receive a shipment of supersonic bombers and an accelerated delivery schedule of key military items. These pledges, however, were not kept. See Notes of the Discussion between Tito and Sadat, February 5, 1972; Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, pp. 225, 283-284; Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, p. 89; Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 167; and Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan*, p. 138. On the treaty’s essential insignificance, see Representative Lee Hamilton’s Remarks, “Egyptian-Soviet Friendship Treaty,” June 2, 1971, Addresses to Congress and Remarks by Members of Congress, Sadat Archives, <http://www.sadat.umd.edu/archives/addresses/Soviet%20Friendship%20Treaty.pdf>; and Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, p. 78.

simply communicating to the Americans that they would insist on playing a role in the negotiation of a final settlement.⁶² As Sisco understood: “[The] Russians want to be in if there is any settlement. The Russians are saying to us that nothing will happen unless we get in.”⁶³

The Politburo leaders, however, knew that the treaty was, at best, a stopgap measure. To achieve its main objective in the Middle East, namely, the consolidation of its interests via a settlement negotiated with the Americans, Moscow would need to do something dramatic.

Consequently, Brezhnev directed Gromyko to present the White House with a proposal of far-reaching significance when he visited Washington in September. In a private meeting with Nixon, the foreign minister stated that if the superpowers could agree on a full Israeli withdrawal, Moscow would impose a total arms embargo on its Arab clients. More importantly, Gromyko offered the Americans the concession that mattered most to them. The Soviets, he said, were prepared to withdraw their military personnel and keep only a “limited, and maybe very limited” number in place, for “purely advisory purposes.” For good measure, the Soviet Union would accept whatever security guarantees Israel and the United States found suitable and could implement such an accord in phases.⁶⁴ In effect, Moscow had accepted the Rogers Plan.⁶⁵

The White House greeted the receipt of Brezhnev’s proposal with noticeable enthusiasm. Contrary to what Kissinger claims in his memoir, the Americans were elated with the Soviet framework.⁶⁶ Indeed, Nixon believed that the Soviet offer seemed to him “a hell of a concession.” The proposal, Kissinger agreed, was “a tremendous step.” It would, Nixon stressed,

⁶² Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 184.

⁶³ Editorial Note of Telecon, May 28, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 711. Rogers correctly intuited that the treaty represented a manifestation of Moscow’s weakening influence with Egypt, whereas Kissinger drew the opposite conclusion. See Editorial Note, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 863-864; and Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1280, 1284-1285.

⁶⁴ Conversation between Nixon and Gromyko, September 29, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 1051-1055.

⁶⁵ Korn, *Stalemate*, p. 274. The USSR made no demands regarding Israel’s nuclear program, which, by this time, had been exposed. See Hedrick Smith, “U.S. Assumes the Israelis Have A-Bomb or Its Parts,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1970, p. 1. Moscow, evidently, was prepared to accept tacitly Israel’s status as a nuclear-armed state.

⁶⁶ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1288-1289.

be the Israelis who would be “the tough ones,” certainly “a hell of a lot tougher than the Russians,” which meant that Rabin would need to be told that the Soviet package represented “a hell of a deal.”⁶⁷ Gromyko’s attitude, the president reiterated on October 1, had “turned 180 degrees.” The Soviet proposal, Kissinger concurred, was “a major concession” and “really the biggest steps forward in the [Middle East] that have been made in your administration.” The Soviet Union, he said, was now “offering what you asked for.”⁶⁸ Because the Middle East might now be resolved and an arms control agreement reached, he added: “This is going to go down as the outstanding period of foreign policy.”⁶⁹

Thus, everything necessary for the superpowers to cooperate in the Middle East finally seemed to have fallen into place. Anxious to prevent an explosion in the region that would imperil its détente policy and worried about its position in Egypt, Moscow had tabled a proposal that had clearly intrigued the Americans. To be sure, a U.S.-Israeli confrontation would be necessary to implement the plan. Nevertheless, there was little in Brezhnev’s offer to which the United States could object. As Nixon and Rogers had told Gromyko, the administration “agree[d] with the Arab position pretty much. We lean way over in that direction.” Other than “insubstantial rectifications,” Washington supported the prewar lines.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, September 30, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 1060, 1065.

⁶⁸ Telecon, October 1, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 1079.

⁶⁹ Telecon, October 2, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 1088. Daigle terms the proposal Gromyko presented “generous” and acknowledges that it went well beyond what the USSR had offered in 1969 but nevertheless argues that it was “far from perfect” because it did not include a provision for Egyptian recognition of Israel. See Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, pp. 198, 201. The Soviets, however, had indicated repeatedly that if the territorial question could be resolved, nothing else would stand in the way of a deal. Moreover, Sadat had more or less already declared publicly in February that Egypt was willing to make this concession and, in any case, even the Americans at this point did not demand fully normalized relations from the Arabs as the price for Israeli withdrawal.

⁷⁰ Memo for the President’s File, “Subject: President Nixon’s Meeting with USSR Foreign Minister Gromyko on September 29, 1971 from 3:00 p.m. to 4:40 p.m. in the Oval Office of the White House,” September 29, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 1040 n. 8.

Why, then, was no deal struck? With the announcement in October that Nixon would visit Moscow, superpower relations appeared to have turned a corner. Given the significance of the Middle East dispute, how was the problem not addressed?

The Shadow of November: Nixon's Reelection Problem

It had taken a major gesture on Moscow's part to lessen Nixon's suspicion of Soviet intentions in the Middle East. What Gromyko had presented had greatly assuaged many of the president's earlier doubts. The potential obstacle to cooperation raised by misperception had not, of course, been eliminated entirely, but the problem had been reduced to more manageable dimensions.

In addition, the White House had grown increasingly concerned about the possibility of another war in the region, which, one would think, would have deepened Washington's interest in a settlement. To be sure, U.S. strategists hoped that Moscow would continue to restrain its clients. If the administration succeeded in persuading the USSR to agree to a meeting with Nixon, Kissinger argued, the United States would be in "great shape. Because if the summit is coming up... we know there won't be a Middle East blowup before then, because they'll sit on the Egyptians."⁷¹ Still, Nixon acknowledged, the superpowers might not be able to control their respective "constituents," a factor which made "the situation very explosive."⁷² And if Moscow wanted to, the president believed, it could "raise hell in the Middle East."⁷³ Indeed, the White House's anxiety about this possibility was one of the main reasons for its tough policy during the December conflict between India and Pakistan. "[H]aving acquiesced, if not encouraged, the war in the subcontinent," a December 22 memorandum Kissinger forwarded to Nixon asserted, "the Soviets will find that they cannot very effectively argue against the use of force in the Middle

⁷¹ Conversation between Nixon, Kissinger, and Haldeman, August 9, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 929.

⁷² Memo for the President's Files, June 15, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 775. See also Memcon, June 15, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 384.

⁷³ Conversation between Nixon and Haig, July 6, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 814.

East.”⁷⁴ If the United States permitted a major Soviet victory in the crisis, the national security adviser claimed, the result would be “a ghastly war in the Middle East.”⁷⁵

Moreover, the administration’s attempt to negotiate unilaterally an interim Suez Canal agreement had failed badly. Sadat insisted that any partial deal either be linked indissolubly to an overall settlement or to a ceasefire of only limited duration, formulae Jerusalem had rejected out of hand. Pressing for such an arrangement, therefore, no longer made sense, for it would require Nixon to expend too much political capital for only minimal gains. Whereas the original idea for an interim bargain had been narrow in scope, Kissinger observed, the terms now being contemplated would require the Americans “to press Israel almost as hard as to get an overall settlement.”⁷⁶ Consequently, Nixon had decided to avoid a confrontation over the matter with the Meir government, which, in effect, amounted to a U.S. abandonment of the initiative.⁷⁷

In short, in strictly power political terms, there were compelling reasons for the administration to pursue the type of deal that the Soviet Union had outlined. And with its China initiative falling into place after Kissinger’s visit to that country in July, the United States would be in a strong position to negotiate on the Middle East at the upcoming Moscow summit in May.

⁷⁴ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Some Indicators of Soviet Behavior,” December 22, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 108.

⁷⁵ Editorial Note of Conversation between Nixon, Kissinger, and Haig, December 12, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 74. On the linkage between the two issues, see also Telecon, December 5, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 62; Telecon, December 8, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 67; and Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 886-887, 898-899, 913-914, 916, 1288. The fact that Sadat was openly talking of war and had visited Moscow in October was cause for additional concern in Washington. For the U.S. analysis of what Sadat had discussed during his consultations with the Soviets, see Editorial Note, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, pp. 16-17.

⁷⁶ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Letter from Mrs. Meir,” September 23, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 902. See also Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1286; Memo from Haig to Nixon, “Subject: New Suez Canal Initiative,” July 2, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 880; and Haldeman Diary Entry, July 2, 1971, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 314.

⁷⁷ Memo for the Record, “Subject: NSC Meeting on the Middle East and South Asia,” July 16, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 886, 887; and Sisco Interview, in Episode 2 of *The Fifty Years War*, at 5:51-6:06. Moreover, Kissinger had again sabotaged Sisco’s visit by actively discouraging Jerusalem from making concessions, and the Israelis were informed on the eve of his trip that the administration had no intention of making their military assistance requests conditional on their negotiating position. See Memo for the Record, July 1, 1971, KT00306, DNSA; and Vanetik and Shalom, *The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Peace Process*, p. 169.

Yet Nixon and Kissinger, the latter of whom had finally taken control of Arab-Israeli strategy from Rogers, chose not to respond decisively. Partly this was because the White House hoped to exploit the importance the USSR attached to resolving the Middle East conflict to wring additional concessions from Moscow in other areas or on the terms of a settlement. The Soviets, Kissinger argued, were “under pressure to deliver something for [the Arabs] sooner or later if they are to preserve their influence.” The administration, hence, could use the Middle East “*to regulate Soviet conduct elsewhere.*”⁷⁸ With this in mind, Nixon directed Kissinger to refuse to discuss the issue without also raising Vietnam.⁷⁹ The president wanted an Arab-Israeli settlement “dangled.” Other than the U.S. opening to China, he believed, the Soviets’ principal concern was the Middle East: “They really are worried about the damn place.” Nixon, therefore, wanted the Soviets to “want something from us on the Middle East. They must want our cooperation, and we must not be in the position of wanting theirs so much.” “I’m not so sure,” he added, “but what they may get a hell of a lot more worried about the Middle East and their clients.” The Kremlin “may not like things the way they are.... So I’d keep them worried.”⁸⁰

But the White House’s attempt to drive a hard bargain did not imply that it was uninterested in what the Soviets had proposed. The Israelis, of course, had been worried about a joint U.S.-USSR approach of this sort ever since Nixon had taken office. “We knew perfectly well,” Rabin later wrote, “that if an agreement were reached between the two powers, each would be obliged to ‘induce’ its ‘client’ to accept it.” Even as Kissinger attempted to reassure him that Nixon had no intention of pursuing such a policy, the ambassador “could not shake free

⁷⁸ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Your Private Session with Gromyko on September 29, 1971,” September 28, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 1019-1020 (emphasis in original). See also Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, September 29, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 1028.

⁷⁹ Telecon, September 29, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, p. 1057. See also Telecon, October 2, 1971, p. 1086.

⁸⁰ Conversation between Nixon, Kissinger, and Rogers, September 30, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 1066-1067.

of the vision of Kissinger and Dobrynin closeted away cooking up deals, with Kissinger subsequently announcing the results to us as a *fait accompli*.⁸¹ The Americans, Meir had complained repeatedly, were unsympathetic “to our refusal to accept any solution for the Middle East that would be imposed upon us by others nor to my strong opposition to [the] idea that the [great powers] should sit down comfortably somewhere to work out a ‘feasible’ compromise.”⁸²

In later years, Kissinger denied vehemently that he and Nixon had ever even considered such an approach. “Meir,” he said in 2006, “was always convinced that some secret deal was being cooked up between us and the Soviet Union, without a shred of evidence.”⁸³ The prime minister’s “overriding fear,” he writes, “was that some Soviet-American deal would be imposed at Israel’s expense, though no such arrangement was ever discussed or contemplated.”⁸⁴

The truth, however, was quite different. Kissinger, Haldeman recorded in his diary on October 9, had grown furious with Rogers for trying to restart the talks on an interim agreement because Moscow would assume that the Americans were again trying to leave them out of the negotiations. The White House’s plan, he said, “depended on the Russians delivering the Egyptians and we delivering the Israelis.” The State Department’s approach, by contrast, would “inevitably leave the Russians sitting solid in the Mideast, where we can get what we want as the result of a deal with the Russians and without the Israelis’ total opposition.” If Rogers persisted, he complained, there would be “no reason for the Russians to get out,” and then the United States would be “in real trouble because we [would] give the Russians a solid base in the Mediterranean. We don’t care about the Israeli-Egyptian border thing.... [W]e do care about

⁸¹ Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 147-148, 205.

⁸² Golda Meir, *My Life* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1975), pp. 382-383.

⁸³ Quoted in Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land: America’s Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2008), p. 143.

⁸⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), p. 374. See also Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1288-1289, 1292.

getting the Russians out and that it won't provide. It will keep the Russians sitting there dominating the Mediterranean. And we know under our plan we can get them out." Rogers, in effect, was squandering Nixon's "ace in the hole with the Russians" for nothing but "a little bit of desert land" and "in the process [was] letting the Russians establish a Mediterranean base."⁸⁵

And it is clear that the White House intended to negotiate with the Soviets on this sort of package behind the scenes. To be sure, Nixon and Kissinger informed Meir and Rabin of what they were discussing with Moscow and implied that the United States would not apply pressure on Jerusalem to accept such an agreement. The administration, Nixon assured the prime minister during an important meeting at the White House on December 2, would not link the continued delivery of Phantom aircraft to Israel's negotiating position. The president was only asking Jerusalem to give the "appearance" of negotiations in order to help "cool" the situation in the Middle East. "We're not," he added, "talking about the two of us getting together and pressuring you."⁸⁶ Thus, several scholars have concluded that the administration had acquiesced to Meir's request to abandon the Rogers Plan and agreed not to exert pressure on Israel to accept it.⁸⁷

Secretly, however, Nixon and Kissinger planned to pursue an agreement on the basis of the USSR offer. What the Soviets had offered, Nixon repeated on December 9, was "a hell of a lot." At the appropriate time, the two men agreed, the United States would have to "squeeze"

⁸⁵ Haldeman Diary Entry, October 9, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13, pp. 1093-1095. See also Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, "Subject: State of Play in Mid-East Diplomacy," November 15, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 946-948.

⁸⁶ Editorial Note of Conversation among Meir, Rabin, Nixon, and Kissinger, December 2, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 954. Kissinger had actually already presented the Soviet proposal to Rabin on November 5, after which Meir had requested a meeting to discuss the matter with Nixon directly. See Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, pp. 203-206.

⁸⁷ Yigal Kipnis, *1973: The Road to War* (Charlottesville, VA: Just World, 2013), pp. 78-80; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution, 1994), p. 87; Vanetik and Shalom, *The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Peace Process*, pp. 182-188; and Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, pp. 205-206.

Jerusalem and, as Kissinger put it: “I’ve got that worked out with the Russians.” It had always been his belief, he added, that “at the right moment, we’ve got to put it to Israel.”⁸⁸

In other words, the White House had by no means chosen to reject the USSR peace plan, it simply had decided to employ deceptive tactics with the Meir government.⁸⁹ The Soviets were perfectly willing to conduct the negotiation in secret. “I give you my word it will be absolutely waterproof,” Gromyko had promised Nixon. “There can be no mistake, we would never tolerate it.”⁹⁰ Consequently, Kissinger told the president that the administration’s tactical handling of the matter had “to be very tricky.” He had, he said, lied to Rabin about disengaging from the talks with Dobrynin precisely because he wanted “to be able to stay in the negotiations.” His hope, he added, was that the superpowers could negotiate an interim arrangement in 1972 and then defer the discussion of an overall settlement with the Soviets until later.⁹¹ It would, Kissinger told Dobrynin on November 4, be for the United States “the more honorable course” to level with Jerusalem, but it “might be the more effective course” to “bring the Israelis in on an interim settlement but to keep vague its relationship to an overall settlement until 1973.”⁹²

Why did Nixon and Kissinger consider it so important to maintain the secrecy of the bargaining scenario they had worked out with the Soviets? Implementing this sort of agreement

⁸⁸ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, December 9, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 956, 959.

⁸⁹ Such methods are not uncommon in international relations, although most of the literature in this area has focused on how leaders try to mislead their domestic audiences, rather than other states, especially allies. See John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and John M. Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015). See also Chaim Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War,” *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2004), pp. 5-48.

⁹⁰ Memcon, September 30, 1971, p. 1072.

⁹¹ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, March 30, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, pp. 248-249. See also Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, May 18, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, pp. 946-947; and Memcon, March 17, 1972, in *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 625-627. Rabin confirms that Kissinger told him that he had broken off his contacts with Dobrynin on the Middle East and, evidently, believed this to be true. See Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, p. 212.

⁹² Memcon, November 4, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 28. Note also Nixon’s misleading of American Jewish leaders regarding his goals in the Middle East on the eve of his reelection. See Peter Golden, *Quiet Diplomat: A Biography of Max M. Fisher* (New York: Cornwall, 1992), p. 271.

would, of course, inevitably involve a major U.S.-Israeli confrontation. “We can assume,” Kissinger had said in February, “that any settlement which is acceptable to the Arabs would push Israel further than they want to go.” The administration, therefore, needed to determine the right “combination of pressures and promises” that would be required to induce a withdrawal.⁹³ The White House, the national security adviser stressed, had “never had any illusions that Israel would go back of its own volition. We knew that pressure would be needed.”⁹⁴ The United States, Nixon stated on October 15, could not “give the Israelis the moon.”⁹⁵

With this in mind, the key factor preventing the Americans from cooperating with the Soviets on the proposal they had outlined was Nixon’s concern about how pursuing such an approach would affect his prospects for reelection in 1972. The president’s denials that he took domestic politics into account when crafting Middle East policy notwithstanding, the White House was clearly worried about stirring opposition to its strategy at home. As early as January, Kissinger had informed the SRG that Nixon wanted the question of arms supply to Israel “out of the way by summer for a sufficient period so as to avoid endless debate in 1972.” It was not in the national interest, he observed, “to have an escalating debate next year on various packages in which everyone is trying to outdo everyone else in an election year.”⁹⁶ The State Department’s decision to suspend the delivery of aircraft to Israel, he had warned Nixon in June, was “going to produce an explosion amongst the Jewish leaders here.”⁹⁷ Thus in January, Nixon ordered Rogers to, as he put it, “play it politically,” by decoupling the delivery of Phantom aircraft to

⁹³ Minutes of an SRG Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” February 8, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 739. See also Paper Prepared by the NSC Staff, “Analytical Summary: Options Vis-à-vis Israel,” February 22, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 744-748.

⁹⁴ Minutes of an SRG Meeting, February 25, 1971, p. 756.

⁹⁵ Memcon, October 15, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 15 n. 6.

⁹⁶ Minutes of an SRG Meeting, “Subject: Middle East Negotiations,” January 11, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 694. See also Minutes of an SRG Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” January 25, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 719.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 187.

Israel from the negotiations. The administration could not, he said, “have the American Jews bitching about the plane deliveries. We can’t push Israel too hard and have a confrontation, so he’s to keep Sisco slowed down.... We must not let this issue hurt us politically.”⁹⁸ A confrontation, Kissinger had stated in February, would require Nixon to “take the heat.”⁹⁹

Such concerns affected to a significant extent the White House’s ability to negotiate with the Soviets. As early as June 8, Kissinger had informed Dobrynin that the Middle East would need to be handled delicately and in secret, due to “the great sensitivity of this problem in U.S. domestic politics.”¹⁰⁰ “There was no possibility,” the national security adviser told Gromyko, “of implementing a final agreement before the American election. No American President could engage in the pressures that might be necessary to achieve this.”¹⁰¹ The Meir government, he reiterated to Dobrynin on October 15, was being “quite uncompromising, evidently in the hope that the closer to the U.S. elections, the easier it would be for Israel to influence American politicians.” Jerusalem, he added, was “well aware [that direct American pressure on the Israeli Government] would not be easy for any administration in Washington, given current circumstances in the U.S.” Nixon’s political advisers were doing their utmost to build a base of support at home, but Israel’s leaders were quite artfully exploiting the “pre-election

⁹⁸ Haldeman Diary Entry, January 23, 1972, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 401. Nixon also wanted “a good Israeli plank” in his campaign platform. See Haldeman Diary Entry, August 9, 1972, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 491.

⁹⁹ Minutes of an SRG Meeting, February 25, 1971, p. 754.

¹⁰⁰ Memcon, June 10, 1971, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 374. See also Conversation between Nixon and Gromyko, September 29, 1971, p. 1053.

¹⁰¹ Memcon, September 30, 1971, p. 1073. The Soviet minutes of this meeting highlight the domestic factor to an even greater degree. “Nixon,” the USSR record notes, “has certain domestic political complications. An intensive election campaign will be underway in the U.S. in 1972. In view of the fact that pro-Israeli groups control the U.S. media to a significant extent, it would be difficult for the President to agree to measures that would seriously displease those groups during the election period. This could even cost him the White House.... Once the election is over, it will be a different story.” With political considerations out of the way, Nixon would “be able to implement a solution on Middle East issues, which can be worked out jointly with the Soviet side prior to that time without paying a great deal of attention to Jewish circles.” See Memcon, September 30, 1971, in *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 481-482. See also Memcon, January 9, 1971, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 261; and Memcon, January 21, 1972, pp. 134-135.

environment” to present the Meir government’s “interests on the largest scale, deliberately muddling this issue and thereby receiving the active support of well-organized pro-Israeli groups in the U.S., which no administration in Washington can ignore.”¹⁰²

And it is clear that American officials were not simply pointing to the domestic constraints they faced as an excuse to avoid dealing with the issue with Moscow. “The only time you have a window of opportunity to come up with anything responsible in the Middle East is non-election years,” Nixon told an interviewer in 1984, well after he had left office. “In 1986, there’s no way you can do any thing in the Middle East that won’t be tilted too far in the direction of Israel.”¹⁰³ Even as he claimed that political concerns would not sway his decision-making on the issue, Nixon observed: “There is no denying that there is a political campaign coming in this country in 1972. A number of politicians are already making it plain that they will make political capital out of their support for Israel. Senator [Henry] Jackson is already making noises of this kind.”¹⁰⁴ The Israelis, the president said when discussing Meir’s request for additional military assistance, would “egg on the Presidential hopefuls as well as their usual friends.” Ultimately, “[H]e saw this blowing up into strong Israeli pressure.”¹⁰⁵

Thus, even when he had given Rogers and Sisco greater authority to push for an interim agreement during the summer, the president had recognized that he had only a narrow window of opportunity. “I am convinced,” he had concluded in his May 26 memorandum, “that unless we get some kind of a settlement now with the Israelis on the Suez or some other issue, we aren’t

¹⁰² Memcon, October 15, 1971, in *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 496-497. Note also Kissinger’s comment to Gromyko that if the details of what they were discussing leaked it “would produce an enormous outcry.” See Memcon, September 30, 1971, p. 1074. See also Memcon, October 30, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 26; Memcon, November 4, 1971, p. 28; Memcon, January 28, 1972, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 576; Memcon, January 21, 1972, p. 134; and Memcon, “Subject: Basic Principles (briefly at beginning); Middle East,” May 28, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 1190.

¹⁰³ Karen Elliott House, “Nixon Advises Reagan to Move Quickly on Foreign Policy, Focus on Few Issues,” November 13, 1984, *Wall Street Journal*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ Memcon of an NSC Meeting, February 26, 1971, p. 760.

¹⁰⁵ Memo for the Record, July 16, 1971, p. 887.

going to get any kind of settlement until after the [19]72 elections.”¹⁰⁶ One of the main reasons, Sisco later recalled, that Nixon had refused to lend his full support to the State Department’s efforts was that he hoped to “take another crack at [Meir] subsequently,” meaning after the 1972 presidential campaign had ended.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, to Nixon’s mind, it was doubtful that the administration could pursue a strategy of coercive diplomacy with the Israelis prior to 1973, given that Meir was planning to “wait us out through the elections.”¹⁰⁸

Once Nixon’s reelection considerations were out of the way, however, he planned to move forcefully in the Middle East. If Washington was going to have to press Jerusalem, Kissinger observed: “[19]73 is a hell of a lot better than [19]72.” “That’s right, that’s right, that’s right,” Nixon replied. “Next year, or well into [19]73,” Kissinger concluded.”¹⁰⁹ The administration, the national security adviser reasoned, could use the prospect of an Arab-Israeli settlement to give Moscow a stake in the president’s reelection. “If you’re the one that delivers,” he told Nixon, “you need to be strong. That’s why we have to set up trade and the Middle East in such a way that you are the one that has to deliver it after the election.”¹¹⁰

And the plan Gromyko had presented remained Nixon and Kissinger’s focus. The USSR had offered “a clear horse-trade” of the 1967 borders for a removal of Soviet forces from the

¹⁰⁶ Memo from Nixon to Rogers, May 26, 1971, p. 859.

¹⁰⁷ Transcript, Joseph J. Sisco, Oral History Interview, March 19, 1990, by Michael Sterner, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/mss/mfdip/2004/2004sis02/2004sis02.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸ Memo from Kissinger for the President’s File, “Subject: The President’s Private Meeting with British Prime Minister Edward Heath, on Tuesday, December 21, 1971, 9:30 a.m. to Noon, in the Sitting Room at Government House, Bermuda,” December 21, 1971, Kissinger Conversations, Supplement (KC) 00176, DNSA. See also Memo from Saunders to Kissinger, “Subject: Current State Department Line on the Middle East,” June 19, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 1012-1013; Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, July 25, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 1027; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 459; and Edward R.F. Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger: A Secret History of American Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Reader’s Digest, 1976), p. 21.

¹⁰⁹ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, December 9, 1971, pp. 956, 959.

¹¹⁰ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, January 20, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 122. Note also Kissinger’s comment to Brezhnev just a month prior to the Moscow summit that even though the administration could not begin implementing any agreement in the Middle East until early 1973, it was to Moscow’s advantage to have Nixon in the White House: “At the same time, I would like to stress that no President except Mr. Nixon will be able to do this at all.” See Memcon, April 24, 1972, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 772.

Middle East and the White House, although it would continue to negotiate to determine whether it could get a better deal, was clearly interested.¹¹¹ Getting the Soviets out of the region in exchange for the prewar lines, Nixon remarked on March 18, would be “a damn good deal for just a few hunks of desert.”¹¹² The Americans, Kissinger agreed, would “get [the Middle East] done before the election and brutalize [the Israelis] after the election.... We have got to get the Soviets out of the Middle East.” Whereas the State Department viewed the Arab-Israeli dispute from a regional perspective, Nixon concurred: “We are looking at it in terms of the Soviets.”¹¹³

Thus, it is rather unsurprising that compelling evidence exists demonstrating that Nixon’s December pledges to Meir regarding the Rogers Plan were a good deal more equivocal than scholars have suggested. Kissinger, for instance, observes in his memoir that the president had agreed to jettison the negotiations for a comprehensive solution only “for the time being.”¹¹⁴ Likewise Rabin, who implies in his account that Meir had persuaded Nixon to accept essentially all of her demands, nevertheless acknowledges that what was discussed at the meeting was not unambiguous. The president, he later wrote, had been “vague,” and urged greater flexibility on Israel’s part because the Americans could not simply ignore the Middle East at the Moscow summit. The exchange between Nixon and Meir was, he claims, “one of the most amazing examples of the subtleties of diplomacy I was ever to witness,” and it is not at all clear based on his description if the Americans accepted the Israeli position. Indeed, he observes, Kissinger was careful to avoid “a single concrete reference to any American political position.”¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Memcon, March 1, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 188.

¹¹² Editorial Note on Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, March 18, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 214. Kissinger reiterated that the matter should be left for Nixon’s second term.

¹¹³ Telecon, March 27, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 230.

¹¹⁴ Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1289.

¹¹⁵ Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, pp. 208-209. At no point in Rabin’s account does he claim that Nixon and Kissinger agreed to abandon the Rogers Plan; they merely noted Meir’s position that *Israel* rejected the proposal.

More importantly, Nixon and Kissinger's subsequent discussions reveal that they had been deliberately unclear with Meir. The president's performance at the December 2 meeting, Kissinger said, had been impressive. Had he mishandled the issue, it "could have raised enormous political problems for you—you have no idea with what suspicion, and determination to have a showdown, they [the Israelis] came to this country. And they are actually, now, from our domestic point of view, in a rather good position to put the heat on us, at least." "Yeah, sure they are," Nixon replied. Nevertheless, the White House had left Meir "floating on air, and we didn't really give them anything." The "real negotiations," Kissinger said, would go on, and hopefully "by early [19]73, will lead to a result." Concluding the agreement would, of course, "require some painful things early in [19]73" but it would be in Israel's "own interest."¹¹⁶

The United States would, Kissinger subsequently stated on several occasions, continue to try to negotiate an agreement more favorable to Israel than the Rogers Plan if such a deal were possible, but that did not mean that Nixon would have rejected an arrangement with the Soviets on the basis of the December 1969 proposal. To the contrary, the president seemed quite willing to accept such terms. Regarding Meir's claim that Nixon had acquiesced to the prime minister's demand for border changes in Sinai and the abandonment of the Rogers Plan, Rabin observes in his memoir: "I must state that I never heard the president express any such agreement in any of the meetings I attended."¹¹⁷ Meir's belief that the president agreed with her about the Rogers Plan and the territorial question on the Sinai front, Kissinger told the ambassador on February 16, was "a misreading by the Prime Minister." The national security adviser had indeed pledged "that he personally would make an effort to move the U.S. position," but stressed "that he could not guarantee it nor was he optimistic that he would succeed." There was, he had emphasized,

¹¹⁶ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, December 9, 1971, pp. 955, 957, 959.

¹¹⁷ Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, p. 211.

“no reason for optimism.” Moreover, Rabin admitted that this was his reading of what had been discussed as well, and noted that he had even had “a clash with the Prime Minister on the issue.” Nixon and Kissinger, the ambassador said, had told Meir only that “the best that Israel could assume was that there would be no pressure from the United States to accept the final parameters with respect to the boundary,” but had added that they “had not agreed to abandon the former U.S. position.”¹¹⁸ Given what Nixon and Kissinger were discussing privately, it seems clear that the president was getting ready to implement the Rogers Plan jointly with Moscow in 1973.

That the problem was mainly one of timing is evident from an analysis of the White House’s negotiations with the Soviets during the months leading up to the summit. The Israelis, Kissinger had reiterated to Dobrynin on November 4, would never countenance a settlement that had been negotiated by the United States and the Soviet Union. Consequently, Meir “would almost certainly make this agreement public and, taking advantage of the U.S. election campaign, would try to torpedo it.” As soon as the presidential contest had ended, however, Nixon would “use all the authority and resources at his disposal to make Israel carry out the agreement.” It was therefore important to the administration, Dobrynin reported to Moscow, “to [not] stir up the Israelis prematurely.”¹¹⁹ Because the Middle East was, in Nixon’s words, “too emotional an issue inside the United States for public discussion” and could “only be subject to a secret preliminary agreement between us,” Brezhnev had agreed to coordinate a schedule with the Americans and to deal with the matter when he met with the president in May.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Memcon, February 16, 1972, KT00429, DNSA. Similarly, Kissinger had told Dayan on February 7 “that while he [personally] recognized the Israeli position, he had always taken the position himself that Israel may not be able to get all these points.” See Memcon, February 7, 1972, KT00423, DNSA.

¹¹⁹ Memcon, November 4, 1971, in *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 510-512. See also Memcon, March 1, 1972, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 601; and Memcon, March 17, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 211.

¹²⁰ Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 242.

To be sure, Kissinger maintained an obstinate line in his talks with USSR representatives. Aside from the fact that the White House was still hoping to use the prospect of a settlement to give the Soviets added incentive to show restraint in the Middle East and in Vietnam—and was still exploring whether it could get better terms for its Israeli client—Nixon was deeply concerned that a secret deal might leak prior to the election. As a result, during his preparatory meetings with Gromyko in April, Kissinger refused to commit explicitly to any major concessions, telling the foreign minister that the Middle East might simply prove “an insoluble problem.” The Kremlin leaders, he said, did not face the difficulty of having “to run for reelection this year.” While an interim deal might be possible, the White House could not at the moment pressure Israel, and was reluctant to discuss the terms of a comprehensive solution at the summit, for it was “an absolute necessity” that Nixon be able to claim credibly that “no secret agreements were made—because there will be pressure from many in our country, especially Jewish groups.” The superpowers could discuss “general principles,” but specifics would have to wait until the fall, at which time “we could reach agreement on an overall solution.” Thus, even though the two men agreed that the Middle East was “the big unsolved problem” and it could “poison the atmosphere” at the summit, for the moment the discussions were left in limbo.¹²¹

¹²¹ Memcon, “Subject: Basic Principles; Middle East; Economic Relations; Announcement of Kissinger Visit,” April 23, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, pp. 571-583. For the Soviet minutes, see Memcon, April 23, 1972, in *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 748-756. The matter of what to do about the territorial question apart from the Sinai, in particular the Golan Heights, seemingly raised an additional obstacle during these talks, as Kissinger expressed disappointment when Gromyko insisted that the Egyptian-Israeli aspect of the conflict could not be settled in isolation. It is unclear why the foreign minister took this position, but it is possible that Moscow was trying to put pressure on the United States. Dobrynin, after all, had earlier suggested that the Kremlin present Washington with an updated peace plan as a means of incentivizing U.S. responsiveness to its overtures. See Memcon, January 28, 1972, p. 578. Moreover, the Soviets had, albeit somewhat inconsistently, suggested previously that a Sinai agreement could be negotiated apart from the problem of Syria. For example, see Memcon, November 18, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, pp. 48-49. In any case, given both sides’ great desire for an agreement and Syria’s continuing refusal to accept Resolution 242, it seems unlikely that Washington and Moscow would have allowed the dispute over the Golan Heights to torpedo the U.S.-Soviet arrangement. On the White House’s concerns about the potential that a secret agreement might leak, see Telecon, March 27, 1972, p. 230; and Memo from Nixon to Rogers, February 3, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 148. See also Memcon, May 5, 1972, in *Soviet-American Relations*, p. 797; and Memcon, May 18, 1972, in *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 826-827. Even a partial deal, the White House

Nixon and Kissinger, then, did not think that they could go about negotiating an Arab-Israeli settlement with the Soviets in a totally straightforward way, but that did not mean that the problem was completely ignored at the summit. Contrary to Kissinger's later claims, it seems likely that the superpowers developed an implicit understanding on the basic outline of a deal. To be sure, the "general working principles" worked out by Kissinger and Gromyko were quite ambiguous.¹²² The Americans, Kissinger later boasted, had, by holding at risk the prospect of an improved U.S.-Soviet relationship, convinced the Kremlin to accept "a meaningless paragraph" on the Arab-Israeli issue and a set of principles that either "did not go beyond the existing United Nations resolutions or were so vague as to leave wide scope for negotiation in implementation." "I have never understood," he writes in his memoirs, "why Gromyko accepted them."¹²³

The evidence, however, tells a different story. The negotiations regarding the principles, Quandt, who at this time was an aide on the NSC staff, later wrote, were not merely conducted under *pro forma* conditions: "My impression is that Kissinger took the exercise somewhat more seriously, and almost certainly Nixon did. And though written in general terms, the principles did not simply parrot UN resolutions, as Kissinger implies."¹²⁴ More importantly, Nixon implied in strong terms during his discussion of the issue with Brezhnev that after the election, a deal could be discussed more seriously. The USSR, he acknowledged, had shown restraint in the Middle East and adopted a "very constructive" negotiating stance. "To put it very simply," the president

believed, would cause the administration difficulties because it would need to be linked to an overall one, meaning it would require essentially the same level of effort and expenditure of political capital. As Kissinger told Nixon just prior to the Moscow summit: "The trouble with pressing too hard on the interim agreement, which we may get, is that it may raise more questions about the final agreement than it's worth." See Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, May 18, 1972, p. 946.

¹²² For the text of the principles, see Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1494 n. 4. The Middle East section of the joint communiqué issued at the conclusion of the summit ignored the substance of the Arab-Israeli problem entirely. See Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1493 n. 3. Even Rabin later wrote that what Nixon and Kissinger had negotiated represented "a downright achievement, and we had cause to be grateful to the president and his national security adviser." See Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, p. 214.

¹²³ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1247-1248, 1294.

¹²⁴ Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 454 n. 106.

said, “our ties with Israel poison our relations with Israel’s major neighbors.... I have determined that the interests of the United States are being very seriously damaged by the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict.” The superpowers “simply [could not] allow that festering sore to continue. It is dangerous to us both—frankly it is more dangerous to us than to you.”¹²⁵

Indeed, Nixon emphasized, the problem was really only one of scheduling. The situation, he stated, was not “hopeless. As a matter of fact, I am only raising a problem of timing, which is now difficult for us, if we are to affect the Israelis.” Although he insisted that domestic political considerations would not influence his decisions, he claimed that the administration had to move cautiously at the tactical level. “For us to attempt *at this time*,” he observed, “to impose a settlement on Israel would be an insurmountable problem.” The way to resolve the dispute, he said, was “for the US and Soviet Union privately and with discretion to use their influence to bring the parties together to make a settlement.” Once the nominating conventions in the United States were over in September, he added, “we can try to get to the nutcutting part of the problem.” While it might be necessary to solve the problem in steps, the key was “to get a general understanding in principle on where we want to go.” To be sure the point was clear, he added: “Candidly, we can’t settle it before the election, but after that we can make progress, in a fair way.”¹²⁶ In short, Kissinger’s later claim that “a Middle East condominium was a card that we had no interest in playing at all” is not supported by a close analysis of the evidence.¹²⁷

After several years of stalemate, the superpowers had finally appeared to come to a preliminary understanding on the Arab-Israeli issue. To be sure, not every detail had been resolved but the basic contours of a settlement were now coming into focus. The Soviet Union

¹²⁵ Memcon, “Subject: The Middle East,” May 26, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, pp. 1130-1132.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 1133-1134, 1136-1138 (emphasis added). For the Soviet minutes of the meeting, see Memcon, May 26, 1972, in *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 946-951.

¹²⁷ Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1151.

would remove its military forces from Egypt, impose an arms embargo on its clients, accept whatever security guarantees Washington and Jerusalem deemed necessary, and insist that the Arabs live in a state of peace with Israel; in exchange, the United States would use its influence with the Israelis to bring about a withdrawal from all of the Sinai and most of the West Bank. But for the time being, an agreement would have to wait until Nixon had secured his reelection.

The Price of Restraint

Had the situation not already been deadlocked for so long, it is likely that this sort of bargain could have formed the basis for a negotiation in 1973. The decision to ignore the issue temporarily, however, meant that the unstable state of affairs could not be maintained. It had been unrealistic, it soon became clear, to expect the Arabs to accept the summit's outcome.

The Soviets, after all, had repeatedly held off Egypt's requests for offensive arms. Without some sign that Moscow could bring the Americans to move the Israelis relatively soon, Cairo was bound to lose patience. Sadat's February visit to Moscow had not gone well; frustrated by the delayed delivery of weapons he had been promised in October and by the Kremlin's seeming inability to alter the U.S. position, the Egyptian leader had told Brezhnev and Kosygin: "The only thing that remains is the military solution." He would take no action prior to the summit, but the coming months would be devoted "to strengthening the internal fronts and preparing the population for war." And while he remained dependent on Moscow, Sadat now considered the Soviets "difficult, untrustworthy and slow in making decisions."¹²⁸

To deal with this dilemma, the USSR leaders had resorted to their standard method for dealing with U.S. standoffishness in the Middle East. The White House, Dobrynin had reported

¹²⁸ Notes of the Discussion between Tito and Sadat, February 5, 1972. See also Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile*, pp. 166-173; Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, pp. 212-213; and Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan*, pp. 159-160. Sadat had grown so desperate to acquire arms from Moscow that he had offered to pay for them in hard currency. See Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez*, pp. 141-145; and Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 163-168.

on February 15, was “not exhibiting great interest in active and concrete discussion of this issue,” probably because it was preoccupied with preparations for Nixon’s visit to China or due to its “desire to not give Golda Meir grounds to appeal to Jewish circles in the U.S., especially during the election campaign.”¹²⁹ For the time being, he felt, Nixon and Kissinger were relying on Israel’s military superiority. The Soviet Union, he concluded, had to somehow show “that not everything is going so well for Israel and the U.S. in the Middle East [and] that further delay on a Middle East settlement can only strengthen and entrench the very processes and elements in the [region] that they fear most of all, including the consolidation of our military presence there.”¹³⁰

It was for this reason that following Sadat’s visit to Moscow in April, the Soviets had agreed to a joint communiqué stating that they approved of “a further strengthening of military cooperation between [Egypt and the USSR].” Because no political solution appeared possible, the declaration stated, Moscow’s clients had “every reason to use other means, too, to regain the Arab lands captured by Israel.”¹³¹ The USSR, Dobrynin told Kissinger on March 17, retained the option of “a considerable increase of its military presence in Egypt and other Arab states.” Given that the Kremlin was “deluged with offers” to provide such protection and with requests for “a massive influx of arms,” he had added, Washington would be wise to move on the Soviet Union’s “major policy act,” for otherwise “the consequences might be quite serious.”¹³²

Contrary to the claim that the Soviets were beginning to hedge their bets with Egypt by expressing greater approval for Cairo’s military option, then, Moscow was again attempting to utilize military pressure to achieve political ends.¹³³ USSR officials, in fact, had no intention of

¹²⁹ Memcon, February 15, 1972, in *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 589-590.

¹³⁰ Memcon, January 28, 1972, pp. 577-578.

¹³¹ “Sadat’s Soviet Visit Ends on Tough Mideast Note,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1972, p. F6.

¹³² Memcon, March 17, 1972, pp. 212-213.

¹³³ For the claim that Moscow was moving in favor of a military solution to protect its relationship with Egypt, see Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 163-166.

sanctioning even a limited Arab attack. The communiqué, one historian rightly observes, was nothing more than “a transparent gesture,” for Sadat had once again returned from Moscow “empty-handed.”¹³⁴ The Soviets, it is now clear, had agreed to include the provocative language in the statement only reluctantly, in order to fortify their bargaining position at the summit.¹³⁵

For the same reason, the Politburo had passed up the opportunity to remove its forces from Egypt, despite its fear that their presence could involve the Soviet Union directly in a Middle East war, because USSR strategists understood that the existence of their military personnel in the area constituted their most valuable bargaining chip with the Americans. The Soviets, therefore, had prevailed on Sadat to allow them to keep a sizable number of their troops in the country so as to preserve their negotiating leverage with Nixon. The USSR advisors were, Brezhnev said as late as June, “an international necessity.”¹³⁶ Likewise, Grechko had been authorized to conclude another arms deal with Sadat just prior to the summit to apply additional pressure on Washington, though, again, the arms were not delivered on time.¹³⁷

And Brezhnev, who well understood that Sadat could not be held off forever, implored the Americans to at least cooperate for a partial agreement. It had been his hope, he told Kissinger on April 24, that the superpowers could “formalize” at the summit the proposal that Gromyko had presented in September, with a confidential understanding that its implementation could begin in early 1973. Although he understood that Nixon could not act before that time, he was deeply frustrated by Kissinger’s explanation that the president could not accept a secret agreement until later in the year, as well as by his insistence that the superpowers would have to

¹³⁴ Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 216.

¹³⁵ Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile*, pp. 177-180.

¹³⁶ Quoted in Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez*, pp. 138-139, 144, 153, 161. See also Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan*, pp. 165, 169-170.

¹³⁷ Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez*, pp. 156-157; Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, pp. 228-229; and Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, p. 79. For details of the sale, see Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, p. 228.

confine themselves to merely “a preliminary discussion.” The Egyptians, he noted, were growing restless, and it was possible that the situation could “get out of control.” The situation, the Soviet leader complained, was growing dangerous. “I’ll tell you honestly,” he said in response to Kissinger’s statements. “I certainly cannot say that satisfies me.... [A]s things stand now, I do not know how to talk to Sadat, in particular. If I’m deprived of this weapon, that is the agreement with you, I don’t know how we can approach the Arab leaders without causing an explosion.”¹³⁸

The Arabs in the end did not launch a war—mainly because the Soviet Union continued to deny them the necessary weaponry—but the delay did result in the collapse of the U.S.-USSR bargaining scenario, for Sadat was not willing to wait any longer. The Egyptian leader had agreed to give the Soviets additional time to negotiate with the Americans at the summit only with the greatest reluctance. Moreover, he had been led to understand that during months preceding the U.S. election, Moscow would see to it that Cairo’s military needs were met, so as to ensure that the Arabs retained a realistic military option if a diplomatic solution could not be achieved. When it emerged that the superpowers had, in effect, decided to ignore the Arab-Israeli question for the time being, and the Soviets subsequently failed to deliver the arms he had been promised, Sadat was furious. These developments, he later wrote, were for him “a violent shock.” Thus in July, the Egyptian president proceeded to make his dramatic announcement that the Soviet military presence in his country would be immediately terminated.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Memcon, “Subject: Vietnam; Middle East; Nuclear Non-Aggression Pact; Economic Relations; European Security; Summit Preparations; Announcement of Kissinger Visit,” April 24, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, pp. 608-609, 614-615.

¹³⁹ Sadat’s domestic concerns also likely contributed to his decision. On his expulsion of the Soviets, see Sadat, *In Search of Identity*; pp. 229-230; Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan*, pp. 172, 175-176; Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar*, pp. 241, 243; Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 227-231; Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez*, pp. 162, 173-176; Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, pp. 226-235; Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, pp. 93-95, 109-113; Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, pp. 78-79; Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile*, pp. 180, 184-185, 187, 189-198; Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East*, p. 90; Quandt, *Peace Process*, pp. 95-96; Abraham S. Becker, “The Superpowers in the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1970-1973,” in Becker, Bent Hansen, and Malcolm H. Kerr, eds., *The Economics and Politics of the Middle East* (New York: American Elsevier, 1975), pp. 83, 99, 102-103; and Fred

Moscow, as a result of its restrained posture in the Middle East, had lost its most potent bargaining chip. Sadat's bold move, in fact, had almost certainly been taken partly as a signal to the Nixon administration that he was still willing to accept help from the United States for a negotiated return of the Arabs' territories.¹⁴⁰ The Kremlin's ability to pressure the White House had, in short, undoubtedly been weakened.

Nevertheless, there remained compelling reasons to expect, on the basis of power political considerations, that the superpowers would favor cooperation on the Arab-Israeli problem following the American election. Although they had suffered a reversal as a result of Sadat's expulsion of their military personnel, the Soviets maintained a strong interest in seeing the conflict resolved. Aside from their desire to solidify their position in the Middle East and to avoid a confrontation over the issue, the USSR leaders now saw an opportunity to build on what had been accomplished in 1972 to establish a genuine *détente* with the United States.

And even though they had experienced a serious setback, the fact remained that the Soviet Union was still Sadat's only source of arms supply and, consequently, retained significant influence with the Egyptians. Indeed, Moscow's decision to "over-comply" with Sadat's order through the removal of more personnel and equipment than he had requested, as well as its refusal to issue a joint communiqué with Cairo about the matter, were tactical choices taken to demonstrate Egypt's continuing dependence on USSR support for the achievement of its political

Wehling, *Irresolute Princes: Kremlin Decision Making in Middle East Crises, 1967-1973* (New York: St. Martin's 1997), pp. 100-101.

¹⁴⁰ Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 230. I find, however, no evidence to support the theory advanced by two scholars that Sadat's decision to remove USSR forces from Egypt had been previously coordinated with the United States and the Soviet Union as part of the deal that Washington and Moscow had been discussing. See Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, "The Origins of a Misnomer: The 'Expulsion of Soviet Advisers' from Egypt in 1972," in Nigel J. Ashton, ed., *The Cold War in the Middle East: Regional Conflict and the Superpowers, 1967-1973* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 136-163. The Kremlin was clearly disappointed by what Sadat had done, knowing that it had deprived it of a key source of leverage, and the Americans not only viewed the announcement as a major setback for Moscow, but were also baffled as to why Sadat had demanded that Moscow withdraw its military personnel without first negotiating something in return from the United States.

objectives.¹⁴¹ As Dobrynin explained to Kissinger on August 11: “Sadat had miscalculated. He had thought the request to leave would produce negotiations. Instead, the Soviet Union had pulled everybody out. When the Egyptian military realized the implications for maintenance and overall combat effectiveness it might turn out that the chapter was not yet closed.”¹⁴²

Probably of greater importance was Nixon’s sustained determination to work out an agreement in the Middle East in conjunction with Moscow. In response to Kissinger’s comment during a conversation on August 2 that the administration would now have “to move after the election,” the president replied: “Well, our main game there is the Russians.” The two men still agreed that the United States would need “to brutalize the Israelis” and that the first half of 1973 was “the time to do it.” And, the president added: “The main thing is to do it for the reason that our interests vis-à-vis the Soviet Union must override everything else in the world today.”¹⁴³ Thus, Nixon told Gromyko on the eve of his reelection that the superpowers would have to sort out the issue in 1973: “We... ha[ve] to work on the Middle East early in the next term.... With respect to the Middle East, the U.S. would like significant progress made before [Brezhnev’s visit to the United States]. After the election we would have a mandate to move forcefully in this field. We could not leave the problem unsolved. We had to grapple with the problem early.”¹⁴⁴

Both superpowers, thus, retained considerable influence with their respective clients and shared a major interest in terminating the dispute along quite similar lines. And with Nixon’s overwhelming victory over the Democratic candidate, George McGovern, in November, White House officials would feel far less constrained politically on the issue in the future. Despite

¹⁴¹ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, p. 80.

¹⁴² Memcon, August 11, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 68. See also Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan*, p. 178. It was for precisely this reason that many top Egyptian military commanders had considered Sadat’s order an act of folly. See Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, 230-232, 240; and Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez*, p. 163.

¹⁴³ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, August 2, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 1033-1034.

¹⁴⁴ Memo for the President’s File, October 2, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 203.

Sadat's decision to expel the Soviets, the moment for a major joint action by the superpowers had seemingly arrived.

Conclusion

As had been the case at the outset of Nixon's term in office, power political forces had created major incentives for the United States and the Soviet Union to cooperate in the Middle East. And unlike during the earlier period, the two sides were able to reach a preliminary understanding on the issue, which, given the importance they each attached to finding a solution, is not particularly surprising. Nevertheless, an agreement along the lines Washington and Moscow had been discussing since the middle of 1970 was not reached. What explains this outcome?

It cannot be said that the result had been a function of the Kremlin's lack of interest in a reasonable settlement. To the contrary, Moscow was willing to press the Arabs to accept a peaceful solution that would guarantee Israel's security in exchange for the return of the territories taken in 1967. Given the importance they attached to détente with the United States and their general lack of involvement in the negotiations on the Jordanian front, it seems rather unlikely that in the final analysis Soviet leaders would have allowed the sole issue of the Golan Heights to block an agreement at a time when Syria had not even agreed to accept Resolution 242. There was, thus, no significant substantive disagreement between the superpowers on the issue, and the Soviet Union's clear preference was to resolve the problem in joint fashion with the United States. Thus, Brezhnev had decided in the fall of 1971 to present the Americans with a proposal that the Nixon administration was bound to find attractive.

Nor did the objections of the parties to the dispute represent an insuperable obstacle to great power cooperation. To be sure, there was a limit to Moscow's influence in Egypt, as was made evident by Sadat's attempts to reach out to the Americans and his decision to expel the

Soviet military forces from his country. The “locals,” then, retained some capacity to frustrate the designs of the superpowers. Yet, what is most striking about an analysis of the USSR-Egyptian relationship during this period is that, in broad terms, Moscow and Cairo were basically in agreement about what was needed to resolve the dispute. Tensions had arisen between the two sides only because there had been no movement in the diplomatic realm, which was primarily a function of the United States’ refusal to use its leverage with the Israelis. The Soviets, in fact, had enjoyed some success in moderating Egypt’s negotiating position. Indeed, it was precisely because the USSR remained Sadat’s sole source of arms supply that even after he had terminated its military mission, the Kremlin continued to control important levers of influence in Cairo.

Similarly, the factor of misperception played a less prominent role than it had during the initial phase of Nixon’s presidency. The superpowers had, of course, by no means established a relationship on the basis of mutual trust, but the nature of the offer presented by Gromyko was such that Nixon and Kissinger could only conclude that Moscow was genuinely committed to helping in the achievement of a stable settlement. The two men had stated in their private conversations that the Soviets had more or less agreed to U.S. terms and recognized that the USSR was quite anxious about the situation in the Middle East. The fact that the proposal had included the all-important concession that Moscow would withdraw its military personnel from Egypt was especially important, for it showed that Soviet policy was not driven by a desire to take advantage of the United States in the region at a time when Washington was tied down in Southeast Asia. And given the positive developments in the overall U.S.-USSR relationship and the holding of the Moscow summit, the impediment had declined in explanatory significance.

Thus, the key factor preventing a U.S.-USSR deal during this period was Nixon’s concerns about how a major effort in the Middle East, even a secret one, would affect his

reelection prospects. The degree to which the president's domestic political concerns shaped U.S. strategy on the issue during this period is quite striking. Nixon had repeatedly expressed the opinion that the Arab-Israeli conflict represented a substantial threat, both to international security and to important American interests. Moscow was helping to prevent another war in the area, but the situation remained extremely unstable, as the president clearly recognized. Yet he chose not to respond to the Soviet peace plan, which he considered a significant offer, because of his concern that the Israelis and their American supporters could effectively mobilize opposition to White House pressure in an election year.¹⁴⁵ In effect, considerations relating to politics at home had overridden, for the time being, power political concerns.

But these constraints were surmountable. As Nixon had stressed to Brezhnev and his colleagues, his domestic problem was primarily tactical in nature. In 1973, when he would not have to take into account how his decisions relating to Arab-Israeli diplomacy would affect his chances at the polls, the president would be able to maneuver much more freely. Moreover, the White House evidently had no qualms about resorting to rather devious methods when dealing with Meir. His admiration for Israel and sympathy for its security concerns notwithstanding, Nixon was determined to reach an understanding with the Soviets and Arabs on the issue, which would require Washington to dissociate from Jerusalem to a considerable extent. In short, domestic politics were extremely important, but did not constrain the president absolutely. And in strictly realistic terms, Nixon basically agreed with the Soviets that the superpowers would, in the end, have to work out a settlement. Conditions in the Middle East were growing increasingly threatening, as the Arabs would not tolerate the status quo much longer. With this in mind, Washington and Moscow shared a major interest in making progress on the problem early

¹⁴⁵ On Israel's skill in this area, see Robert O. Keohane, "The Big Influence of Small Allies," *Foreign Policy*, No. 2 (1971), pp. 175-178.

in 1973. Despite Sadat's expulsion of the Soviet military presence, structural forces would still lead one to expect an outcome of U.S.-USSR cooperation on the Arab-Israeli problem once Nixon's electoral concerns were out of the way. With the president's impressive victory at the polls, such an objective appeared to be within reach. And when an explosion in the Middle East not only demonstrated that Moscow had been correct to worry about the situation but also seriously imperiled U.S. energy interests and highlighted the real possibility of a superpower confrontation in the region, forces at the systemic level offered American strategists powerful additional incentives to move in concert with the USSR.

Chapter 4: “Under the Cover of Détente”

I don't see any contradiction between détente and our attempt to separate Egypt from Moscow. Détente did help to split Egypt from the Soviets.... I don't see any contradiction.
—Henry Kissinger¹

[The Soviets] are being put through a humiliating show of impotence.... It is even more humiliating, because no one is fooled.
—Henry Kissinger²

If the Soviet Union and the United States had complied responsibly with their international obligations and had been guided by the noble task of helping the Arabs and Israelis live in peace and prosperity, the Yom Kippur War could have opened up great opportunities for establishing a genuine peace in the Middle East.
—Victor Israelyan³

If there was ever a time at which the superpowers should have been able to cooperate to achieve peace in the Middle East, it was during Nixon's second term. The president, who had delayed acting on the problem throughout 1972 to minimize the risks to his reelection campaign, now possessed one of the most commanding mandates in American history. In addition, the conclusion of the Vietnam peace negotiations meant that the White House could focus its attention elsewhere, and do so in a less chaotic domestic environment. And it is clear that Nixon, despite his past support for Israel, believed that the time had come to press for a settlement.

Likewise, the Soviets' interest in negotiating a political resolution of the dispute had not lessened. Moscow, if anything, had grown only more worried about the unstable situation that prevailed in the Middle East by early 1973, for the Kremlin leaders understood that a war in the region, which now seemed like a real possibility, could grievously harm their country's improving relationship with the United States. To be sure, the removal of USSR forces from Egypt had weakened Soviet leverage and effectively collapsed the scenario that Brezhnev had

¹ Quoted in Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 149.

² Memorandum of Conversation (Memcon), April 25, 1974, in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969-1976*, Vol. 26: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1974-1976* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2012), pp. 203-204.

³ Victor Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), p. 219.

offered in late 1971. At the same time, Moscow remained the Arabs' sole source of arms supply and, as such, continued to command important influence with its clients. Thus, there existed a real opportunity for the superpowers to collaborate on the issue.

The October War, even though it demonstrated in certain respects the limitations of détente, further widened the range of possibilities for great power cooperation.⁴ The Arabs, whose military performance in the conflict had been impressive, had erased the humiliation of 1967 and were now more willing to countenance a political settlement than they had ever been before. Equally significant, their ability to link Western energy interests to diplomatic objectives gave them a major bargaining tool to use with the Americans. The Israelis, who had suffered heavy losses and learned that a strategy of holding indefinitely the territories they had taken during the Six-Day War was unsustainable, found themselves totally isolated in the aftermath of the war, which provided the Americans with powerful leverage in Jerusalem. The combined influence of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Middle East in late 1973, in other words, was at its height. Of potentially even greater importance, détente had, by this time, become a major factor in international politics. "Soviet-American relations," Dobrynin later recollected, "reached a level of amity in 1973 never before achieved in the postwar era."⁵ "In the spring of 1973," Kissinger agrees, "Soviet-American relations were unusually free of tension."⁶

The postwar diplomacy, however, failed to witness substantial progress toward an overall settlement and, instead, led to the emergence of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a prime cause of the eventual erosion of détente. The October War, two scholars observe, "marked the beginning of

⁴ It should be noted that the way in which the October War ran its course could in many ways be considered a major achievement of détente. The situation had been made considerably less dangerous by the improved status of U.S.-Soviet relations.

⁵ Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents, 1962-1986* (New York: Times, 1995), p. 265.

⁶ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 228.

the end of détente and the start of a second Cold War.”⁷ The Middle East, Dobrynin later wrote, ultimately became “an apple of discord between Moscow and Washington.”⁸

Even more so than during the period from 1967 to 1972, the lack of U.S.-USSR cooperation in the area at this time is deeply perplexing. Given each side’s interests and the favorable international context, it certainly seemed that the time had come for the superpowers to concert their efforts for an agreement. Yet, in the end, precisely the opposite occurred. How is this outcome to be explained? What were the key obstacles to great power cooperation? Why, despite strong structural incentives, did the Middle East actually contribute substantially to the Cold War’s intensification, rather than to the betterment of Soviet-American relations?

Gearing up for a Major Push

With the election and Vietnam out of the way, Nixon was determined to move quickly on the Arab-Israeli problem. The president continued to stress that the issue constituted a major threat to international security. “The Middle East,” he had said on the eve of his reelection, “will have a very high priority because while the Mideast has been, over the past couple of years, in a period of uneasy truce... it can explode at any time.”⁹ Nixon completely rejected Kissinger’s claim in a February 23 memorandum that it was “difficult to argue that another few months’ delay in moving toward a negotiation would be disastrous for US interests.” “I totally disagree,” he wrote

⁷ Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, p. 287. See also Alexander L. George, “The Arab-Israeli War of October 1973: Origins and Impact,” in George, ed., *Managing U.S.-Soviet Rivalry: Problems of Crisis Prevention* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1983), pp. 150-151.

⁸ Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 349.

⁹ “Statements from Pre-Election Interview with Nixon Outlining 2d-Term Plans,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1972, p. 20.

in the margin. “This thing is getting ready to blow.”¹⁰ The Middle East, Nixon believed, was “boiling,” and he therefore considered a settlement a top priority for his second term.¹¹

Consequently, the president emphasized early and often, despite Kissinger’s hesitance, that the matter would have to be dealt with expeditiously. Whereas Kissinger, Haldeman noted in his diary on February 6, was “reluctant to move into the Middle East,” Nixon felt that the issue had “to be settled now.”¹² The national security adviser had “filibustered the Mideast for almost four years,” Nixon told Haig on January 23, “because he is totally attacking what the Jewish agenda wants.” The president claimed that he had “practically choked right after the election” while discussing the issue with Kissinger.¹³ “I hit Henry hard on the Mideast thing,” Nixon recorded in his diary on February 3. The United States, he had said, could not afford to wait until after Israel’s October elections, for the administration would never again be so strongly positioned. Kissinger did not want to engage his prestige on the issue “because of the enormous pressures he’s going to get from the Jewish groups in this country,” but Nixon was “determined to bite the bullet and do it now because we just can’t let the thing ride and have a hundred million Arabs hating us and providing a fishing ground not only for radicals but, of course, for the Soviets.”¹⁴ In “every other year,” Nixon told British Prime Minister Edward Heath, “the

¹⁰ Memorandum (Memo) from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Background for Your Meeting with Egyptian Emissary Hafiz Ismail,” February 23, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25: *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), p. 70 n. 3.

¹¹ Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), pp. 765, 839. In a January 11 note, Nixon had written, “Mideast—Settlement” under the heading “goals for 2d term.” See also Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 195. Despite his inclination to move slowly, Kissinger clearly understood how perilous the Arab-Israeli problem had become. “If we consider Vietnam our most anguishing problem,” he told his assistants at one point, “certainly the Middle East, constitutes our most dangerous problem.” The region, he noted, had all the “ingredients” for a great power showdown, with each side backed by a superpower patron. “Therefore,” he concluded, “a relative triviality in a global context would lead to the kind of confrontation which neither of the super-powers would want but which neither could prevent.” Quoted in Jonathan Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 272.

¹² H.R. Haldeman Diary Entry, February 6, 1973, in H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1994), p. 575.

¹³ Conversation between Nixon and Haig, January 23, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 8.

¹⁴ Nixon, *RN*, pp. 786-787.

United States Government were inhibited, by one or other of their Elections, from taking any action in relation to the Middle East which would be unacceptable to Israeli opinion. 1973, however, was a year in which they were free from this particular inhibition.”¹⁵ Even though Meir had an election coming up, Nixon told Kissinger, 1973 was “our year to really do something.”¹⁶

The president, moreover, was willing to exert pressure on Israel, which U.S strategists understood would be necessary to get an agreement.¹⁷ “[T]he time has now come,” Nixon had told Kissinger soon after his reelection, “that we’ve got to squeeze the old woman [Meir].”¹⁸ The prime minister, he wrote, needed to “be informed in strong terms that this *totally* intransigent attitude will not wash here despite her election problems at home.”¹⁹ The Americans, the president emphasized, would have “to take a very strong line with the Israelis.” The White House could not “let Mrs. Meir come here and take the same hard-nosed line about the election. That’s all done now. Right now, this is going to be settled.... We’re going to move.”²⁰

Nixon’s frustration with Jerusalem, in fact, seemed to be boiling over. During a May 1 meeting with West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, he launched into what the note-taker characterized as a “long anti-Israel speech.” A Middle East settlement, he claimed, was his “highest priority in the year of 1973.” The United States, he added, was “not Israel’s lawyer. Israel should make its deal now... before the Arabs engulfed it.” The president was not willing to

¹⁵ Quoted in Salim Yaqub, “The Politics of Stalemate: The Nixon Administration and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973,” in Nigel J. Ashton, ed., *The Cold War in the Middle East: Regional Conflict and the Superpowers* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 50.

¹⁶ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, February 24, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 79-80.

¹⁷ The key question at the outset of Nixon’s second term, Saunders argued, was “whether and how we are going to try to put our relationship with Israel on a plane where the very high level of US diplomatic, economic and military support will be reciprocated by a serious Israeli effort to move toward peace in close collaboration with the US.” This was, he claimed, “*the major decision to be made and is a matter for general understanding at the highest level.*” See Memo from Saunders to Kissinger, “Subject: Next Steps on the Arab-Israeli Problem,” January 26, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 16 (emphasis in original).

¹⁸ Conversation between Nixon and Haig, January 23, 1973, p. 8.

¹⁹ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Information Items,” February 13, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 44 n. 2 (emphasis in original). See also Memcon, February 13, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 50.

²⁰ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, February 23, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 67-68. See also Conversation among Nixon, Kissinger, and Sisco, April 13, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 146.

risk a confrontation with the Soviets over the Middle East or to “fight a world war for Israel.” Although he admired them, Nixon felt that the Israelis “were totally wrong in their strategy.”²¹ The president’s support for Jerusalem, he informed Kissinger, had “been based on broader issues than just Israel’s survival. Those issues now strongly argue for movement toward a settlement.” The United States was Israel’s sole friend in the world but Nixon had failed to see “*one iota* of give on their part.... This is the time to get moving—[and] they must be told that *firmly*.” He reportedly added: “[T]he time has come to quit pandering to Israel’s intransigent position. Our actions over the past have led them to think we will stand with them *regardless* of how unreasonable they are.” With American energy interests increasingly being put in jeopardy by the Arab-Israeli issue, however, Nixon emphasized that he would not tolerate further stalling: “I have delayed through two elections [and] this year I am determined to move off dead center.”²² Whereas the Egyptians had made what he considered a reasonable offer, the Israelis had not “budded even a third of an inch.” The Meir government, he told Kissinger, had been “[d]iddling” the Americans. The president was “all for quid pro quo,” but even when the United States had provided the Israelis with sophisticated aircraft, “they’ve still been bastards in negotiations.”²³

²¹ Memo for the President’s File by Kissinger, “Subject: Meeting with Chancellor Willy Brandt of the Federal Republic of Germany on Tuesday, May 1, 1973 at 10:45 a.m. to 12:25 p.m.,” May 1, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. E-15, Part 2: *Documents on Western Europe, 1973-1976* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2014), pp. 824 n. 1, 826. See also Memcon, “Subject: Cabinet Meeting,” May 18, 1973, folder: Nixon Administration Memcons, box 1, Gerald R. Ford Digital Library; and Memcon, June 5, 1973, folder: Nixon Administration Memcons, box 1, Ford Digital Library. Note also Nixon’s vehement marginal comments on a memorandum from Kissinger detailing the Meir government’s policies in the occupied territories. See Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, September 1, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 260 n. 2.

²² Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, February 23, 1973, pp. 70, n. 2, n. 4, 71 n. 7 (emphasis in original); and Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 211-212. See also Memcon, February 27, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 98. On U.S. energy vulnerability during this period, see James E. Akins, “The Oil Crisis: This Time the Wolf is Here,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (1973), pp. 462-490; and Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America’s Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 239-244. See also Nixon’s Remarks about the Nation’s Energy Policy, September 8, 1973, American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=3953>.

²³ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, February 28, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 100-101.

And consistent with the view he had taken since the outset of his term in office, he continued to think that a stable settlement could not be reached without the involvement of the Soviet Union. Soon after his reelection, the president had written Brezhnev that the Middle East was “a topic we should consider high on the agenda for the coming year.”²⁴ The development of “close and sound relations with the Soviet leadership,” he told Max Fisher, who served as the president’s informal liaison to the American Jewish community, on March 15, was a matter of “great importance and closely related to the eventual negotiation and maintenance of a stable peace in the Middle-East.”²⁵ More so than at any time since June 1967, it seemed that the United States was prepared to make a significant effort to address the issue jointly with the USSR.

On Deaf Ears: Soviet Warnings and the Path to War

In subsequent years, it became fashionable among former U.S. officials and many scholars to criticize Soviet policy prior to and during the October War as innately aggressive and driven inexorably by ideological impulses. James Schlesinger, who served as CIA director and secretary of defense, held a typical view. Although, he later wrote, Moscow had benefitted greatly from détente: “[T]he Soviets could not leave well enough alone. They proceeded to poison the goose that laid the golden eggs.” The Kremlin, he claims, had tried to “stimulate” and “exploit” the October War, which, he argues, was a clear manifestation of the USSR leadership’s unrelenting dedication to global competition.²⁶ In San Clemente during the second Nixon-Brezhnev summit, Kissinger asserts, the Soviet leader had tried to bully the president and had menaced the United

²⁴ Letter from Nixon to Brezhnev, December 18, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976, Vol. 15: Soviet Union, June 1972-August 1974* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), p. 250.

²⁵ Memo for the President’s File by Garment, “Subject: Meeting with Max M. Fisher,” March 15, 1973, folder 3, box 34, Papers of Leonard Garment, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C.

²⁶ James Schlesinger, “The Eagle and the Bear: Ruminations on Forty Years of Superpower Relations,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 5 (1985), p. 949. See also Abraham S. Becker, “The Superpowers in the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1970-1973,” in Abraham S. Becker, Bent Hansen, and Malcolm H. Kerr, eds., *The Economics and Politics of the Middle East* (New York: American Elsevier, 1975), pp. 117-120; Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile: The Soviet-Egyptian Influence Relationship since the June War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 262-287; and Joseph Kraft, “New Realities in the Mideast,” *Washington Post*, October 18, 1973, p. A17.

States “with a Middle East war unless we accepted [radical Arab] terms.” The general secretary, he writes, had engaged in “a blatant attempt to exploit Nixon’s presumed embarrassment over Watergate.” Thus, Kissinger concludes: “[N]o Soviet leader can step out of his philosophical skin and abandon the Leninist postulate that a country’s influence is ultimately determined by a correlation of forces.”²⁷ Brezhnev, Nixon agrees, had attempted to “browbeat me into imposing on Israel a settlement based on Arab terms.”²⁸ Even prior to the meeting, Kissinger maintains, the Politburo had mixed “an explosive brew” by rearming their Arab clients in early 1973.²⁹ The Soviets’ decision to reopen their arms pipeline, one scholar agrees, represented a “shift in emphasis from collaboration and détente with the United States to more aggressive competition for political influence and strategic presence in the third world.”³⁰ The Soviets, a foreign policy task force of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority claimed, had played an “incendiary” role in October 1973. Under their conception of détente, it was permitted “to conduct revolutionary and proxy wars at will, so long as nuclear war with the United States is avoided.”³¹

The historical record, however, tells an altogether different story. Moscow’s interest in reaching a comprehensive settlement through negotiation with Washington, in fact, remained substantial. Aside from the fact that Sadat’s expulsion of their military advisers had undermined the basis for the bargain that they had earlier offered the Americans and had demonstrated that their position with the Arabs would never be secure until they could help deliver political

²⁷ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 298-300.

²⁸ Nixon, *RN*, p. 885. See also Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 493-494.

²⁹ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 209.

³⁰ Dina Rome Spechler, “The U.S.S.R. and Third-World Conflicts: Domestic Debate and Soviet Policy in the Middle East,” *World Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1986), p. 457.

³¹ “The Quest for Détente,” Statement by the Foreign Policy Task Force of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, July 31, 1974, http://neoconservatism.vaisse.net/doku.php?id=the_quest_for_detente. In the view of one scholar, this document represents “the first head-on assault on Détente by Neoconservatives.” See Justin Vaïsse’s companion website, <http://neoconservatism.vaisse.net/doku.php>; and Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

progress, the Soviets had grown extremely fearful that another Arab-Israeli war was imminent. Given the probability that such a conflict would cause major strains with the Americans, USSR leaders believed that the situation in the region represented a significant threat to their most important foreign policy objective, namely, the development of détente with Washington. Whereas a settlement would result in the fulfillment of all of Moscow's goals, the conflict's continuation endangered both its regional interests and relations with the United States.

Thus, Moscow continued to hope that Washington could be persuaded to work together on the Arab-Israeli issue and began exploring more seriously whether diplomatic relations with Israel could be reestablished. "Let Sadat think about what the end of the war in Vietnam means for him," Brezhnev said at a Politburo meeting on February 6, with the implication that with the conflict in Southeast Asia now over there would be fewer impediments to superpower cooperation elsewhere. The Soviet Union, he had added, would make an effort to improve its ties to Israel: "To just sit there with severed relations—that is not a policy."³²

Moscow, however, encountered a situation similar to what it had confronted in 1970. The Americans—as will be discussed below—despite the assurances they had given Soviet leaders, were again stonewalling and leaving the Soviet Union out of the diplomacy. Washington's strategy remained more or less totally aligned with Israeli policy and, in effect, was undermining the USSR position in the area. In the meantime, the Arabs' patience was wearing thin.

³² Anatoly S. Chernyaev Diary Entry, February 6, 1973, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB430/Chernyaev%201973%20final%20PDF%20version.pdf>. For the Soviet Union's contacts with Israel, see Memcon, March 30, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 125-126; and Excerpts from a Record of a Meeting between Soviet Journalist, Victor Louis, and General Director of the Prime Minister's Office, Mordechai Gazit," June 15, 1973, Cold War International History Project (CWIHP), <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114294>. On this issue, see also Transcript from a Workshop at Oslo, Norway, "US-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy toward the Middle East and Africa in the 1970s," October 1-3, 1994, Odd Arne Westad, ed., p. 61. Note also Sadat's assertion that the Soviet Union still had an important role to play in solving the Middle East dispute. See Memo from Richard T. Kennedy to Kissinger, "Subject: Secret Jordan-Egyptian Negotiations," January 2, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 2.

The Soviet decision to rearm the Arabs in early 1973 must be considered in this context. The Americans were not only continuing to supply Israel with substantial military assistance at a time when the balance of capabilities was already strongly in Jerusalem's favor, they were making little effort to move the peace process forward and managing the negotiations unilaterally. As a result, despite its deep concerns, Moscow felt it had no choice but to reopen its arms pipeline to maintain some influence with its clients.³³ More importantly, the decision for rearmament was, again, made to help in the achievement of political objectives. "Vietnam has set the Arabs a good example," one Soviet official said in February. "It shows how necessary it is to combine military action with political discussion."³⁴ Moscow's approach, one scholar notes, was intended to provide the Arabs with "leverage for negotiation rather than as prelude to war."³⁵

Even as the Kremlin rearmed Egypt and Syria, it continued to discourage war and stressed the need for a peaceful solution, even though doing so was contributing to the continued

³³ This was the crux of an important letter Sadat had sent Brezhnev in August. See Sadat, *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 233-234, 318-323. See also Message from Tito to Brezhnev, January 18, 1973, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113624>. On the Soviet decision to rearm the Arabs, see William B. Quandt, "Soviet Policy in the October Middle East War—I," *International Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (1977), p. 381; Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 164-169; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994), pp. 362-363; Jon D. Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs: The Soviet Union and War in the Middle East* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 98-117, 194-197; Galia Golan, *Yom Kippur and After: The Soviet Union and the Middle East Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 41, 71-73; Yigal Kipnis, *1973: The Road to War* (Charlottesville, VA: Just World, 2103), p. 43; Philip D. Stewart, Margaret G. Hermann, and Charles F. Hermann, "Modeling the 1973 Soviet Decision to Support Egypt," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (1989), pp. 35-59; and Richard D. Anderson, "Explaining Self-Defeating Foreign Policy Decisions: Interpreting Soviet Arms for Egypt in 1973 through Process or Domestic Bargaining Models?" *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (1992), pp. 759-762.

³⁴ Quoted in Haslam, *Russia's Cold War*, p. 272.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 272. Note also one study's characterization of the "double standard" in U.S. Middle East policy during this period. See Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, p. 174. Alexander George similarly argues that U.S. strategy violated the 1972 Basic Principles Agreement and incentivized Moscow to pursue a less cooperative approach. See George, "The Arab-Israeli War of October 1973," pp. 139-147. One scholar has also made the point that because the Americans showed no inclination to deviate from the Israeli position, the Soviets could not be expected to part company, at least publicly, with the formal Arab stance. See Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 365 n. 20.

erosion of USSR-Egyptian relations.³⁶ While some Kremlin officials might favor increased tension in the Middle East, Schlesinger indicated in a May 5 memorandum, overall the Soviets were “concerned and are counseling the Arabs against precipitate military action.”³⁷ Cairo, U.S. intelligence analysts believed, had grown bitter with “Soviet refusals to supply the type of military and diplomatic support it wants.”³⁸

Thus, USSR actions must be understood as a reaction to Washington’s refusal to look seriously at the Middle East problem. If the Americans were not only going to continue to delay taking action and to shift the military balance against the Arabs, while simultaneously leaving the Soviet Union out of the negotiations, it was only natural that Moscow would respond by reconsidering its restrained arms policy. That the Kremlin’s strategy remained as moderate as it did is actually rather striking, given the few benefits the Kremlin had accrued from its détente policy. “If I were a member of the Politburo,” Kissinger admitted on April 25, “I could make a strong case against Brezhnev in regard to the détente. He has received nothing.”³⁹

³⁶ The Soviets continued to supply equipment that was mainly useful for defensive warfare and could only achieve limited military objectives. Moscow, in fact, might have calculated that because war was inevitable in any event, it made sense to try to control how it would be prosecuted, so as to minimize the international dangers it would pose. And it is worth noting that USSR military experts were quite surprised by the Arabs’ early successes during the October War. On these points, see Golan, *Yom Kippur and After*, p. 41; and Fred L. Wehling, *Irresolute Princes: Kremlin Decision Making in Middle East Crises, 1967-1973* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997), p. 102. Thus in the months preceding the outbreak of hostilities, Shazly continued to argue that a limited attack was Sadat’s only option, given that Egypt could not match the Israelis in armored warfare and Jerusalem’s overwhelming air superiority. See Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez* (San Francisco: American Mideast Research, 1980), p. 204. On Egypt’s “limited aims strategy,” see also John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 155-164.

³⁷ Memo from Schlesinger to Kissinger, “Subject: Middle East Military Situation,” May 5, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 154.

³⁸ Intelligence Memo No. 1652/73 Prepared in the CIA, “The Status of Soviet Relations with Egypt and the Palestinians,” June 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 195. See also Memcon, February 27, 1973, p. 96; Memcon, May 12, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 167; Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Dobrynin’s Message on the Middle East: Brezhnev/Ismael Conversations in Moscow,” July 21, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 244 n. 4; Golan, *Yom Kippur and After*, pp. 42, 44, 47-50, 53; and Craig Daigle, *The Limits of Détente: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 286-287

³⁹ Memcon, April 25, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 323.

The Soviets, however, could not hold back the Arabs indefinitely. “Every door I have opened has been slammed in my face by Israel—with American blessings,” Sadat told an interviewer in April. Military action, he proclaimed, was “now inevitable,” as Washington had “left us no other way out.”⁴⁰ Given the deadlock, it was unrealistic to expect the Arabs to sit back and accept the situation. As even Nixon had written presciently two years earlier, if progress was not made by early 1973: “[T]he Soviet [Union] will have had no other choice but to build up the armed strength of Israel’s neighbors to the point that another Mideast war will be inevitable.”⁴¹

Even more revealing of the Kremlin’s preference for a political solution and anxiety about the chances of another major conflict breaking out was its repeated attempts to warn the Americans of the perils of continued inaction. The situation, a message Dobrynin had given Kissinger on January 28 noted, remained “complicated and dangerous. If effective measures are not taken the events there can get out of control.” And given the geopolitical structure of the dispute: “[T]here could develop quite unwelcome consequences for the cause of international security.” With this in mind, it was the Soviet view “that both the USSR and the US really can use their influence, their weight, and nature of their ties with the countries... in order to finally bring the whole matter to the liquidation of the military hotbed in the Middle East.”⁴²

Likewise, when he met with Kissinger in Zavidovo in May, Brezhnev laid great stress on the issue. Moscow, he emphasized, was doing everything in its power to restrain the Arabs, but if there was no movement toward a political settlement it was unlikely that war could be averted. Détente, the Soviet leader had added, would be put at risk, and it was therefore the Soviet view

⁴⁰ Quoted in Arnaud de Borchgrave, “The Battle is Now Inevitable,” *Newsweek*, April 9, 1973, p. 45.

⁴¹ Memo from Nixon to Rogers, May 26, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1969-1972* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2015), p. 859.

⁴² Message from Dobrynin to Kissinger, undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 20. See also Message from the Soviet Leadership to Nixon, undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 52-54; Editorial Note, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 118; Letter from Brezhnev to Nixon, May 3, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, pp. 328-329; and Message from Brezhnev to Nixon, May 13, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 172.

that the superpowers needed to work jointly to prevent such an outcome. “It will certainly be very strange indeed and incomprehensible,” Brezhnev had told Kissinger, “if two big states as the US and the Soviet Union should prove to be so impotent as to be unable to solve this problem.” The great powers, he said, could not simply “turn a blind eye on this question.”⁴³

The most significant Soviet warning, however, came during Brezhnev’s meeting with Nixon in San Clemente late on the night of June 23. Contrary to what Nixon and Kissinger later claimed, there is no evidence to suggest that the Soviet leader threatened the United States with war if the administration were not more forthcoming. Instead, he had simply warned the Americans that unless an effort were made to achieve a diplomatic solution, it would be impossible to avert a conflict in the Middle East.⁴⁴ Moscow understood that the White House could not agree publicly to a set of concrete principles on how to end the dispute, but the Soviet Union was willing to “make a gentleman’s agreement” and to keep the deal secret. And once a settlement had been reached, the USSR would reestablish diplomatic relations with Israel.⁴⁵

Thus, to characterize Soviet policy as opportunist and driven by ideological considerations, or to claim that Brezhnev had tried to menace the United States through threats of war, is highly problematic. Even Nixon and Kissinger, both at the time and subsequently, admitted as much. “I do find it credible now that Brezhnev tried to warn us at San Clemente,” Kissinger said in an interview after leaving office.⁴⁶ Moscow, he later acknowledged, had “discouraged” the Arabs from going to war and “tried hard to prevent an outbreak.” “Thus,” he

⁴³ Memcon, “Subjects: Nuclear Treaty; SALT Principles; Middle East; Communiqués of HAK visit and Brezhnev visit,” May 7, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 159-161, 163.

⁴⁴ Brezhnev may have made the point somewhat awkwardly. See Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 283.

⁴⁵ Memo for the President’s File by Kissinger, “Subject: President’s meeting with General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev on Saturday, June 23, 1973 at 10:30 p.m. at the Western White House, San Clemente, California,” June 23, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, pp. 539-542.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, p. 176.

said, “we do not believe the Soviets behaved irresponsibly even in the Middle East.”⁴⁷ The administration, he would eventually admit, had “put them off twice at Zavidovo and San Clemente when the Soviets wanted to make a bilateral political deal for the Middle East. We gave them nothing because we were under a misimpression about the Arab ability to attack.” The idea that the Soviets had stoked a conflict, he added, was “absolutely preposterous.”⁴⁸ Nixon agreed, telling Kissinger during the October War: “[A]s far as the Russians are concerned, they have a pretty good beef insofar as everything we have offered on the Mid-East, you know what I mean, that meeting in San Clemente, we were stringing them along and they know it.”⁴⁹

In retrospect, the results of the San Clemente consultation meant that war in the Middle East had become inevitable.⁵⁰ Although Moscow had consistently warned that a stalemate would inevitably result in an explosion, the United States had refused to take action with the Soviets to address the matter. How had this happened? If Nixon was so interested in reaching a settlement and believed that a final agreement would require cooperation with Moscow, why were the Soviets, who were obviously hoping to make a deal with the United States, completely ignored?

Paralysis in Washington: Between Watergate and Stalemate

Although the documentary record is not unambiguous, two principal factors explain the paradox between Nixon’s intention to move determinedly with the Soviet Union on the Arab-Israeli issue

⁴⁷ Memcon, “Subject: Meeting with Academicians,” December 19, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16: *Soviet Union, August 1974-December 1976* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2012), p. 390. See also Memcon, “Subjects: Jackson Amendment; CSCE; Middle East; Nuclear War,” October 24, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 212-213; Memo from Deputy National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft to President Gerald Ford, October 25, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 221; Memcon, “Subject: SALT; Middle East,” May 20, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 588; and Memcon, “Subject: CSCE; Middle East,” July 11, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 645.

⁴⁸ Memcon, “Subject: Draft Statement for Senate Foreign Relations Committee Appearance,” August 1, 1974, Kissinger Transcripts Collection 01268, Digital National Security Archive (DNSA).

⁴⁹ Telephone Conversation (Telecon), October 14, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 496. Other scholars agree that Brezhnev’s warning was genuine. See Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, pp. 277-283; and Patrick Tyler, *A World of Trouble: The White House and the Middle East—from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), pp. 125-130.

⁵⁰ Gromyko did warn Nixon and Kissinger one last time about the dangers posed by the Middle East situation on the eve of the October War, but by that time it was much too late. See Memcon, September 28, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 559.

and the reality that U.S. policy throughout 1973 proved anything but ambitious. First and most significantly, even with the election out of the way, the American domestic context continued to impose real constraints on the White House. While such limitations on the administration's freedom of action were, on their own, manageable and primarily important in terms of how they affected its tactical handling of the issue, when combined with the impact of the Watergate scandal that ultimately destroyed Nixon's presidency, they played a crucial role in thwarting his plans in the Middle East. Second, with the president's demise and the concomitant rise of Kissinger as the prime shaper of American foreign policy, U.S. strategy moved in a very different direction. The two men, after all, had never seen eye to eye on the Arab-Israeli problem. Specifically, Kissinger's views on how to handle the Soviet aspect of the issue diverged noticeably from those held by Nixon, which resulted in crucial alterations to American strategy.

Even with the election behind him, Nixon could not simply proceed to implement his preferred policy in the Middle East without regard for domestic political factors. "Israel's lobby is so strong that Congress is not reasonable," he had told the Cabinet on May 18. Such constraints were deeply frustrating, the president said, because he felt that Washington needed to adopt "policies which don't allow an obsession with one state to destroy our status in the Middle East."⁵¹ "It would," one U.S. official therefore observed, "be a significant political decision to take [the Arab-Israeli conflict] on." The president probably would be unwilling to take such a risk, as he could "really cause an uproar with any move." The administration, Kissinger concurred, had to get its "ducks in a row before we start," because the White House would be

⁵¹ Memcon, May 18, 1973.

sure to encounter problems “controlling the media and financial pressure.”⁵² “We could not exert ourselves [in 1973],” he said later, “for the domestic price we would have to pay.”⁵³

The White House felt especially constrained in its ability to manipulate arms assistance, perhaps its most potent source of leverage, in relation to Israel’s negotiating stance.⁵⁴ The United States had “very few assets” with Jerusalem, Nixon and Kissinger agreed on February 26, in part because, as the latter put it, a threat to cut off aid would lead to “an uproar.”⁵⁵ Even during the October War, White House officials had taken such considerations into account. “[Israel’s Ambassador Simcha] Dinitz has to keep the pro-Israel group off our back,” Nixon complained to his aides on October 9. The president was willing to help, “But the quid pro quo is to tell Golda to call off the Jewish Community in this country.”⁵⁶ It had been a wise move, one Defense Department analyst stated toward the close of the war, for the White House to request supplementary assistance for Israel, because otherwise “the Jewish leaders would have come right down the gun barrel at us.... There are 85 Senators in the Jewish pocket, and they would have taken the lead on it.”⁵⁷

⁵² Memcon, September 20, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 272-273. Note also Nixon’s belief that “the problem with the Israelis in Israel was not nearly as difficult as the Jewish community here.” See Nixon, *RN*, p. 787.

⁵³ Memcon, December 19, 1974, p. 402. Note also the White House’s continued concern about expending political capital without a reasonable prospect for success. See Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, February 21, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 59.

⁵⁴ This finding is consistent with the work of Robert Trice. See Trice, *Interest Groups and the Foreign Policy Process: U.S. Policy in the Middle East* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976), pp. 55-59.

⁵⁵ Editorial Note of Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 86. Kissinger did add, however, that he believed that the administration “could get responsible members of the Jewish community and turn them around against Israel.” Note also Kissinger’s comments during an August 13 meeting with the new U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Kenneth Keating. See Boaz Vanetik and Zaki Shalom, *The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Peace Process, 1969-1973: From the Rogers Plan to the Outbreak of the Yom Kippur War* (Chicago: Academic Sussex Press, 2013), p. 241.

⁵⁶ Memcon, October 9, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 411-412. See also Telecon, October 11, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 437-438; Memcon, “Subject: WSAG [Washington Special Actions Group] Principals: Middle East War,” October 17, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 586; and Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 485. Note also Dinitz’s comments on this issue. See Memcon, October 12-13, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 461. Kissinger later wrote that the Israeli ambassador deserved a monument for his role in getting the White House to approve a resupply effort. See Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), p. 447. See also Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 253. Dinitz had replaced Rabin in March.

⁵⁷ Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” October 24, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 718.

In addition, top administration officials felt incapable, in large part due to domestic constraints, of influencing the Meir government until the Arabs had first agreed to negotiations with Jerusalem. The United States, one State Department paper pointed out, simply could not be effective in a vacuum.⁵⁸ As Kissinger put it, “If the Israelis could have designed [Egypt’s] strategy, they couldn’t have done it better, because you come up with all these high-sounding formulae, which cannot be accepted, and which leads only to stalemate, the result of which, then, is that the Israelis stay exactly where they are, which is what they want.”⁵⁹

Even so, given his strong political position in the aftermath of the election, Nixon in all likelihood could have handled the domestic problem. Sadat’s national security adviser, Hafez Ismail, after all, had offered during his February meetings with Kissinger what some scholars have called “the most far-reaching proposal yet by the Egyptians in the negotiations for a settlement with Israel.”⁶⁰ Cairo, Kissinger informed Nixon, was now willing to accept a separate agreement with Jerusalem, although full normalization of relations would have to await a settlement of the other aspects of the conflict.⁶¹ Due to its rapidly deteriorating economic situation and realization that it could not retake its territory by force, Helms had indicated in September: “Egypt as a whole, at all levels, recognizes its need for peace. Egypt’s leadership recognizes and accepts what it was unwilling to accept prior to 1967, that the price it must pay for its 1967 defeat by Israel is Egyptian agreement to allow Israel to exist as a state and in

⁵⁸ Vanetik and Shalom, *The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Peace Process*, pp. 219-220.

⁵⁹ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, February 21, 1973, pp. 56-57.

⁶⁰ Vanetik and Shalom, *The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Peace Process*, p. 208.

⁶¹ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: My Talks with Hafiz Ismail—Summary,” February 25-26, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 80-84; and Editorial Note, p. 85.

conditions of genuine peace.” Sadat, in fact, had enjoyed the support of “the great majority of his people” when he had launched his peace initiative in 1971.⁶²

Thus, domestic constraints were primarily significant in terms of how they affected the administration’s tactics. Specifically, Nixon and Kissinger felt that they had to proceed in steps, as they could not exert intense pressure on Israel at the outset of any negotiation. A partial deal was, Nixon wrote in his diary, “the only thing we can talk about—that’s the only thing the Israelis will ever go for—and the Egyptians are just simply going to have to take a settlement of that sort—or the Arabs are—with the assurance that we will do the best we can to get a total settlement later.”⁶³ “The US,” Kissinger said, “needs to avoid the kind of concrete detail that would trigger sharp domestic and Israeli pressures on us at the outset and limit the usefulness of our involvement before we have even begun. The potential of these pressures is great.”⁶⁴

In addition, Nixon continued to employ deceptive tactics with Meir. When the two met on March 1, Nixon gave no hint of his frustration with Israel’s negotiating behavior. The president pledged that he would not pressure Jerusalem and that U.S. arms assistance would not be linked to the diplomatic process. And rather than focus on a comprehensive settlement, the two sides agreed to try for an interim deal linked only vaguely to an overall agreement. Meir was so pleased with the results of the consultation that she twice stated: “We never had it so good.”⁶⁵

⁶² Memo from Helms to Kissinger, “Subject: Nature of the Exploratory Talks,” September 22, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 1051. See also Paper Prepared in the CIA, “Comments on the Egyptian Government Message of 1 February 1973,” undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 22.

⁶³ Nixon, *RN*, p. 786. See also Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, pp. 459-460.

⁶⁴ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Meeting with Hafiz Ismail on May 20,” May 20, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 187-188, 190. “I felt,” Kissinger added in this report, “that more progress was made than last time in bringing Ismail to understand the reasoning and the domestic political realities behind our proposal to move toward a settlement in a step-by-step approach.” See also Memcon, “Subject: Middle East; Indochina,” May 8, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, pp. 441-442.

⁶⁵ Memcon, March 1, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 108-113. See also Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 215-218.

Immediately following the meeting, however, Nixon and Kissinger agreed that the White House would obviously have to use pressure. If Egypt accepted the idea of an interim deal connected only generally to a final agreement, Kissinger said, the administration might “have to squeeze the Israelis.... We might have to screw them a bit.” The Americans, Nixon agreed, would “tell [the Israelis] we’re not squeezing them and then squeeze [them].” When “dealing with somebody that’s intelligent,” he added, “there’s got to be subtlety.” The president boasted that he had convinced Meir that he was not “linking anything, knowing damn well we will.”⁶⁶

In short, although domestic political considerations limited Nixon’s freedom of maneuver on the Arab-Israeli question, they did not impose an absolute check on his ability to formulate policy. The president would continue to mask his intentions with Jerusalem, and if the Arabs could be portrayed as more reasonable, he could then pursue a more forceful strategy.

To be sure, these tactical necessities, the need for which was in large part a function of American domestic political constraints, placed real obstacles in the path of U.S.-USSR cooperation. The United States, Nixon had responded to Brezhnev in San Clemente, had a genuine procedural disagreement with the Soviet Union on the Arab-Israeli question. “It would be very easy for me to say that Israel should withdraw from all the occupied territories and call it an agreed principle,” he had told the general secretary. “But that’s what the argument is about.” The Politburo’s preferred approach was simply infeasible, for the White House could neither move in a negotiating vacuum nor operate forcefully until the appropriate context had first been developed.⁶⁷ And Nixon, of course, had a point; the idea that peace could be achieved without the Arabs agreeing even to hold negotiations was, indeed, unreasonable.

⁶⁶ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, March 1, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 115-116.

⁶⁷ Memo for the President’s File by Kissinger, June 23, 1973, pp. 539-542.

Still, under ordinary conditions it is likely that the president would have found much of what Brezhnev had proposed quite attractive. Aside from their tactical divergence, the two men shared essentially indistinguishable views on the substance of a settlement. The terms Brezhnev had espoused, one historian rightly notes, “bore a strong similarity” to the Rogers Plan.⁶⁸

Indeed, the evidence shows quite strikingly that Nixon wanted to cooperate with the Soviets. Even in the midst of the October War, the president observed that the Kremlin seemed to “like the condominium business.” Although the Israelis would “squeal like stuck pigs,” he told Kissinger, the way forward was for “Brezhnev and Nixon [to] settle this damn thing. That ought to be done.”⁶⁹ “I believe that, beyond a doubt,” he wrote on October 20, “we are now facing the best opportunity we have had in 15 years to build a lasting peace in the Middle East. I am convinced that history will hold us responsible if we let this opportunity slip by.” The superpowers, therefore, had to go “all out to achieve a just settlement now.” Israel would prevail in this instance, but it was in Jerusalem’s own interest for Washington and Moscow to reach an agreement “which is reasonable and which we can ask the Soviets to press on the Arabs.” The failure to achieve Middle East peace had been the administration’s “greatest foreign policy weakness over the past four and a half years,” and Nixon was now determined to push for a settlement, regardless of the domestic political consequences.⁷⁰

The president hoped that an Arab-Israeli settlement would be “without question one of the brightest stars in which we hope will be a galaxy for peace stemming from the Nixon-Brezhnev relationship.” The Soviet leader, he admitted, had been right at San Clemente, and the time had now come to “take decisive action to resolve the problem. Only the U.S. and the Soviet

⁶⁸ George Lenczowski, *American Presidents and the Middle East* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 128.

⁶⁹ Telecon, October 14, 1973, p. 499.

⁷⁰ Telegram from Scowcroft to Kissinger, October 20, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 628.

Union have the power and influence to create the permanent conditions necessary to avoid another war.” Because the parties to the conflict could never reach agreement on their own, he added: “Nixon and Brezhnev, looking at the problem more dispassionately, must step in, determine the proper course of action to a just settlement, and then bring the necessary pressure on our respective friends for a settlement which will at last bring peace to this troubled area.”⁷¹

And once the war had ended, Nixon intended to pressure Jerusalem to get a deal. “The one thing we have to be concerned about... looking down the road,” he had told Kissinger early in the conflict, “is that the Israelis when they finish clobbering the Egyptians and the Syrians... will be even more impossible to deal with than before and you and I have got to determine in our own minds, we must have a diplomatic settlement there.” The administration, the president emphasized, could not have “this thing hang over for another four years and have us at odds with the Arab world. We’re not going to do it anymore.”⁷² With this in mind, the Americans would need “to squeeze the Israelis when this is over and the Russians have got to know it. We’ve got to squeeze them goddamn hard. And that’s the way it is going to be done.”⁷³ Israel, he stressed, would have to be brought to the negotiating table “kicking and screaming.”⁷⁴

Nixon’s comments in the conflict’s aftermath demonstrate that he had been serious about pursuing this approach. The Meir government, he wrote Kissinger on December 12, would have to “go it alone” if its intransigence resulted in a resumption of hostilities.⁷⁵ “I will deliver the

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 628-629.

⁷² Telecon, October 8, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 389.

⁷³ Telecon, October 14, 1973, p. 496.

⁷⁴ Memcon, October 17, 1973, p. 586.

⁷⁵ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Information Items,” December 12, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 1053 n. 2. See also Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Information Items,” November 26, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 981 n. 4; and Memcon, December 16, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 1105, 1110.

Israelis,” the president pledged to Dobrynin two weeks later. “It will be done.”⁷⁶ Israel, he told a group of American Jewish leaders as his presidency neared its end, could not survive indefinitely without reaching a political agreement with its Arab neighbors, and he therefore had no intention of giving Jerusalem a “blank check.”⁷⁷ Consequently, on at least two occasions in mid-1974, Nixon ordered a complete cutoff of aid to Israel to compel greater flexibility on its part, although Kissinger persuaded him to reverse his decision in each instance.⁷⁸

And the president still believed that the way to get a settlement was via Soviet-American cooperation. To be sure, the Nixon still occasionally expressed doubt about Moscow’s intentions, but the great bulk of the evidence shows that he continued to favor a joint effort by the superpowers. “The U.S.,” he told Congressional leaders on November 27, “is committed to movement on peace. In that case, only the U.S. and the Soviet Union matter and that is why the Soviet Union must play a role.”⁷⁹ Israel, he told Dobrynin, actually did not want a settlement or, for that matter, an end to the Cold War. Jerusalem, he claimed, hoped to exploit Soviet-American tensions to avoid a showdown with Washington, and was aided in this goal by its politically influential supporters in the United States. The president, in fact, was considering making a major address on the matter and had grown bitter about the attacks on détente coming from Israel’s American friends.⁸⁰ “Permanent peace is possible in the Middle East,” he told Gromyko

⁷⁶ Memo for the President’s File by Kissinger, “Subject: Meeting with Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy F. Dobrynin, in the Oval Office, Wednesday, December 26, 1973, 10:35-11:29 a.m.,” December 26, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 1197.

⁷⁷ Nixon, *RN*, pp. 1007-1008. See also Letter from Nixon to Meir, May 4, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 219.

⁷⁸ One of the president’s final acts in office was to order such a cutoff. See Memo from Scowcroft to Nixon, May 15, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 280-281; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 1078-1079, 1205; Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land: America’s Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2008), p. 155; and Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 566. Note also Nixon’s threat of “a reassessment of United States policy toward Israel” during the Syrian-Israeli disengagement negotiation. See Letter from Nixon to Meir, May 22, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 295.

⁷⁹ Minutes of a Bipartisan Leadership Meeting, November 27, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 993.

⁸⁰ Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 303-305.

in February 1974, “only if it is supported by the Soviet Union and the US.”⁸¹ It was, he said, “a short-sighted view” for either side to think that it could “drive the other out” of the area.⁸²

What, then, explains the superpowers’ failure to reach an agreement? And why did the Middle East contribute to the eventual degeneration of U.S.-USSR relations?

The problem was that early in 1973, Watergate had begun undermining Nixon’s ability to conduct Arab-Israeli diplomacy. Contrary to Kissinger’s later assertion that the issue “had the least impact on our Middle East policy,” the president’s preoccupation with domestic controversy, combined with his belief that he could not afford to make additional political enemies in his weakened state, prevented him from pursuing a settlement. As Kissinger himself later wrote, Nixon had become “a lame duck” by the middle of 1973.⁸³ “At the moment when Nixon might have pushed for a new Mideast initiative,” Steven Spiegel observes, “his attention was elsewhere.”⁸⁴ The administration, Saunders told a British official on June 21, understood that the situation had become extremely dangerous, but would have an “especial difficulty in taking steps which might provoke a confrontation with the Jewish lobby and their congressional supporters when they have been weakened domestically by the Watergate Affair.”⁸⁵ To the extent that the scandal had been a factor at San Clemente, then, it was on the American side, for Nixon’s domestic problems precluded the sort of approach that Brezhnev had advocated.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Memcon, February 4, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 669.

⁸² Memo for the President’s File by Kissinger, December 26, 1973, p. 1197. See also Memcon, “Subject: Bipartisan Leadership Meeting on the Egyptian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement,” January 21, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 101; and Memcon, April 12, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 827.

⁸³ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 114, 195.

⁸⁴ Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 239.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Yaqub, “The Politics of Stalemate,” p. 53. See also William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 103; Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 178-179; and Vanetik and Shalom, *The Nixon Administration and the Middle East Peace Process*, pp. 229-231, 242, 258.

⁸⁶ Kipnis, 1973, p. 170; and Tyler, *A World of Trouble*, pp. 126-127, 129.

The scandal, it is clear, ultimately left Nixon far too weak to take decisive action. The president's order to stop deliveries of military equipment to Jerusalem, Kissinger told Schlesinger a week prior to his resignation, was "not realistic." The Israelis, the secretary of state believed, "could roll any aid bill through the Congress. The only resistance they take seriously is that of the President—and he is paralyzed now."⁸⁷ U.S. strategy, Kissinger had explained to Syrian President Hafez al-Asad in May, was to "push the Israelis as far as possible without raising a general uproar. If we push it too far, given the situation the President faces, we could face months of paralysis."⁸⁸ Jerusalem, Kissinger believed, now felt free to ignore Nixon. Among the reasons for Israel's intransigence during the disengagement negotiations with Syria, he claimed, was its "assessment of Presidential paralysis—the last message from the President was brushed off with disdain by [Meir]."⁸⁹ "There is no question," he admitted to Allon, now Israel's foreign minister, in July, "that in our domestic situation as it is, systematic pressure on Israel is less likely. I might as well state it, because you know it anyway."⁹⁰

So Nixon was in no position to formulate Middle East strategy, which left Kissinger in the central position to shape U.S. policy, a fact that had profound implications for the way the diplomacy ultimately ran its course. Although they concurred in some respects in how they assessed the problem, the two men diverged in their beliefs more often than not on the Arab-Israeli question. "Henry's wrong on the Mideast," Nixon had told Haldeman and Ehrlichman at one point. "I mean, he just happens to be wrong." The president characterized his position on the

⁸⁷ Memcon, August 2, 1974, folder: Nixon Administration Memcons, box 4, Ford Digital Library. See also Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 316.

⁸⁸ Memcon, May 8, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 244. See also Telegram from Kissinger to the Embassy in Egypt, May 16, 1974, folder: Egypt (2), box 12, National Security Adviser (NSA) Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, 1969-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁸⁹ Telegram from Kissinger to Scowcroft, May 14, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 277.

⁹⁰ Memcon, July 30, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 390. See also Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 1071, 1112, 1140, 1178; and Tyler, *A World of Trouble*, pp. 154, 173. Kissinger, naturally, felt compelled to deny that Watergate restricted U.S. Middle East policy in his public remarks. See "Kissinger Meets Haikal," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1974), p. 214.

matter as “very different from Henry’s. It’s the one thing he’s blind on.” It was necessary, he said, to keep Kissinger excluded from the decision-making process in the area, because “when he gets involved in Israel, he is totally irrational about everything else.”⁹¹

In particular, the two men held conflicting perspectives on how to deal with the Soviet Union in the Middle East. Nixon, it is clear, considered the inclusion of the USSR indispensable to any final settlement and, in the final analysis, believed that the appropriate path to such an agreement was through superpower cooperation for what would be essentially an imposed solution. Kissinger, by contrast, set as arguably his top objective the reduction of Moscow’s influence in the region. And given his recognition of the overlap in the U.S. and USSR visions for a settlement, his position must have stemmed from his anti-Soviet views rather than, as he often claimed, a genuine belief that the Kremlin backed the “radical Arab program.”

As a result, Kissinger chose to delay throughout 1973. To be sure, the Soviet factor was not the only reason for this decision. Pessimistic about his prospects for success, the national security adviser, who would become secretary of state in September, was reluctant to commit his personal prestige to a major effort. And because he considered Israel’s military position

⁹¹ Conversation among Nixon, Ehrlichman, and Haldeman, May 10, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, pp. 852, 853-854. Daigle asserts that the idea that Nixon was reluctant to allow Kissinger to be involved in the formulation of Middle East policy due to the fact that he was Jewish “has been overstated by scholars.” See Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 33. The president’s comments during this conversation call this claim into question. Aside from his remarks about Kissinger, the president stated that he had “never found a Jew that was rational about Israel—never one.... That’s why Johnson’s appointment of Goldberg to the UN was a terrible, terrible blunder.” See p. 855. See also Conversation between Nixon, Haldeman and Ehrlichman, March 9, 1971, in Douglas Brinkley and Luke A. Nichter, eds., *The Nixon Tapes, 1971-1972* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), pp. 37-38; Nixon, *RN*, p. 477; and Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 348. Note also the multiple instances in which Nixon had complained about Kissinger getting involved in Middle East strategy discussions. See Haldeman Diary Entry, March 10, 1970, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 136; Haldeman Diary Entry, March 18, 1970, in Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, p. 139; and Memcon, February 23, 1971, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 13: *Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), pp. 361, 363. For a more extreme view of Kissinger’s Middle East diplomacy and how it contrasted with Nixon’s preferences, see Salim Yaquub, “The Weight of Conquest: Henry Kissinger and the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” in Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds., *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 227-248. For Kissinger’s own thoughts on how his background contributed to his view of the issue, see Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 203; and Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), p. 562.

impregnable, especially with the removal of USSR forces from Egypt, the problem seemed less urgent.⁹² In addition, Kissinger preferred to wait until after Israel's elections.⁹³ Consequently, although he made frequent attempts to persuade the Meir government to be more flexible and comprehended the danger of an explosion, at no time did he put pressure on Jerusalem.⁹⁴

These considerations aside, a critical aspect of Kissinger's strategy was to undercut the Soviet position in the region. From the moment he had taken office, of course, he had believed that the reduction of USSR influence was "the prerequisite of effective Middle East diplomacy."⁹⁵ A prolonged stalemate, he calculated, would secure that objective by demonstrating Moscow's impotence, which would thereby oblige the Arabs to turn to Washington. The scenario the White House had been discussing with the Soviets in 1971-1972, Kissinger had crowed after Sadat's expulsion of the USSR forces, constituted "one of the better negotiations we've conducted," because the delay is what had frustrated the Egyptian president.⁹⁶ His basic approach, he stressed, had always been to create enough dissatisfaction among the

⁹² Memcon, January 16, 1973, Kissinger Conversations, Supplement 00186, DNSA. See also Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 256; Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, p. 175; and Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 66-67. On the administration's belief that Israel's military superiority would deter an Arab attack, see also Conversation among Nixon, Kissinger, and Sisco, April 13, 1973, p. 146; and Yaqub, "The Politics of Stalemate," p. 50. On the U.S.-Israeli intelligence failure to anticipate the October War, see Uri Bar-Joseph, *The Watchman Fell Asleep: The Surprise of the Yom Kippur War and Its Sources* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).

⁹³ There is a debate among scholars regarding how important a factor the Israeli election was in shaping U.S. policy. See Kipnis, 1973, pp. 26-27, 77-80, 84, 98, 172-173; Craig Daigle, *H-Diplo* Review Essay, May 23, 2014, <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Daigle-Kipnis.pdf>; Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 245; Kipnis, *H-Diplo* Review Essay—Author's Response, May 26, 2014, <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Daigle-Kipnis-response.pdf>; and Daigle, *H-Diplo* Review Essay—Reply to Author's Response, May 30, 2014, <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Daigle-Kipnis-reply.pdf>. My own view is that Israel's elections, at least early in the year, influenced Nixon's thinking only marginally but once Watergate began to take its toll, the issue had a much greater impact on American strategy. On this question, see also Yaqub, "The Politics of Stalemate," p. 53.

⁹⁴ Kissinger pursued this strategy even though he believed it was "leading [Israel] to disaster." Quoted in Edward R.F. Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger: A Secret History of American Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Reader's Digest, 1976), p. 27.

⁹⁵ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 350-351.

⁹⁶ It is worth noting, with this in mind, that the administration had persisted in its efforts to convince Sadat to remove the Soviets' forces from Egypt into 1972 by passing messages to him through the Saudis. See "Arab Aide's Talk with Nixon Called Factor in Sadat Decision," *New York Times*, July 24, 1972, p. 2; and Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, pp. 22, 65.

Arabs “with the inability of the Russians to produce something [so that] they will be forced to move to us.”⁹⁷

Thus, Kissinger consistently refused to negotiate with the Soviets, even though they were “pleading” with the administration to look at the problem more seriously.⁹⁸ The administration, he had told Rabin, intended to work only with the Egyptians and to keep the Soviets excluded at least until the second Brezhnev-Nixon summit.⁹⁹ Now that the United States was talking to the Egyptians directly, he informed Dinitz, the Americans were able to “kill off talks with the Russians.” The White House, he stressed, was “pushing nothing, we are wasting time.” Because the Kremlin had little leverage to change the situation, “[W]ith the Russians there is practically nothing going on.” The national security adviser would “take no initiatives. I will react in a slow-moving way to [Egypt’s] proposals. If it moves slowly and drags through the summit, that is their problem. I am not aiming at a Nobel Prize on the Middle East.” The Americans, he had added, would encourage Israel to begin thinking only about “eventual negotiations.”¹⁰⁰ U.S. strategy, he said as late as September 10, was “to exhaust the Arabs.”¹⁰¹

And Kissinger planned to take advantage of Moscow’s stake in improving its relationship with Washington to maintain the stalemate and weaken the USSR position in the region. “[O]ur policy to reduce and where possible to eliminate Soviet influence in the Middle East,” he later boasted, “was in fact making progress under the cover of détente.”¹⁰² Sadat, he had told King Hussein in February, could not “play the United States off against the Russians, because the

⁹⁷ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, July 25, 1972, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 1026.

⁹⁸ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, February 21, 1973, p. 56. See also Paper Prepared in the CIA, undated, p. 24.

⁹⁹ Memcon, February 27, 1973, p. 98. See also Editorial Note, pp. 85-86.

¹⁰⁰ Memcon, March 30, 1973, pp. 126-128. See also Editorial Note, p. 86; and Memcon, March 8, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 275. The basic thrust of Kipnis’s argument is that Kissinger repeatedly encouraged the Israelis to show greater flexibility throughout the year but was unwilling to use pressure to achieve that objective, at least until after their October elections. See Kipnis, *1973*.

¹⁰¹ Memcon, September 10, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 267.

¹⁰² Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 594.

Russians and we have more important common interests than Egypt.”¹⁰³ The Americans were “under massive pressure from the Soviets,” Nixon and Kissinger agreed, but the right approach was to “waste time so that there’s no blowup.” Moscow’s frustration, the latter argued, would be assuaged by the Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War, and given Israel’s military superiority, war could only come “because of the irrationality of the Arabs.” With any luck, the Egyptians would cave and Washington “could buy [itself] a year.”¹⁰⁴

Watergate, thus, had a pronounced effect on U.S. Middle East policy. Nixon, who had planned to make the Arab-Israeli issue his highest foreign policy priority, was, as a result of the scandal, quickly deprived of the requisite political capital to launch an ambitious initiative. Of equal importance, the president’s downfall put Middle East strategy in the hands of Kissinger, whose ideas on the matter, particularly as they related to the Soviet role in the peace process, were inconsistent with Nixon’s. As Quandt later observed, “Nixon was more inclined than Kissinger to consider a forceful American role in imposing a settlement in the region and was not reluctant to talk of pressuring Israel. But he was neither able nor determined to follow through on these sentiments.”¹⁰⁵ When, as Brezhnev had predicted it would, the region exploded in October, the contrast between the two men became unmistakable.

“A Protracted Duel”?

The October War was, Kissinger later wrote, “a protracted duel in which Washington and Moscow, each protesting its devotion to cooperation, sought to weaken the other without an open confrontation.” Détente notwithstanding, he claims in his memoir, the Soviet Union had no

¹⁰³ Memcon, February 27, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 94.

¹⁰⁴ Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, May 16, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 178-179. See also Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Your Meetings with Brezhnev,” June 14, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 204-207.

¹⁰⁵ Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 463 n. 1. I am grateful to Dr. Quandt for discussing this aspect of the story with me at length.

interest in cooperation during the conflict. To the contrary, the Kremlin's objective had been "to intensify [our dilemmas]." Washington's aims were more or less the same. "To demonstrate the futility of Soviet-backed blackmail," he asserts, "had been for some time the key to our diplomacy." The conflict represented an "unexpected showdown. At its end—if we played our cards well—the Arab countries might abandon reliance on Soviet pressure and seek goals through cooperation with the United States."¹⁰⁶

What stands out from a careful analysis of the way events ran their course during the conflict, however, is the overall restraint exhibited by the USSR leadership. Moscow's objectives during the war, Raymond Garthoff correctly observes, were "modest." To be sure, the Kremlin hoped to recover some of the ground it had lost in the Arab world and took into account its concerns about its credibility as a great power patron, but it attached far greater importance to the goal of using its improved relationship with Washington to convince the Americans to allow it to "share in the peace process."¹⁰⁷ "The paramount consideration for the Kremlin," one Soviet official later wrote, "was to ensure that the war did nothing to damage Soviet-American détente."¹⁰⁸ Although USSR strategists certainly hoped that the outcome of the war would leave the Arabs with more bargaining leverage, their overriding priorities were to localize the conflict and win an influential role for the Soviet Union in the postwar peace negotiations.

When the Soviets finally learned definitively on October 4 that Egypt and Syria would launch a simultaneous, surprise attack against Israel two days later, the mood at the Kremlin was one of consternation. Moscow, Gromyko told his subordinates, had warned its clients against taking military action, as the result was likely to be another battlefield defeat and potentially a

¹⁰⁶ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 459, 467, 468. See also Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁷ Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 373. See also Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 287-288.

¹⁰⁸ Victor Israelyan, *On the Battlefields of the Cold War: A Soviet Ambassador's Confession* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), p. 249.

serious blow to its détente policy. The Soviets, moreover, made little effort to disguise Arab intentions, believing the Americans and Israelis could not possibly have missed the signs that war was imminent. In blatant disregard for its clients' interests, Moscow elected to evacuate its dependents from Egypt on the eve of the war, which ought to have alerted Washington and Jerusalem, with Gromyko saying simply: "The lives of Soviet people are dearer to us."¹⁰⁹ Even Kissinger later admitted that it had been "inexplicable" that the Americans had overlooked this signal.¹¹⁰ It had not been Moscow's fault, he said later, "if our intelligence did not interpret this correctly."¹¹¹ The Kremlin's message to the Arabs, then, had not been one of encouragement.¹¹²

Likewise, the USSR's military posture during the war was deliberately structured to underscore to Washington the Kremlin's preference that the war stay localized. "In fact," the commander of U.S. naval forces in Europe later said, "the Soviets weren't overly aggressive. It looked as though they were taking some care not to cause an incident. On the whole, their overt posture was restrained and considerate."¹¹³ Moscow, naturally, raised the readiness of its military forces, but these were "normal precautions under circumstances of extreme international tension

¹⁰⁹ Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 2-3, 5, 8-12, 14, 16-18, 21, 29. The Soviets were almost certainly aware by August or September that war was on the horizon, but it was not until October 4 that they knew the precise timing of the attack. As Shazly points out, the Arabs had deliberately misled their patron about their intentions. See Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez*, p. 212. Sadat later wrote that he was extremely annoyed about the USSR decision to evacuate its citizens. See Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, p. 247.

¹¹⁰ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 465, 467. The purpose of the evacuation, Brezhnev later told Kissinger, had been to alert the Americans to the possibility of war. See Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 272-273.

¹¹¹ Memcon, December 19, 1974, p. 390.

¹¹² This was the basic thrust of Brezhnev's October 4 letter to Sadat. See Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 10-11. As one study notes, the Soviet Union has tended to view large-scale Middle East wars as "no-win" scenarios. See Uri Bar-Joseph and John P. Hannah, "Intervention Threats in Short Arab-Israeli Wars: An Analysis of Soviet Crisis Behavior," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1988), p. 444. See also Quandt, "Soviet Policy in the October Middle East War—I," pp. 379, 382-386; and Alexei Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East: From Messianism to Pragmatism* (Reading: Ithaca, 1993), pp. 97-101.

¹¹³ Quoted in Golan, *Yom Kippur and After*, p. 109. See also Quandt, "Soviet Policy in the October Middle East War—I," pp. 386, 388; and Quandt, *Peace Process*, pp. 108-109. Note also Daigle's claim that "Brezhnev bent over backward to make it clear to Nixon and Kissinger that the Soviets did not want to get involved in the war." See Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, pp. 300-301. Kissinger understood at the time that this was the signal Moscow intended to send. See Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, "Subject: Middle East," October 7, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 356.

and a war in its direct neighborhood.” Moreover, as Schlesinger later acknowledged, the Soviets had at no one point during the conflict moved any troops for action.¹¹⁴

U.S. officials during the war complained that the Kremlin leaders had attempted to escalate the fighting by encouraging the other Arab states to support Egypt and Syria by direct intervention and through the imposition of an oil embargo on the United States and its allies.¹¹⁵ While unhelpful, Brezhnev’s declared backing for greater Arab participation in the war was cheap rhetoric and, in any case, had little effect on military developments.¹¹⁶ The Soviets, it should be noted, were beginning to come under pressure from their clients by October 8, when their messages encouraging Arab solidarity were dispatched, because the war had started to turn in Israel’s favor on the Syrian front. Brezhnev’s much-criticized letter to Boumedienne urging Arab intervention, moreover, was hardly one of all-out support. The message, in fact, implied that there were definite limits to USSR willingness to back Egypt and Syria and, thus, the provisioning of additional assistance would have to be the responsibility of the other Arabs. With this in mind, the purpose of Moscow’s declaratory policy seems to have been to deflect criticism from its clients and justify its posture of restraint, even as Syria’s military position continued to deteriorate.¹¹⁷ In addition, as even Kissinger admits, Dobrynin’s point that it was hypocritical of

¹¹⁴ Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, p. 191. Note also Chernyaev’s comments on Soviet press coverage of the war. See Chernyaev Diary Entry, October 14, 1973, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB430/Chernyaev%201973%20final%20PDF%20version.pdf>.

¹¹⁵ Memcon, “Subject: Special WSAG—Principals Only,” October 9, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 400-402; Memcon, October 9, 1973, p. 411; and Memo from Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger, “Subject: The Soviet Role in the Middle East War,” October 10, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 416-418. See also Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 494. Note, however, that some U.S. officials, like CIA Director William Colby, understood that Soviet rhetorical support for the Arabs was “cheap. It is not costing them anything.” Note also Kissinger’s admission that the Soviet Union might simply have been posturing. See Memcon, October 10, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 421.

¹¹⁶ Tyler, *A World of Trouble*, pp. 570-571 n. 16.

¹¹⁷ Quandt, “Soviet Policy in the October Middle East War—I,” pp. 388-389; and Golan, *Yom Kippur and After*, pp. 81-82.

the Americans to complain about Moscow's public backing for the Arabs, while simultaneously making similar statements in support of Israel, "was not without merit."¹¹⁸

As for the idea that Moscow had pressed the Arabs to utilize "the oil weapon," the evidence demonstrates exactly the opposite. It is true that once the Gulf Arab states made their decision, USSR propaganda changed its tune and supported the embargo and production cuts. Yet when the Politburo had discussed the issue on October 15, the Kremlin leaders expressed strong opposition to urging the Arabs to pursue such a course. If oil were used as a coercive political instrument, Kosygin had argued, NATO forces would immediately "descend on the Middle East." Gromyko agreed, telling his subordinates: "We should not collaborate with [the] Arabs." Thus, as Victor Israelyan, a member of the task force designated to consult the Politburo on the crisis, later put it: "[T]he Kremlin did not play a backstage role in arranging the embargo. On the contrary, a concern that the Arab oil embargo would complicate and broaden the Middle East conflict prevailed in the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War."¹¹⁹

The most significant criticism leveled against the Soviet Union during the war was that its decision to airlift military equipment to Egypt and Syria had led to a dangerous intensification and prolongation of the fighting.¹²⁰ It is clear, however, that Moscow's resupply effort had not been undertaken with the goal of exploiting the situation. The airlift, Kissinger observed during his October 12 press conference, was "moderate" and had been matched by Soviet restraint in the

¹¹⁸ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 494, 508. The Soviet ambassador had also assured Kissinger that Brezhnev's letter to Boumedienne had been "boilerplate Soviet rhetoric." It is worth noting that the Soviets had never intended for these messages to become public. When the Algerians published Brezhnev's letter, the Soviet leader grew angry and asked: "How can you do business with such people?" See Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, p. 62. See also Quandt, "Soviet Policy in the October Middle East War—I," p. 389; and Golan, *Yom Kippur and After*, pp. 81-82. The Soviets refrained throughout the war from criticizing the United States and Brezhnev's October 8 speech had been couched in quite moderate terms. See Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, p. 51.

¹¹⁹ Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 97-98. It is noteworthy that the Soviets only expressed opposition to a lifting of the embargo when it became clear to them that the United States intended to exclude them from the postwar diplomacy. See Golan, *Yom Kippur and After*, pp. 204, 206.

¹²⁰ Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, pp. 130-131; and Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, p. 193.

media and at the UN.¹²¹ The Kremlin, in fact, was limiting itself to the replacement of consumables, just as the Americans were doing with the Israelis, though on a larger scale.¹²²

More importantly, the initial focus of the airlift was on the Syrian front, where the Israeli advance threatened the collapse of a Soviet ally. “The aim,” Dayan had said publicly on October 11, “is to reach Damascus” or perhaps “the gates of Damascus.”¹²³ As early as October 9, Jerusalem had chosen to commence with a strategic bombing campaign against important Syrian targets and to press beyond the 1967 lines. Moscow, of course, hardly could have been expected to remain passive in the face of such a threat to its client. As Kissinger complained to an Israeli official, it would be difficult for the United States to work with the Soviet Union on a ceasefire at the United Nations in such circumstances: “[W]hat in the hell am I now going to tell the Russians [?] This looks like the most extreme form of collusion and bad faith.”¹²⁴ Just as the Americans felt bound to support their Israeli allies in the fighting, so Moscow felt an obligation as a great power to back its own clients, especially when the tide of war shifted against them.¹²⁵

Furthermore, as was their habit, the Soviets were manipulating their arms resupply decisions for political purposes. Even after the Arabs’ early battlefield successes, Soviet military experts continued to doubt their ability to maintain positive momentum and assumed that the Israelis would soon turn the tide.¹²⁶ Moscow, therefore, hoped that the fighting could be halted as

¹²¹ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 507.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 497.

¹²³ Quoted in Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York: Vintage, 2001), p. 408.

¹²⁴ Telecon, October 11, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 439. Dobrynin approached Kissinger directly on October 12 and warned him that Moscow could not remain indifferent to Israeli threats to march on Damascus. See Telecon, October 12, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 454; and Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 508. Note also INR Director Ray Cline’s revealing October 13 memorandum to Kissinger. See Memo from Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger, “Subject: Aspects of the Middle East War,” October 13, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 476 n. 2.

¹²⁵ On the Soviet airlift and Moscow’s concerns about Syria, see William B. Quandt, “Soviet Policy in the October Middle East War—II,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (1977), pp. 587-592; Quandt, *Peace Process*, pp. 111-112; Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 56-61; Golan, *Yom Kippur and After*, pp. 86-88, 93-94; Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 183-188; and Bar-Joseph and Hannah, “Intervention Threats,” pp. 449, 453-454.

¹²⁶ Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 54-56.

quickly as possible and probably believed that its resupply mission would give it greater leverage with Sadat, who continued to resist calls for a ceasefire. As Quandt observes, this “was precisely the way in which the United States used the supply of arms to the Israelis.”¹²⁷

Moscow, then, was not looking to outmaneuver the Americans or to precipitate a showdown. The airlift was a natural response of a great power patron to the plight of its beleaguered clients. In addition, the Soviet resupply effort was reasonable in proportion and, when one considers that the Americans had promised the Israelis that their heavy military items would ultimately be replaced, did not differ greatly from Washington’s treatment of its own ally. Indeed, most Arab officials actually complained in strong terms during and after the war about the inadequacy of USSR assistance.¹²⁸ And if anything, USSR aid was probably intended to assist the Soviets in their efforts to convince the Arabs to accept a ceasefire.

The most notable aspect of USSR behavior, moreover, was Moscow’s desire from the very start of the war to halt the fighting. Between October 6 and 9, the Soviets repeatedly pressed for a ceasefire-in-place, believing that the war would inevitably turn in Israel’s favor and that it therefore made sense to lock in the Arabs’ gains. Moreover, the Kremlin leaders hoped to terminate the fighting to prevent a dangerous escalation. Consequently, Vinogradov urged Sadat on at least three separate occasions during the first four days of the war to accept a ceasefire.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Quandt, “Soviet Policy and the October Middle East War—II,” p. 590. See also Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 512. As one study points out, the airlift also served as a substitute for direct USSR military intervention, which, of course, would have been far more dangerous. See Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, p. 186. It is now clear that the Soviet resupply mission had only a marginal impact on military developments.

¹²⁸ Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, pp. 258-260, 263-264, 267, 290, 329; Ismail Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 24, 32; and Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 507. Exceptions include Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez*, pp. 271-276; and Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Arab World* (London: William Collins Sons, 1978), p. 259. Note also that many Soviet aircraft had arrived “more than half empty.” See Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, p. 34.

¹²⁹ On October 4, Asad had informed the Soviet ambassador in Damascus that he favored a quick war, to be followed immediately by a USSR ceasefire proposal at the UNSC, which would halt the fighting and leave the Syrians in control of the Golan Heights. The details of what caused Sadat to reject this approach are still debated. What seems to have happened is that USSR representatives had misunderstood Asad’s message. The Syrian

The Soviets, in fact, were deeply disappointed when the Egyptian president chose to continue the fight, though they were not willing to confront him over his stance. Sadat had been adamant with Vinogradov and from Moscow's perspective, it was difficult to justify putting pressure on the Arabs at a time when, after more than six years of stalemate, they were having success regaining territory which they considered rightfully theirs. As Dobrynin told Kissinger on October 6: "[F]or us to tell [the Arabs] you cannot free your land... is ridiculous."¹³⁰

Moscow had also cooperated with Kissinger in his attempt to secure a ceasefire-in-place at the end of the first week of the war. Sadat, however, would not go along, a decision which Dobrynin later characterized rightly as "a gross political and strategic blunder."¹³¹ And when the effort failed, moreover, the Kremlin had chosen to send Kosygin to Cairo for three days of meetings in an attempt to prevail upon Sadat to end the fighting. The Egyptian president refused to budge, but one cannot argue that the Soviets had not made a concerted attempt to bring about a termination of the hostilities.¹³²

president, it appears, was only willing to accept a ceasefire if it could be linked to an Israeli agreement to withdraw to the 1967 boundaries. There are those who argue, however, that Moscow was deliberately trying to deceive Sadat by telling him that his ally was insisting on an immediate ceasefire. On the other hand, some claim that Asad had in fact requested a ceasefire but was unwilling to admit it to Sadat. In any case, Egypt's refusal to accept the USSR initiative doomed the effort. Moreover, the Americans and Israelis at this point would not have agreed to halt the fighting. On this issue, see "October War Counter-Claims," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1974), pp. 161-162; Quandt, "Soviet Policy in the October Middle East War—I," pp. 386-387; Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 14-15, 31-33, 43, 45-49; Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 199-201; Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace*, pp. 25-26; Memcon, October 29, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 788; Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, pp. 252-254; Wehling, *Irresolute Princes*, pp. 115, 126-127; and Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan* (New York: Quadrangle, 1975), pp. 212-213, 216-218, 221.

¹³⁰ Telecon, October 6, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 320. See also Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 37-41; and Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 290.

¹³¹ Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 291. Even the Egyptian foreign minister felt that Sadat should have accepted the ceasefire initiative. See Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace*, pp. 26-27. See also Chernyaev Diary Entry, October 21, 1973, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB430/Chernyaev%201973%20final%20PDF%20version.pdf>.

¹³² On Moscow's efforts to arrange a ceasefire during the middle of the war, see Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 77-83, 87-114; "October War Counter-Claims," pp. 162-163; Quandt, "Soviet Policy in the October Middle East War," pp. 589-595; Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 201-202, 206-209; Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, p. 259; Glassman, *Arms for the Arabs*, pp. 144, 147; Golan, *Yom Kippur and After*, pp. 91-92, 100-104; and Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan*, p. 237.

Perhaps the most striking evidence of the Politburo's restrained posture throughout the conflict is that U.S. officials viewed USSR policy in quite moderate terms. "The Soviets," Kissinger stated at an October 8 WSAG meeting, "are calm. It's quite different from 1967. They're making no threatening noises, no military moves, no noise in the Security Council, [and] they have agreed to coordinate with us."¹³³ Even after Moscow had launched its airlift and the American ceasefire initiative had unraveled, the secretary of state continued to express sympathy for the Kremlin's dilemmas. The anti-USSR campaign in the American press was to his mind "outrageous. [The Soviets] are trapped in this situation just as we are."¹³⁴ Given Moscow's concerns that an overwhelming defeat for its clients would cripple its position, he later admitted, "it could be understood why the Soviets played out their hand as they did."¹³⁵

As late as October 18, American strategists held to the view that the Kremlin's conduct represented a major achievement for the administration's Soviet policy. Having just returned from a visit to Moscow, Treasury Secretary George Shultz commented that Brezhnev and Kosygin "seemed genuinely sincere about détente." "The significant thing," Nixon concurred, "is that Brezhnev has staked his leadership on better relations with the United States." The Soviets, the president conceded, had an obligation to "support their clients," and it was clear that Moscow had been placed in a difficult position due to the Arabs' recalcitrance. The fact that the Kremlin leaders were demonstrating such restraint was all the more remarkable because, as Kissinger observed, since 1970 the Soviets had "delivered on every political condition... and we have done nothing." U.S. policy during the war, he admitted, had been "extremely tough."¹³⁶ Thus, Sisco

¹³³ Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, "Subject: Middle East," October 8, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 386. See also Telecon, October 8, 1973, pp. 389-390.

¹³⁴ Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, "Subject: Middle East," October 16, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 551.

¹³⁵ Memcon, "Subject: *Washington Post* Luncheon," March 13, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 687. Note also Kissinger's acknowledgement that the Soviets did not control the Egyptians. See Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, October 16, 1973, p. 554.

¹³⁶ Minutes of Cabinet Meeting, October 18, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 588-590.

summed up well the American attitude: “I knew that the Soviets attached importance to détente, but... the strength of that view even surprised me. It just comes out in every possible way.”¹³⁷

The events surrounding the American worldwide nuclear alert at the end of the war appear quite different than most former U.S. officials have portrayed when considered in this context. Much has been made of Brezhnev’s October 24 message in which he informed Nixon that if Israel could not be brought to halt its attacks on the encircled Egyptian Third Army, Moscow would have “to consider the question of taking appropriate steps unilaterally.”¹³⁸ The note, Nixon asserts, “represented perhaps the most serious threat to U.S.-Soviet relations since the Cuban missile crisis eleven years before.”¹³⁹ The Kremlin, Kissinger recollects, had “decided on a showdown.” The letter was tantamount to “an ultimatum” and represented “one of the most serious challenges to an American President by a Soviet leader.”¹⁴⁰

Even a cursory analysis of the reasons for Brezhnev’s decision to issue the warning demonstrates the superficiality of such claims and reveals that the nuclear alert was a severe overreaction on Washington’s part.¹⁴¹ The Soviets, it is now clear, never had any intention of

¹³⁷ Minutes of the Secretary of State’s Staff Meeting, October 23, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 699. Note also Nixon’s comment to Kissinger that the Soviets would be justified in thinking that the United States might not press for a diplomatic settlement once a ceasefire was achieved because of Washington’s past record of supporting Israel’s intransigent position. See Telecon, October 14, 1973, p. 496.

¹³⁸ Message from Brezhnev to Nixon, undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 735.

¹³⁹ Nixon, *RN*, p. 938. See also The President’s News Conference, October 26, 1973, American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=4022>.

¹⁴⁰ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 581, 583. See also Schlesinger, “The Eagle and the Bear,” p. 949; and Memo for the Record, CJCS Memo M-88-73, “Subject: NSC/JCS Meeting, Wednesday/Thursday, 24/25 October 1973, 2230-0330 (U),” October 24-25, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 737-742.

¹⁴¹ The Americans, in fact, subsequently admitted as much. See Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, p. 38; and Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, p. 95. This was also the British view. See Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 324. On the nuclear alert, see also Barry M. Blechman and Douglas M. Hart, “The Political Utility of Nuclear Weapons: The 1973 Middle East Crisis,” *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1982), pp. 132-156; Scott D. Sagan, “Nuclear Alerts and Crisis Management,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1985), pp. 122-128; McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 518-525; and Talia Winokur, “‘The Soviets Were Just an Excuse’: Why Israel Did Not Destroy the Egyptian Third Army,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2009), pp. 59-78.

intervening, which some high-ranking U.S. intelligence officials seemed to understand.¹⁴²

Contrary to what American strategists believed, the Kremlin leadership at no point during the crisis felt a desire to exploit Nixon's weakness over Watergate. The Politburo's purpose in sending the letter was to convince the United States to rein in the Israelis, who seemed intent on destroying Sadat's Third Army. And as Kuznetsov later pointed out, the Soviets had deliberately couched the message in cautious terms, so as "not to frighten the Americans too much."¹⁴³

Moreover, the Kremlin's suspicion that Kissinger had sanctioned Jerusalem's decision to ignore the ceasefire during his stopover in Israel on his way back to Washington was well founded.¹⁴⁴ "You won't get violent protests from Washington if something happens during the night, while I'm flying," he had told Meir.¹⁴⁵ The choice over whether to stop the siege against Egypt's Third Army, he had repeated to Dayan, lay within Israel's "domestic jurisdiction."¹⁴⁶

More fundamentally, U.S. strategists clearly recognized that Moscow had been put in an impossible position and probably understood that the letter had been sent only as a last resort. After all, had the situation been reversed and the Arabs were threatening the destruction of an entire Israeli army—in violation of a ceasefire jointly negotiated with the USSR, no less—there can be little doubt that the Americans would have responded similarly.¹⁴⁷ Moscow had urged Washington repeatedly to put pressure on the Meir government to abide by the ceasefire and,

¹⁴² Ray S. Cline, "Policy without Intelligence," *Foreign Policy*, No. 17 (1974-1975), p. 133. There is also some evidence to suggest that U.S. officials fabricated reports about the Soviets moving nuclear weapons to Egypt at this stage of the crisis to spook the Israelis into halting their offensive against Sadat's Third Army. See Shai Feldman, *Israeli Nuclear Deterrence: A Strategy for the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 182.

¹⁴³ Quoted in Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 132, 167-170, 190-195. See also Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 289, 295-300.

¹⁴⁴ The Soviet leadership, especially Brezhnev, believed it had been deceived. See Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 296; Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 160, 163, 179-180; Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 228, 243-244; and Tyler, *A World of Trouble*, pp. 164-166.

¹⁴⁵ Memcon, October 22, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 658.

¹⁴⁶ Memcon, October 22, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 663. See also Telegram from Kissinger to Scowcroft, October 21, 1973, in *The October War and U.S. Policy Collection, DNSA*; and Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 569. See also Isaacson, *Kissinger*, pp. 527-528; and Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 374-384.

¹⁴⁷ Incidentally, the Soviets would never have permitted such a threat to Israel's existence. See Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East*, p. 101.

according to Israelyan, was genuinely concerned that the Israelis might even threaten Cairo.¹⁴⁸ Thus, even prior to the receipt of Brezhnev's message, Kissinger had informed Dinitz in blunt terms that the United States could not make the general secretary "look like a Goddamn fool in front of his own colleagues."¹⁴⁹ Less than half an hour before the Soviet warning had arrived, he had reiterated to the ambassador that if Israel's offensive led to a reaction from Moscow, "then you will have outsmarted yourselves." He had added: "You know, there's a limit beyond which we can't go and one of them is we cannot make Brezhnev look like an idiot."¹⁵⁰ It had never before been the case, he said, "that a small country is producing a world war in this manner."¹⁵¹

So the Soviets were looking to contain the conflict and hoped to arrange an end to the fighting in conjunction with the Americans that would facilitate the postwar negotiations. Moscow, of course, felt a certain obligation to support its clients and perhaps could have handled Sadat's repeated refusals of its ceasefire proposals more effectively. The overall thrust of the Kremlin's posture, however, was one of restraint and USSR objectives were moderate.

But how did things appear in Washington? One would think, especially given the background leading up to the war, that the Americans would have understood and, to a large degree supported, Soviet objectives. Moscow had repeatedly tried to warn administration officials that the Arabs could not be held off forever and now that a conflict had erupted was assuming a restrained posture. Of arguably greater significance, U.S. decision-makers were also formulating wartime strategy with postwar considerations in mind. The United States, Kissinger argued, did not want to witness "an Arab debacle.... My assessment is a costly [Israeli] victory

¹⁴⁸ Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 239-242, 258, 477 n. 78. It should be noted that Sadat had requested that the Soviets intervene on his behalf, unilaterally if necessary. See Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 165-166.

¹⁴⁹ Telecon, October 24, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 705.

¹⁵⁰ Telecon, October 24, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 706.

¹⁵¹ Telecon, October 26, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 762.

without a disaster is the best.”¹⁵² Given the rough similarity of U.S. and USSR views, one would expect that both superpowers would have favored cooperation.

The problem, as Kissinger’s description of how he thought about the conflict reveals, was that the Americans were not really interested in such an approach. To the contrary, the secretary of state wanted to use the crisis to highlight Moscow’s inability to deliver Israeli concessions to the Arabs, especially Egypt. The result, he hoped, would be that the United States would emerge as the sole arbiter of the Middle East conflict and USSR influence in the area would be reduced.

From the war’s start to its finish, Kissinger worked to achieve that aim. The United States’ goal, he told the Chinese ambassador on October 6, was “to demonstrate that whoever gets help from the Soviet Union cannot achieve his objective, whatever it is.”¹⁵³ “The best outcome,” he reiterated at a WSAG meeting a week later, “would be if the Arabs come to believe that we are the only ones who can solve the problem.”¹⁵⁴ Washington, the secretary of state told his aides on October 15, was “trying to convince the Arabs that if there is to be a settlement, they have to deal with us.”¹⁵⁵ The administration’s “principal objective,” he stressed once again after the fighting had stopped, was “to keep the Soviet military presence out of the Middle East and to reduce the Soviet political influence as much as possible.”¹⁵⁶

Washington’s decision to escalate massively its own airlift to Israel must be set against this background. Given U.S. officials’ awareness of the difficulties Moscow faced in bringing its clients, especially Sadat, to heel, one would think that the American response to the failure of the October 13-14 ceasefire initiative might have been measured. USSR officials, after all, had been

¹⁵² Memcon, October 9, 1973, p. 402.

¹⁵³ Memcon, October 6, 1973, NLC-26-9-1-4-8, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

¹⁵⁴ Memcon, “Subject: WSAG Meeting—Middle East,” October 14, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 511.

¹⁵⁵ Minutes of the Secretary of State’s Staff Meeting, October 15, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 538.

¹⁵⁶ Memcon, October 25, 1973, in William Burr, ed., *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top-Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow* (New York: New Press, 1998), p. 155.

just as surprised and chagrined about Egypt's decision to continue the war as their U.S. counterparts and had continued to press Sadat even after his rejection of the proposal.¹⁵⁷

A key U.S. objective, however, was to highlight American superiority over the Soviet Union in order to convince the Arabs that the United States was the dominant player in Middle East diplomacy. By backing Jerusalem so forcefully, they intended to show that Arab aims could not be achieved militarily or through reliance on Moscow.¹⁵⁸ Even before his ceasefire initiative had collapsed, Kissinger had not desired a policy of full cooperation with Moscow. "An Arab victory," he said on the morning of October 13, "even with American acquiescence, will look like American weakness."¹⁵⁹ "If we get into a confrontation," he stressed, "we have to show that we are a giant! We have to win!" The secretary of state's strategy was "to convince the Arabs and the Soviets that they will be pushed against the wall and that time is on our side."¹⁶⁰ The Americans needed "to run the Soviets into the ground fast." Now that the United States had already paid a price with the Arabs, the U.S. had "to face down the Soviets."¹⁶¹

Kissinger, therefore, considered the result of the fighting a major Cold War victory. What had transpired, he told Deputy National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, represented "a Soviet defeat." Moscow might point to the American airlift as the cause of the outcome, but "that

¹⁵⁷ Note Dobrynin's reaction to Kissinger's informing him of Sadat's rejection. See Telecon, October 13, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 481.

¹⁵⁸ Administration officials were also concerned with demonstrating that the credibility of the U.S. commitment to Israel's security was not in doubt, as well as worried that the Soviets might be tempted to take advantage of Nixon's weakness domestically, which, in their view, reinforced the need for a show of resolve. On American national security strategists' near obsession with credibility, see Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 1-7, 10-20. The Americans had also been somewhat concerned that if the Israelis panicked, they might feel compelled to fall back on their nuclear arsenal. This consideration was not, however, a major factor influencing the key American resupply decision. I thank William Quandt for discussing this issue with me in great detail. On the nuclear aspect of the conflict, see Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 187-191; and Elbridge Colby et al., "The Israeli 'Nuclear Alert' of 1973: Deterrence and Signaling in Crisis," April 30, 2013, Center for Naval Analyses Report, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵⁹ Memcon, "Subject: Special WSAG—Principals Only," October 13, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 483.

¹⁶⁰ Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, "Subject: Middle East," October 15, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 531, 535.

¹⁶¹ Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, October 16, 1973, p. 553.

should make [the Arabs] realize they better get on our side.”¹⁶² “Everyone knows in the Middle East,” he said in celebration, “that if they want a peace they have to go through us. Three times they tried through the Soviet Union, and three times they failed.”¹⁶³ It was now clear, the secretary of state told Chinese representatives, that Moscow was unable to deliver for its clients, which placed the United States in “a very good position to reduce the Soviet political influence.”¹⁶⁴ Washington, he said, was now in “the catbird seat” and “the key element.” He added: “I want the Arabs to see that there is no hope in relying on the Soviets.”¹⁶⁵

How is this outcome to be understood? In structural terms, the outcome defies explanation. Neither Washington nor Moscow had wanted to see the conflict escalate and leaders in both capitals hoped to use the war as a vehicle to catalyze a diplomatic process once the fighting had ended. Both sides, moreover, basically supported a draw on the battlefield, as a decisive victory by either the Arabs or Israelis would run counter to the goal of simplifying the postwar negotiations. American decision-makers seemed to comprehend that the Soviets were not seeking a confrontation and, in fact, were doing to their utmost to convince their clients to agree to a ceasefire. Finally, given the coincidence of U.S. and USSR views on a settlement and the now unavoidable reality that the prolongation of the Middle East dispute constituted a serious threat to international security, incentives at the systemic level were strongly for cooperation.

One is drawn inescapably, therefore, to the conclusion that some other factor had overridden power political considerations. Indeed, Kissinger’s goal of underscoring for the Arabs the inability of the Soviet Union to assist in the attainment of their political objectives, which would give the United States a monopoly over the diplomacy, was the key variable. The

¹⁶² Telecon, October 18, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 597.

¹⁶³ Memcon, October 19, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 622.

¹⁶⁴ Memcon, October 25, p. 157. See also Telegram from Kissinger to Scowcroft, October 21, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 642.

¹⁶⁵ Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, October 24, 1973, pp. 714-715.

secretary of state, it is clear, had viewed the conflict in essentially Cold War terms, a framework which led him to eschew a combined approach. Evidently, Kissinger's anti-Soviet predisposition meant that a joint effort would have been impossible, no matter the nature of USSR policy. Such a conception of the issue, of course, did not augur well for the prospects of postwar cooperation.

The Shuttle Leaves Moscow Behind

Despite the damage that had been done to superpower relations as a result of the nuclear alert, the outcome on the battlefield presented real opportunities for a political solution. The Arab-Israeli problem, it was clear, could no longer be ignored. And given the combined influence of the United States and the Soviet Union, it appeared that Washington and Moscow would enjoy tremendous leverage over how to shape the postwar diplomacy.

The Kremlin, for its part, was willing to move past what happened to cooperate with the United States. U.S. behavior during the conflict, particularly the nuclear alert, had not been reassuring, but USSR leaders, especially Brezhnev, still attached great importance to the twin goals of détente and Arab-Israeli peace.¹⁶⁶ Consequently, the general secretary's October 26 speech to the World Peace Congress in Moscow was, Kissinger later noted, "conciliatory."¹⁶⁷

The USSR leadership, after all, had been extremely pleased with the outcome of the meetings it had held with Kissinger in Moscow toward the end of the war. Encouraged by a personal letter from Nixon, in which the president had written that he and Brezhnev could work together to resolve the dispute, the Soviet leader was optimistic about what could be achieved.¹⁶⁸

The superpowers, he told Kissinger on October 21, possessed "decisive influence on decisions

¹⁶⁶ Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 180-186; and Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 302-303.

¹⁶⁷ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 600. Moscow only felt compelled to respond to the nuclear alert when Nixon gave an impolitic press conference several days later. Even then, Soviet reportage of the incident was primarily for public consumption. See Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 200-208.

¹⁶⁸ Message from Nixon to Brezhnev, October 20, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 626-627. See also Message from Nixon to Brezhnev, October 18, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 594-595. Nixon later misrepresented the tone of his October 20, claiming that it had been a "stern" message. See Nixon, *RN*, p. 933.

and a joint decision taken by us could prevail. What President Nixon said, I certainly agree with.”¹⁶⁹ Moscow, in fact, interpreted the agreement it had struck with the American delegation that the postwar negotiations would take place “under appropriate auspices” as meaning that the superpowers would jointly press for a settlement by exerting pressure on their respective clients.¹⁷⁰ And as Chernyaev recorded, U.S.-Soviet cooperation in ending the war had represented “a huge event in terms of prospects for world peace.” Superpower agreements on how to contain conflicts were no longer “just words. It is a reality, and what a reality!”¹⁷¹

The Kremlin, moreover, was more than willing to pressure the Arabs. Moscow, Chernyaev had written on October 22, would now keep its arms pipeline closed. While their clients would never forgive the Soviets, he recorded: “We should put an end to our superpower concerns and keep our authority in front of them, and in front of the whole world, with just one thing: that we will not allow you to start a world conflagration!”¹⁷² Brezhnev agreed wholeheartedly, telling Gromyko days after the fighting had ended that the Soviet Union had a “right and duty” to assist in the dispute’s resolution. Moscow, he said, would help guarantee Israel’s borders and, at the appropriate time, restore diplomatic relations with Jerusalem. In response to his foreign minister’s protest that such policy shift would upset the USSR’s clients, Brezhnev had replied that the Arabs could “go to hell!” The Soviets had offered them “a sensible way for so many years,” but the Syrians and Egyptians had chosen war, only to be soundly

¹⁶⁹ Memcon, October 21, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 635. See also Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 292-293.

¹⁷⁰ On the Kremlin leadership’s satisfaction with the results of Kissinger’s visit, see Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 125, 128, 134, 137-138, 142, 146-149; and George, “The Arab-Israeli War of October 1973,” pp. 149-150. Note also that the Soviets, for the first time, agreed that there should be direct negotiations between the parties.

¹⁷¹ Chernyaev Diary Entry, October 22, 1973,

<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB430/Chernyaev%201973%20final%20PDF%20version.pdf>.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

defeated once again. “We are not going to fight for them,” he concluded. “And especially we will not start a world war because of them. So that’s that. We will act like I said.”¹⁷³

Unsurprisingly, given what his strategy had been during the October War, Kissinger was uninterested in a joint effort. The secretary of state not only doubted the feasibility of securing a comprehensive settlement in the immediate aftermath of the October War—such an aim represented “a mirage”—he was less inclined than Nixon pressure the Israelis.¹⁷⁴ More importantly, even if an overall deal were possible, his goal was the reduction of Soviet influence in the Middle East, not an approach that would allow Moscow to share credit for a solution. As Kornienko later recollected: “[I]t was clear at least for me that the American side—Kissinger personally—just did not want to have a real cooperation between [the] United States and the Soviet Union on Middle East affairs.”¹⁷⁵

To a great degree, Kissinger’s reluctance to press for a comprehensive settlement stemmed from his reading of the domestic context in the United States. The impact of Watergate aside, American strategists would have been required to adopt certain tactics to maintain support at home for an activist Arab-Israeli policy. Even during the October War, U.S. decision-makers thought about such considerations. If the administration supported a ceasefire-in-place, Kissinger had told Haig early on in the conflict, it would appear “that we have turned against the Israelis and this would have incalculable domestic consequences.”¹⁷⁶

This factor, however, proved even more crucial in terms of its relation to U.S. postwar aims. The United States, Kissinger understood, would eventually have to “turn on the Israelis,”

¹⁷³ Chernyaev Diary Entry, November 4, 1973, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB430/Chernyaev%201973%20final%20PDF%20version.pdf>. See also Haslam, *Russia’s Cold War*, pp. 275-276.

¹⁷⁴ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 615.

¹⁷⁵ Transcript, “US-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy,” p. 55.

¹⁷⁶ See Telecon, October 7, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 343. See also Telecon, October 8, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 374.

meaning a confrontation with the Meir government was at some point inevitable.¹⁷⁷ With this in mind, the key decision-makers sought to position the administration to be able withstand potentially robust opposition from Israel's American supporters. U.S. strategists made their decisions about resupply and crafted their ceasefire proposals with the hope that when matters came to a head, they would be able to point to their strong support for Jerusalem during the war to neutralize resistance at home. Thus, even as the conflict was deescalating, the secretary of state had ordered a "bulge" in the U.S. resupply mission. "By December," he explained, "we will turn on them, but up to then we don't want to have the Jewish community on us for not being generous now."¹⁷⁸ "Keep the aircraft going to Israel," he had directed on October 19, "so Israel will be grateful and can't say we screwed them in their hour of triumph."¹⁷⁹

It is unsurprising, therefore, that domestic politics played an important role in shaping U.S. postwar diplomacy. Because, Kissinger argued, the Israelis would "scream" when the pressure came, it was imperative that the White House "have unity in this country to stand up for it.... We have to start working on the Jewish lobby."¹⁸⁰ The secretary of state, therefore, did not "want to spook [the Israelis] before the real pressure starts." "We shouldn't give them the sense that we are slowing down," he told Deputy Defense Secretary William Clements. "By February we will be in a real brawl with the Israelis. I don't want to excite their supporters in this country

¹⁷⁷ Memcon, "Subject: Special WSAG—Principals Only," October 13, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 484.

¹⁷⁸ Memcon, October 24, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 725.

¹⁷⁹ Memcon, October 19, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 622. The administration, Kissinger said, was from the start of the war trying "to put some money in the bank with the dissociation with the Israelis in subsequent efforts to get a settlement." See Telecon, October 6, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 310. See also Telecon, October 7, p. 344; Telecon, October 7, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 345; Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, "Subject: Middle East," October 7, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 357; Memo from Quandt to Kissinger, "Subject: Middle Eastern Issues," October 9, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 409-410; Memcon, October 9, p. 412; Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, October 16, 1973, p. 554; Memcon, October 17, 1973, p. 585; and Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 108. Note also Kissinger's later claim to American Jewish leaders that without the U.S. resupply effort, Israel would have lost the war. See Memcon, December 27, 1973, in Zaki Shalom, "Kissinger and the American Jewish Leadership after the 1973 War," *Israel Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2002), p. 210. See also Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, p. 70.

¹⁸⁰ Memcon, November 3, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 875.

in December when we have nothing on the table for them. I know that's a very cynical attitude."¹⁸¹ "There's no chance of getting the Congress on board," he told his deputy, Kenneth Rush, "but we're working to get the leadership lined up." The sealift of military equipment to Israel would continue because a premature reduction in American assistance "would produce a confrontation. We can use this to paralyze the pro-Jewish Senators."¹⁸²

To be sure, Kissinger declared, the United States would pursue its own interests, over Israel's intense opposition if necessary. "We did not go through four weeks of agony here," he said, "to be hostage to a nation of two and a half million people. US foreign policy will be determined by the United States, not by Israel." But it was precisely because he wanted it made clear to the Meir government that it would "be [in] a brawl if they take us on" that he felt time was needed to organize the administration's position domestically.¹⁸³

Thus, among the key reasons for Kissinger's advocacy of a step-by-step approach to the problem, rather than an effort for a comprehensive solution, was his calculation that the administration could most effectively manage domestic constraints in this manner.¹⁸⁴ "If you want me to be helpful, what good would it do if it goes the way it went in 1971?" he asked Egyptian Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy in what would become one of his standard refrains.

¹⁸¹ Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, "Subject: Middle East and Indochina," November 29, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 1011. Note also Kissinger's comment to the Egyptian foreign minister that he and Nixon were contemplating "how to organize ourselves domestically to get ready for the battle ahead." See Memcon, November 2, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 856.

¹⁸² Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, "Subject: Middle East; Vietnam and Cambodia," November 2, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 841-844. Note also the exchange on this issue between Nixon, Kissinger, Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott, and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright. See Minutes of Bipartisan Leadership Meeting, November 27, 1973, p. 991. According to one journalist, 1974 was a "revolutionary" year for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the principal pro-Israel lobbying organization in Washington. See Edward Tivnan, *The Lobby: Jewish Political Power and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 81. See also Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 222-223.

¹⁸³ Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, November 2, 1973, p. 843.

¹⁸⁴ This is not to say that domestic considerations constituted the sole purpose of the step-by-step approach.

“There is a great deal of pressure to overcome in this country and we must find a method.”¹⁸⁵

Step-by-step diplomacy, he explained to Ghorbal, now Egypt’s ambassador in Washington, “might look like [a] slow procedure to President Sadat,” but it “was necessary in terms of our own political process and would actually lead to faster results. If moves were made prematurely which led to [an] explosion of public opinion against them everything would be wrecked.”¹⁸⁶

The administration’s domestic requirements hampered Washington’s ability to cooperate with Moscow to a significant extent. The Soviets, of course, had always favored a comprehensive solution that would “do away with [the conflict’s] roots.”¹⁸⁷ Such an objective would necessitate not only an Israeli evacuation of essentially all the territories occupied in 1967, but a resolution of the Palestinian question as well. To be sure, as USSR representatives consistently told Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Yasser Arafat, the Kremlin did “not support extremist slogans of certain Arab countries and Palestinian organizations that call for the destruction of Israel and only help to seriously exacerbate the situation in the Middle

¹⁸⁵ Memcon, October 29, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 788. Note also Fahmy’s comparison of Nixon and Kissinger on this point. See Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace*, pp. 47-53, 168. On Kissinger’s use of this tactic, see also Isaacson, *Kissinger*, p. 556; and Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, pp. 134-135.

¹⁸⁶ Telegram from the Department of State to the U.S. Interests Section in Egypt, “Subject: Ghorbal Discussion With Secretary on Middle East,” December 8, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 1037. See also Memcon, December 15, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 1068-1069, 1075; Memcon, December 16, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 1096; Quandt, *Peace Process*, pp. 131-134; Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 268; Stanley Hoffmann, “A New Policy for Israel,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (1975), pp. 407-408; Abraham Ben-Zvi, *The United States and Israel: The Limits of the Special Relationship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 91; and Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, pp. 49-50, 71-73, 114. Kissinger’s frequent use of what many observers ultimately came to call his “Doomsday Speech” with the Israelis, in which he warned of the disastrous consequences that would ensue if they did not demonstrate greater flexibility in the disengagement negotiations, must be viewed in this context. Rather than directly pressure Jerusalem, he hoped that he could *persuade* his interlocutors to make concessions. The secretary of state recognized that at some point a confrontation would be inevitable and, therefore, resorted to this tactic to avoid expending precious political capital that would be needed once step-by-step diplomacy had run its course. On Kissinger’s negotiating tactics, see Amos Perlmutter, “Crisis Management: Kissinger’s Middle East Negotiations, October 1973-June 1974,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1975), pp. 316-343; and Janice Gross Stein, “Structures, Strategies, and Tactics of Mediation: Kissinger and Carter in the Middle East,” *Negotiation Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1985), pp. 331-347.

¹⁸⁷ Letter from Brezhnev to Nixon, undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 625.

East.”¹⁸⁸ But the issue, which Moscow considered central to the whole question of war and peace in the Middle East, could not be ignored as part of a final agreement, meaning the PLO would need to be involved in the postwar negotiations and the Palestinians would have to get a homeland.¹⁸⁹

Given the political climate in the United States, the administration would have encountered major encumbrances had it tried to pursue this sort of policy. The White House, Kissinger explained to Brezhnev at one point, had “an extremely complicated domestic situation, complicated by events of the past year and complicated because of the influence of certain pressure groups. That imposes on us necessities of complicated tactics that are in no sense directed at the Soviet Union.”¹⁹⁰ While he admitted that the Palestinian question could not be faced without the inclusion of the Palestinians, the issue was nevertheless “an impossibility for us. It is an enormous domestic problem.... Our approach is that we fight the appropriate battle at an appropriate time, and this is not the time.”¹⁹¹ If the Soviet Union wanted to be involved in the peace process, he told Dobrynin, it “would have to change some of its tactics. The tendency to come up with global solutions was simply not possible.”¹⁹²

The domestic factor, however, was not the prime reason for the lack of superpower cooperation. To be sure, Moscow was troubled by Kissinger’s unilateral moves and could barely hide its bitterness in the wake of his successful mediation of the negotiations that led to the Sinai

¹⁸⁸ Notes on Yasser Arafat’s Visit to Moscow in July [1974], August 1974, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114536>. American and Arab leaders were well aware that Moscow consistently emphasized during its dealings with PLO representatives that the organization would need to recognize Israel’s right to exist and rein in its more extremist elements to achieve its aspirations. See Intelligence Memo, June 1973, pp. 195, 197-198; and Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, p. 297.

¹⁸⁹ This position did not necessarily imply that Moscow was totally inflexible about the necessity of an independent Palestinian state. The Soviets, for example, would not have objected to a confederative arrangement between the West Bank, Gaza, and Jordan, which, incidentally, would become the Americans’ preferred solution.

¹⁹⁰ Memcon, “Subject: CSCE; Middle East,” March 26, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 752.

¹⁹¹ Memcon, “Subject: Communiqué [Middle East and SALT Sections],” July 2, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 1005.

¹⁹² Memcon, February 1, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 651.

and Golan disengagement agreements.¹⁹³ Moreover, the administration's cautious handling of the negotiations with Israel conflicted with the Soviet predilection for a more ambitious agenda.

Yet despite this preference, the Kremlin's ultimately negative reaction to American diplomacy did not stem mainly from its objection to the gradualist approach. As Kissinger observed in the wake of the First Egyptian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement (Sinai I) in January, the Soviets had begun "shifting to accommodate themselves to the concept of disengagement and to the procedure of piecemeal, temporary settlements."¹⁹⁴ Moscow, in the event, took no steps to obstruct Kissinger's efforts and actually continued to press Asad to show greater flexibility.¹⁹⁵ Whereas the other Arabs opposed the deal, the Politburo's response was measured. Sinai I, Brezhnev and Kosygin related to Iraqi Vice President Saddam Hussein, would only be worthy of criticism if it led to "an indefinite deferral" of the dispute's resolution.¹⁹⁶

The key problem from the Kremlin's perspective, then, was not its principled opposition to step-by-step diplomacy, but rather that the Americans had decided to exclude the USSR from the diplomacy. As one expert writes, "Whatever the specific elements or conditions of a settlement, the essential ingredient for the Russians must, of course, be Soviet participation."¹⁹⁷ Moscow, in fact, had actually welcomed certain aspects of the disengagement agreements, and it

¹⁹³ Chernyaev Diary Entry, January 25, 1974, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB430/Chernyaev%201973%20final%20PDF%20version.pdf>; Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 306; and Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East*, p. 113.

¹⁹⁴ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 940.

¹⁹⁵ One of the reasons that Soviet-Syrian relations declined during this period was that Moscow grew increasingly frustrated with what it considered overly hardline negotiating behavior on the part of Damascus. See Golan, *Yom Kippur and After*, pp. 137, 169; and Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East*, p. 126.

¹⁹⁶ Report on the Visit of Saddam Hussein to Moscow, March 14, 1974, CWIHP, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121071>. The stark contrast between Brezhnev and Kosygin's comments with those of Saddam, the latter of whom had criticized Sadat in harsh terms and wanted to discourage Asad from pursuing a similar agreement, is especially noteworthy. One could, moreover, credit the Soviets for recognizing that the step-by-step approach would ultimately complicate future negotiations for an overall settlement.

¹⁹⁷ Golan, *Yom Kippur and After*, p. 131.

was only when it became clear that the United States intended to monopolize the peace process that the Kremlin had turned decisively against what Kissinger was doing.¹⁹⁸

U.S. officials, moreover, seemed to comprehend the basis for this objection. “The Soviets are determined to insist on being accorded a role as arbiter of developments in the Middle East,” a December 5 Special National Intelligence Estimate had concluded. “While much of their activity will be directed to demonstrating support to their Arab clients, their own particular goal will be to get a settlement which gains formal US acknowledgement of their role in the area.”¹⁹⁹ The key reason Moscow had acquiesced to Kissinger’s unilateralism, the secretary of state later pointed out, was that the Soviet Union believed that at some point the negotiations would return to the multilateral Geneva Conference, where it was co-chairman with the United States.²⁰⁰

American strategists, in fact, viewed Soviet policy as quite moderate. “Given their system,” Kissinger told his advisers, “they have tried to be fairly reasonable all across the board. You can look at no place where they have really tried to make serious trouble for us. Even in the Middle East where our political strategy put them in an awful bind, they haven’t really tried to screw us.”²⁰¹ “Although for a period,” he told his staff on another occasion, “problems in our relationship were caused by the Soviets, I think during the last two years the conflicts have mostly been our fault. What have they done that’s so bad? Even in the Middle East, they were relatively restrained considering they were being kicked around by both Egypt and Syria.”²⁰² The United States could not have achieved the Sinai I agreement, the secretary of state told the Cabinet on January 23, “without Soviet acquiescence.... They are not happy, but it was crucial

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 158-160, 165, 170-175, 179, 183, 215-216, 219-225, 228-232, 246-248.

¹⁹⁹ Special NIE 30/3-73, “The Arab-Israeli Situation and the Oil Crisis,” December 5, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 1027.

²⁰⁰ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 645. See also Memcon, March 29, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 177.

²⁰¹ Memcon, “Subject: The Secretary’s Visit to the Soviet Union,” March 18, 1974, in *The Kissinger Transcripts*, p. 225.

²⁰² Memcon, August 1, 1974.

they did not interfere.”²⁰³ Thus, Kissinger admitted to Gromyko that USSR restraint, for which Sadat had begun publicly castigating Moscow, had been beneficial to his efforts.²⁰⁴ Even during the Golan disengagement negotiations, the secretary of state admitted, Moscow had acted with great restraint. It was simply not true, he corrected Sonnenfeldt, that the USSR had moved forcefully to block the agreement. The Soviets, Kissinger said, had done just “enough to keep their franchise, not enough really to challenge us and that’s the reason they lost.”²⁰⁵

Thus, the American aversion to working in concert with the Soviets was far more fundamental than would have been the case if Washington had merely been concerned with the domestic political aspect of the Middle East problem. Given that the USSR leadership would have been willing, even against its better judgment, to acquiesce to the step-by-step program, and had made no attempt to direct its considerable influence toward undermining Kissinger—despite its clear incentive to do so—his strategy must have flowed from deeper sources.

Indeed, what stands out from an analysis of U.S. postwar statecraft is its intense emphasis on making “gains” at the expense of the USSR, especially with Egypt. Aware that the Soviets attached tremendous importance to détente, and secure in the knowledge that only the United States could deliver Israeli concessions, Kissinger sought to undermine the Kremlin’s position by making Arab abandonment of Moscow the price of American involvement in the peace process.

The evidence relating to this point is quite remarkable. Immediately after the cessation of hostilities, Kissinger had begun moving to monopolize the peace process. Although there would be “formal cooperation” with the Soviets, he had said on October 25, there was a need to “distinguish appearance from reality. There may be some face-saving things, but we will

²⁰³ Memcon, “Subject: Secretary Kissinger’s Report on Egyptian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement,” January 23, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 103.

²⁰⁴ Memcon, “Subject: HAK-Gromyko Meeting in Mideast; Syrian-Israeli Disengagement; Palestinians; Jackson Amendment,” April 29, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 873.

²⁰⁵ Memcon, August 1, 1974.

determine for ourselves what will be done.”²⁰⁶ The United States, he told Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Mao Zedong, would “move matters toward a settlement in the Middle East, but we also want to demonstrate that it was not done by Soviet pressures. So, whenever the Soviets press we must resist apart from the merits of the dispute.” Washington was “not against Arab aspirations,” he stressed, “we are against their being achieved with Soviet pressure.”²⁰⁷ His strategy, in short, was “to squeeze the Soviets to the sideline, not to settle it with them.”²⁰⁸

What this approach implied was that the Americans, even if doing so would mean delaying the search for peace, would refuse to press Jerusalem unless the Arabs severed their USSR connection. “[W]e must settle [the Middle East crisis],” Kissinger had said when he visited the region soon after the war, “but not under Russian pressure. If there is Russian pressure, we will switch back to Israel because we must demonstrate that the Soviet Union can not settle the problem.”²⁰⁹ The United States, he argued, had to use its “muscle now or the Russians will take extreme positions and drive us right out of the Middle East.” The Americans would obviously need to press the Israelis, but only in a way that would ensure Washington got “credit for it.” Moscow’s interest in collaborating on the problem notwithstanding, U.S. strategy had “to be that when the Soviet Union, the British and French press, we stall—so all of them know only we can deliver.” The administration would, in such circumstances, “just sit on our hands.”²¹⁰ Even when Meir expressed interest in having the Soviets negotiate with the Syrians for the return of Israeli prisoners of war, Kissinger rejected the idea categorically: “I frankly

²⁰⁶ Memcon, October 25, 1973, p. 158.

²⁰⁷ Memcon, November 12, 1973, in *The Kissinger Transcripts*, p. 188.

²⁰⁸ Memcon, “Subject: Secretary Kissinger’s Meeting with Jewish Intellectuals,” December 6, 1973, in Shalom, “Kissinger and the American Jewish Leadership,” p. 204. See also Memcon, December 27, 1973, p. 211.

²⁰⁹ Telegram from Kissinger to Scowcroft, November 6, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 893 n. 3.

²¹⁰ Memcon, November 29, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 1002, 1004. See also Memcon, November 26, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 985; and Minutes of the Secretary of State’s Staff Meeting, December 26, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 1201-1202. On the effect of Kissinger’s Middle East policy on the United States’ relations with its European allies, see Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 226-234.

want to keep them out of the negotiations as much as possible. If there is a disengagement agreement, I want it clearly to be the product of Sadat's moderate course towards us and ignoring the Russians. I don't want to go to them now and say, 'Give us a little help.'"²¹¹

The depth of Kissinger's opposition to USSR participation in the peace process was so strong that he protested Nixon's evident disposition to work in conjunction with Moscow. After being informed by Scowcroft that Dobrynin had characterized his December 13 appointment with the president, during which the latter had been highly critical of Israeli policy and implied that the Americans would concert with the Soviets, as "one of the most satisfactory meetings he [had] ever had with the President," the secretary of state objected that such a message would undermine his strategy. Sadat, he wrote Haig, was turning decisively against Moscow, and it was therefore critical that the administration avoid creating the impression of condominium.²¹²

With this in mind, Kissinger considered the maintenance of momentum in the negotiations crucially important, for continued progress would lead to the further reduction of Soviet influence in the Middle East. Without movement, he wrote Nixon on January 6, Moscow might "decide to run with the ball."²¹³ Israeli intransigence, he argued during the Golan negotiation, had jeopardized the U.S. position in the Middle East by risking "an enhanced role for the Soviet Union."²¹⁴ Peace in the area was an important American interest in its own right, but Kissinger's insistence on displacing the USSR was a crucial driver of his strategy.

The United States, then, was taking a deliberately uncooperative stance. It was "absurd," Kissinger complained, that the White House was being attacked for being soft on the USSR:

²¹¹ Memcon, December 17, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 1145.

²¹² Backchannel Message from Kissinger to Scowcroft, December 14, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 1058, n. 3; and Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 771-772.

²¹³ Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, January 6, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 3.

²¹⁴ Memo from Scowcroft to Nixon, May 9, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 271. See also Letter from Nixon to Meir, April 30, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 212; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 581; and Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 172.

“We’ve had the toughest policy possible.”²¹⁵ “If I explained in detail what I am doing,” he told Meir shortly after her resignation in early June, “I would win [George] Meany but lose the Russians. I am carrying out the toughest policy that can be sustained over a long period.”²¹⁶

Such an approach, of course, was bound to strain U.S.-Soviet relations. Kissinger’s discussion of the issue with Brezhnev in March, he informed Nixon, “was one of the most acid I have had.”²¹⁷ In response to the secretary of state’s suggestion that the Americans continue unilaterally and that the reconvening of the Geneva Conference be delayed, the Soviet leader had accused him of violating what they had agreed to in October, adding: “I never heard before such an open statement of U.S. intentions to exclude the Soviet Union’s participation.”²¹⁸

Naturally, this development caused deep concern among American strategists. The Kremlin, of course, retained a formidable capacity to obstruct progress in the Middle East and, more alarmingly, might feel compelled to back the Arabs more tangibly than they had during the October War if the negotiations deadlocked. As early as November 2, Kissinger had claimed that the Soviets seemed to be “biding their time. Something eerie is going on.” It was important, he added, to think about what he considered his “nightmare: Russian helicopters going in there, and an enormous crisis which forces [Israel] back anyway.”²¹⁹

The administration, consequently, felt it necessary to offer Moscow a soporific. The Soviets, U.S. decision-makers were quick to admit, had received few meaningful benefits from their efforts to improve their relationship with Washington. The “only reason” the United States was even providing Moscow the semblance of participation in the negotiations, Kissinger

²¹⁵ Memcon, December 6, 1973, p. 203.

²¹⁶ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 1030.

²¹⁷ Message from Kissinger to Scowcroft, March 26, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 794. See also Memcon, March 29, 1974, p. 169.

²¹⁸ Memcon, March 26, 1974, p. 762.

²¹⁹ Memcon, November 2, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, pp. 864, 869. See also Memcon, November 3, 1973, p. 875; and Memcon, December 6, 1973, p. 205.

explained to Allon, was because the USSR was “more dangerous outside than inside. The opponents of Brezhnev could make a case that he’s got nothing in return except words.”²²⁰ A “myth” had begun to develop, Kissinger told Congressional leaders in July, that détente was one-sided in the Soviets’ favor. After all, he pointed out, the Americans had “squeezed them in the Middle East in an unbelievable way.”²²¹ Aside from the U.S.-Soviet wheel deal, he noted: “Brezhnev’s colleagues can say he was taken to the cleaners.” Whereas the United States had “pushed [the Soviets] out of the Middle East,” Moscow had “got nothing” from détente.²²² “If I were the Soviets,” Kissinger told his staff on August 1, “I would be asking what the hell are we doing.” The secretary of state’s comments about the Arab-Israeli issue in particular, even Hyland acknowledged, were “true. We have been screwing them.”²²³

The White House’s persistent attempts to persuade Congress to afford the Soviet Union Most Favored Nation (MFN) status must be seen in this context. It was unrealistic, administration officials recognized, to expect Moscow to continue making efforts to improve its relations with Washington when all the Kremlin was being offered in the Middle East were “face-saving” measures and “symbolic” participation “done for Soviet self-respect.”²²⁴ The administration’s inability to pass the MFN bill was, as a result, a source of frustration for Kissinger, for it deprived the United States of a key tool that could help “tranquilize” Moscow.²²⁵ The secretary of state, in fact, went so far as to ask the Israelis to intercede with key senators and

²²⁰ Memcon, December 16, 1973, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 1120.

²²¹ Memcon, “Subject: Joint Leadership Meeting on the Summit Trip to Moscow,” July 10, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 1020. See also Memcon, “Subject: Middle East,” March 8, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 166; Memcon, April 25, 1974, p. 210; and Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, pp. 560, 583.

²²² Memcon, February 8, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 116-117. See also Memcon, March 13, 1974, p. 685-688; Memcon, 18, 1974, p. 224; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 1160; and Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 249, 267.

²²³ Memcon, August 1, 1974.

²²⁴ Memcon, “Subject: Secretary’s Dinner for the Vice Premier of the People’s Republic of China,” April 14, 1973, in *The Kissinger Transcripts*, p. 280; and Memcon, April 13, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 197.

²²⁵ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 995. See also Ben-Zvi, *The United States and Israel*, pp. 89-91.

American intellectuals so that he could “use it with Dobrynin.” The Soviets remained capable of obstructing the negotiating process, he pointed out, and he therefore wanted to “dangle it as a carrot.... We will use MFN in a coldblooded way, but we need it to whet their appetite.”²²⁶

So the Americans were not interested in cooperating with the USSR. But even if Kissinger had wanted to involve Moscow, would the parties to the conflict have blocked it? U.S. officials, of course, were fond of telling their Soviet counterparts that neither the Arabs nor the Israelis desired the Kremlin’s participation. The Soviet Union, Sisco said later, had been “in no position to produce anything.... None of the principal actors in the region wanted to bring the Soviets into the situation because Moscow was not in a position to bring its influence to bear in order to achieve positive results.”²²⁷ “We certainly did cut the Soviets out beginning with Henry Kissinger’s shuttle diplomacy,” Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Alfred Atherton said in a 1986 interview. But because Moscow had no influence with Israel, he added: “The Soviets in a way, you could say, cut themselves out.”²²⁸ There was no reason, Kissinger told Asad, for the Americans to “talk to Brezhnev when we can talk to you or Sadat or [Saudi King] Faisal.”²²⁹

It is beyond question that Moscow had suffered a serious decline in influence as a result of the war. Sadat, who from the moment he had taken power had approached the Soviets warily, was particularly quick to signal to Washington that he wanted to align Egypt more closely with the United States, for he believed the Americans were better positioned to deliver a settlement.

²²⁶ Memcon, January 15, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 51. Kissinger made the same request to American Jewish leaders. See Memcon, February 8, 1974, pp. 112-121. See also Memcon, “Subject: Dr. Kissinger’s Middle East Briefing,” May 31, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 377-378.

²²⁷ Transcript, Joseph J. Sisco, Oral History Interview, March 19, 1990, by Michael Sterner, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/mss/mfdip/2004/2004sis02/2004sis02.pdf>.

²²⁸ Alfred L. Atherton, Interview by Harry Kreisler, “A Conversation with History: The Peace Process in the Middle East,” February 28, 1986, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, <http://www.uctv.tv/shows/The-Peace-Process-in-the-Middle-East-with-Alfred-L-Atherton-Conversations-with-History-9148>, at 24:06-25:26.

²²⁹ Memcon, May 27, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1974*, Vol. 26, p. 307. See also Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 1033-1036, 1127; Nixon, *RN*, pp. 1011-1015; Quandt, *Peace Process*, pp. 129, 133; and Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, pp. 88-92, 109.

As a result, by early 1974, the Cairo-Moscow relationship had significantly deteriorated.²³⁰ As Chernyaev wrote soon after the completion of the Sinai I negotiation, “[O]ur ‘game’ in Egypt is lost.”²³¹ Asad, he believed, had become the Kremlin’s “last hope” in the Middle East, for Cairo was now “out of our control and Sadat drags us through the mud.”²³²

The Soviet Union, nevertheless, remained a major player in the Middle East. The Kremlin, as a major arms supplier, still possessed considerable influence with other key Arab actors, most importantly Syria and the Palestinians.²³³ To be sure, Asad ultimately chose to allow Kissinger to mediate the Golan disengagement unilaterally. Even so, the Syrian leader had stated that he had “no objection to a U.S./Soviet coordination.”²³⁴ More importantly, once the negotiation had been completed, Damascus hoped to keep Moscow involved in the diplomacy. The Soviets, Kissinger told Allon at the end of July, could maneuver effectively to prevent a second Egyptian-Israeli agreement, “[p]articularly because the Syrians will back them.”²³⁵ Indeed, because he doubted the U.S. ability to deliver an acceptable settlement, Asad “insisted that a solution cannot be reached without the Soviet Union.”²³⁶ As for the Palestinians, Moscow held certain advantages, as the United States had hardly any interactions with the PLO, at this time largely due to the administration’s domestic problem.

²³⁰ Golan, *Yom Kippur and After*, pp. 206-213; Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile*, pp. 288-329; and Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar*, pp. 262-265, 270.

²³¹ Chernyaev Diary Entry, February 8, 1974,

<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB430/Chernyaev%201973%20final%20PDF%20version.pdf>. See also Chernyaev Diary Entry, March 10, 1974,

<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB430/Chernyaev%201973%20final%20PDF%20version.pdf>.

²³² Chernyaev Diary Entry, April 13, 1974,

<http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB430/Chernyaev%201973%20final%20PDF%20version.pdf>.

²³³ It is worth noting that several of Sadat’s advisers opposed his total shift away from the Soviet Union toward the United States. See Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace*, pp. 66-68, 102-103, 123-151; and “Kissinger Meets Haikal,” p. 215.

²³⁴ Telegram from Department of State to the U.S. Interests Section in Syria, “Subject: Message to President Assad [Regarding] Secretary’s Talks With Soviets,” February 6, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 111 n. 3.

²³⁵ Memcon, July 30, 1974, p. 390.

²³⁶ Memcon between Zhivkov and Asad, September 30, 1974, CWIHP, <http://www.digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113435>.

More basically, as Nixon and Kissinger readily admitted, the Soviets, if they had so desired, could always take steps to impede the peace process. Moscow very easily could have reopened its arms pipeline to the key Arab states, including Egypt, or increased its support for the more radical elements in the area. Such moves would have been all the more problematic for the United States at a time when an Arab oil embargo remained a major threat to U.S. interests.

Above all, the argument that the Arabs would have opposed Soviet participation if Kissinger had not insisted on American monopolization of the peace process can hardly be sustained. Even Sadat, as will be discussed subsequently, would later welcome the USSR's involvement, precisely because the Kremlin was willing to help moderate the Syrian and the PLO positions. The unavoidable conclusion, therefore, is that Kissinger had made the exercise of U.S. leverage with Israel contingent upon the Arabs' willingness to part company with their Soviet patron. Sadat's strained relationship with the Kremlin aside, this had been among the secretary of state's principal messages when he had first met the Egyptian president.²³⁷ Now that he understood that Damascus was not a USSR satellite, Kissinger similarly told Asad, there were no longer any obstacles to block an improvement in U.S.-Syrian bilateral relations.²³⁸

As Kissinger was always quick to point out, however, only the United States possessed the capacity to deliver Israeli concessions. As a result, the secretary of state proved extremely successful at reducing USSR influence in the Middle East. The Arabs, in a way, ultimately had no choice, to no small degree because of Soviet restraint. While Sadat would have been interested in establishing closer relations with Washington in any case, the fact that Moscow was unwilling to provide Egypt with arms out of fear that doing so might lead to another war made Cairo's break with the Kremlin almost inevitable. And with Egypt unable to shift the military

²³⁷ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 638.

²³⁸ Memcon, March 1, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 139.

balance, the Arabs no longer wielded a viable war option. With this in mind, Asad also had little choice but to accept American unilateralist diplomacy.²³⁹ In short, the idea that the Soviets had “cut themselves out” simply does not stand up to close examination. Nevertheless, by the time of Nixon’s resignation in August, Kissinger had achieved his objective of driving Moscow out of the Middle East, which, of course, only contributed to the weakening of détente.

Conclusion: The Settlement That Wasn’t

What is one to make of this story? An American president who had just won an election by one of the widest margins in history, and who considered an Arab-Israeli settlement, negotiated jointly with the Soviet Union, of fundamental importance to U.S. interests, seemed poised to bring matters to a head. The Kremlin leaders, it is clear, were thinking along similar lines. And in the aftermath of the October War, major opportunities had opened up for great power cooperation. Yet, in the end, the result was increased conflict between Washington and Moscow.

Unlike during the earlier period of Nixon’s presidency, the complication was not one of misperception. The Soviets had continually warned the Americans that their decision to ignore the problem would inevitably lead to war, a prediction that proved correct. Likewise, the USSR had exhibited marked restraint during that conflict and signaled clearly its desire to cooperate with the United States once the fighting had ended. Above all, U.S. decision-makers’ private remarks reveal that they construed Soviet actions in the Middle East as moderate and show that Washington recognized that Moscow had passed up opportunities to undercut its peacemaking efforts despite its formidable capacity to do so. In fact, if anyone had grounds for feeling

²³⁹ In this regard, it is important to note that one of Kissinger’s most important objectives during the Syrian-Israeli disengagement talks was the further marginalization of Moscow in the Middle East. Although the Soviet Union was “very eager to play a major role in the negotiations,” he had told Chinese officials on April 14, he was aiming for a partial agreement on the Golan Heights to prevent a stalemate, which would allow the Soviets to “come back in.” If the Americans succeeded, however: “[W]e can hope to reduce Soviet influence in Syria, as we did in Egypt.” See Memcon, April 14, 1974, pp. 274-275.

deceived, it was the Soviets, who not only had correctly intuited that Kissinger had approved Israel's violation of the ceasefire, but who were misled about U.S. postwar intentions. As Kissinger later acknowledged, the only reason the United States "got away with [the Geneva Conference was] because the Russians didn't know what was happening."²⁴⁰

Nor had the parties prevented a joint action. The combined influence of the superpowers in the area was never greater than in the immediate aftermath of the October War. Even during the crisis, Washington and Moscow had managed to a great degree to concert their actions, despite their clients' conflicting objectives. Had the United States and the Soviet Union preferred a collaborative approach, there is little the parties could have done. In any case, U.S. officials' claims notwithstanding, the Kremlin retained important leverage to influence the Arabs.

Thus, two main variables explain the outcome. First, U.S. domestic politics created substantial obstacles to cooperation. Even without the Watergate factor, Nixon still would have faced opposition from Congress and Israel's American supporters. Under normal circumstances, the president likely could have managed such constraints, but the scandal effectively prevented him from pursuing the sort of policy he preferred. And without a strong president to back him, Kissinger felt he had no choice in the aftermath of the October War but to proceed step-by-step, so as to defer a confrontation with the Israelis until he believed the administration was better positioned domestically. Given Soviet preferences for a comprehensive solution, politics at home created significant impediments to joint superpower action.

But what is most striking about the evidence is that American domestic politics, though they influenced greatly the course of the diplomacy, was not the key factor in U.S. strategy. The problem, in fact, was more fundamental, for Kissinger's central objective in the Middle East was to displace the Soviet Union. The secretary of state considered the problem in a Cold War

²⁴⁰ Memcon, July 30, 1974, p. 389.

framework and, evidently, viewed it in zero-sum terms. Under his direction, the United States would refuse to pressure the Israelis so long as the Arabs maintained their connection to Moscow. Although he of course hoped to advance toward a peaceful resolution, his focus was simultaneously on managing a major shift of alliances in the Middle East, particularly with Egypt, and on weakening Moscow in the area. Thus, even though the Kremlin had been eager to assist in the achievement of a settlement, the Americans deliberately followed a course that ruled out cooperation among the great powers.

As Nixon's presidency came to an end, then, joint U.S.-USSR action for Arab-Israeli peace no longer appeared possible. With Kissinger still in charge of U.S. foreign policy—his influence would actually rise after the president had stepped down—there was little reason to expect that the United States would be willing to pursue such an approach. Having achieved his objective of driving the Soviets out of the Middle East, there was no reason to expect the secretary of state to move voluntarily to include them in the peace process.

But what if the Americans were to prove incapable of maintaining the momentum of the negotiations? If step-by-step diplomacy stalled and the Middle East once again seemed to be moving toward war, would the United States shift its position? Given the Soviets' ability to help with a settlement, if U.S. strategists determined that a comprehensive program would be more effective, would Washington agree to concert action with Moscow at the Geneva Conference? As Kissinger began to encounter difficulties, particularly with the Israelis, the Americans would have to reconsider whether cutting the USSR out entirely was the most productive path forward. And the manner in which they discussed such a possibility, it turns out, reveals a great deal about how top U.S. decision-makers conceived of great power politics under détente.

Chapter 5: The Finishing Touches

We're using détente to get a good starting position for a crisis. [The Soviets] do it seriously; we're using it tactically.

—Henry Kissinger¹

It's a strange situation. Everyone agrees—[the United States, the Soviet Union], the Arabs, Israel—that it's dangerous, but yet we can't sit down and straighten it out. It is a strange situation indeed.

—Andrei Gromyko²

It seemed extremely unlikely that Gerald Ford's replacement of Nixon on August 9, 1974 would materially alter U.S. Middle East policy. The new president had, of course, chosen to retain Kissinger as both his secretary of state and national security adviser, and he attached great importance to his judgment on foreign policy matters.³ And given the widespread perception of the essential correctness of Kissinger's approach to the problem in the United States, there was little reason to think that Ford would question its basic assumptions.

The White House's step-by-step diplomacy, however, soon stalled. By the spring of 1975, there was a real risk that the Americans would not be able to sustain the momentum of the peace process and that another war might be in the making. An effort to resolve the conflict comprehensively, even though it would raise the core issues of the dispute and involve a serious U.S.-Israeli confrontation, therefore, began to appear more appealing. To proceed in this way, Moscow would have to be involved in the negotiations.

Despite their justifiable frustration at having been excluded from the disengagement talks, the Soviets were still eager to cooperate with Washington. The Kremlin's views on an overall settlement, moreover, remained nearly identical to those advocated privately by U.S.

¹ Memorandum of Conversation (Memcon), August 22, 1975, folder: Vol. I (1), box 4, Middle East Memcons and Reports, Gerald R. Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553968.pdf>, p. 60.

² Memcon, "Subject: SALT; Middle East," May 20, 1975, in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969-1976*, Vol. 16: *Soviet Union, August 1974-December 1976* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2012), p. 595.

³ Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 129-130, 354.

officials. When one considers how exasperated Ford and Kissinger eventually grew with the Israelis, as well as their belief that Jerusalem's intransigence had imperiled American interests, one would think that they would have welcomed the chance to concert with Moscow.

Yet once again, U.S. decision-makers ultimately chose to proceed unilaterally. Given that moving comprehensively would have eliminated the tactical barrier to cooperation, as well as the clear advantages of involving the Soviets, there would have remained no structural or procedural roadblocks to a joint approach. Thus, this period of the diplomacy offers perhaps the clearest look into drove the Americans to behave as they did toward Moscow on the Arab-Israeli issue.

Preserving the American Diplomatic Monopoly

From the outset of Ford's presidency, accelerating the further decline of USSR influence in the Middle East was a major U.S. objective. The White House's continued preference for a step-by-step approach stemmed from a number of sources, but the desire to make additional inroads in the Arab world at Moscow's expense, especially with Egypt, was at the top of the list.

U.S. strategists still viewed Washington's ability to deliver progress in the negotiations as their principal tool for maneuvering the Soviets out of the region. Israel, Kissinger explained to his Chinese counterparts, represented "both our weakest and our strongest point." Although Jerusalem's refusal to make concessions might jeopardize the U.S. position with the Arabs: "[W]hen all is said and done, no one else can make them move."⁴ American policy before the October War, he told Ford on August 12, had been designed "to create such frustrations that the Arabs would leave the Soviet Union and come to us. We didn't want the impression that Soviet

⁴ Memcon, "Subject: President's Visit; Nuclear War; SALT; Yugoslavia," November 27, 1974, in William Burr, ed., *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top-Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow* (New York: New Press, 1998), p. 311.

pressure produces results—that it had to be us.” The outcome of the war, therefore, had been a major victory for the United States: “We couldn’t have done it better if we had set the scenario.”⁵

With this in mind, the secretary of state believed that the Americans now had a real chance to solidify the transformation of the great power politics of the region. “If we can succeed,” he argued, “it will put us far ahead of the Soviets in the Middle East for some time to come.”⁶ Conversely, he worried: “If we can’t encourage the switch away from the Soviet Union and [the Egyptians] turn back, there will probably not be another opportunity in our generation.” It would, he claimed, be “a massive problem” if Sadat and the other Arabs decided to realign with Moscow.⁷ Ford, evidently, agreed with this basic approach. “We want,” he said, “to keep the Soviets out and have friendship with the Arabs.”⁸ It was therefore crucial that the United States make additional progress, so as to “forestall the Soviets getting back in.”⁹

To be sure, the White House’s tactical considerations made a comprehensive approach, which Moscow still favored, a difficult option. Attempting to resolve the core aspects of the Arab-Israeli dispute all at once, Ford and Kissinger felt, would potentially lead to a dangerous deadlock in the negotiations and risk another war in the Middle East. USSR insistence on pressing for a final agreement, Kissinger argued, could “only maintain tensions” and, consequently, “our policies must be designed to keep Soviet involvement to a minimum.”¹⁰

More importantly, the step-by-step approach allowed the White House to manage more effectively its domestic situation. In addition to the constraints that any administration would

⁵ Memcon, August 12, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1974-1976* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2012), p. 402.

⁶ Draft Telegram from Kissinger to Scowcroft, undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 441.

⁷ Memcon, August 13, 1974, folder: Memcons—Ford Administration, box 4, Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1552748.pdf>.

⁸ Memcon, January 22, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 499. See also Ford, *A Time to Heal*, p. 183; and George Lenczowski, *American Presidents and the Middle East* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 141.

⁹ Memcon, November 27, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 377.

¹⁰ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Subject: Your Meeting with Foreign Minister Gromyko,” September 20, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 97-98.

have encountered at home when it came to Middle East policy, Ford's political vulnerability as an unelected president; the legacies of Vietnam and Watergate; and the resurgence of Congressional influence on foreign policy issues all combined to limit the executive branch's freedom of action. While Ford and Kissinger recognized that a confrontation with the Israelis would be unavoidable if their goal was an overall settlement, they believed that moving in stages would put them in a better position at home for such a showdown when the time came. "[O]ur policy," Kissinger told Chinese representatives in November, "is to produce progress that returns Arab territory to Arab control, but gradually at a pace that doesn't produce paralysis of our foreign policy because of the domestic reaction."¹¹ The administration, Kissinger advised Ford, had to continue to deliver concessions but, for the moment, do so in a way that would not give the Israelis "grounds for charging that we have begun to put the squeeze on them."¹²

U.S. leaders continued to emphasize this factor during their meetings with their Soviet counterparts. The situation, Kissinger explained to Brezhnev during his visit to Moscow in October, required special tactics. "We face the problem," the secretary of state said, "that we have a minority group in America of unusual economic and political influence. And therefore the problem of a solution in the Middle East has for us domestic connotations that it cannot have for you." Any attempt by Ford and Kissinger to impose a settlement would "plunge [the administration] into a major domestic crisis," whereas the step-by-step approach allowed the White House "to avoid an unmanageable domestic situation."¹³ "Total involvement by all," Ford repeated at the Vladivostok summit in November, "is also not possible for our domestic political

¹¹ Memcon, November 26, 1974, in *The Kissinger Transcripts*, p. 291.

¹² Memo from Kissinger to Ford, "Meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister Allon," December 9, 1974, folder: Israel (3), box 15, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan (GRFL). See also Galen Jackson, "The Showdown That Wasn't: U.S.-Israeli Relations and American Domestic Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2015), pp. 137-140.

¹³ Memcon, "Subjects: Jackson Amendment; CSCE; Middle East; Nuclear War," October 24, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 213-214.

reasons.” The administration confronted “a very difficult problem at home” with which it had to deal carefully to move toward a solution.¹⁴

These factors aside, it is clear that the Americans would not have been interested in collaborating with Moscow in any case. The Soviets, after all, had reiterated their willingness to consider interim arrangements in the Middle East, provided that they did not prejudice the outlines of a final agreement.¹⁵ And Kissinger was the first to admit that the Soviet leader had raised a “not unreasonable question” when he had asked why a joint effort by the superpowers had to wait until after yet another disengagement negotiation.¹⁶

Thus, the underlying reason for the Americans’ refusal to concert with Moscow was their desire to ensure that the Kremlin not accrue credit with the Arabs for its role in delivering a settlement. “George Ball hurts us,” he told Ford in December, “by saying we should work it out with the Soviet Union. That means the [19]67 borders. If we are willing to do that, we don’t need to do it with the Soviet Union.”¹⁷ The charge leveled by many of Israel’s American supporters that the administration was selling out Jerusalem’s interests for the sake of preserving détente, he later wrote, made no sense, for “a principal purpose” of the White House’s strategy “was to reduce and, wherever possible, to eliminate a significant Soviet role in the Middle East.”¹⁸

Indeed, the evidence quite clearly indicates that the objective of scoring a Cold War victory against the USSR in the area was foremost in the minds of American officials. The

¹⁴ Memcon, “Subject: SALT II, Cyprus, Middle East, CSCE, Trade Bill,” November 24, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 362-364. See also Memcon, “Subject: CSCE; Middle East,” February 17, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 496; and Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents, 1962-1986* (New York: Times, 1995), pp. 325, 332.

¹⁵ Letter from Brezhnev to Ford, January 27, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 454.

¹⁶ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), p. 392.

¹⁷ Memcon, December 18, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 476. See also Memcon, December 17, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 474; and Memcon, February 25, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 520. For Ball’s views, see Ball, “How to Avert a Middle East War,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 235, No. 1 (1975), pp. 6-11. See also Edward R.F. Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger: A Secret History of American Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Reader’s Digest, 1976), p. 166.

¹⁸ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 388.

superpowers, Kissinger explained to Allon, remained “substantially competitive [*sic*]” in the Middle East. The administration’s policy, he said, was “the most anti-Soviet that can be sustained.” While it might appear that the United States was retreating, that was only because domestic opposition required the White House to utilize certain tactics with Moscow. “Our policy,” Kissinger emphasized, “has been that whenever Russia puts a toe across the line, we cut it off. We have to do a complex policy. We have the best potential for being tough by seeming to be soft. Where have the Soviets gained anything?”¹⁹

The United States, consequently, was not willing to discuss the substance of the Middle East problem with the Kremlin. The issue, Sonnenfeldt indicated, posed “the delicate problem of how to keep the Soviets at arm’s length, but convince them that what we are doing does not threaten their interests.”²⁰ The USSR leaders, Kissinger acknowledged, had a legitimate complaint that the Americans had so far given “them only the form and none of the substance of the consultations, and very little of that” and that they had been involved in the negotiations only “nominally.”²¹ U.S. representatives, a State Department strategy paper agreed, faced the difficult task of trying to convince Moscow of the administration’s “willingness to allow them to play a significant role in peace-making (even though we may actually seek to limit this role).”²²

Thus, when U.S. officials did discuss the option of switching to a comprehensive approach and involving Moscow in the diplomacy, they noted that their objective would simply

¹⁹ Memcon, “Subjects: Immediate Defense Needs; U.S.-Soviet Détente; Negotiating Strategy; Long-Term Arms Supply; PLO Vote in the UNGA,” October 13, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 154, 156. See also Memcon, November 26, 1974, p. 290.

²⁰ Memo from Sonnenfeldt to Kissinger, “Your Moscow Talks,” October 18, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 173.

²¹ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Subject: Your Meeting in Vladivostok,” undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 298. “It was,” Kissinger later wrote, “the by now standard maneuver to keep the Soviet Union out of the diplomacy... by hinting at cooperation with it in the next phase.” See Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 392.

²² Department of State Briefing Paper, “Choices Related to Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations and Averting a Renewal of Hostilities,” undated, folder: WSAG Meeting, January 14, 1975—Middle East (3), box 18, U.S. NSC Institutional Files, 1974-1977, GRFL.

be to shift a portion of the blame to the Kremlin for the negotiating impasse. Although reconvening the Geneva Conference was not Washington's preferred course, it at least had "the advantage... that all participants at Geneva would share the responsibility."²³ If the White House could not achieve another Egyptian-Israeli disengagement, Kissinger argued, reassembling the parties might "put a better face on stalemate. It seems desirable also, if there is to be a stalemate, for the US to broaden responsibility for it."²⁴

And while the Americans felt that Geneva could not be avoided forever, they hoped to reconvene the conference only after another demonstration of U.S. influence. The administration, Kissinger explained, had no interest in abandoning the step-by-step program as long as it could be sustained, or in cooperating with Moscow. It would make "an enormous difference," the secretary of state had added, if the United States could return to Geneva after another American negotiating success, as it would show "that moderation pays and that only the U.S. can achieve progress."²⁵ Without another unilateral display of Washington's leverage in the Middle East, he similarly warned the Israelis in March, the Soviets would be able to "step into the area at least as equals of the United States." The administration's strategy, Kissinger emphasized, would be "smashed," in great part because the Americans would "be forced to maneuver with the Soviet Union."²⁶ It was for precisely this reason that the secretary of state was so upset when, in his view, Israel's intransigence threatened to derail the momentum of the negotiations. "We had it won," he complained to Ford. "[T]he Soviet Union was out of the Middle East."²⁷

²³ Memo from Scowcroft to Ford with Attached Draft Message to Sadat, January 23, 1975, folder: Egypt (5), box 12, National Security Adviser (NSA) Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, 1969-1977, GRFL.

²⁴ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, undated, p. 298.

²⁵ Memcon, February 20, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 517.

²⁶ Memcon, March 22, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 561.

²⁷ Memcon, March 24, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 567. See also Memcon, March 22, 1975, folder: Vol. II (9), box 4, Middle East Memcons and Reports, Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553967.pdf>, p. 4.

The United States' ability to exclude Moscow from the peace process was, of course, entirely dependent on its capacity to deliver Israeli concessions. If the Americans failed in this regard, pressures would inevitably build in favor of a comprehensive solution. And it was clear that, under such circumstances, the Soviets could not be sidelined. Aside from the fact that the Syrians and the PLO would want Moscow included as a counterweight to Washington, the USSR's ability to upset the negotiations remained formidable.²⁸ "Moscow," Kissinger writes in his memoirs, "certainly had the capacity to exacerbate tensions in the Middle East."²⁹ If they were so inclined, he knew, the Soviets "could create massive problems—with the radical Arabs and thus with the Europeans and Japanese. Maybe even an [oil] embargo."³⁰

The problem for the Americans was that the Israelis were unwilling to make the sorts of concessions necessary to make another partial Sinai agreement possible. Rabin, who had by this time replaced Meir, was arguably in the weakest position politically of any prime minister in Israel's history and, consequently, hoped to stall the negotiating process as long as possible.³¹

And the White House was well aware that Jerusalem had no intention of yielding, especially because Rabin and his colleagues believed that the administration lacked the political strength to compel their cooperation. "[The Israelis] think that we are too weak to take seriously and that they can get what they want from Congress," Kissinger told Ford after returning from

²⁸ U.S. intelligence officials understood this to be the case. Aside from Asad's objective of limiting Sadat's ability to reach a separate agreement with Israel, an interagency memorandum pointed out, the Syrians also preferred the Geneva forum because they "would be able to count on the Soviets to help protect their interests." See Interagency Intelligence Memo DCI/NIO 2618-74, "The Rabat Watershed," November 27, 1974, folder: Middle East—General (3), box 1, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL. See also William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 468 n. 69.

²⁹ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 268.

³⁰ Memcon, February 20, 1975, p. 518. See also Stanley Hoffmann, "A New Policy for Israel," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (1975), p. 406.

³¹ Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), pp. 325-329.

the Middle East in March.³² Rabin and his colleagues, the secretary of state surmised, probably believed “they could see it through the next Presidential election.”³³

The step-by-step approach, as a result, stalled in the spring of 1975. Ford and Kissinger, as result, were forced to conduct a reassessment of Middle East policy and to consider the advantages of an overall plan, as well as the possibility of moving jointly with the Soviet Union.

The Case for the Comprehensive Option

With the failure of the United States to produce a second Sinai disengagement, conditions now appeared ripe for an overall approach to the problem, one that would inevitably require the involvement of both superpowers. To be sure, there had been a number of advantages to step-by-step diplomacy, one of which was that it had allowed the Israelis to adjust gradually to the transformed political situation in the Middle East wrought by the October War. From “a purely ruthless U.S. point of view,” Kissinger admitted at one point, coordinating with Israel was “not necessarily even the optimum strategy.”³⁴ Exerting serious pressure on Jerusalem for major concessions, however, would have been psychologically difficult. Forcing Israel to carry out a full withdrawal all at once, Kissinger had asserted in September, “would be demoralizing like what was done to Czechoslovakia in [19]38.”³⁵ The secretary of state, in fact, worried that coercion might “break Israel’s back psychologically and destroy the essence of the state.”³⁶

The Rabin government, however, had in the White House’s view shown a total disregard for U.S. interests. As early as August 14, Kissinger had told Schlesinger “that the Israelis were

³² Memcon, March 24, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 571.

³³ Memo for the Files, “Subject: President’s Meeting with the Secretary and Congressional Leadership—Monday, March 24, 1975, 8:00 a.m.,” March 24, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 570. See also Jackson, “The Showdown That Wasn’t,” pp. 140-141; and Memcon, March 31, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 607-609.

³⁴ Memcon, August 27, 1975, folder: Vol. II (5), box 5, Middle East Memcons and Reports, Ford Digital Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553979.pdf>, p. 20.

³⁵ Memcon, “Subject: Visits; 40 Committee; NSC Meeting on Israeli Requests; Preparation for Rabin Visit,” September 6, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 76.

³⁶ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 1138. See also Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 428.

behaving like a bunch of bastards” and “being very obstinate.”³⁷ The United States, he explained to Ford, could not permit Rabin’s domestic difficulties to obstruct its peacemaking efforts. “Israel,” he wrote, “simply cannot hold the entire world at ransom.”³⁸ Even in the wake of the Arab summit at Rabat, during which the Arab League had declared the PLO “the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people,” Kissinger tended to blame Jerusalem for the negotiating impasse.³⁹ Unlike the 1967 Khartoum summit, at Rabat the Arabs had committed themselves to “negotiations on [a] peaceful settlement,” a development which Kissinger deemed an “historic transformation of the Arab position.” By contrast, he claimed, Israel was now “much less ready than it was in 1967 to give up territories occupied in that war.”⁴⁰ Thus, it was hardly surprising that when Kissinger failed during his two-week shuttle in March to convince Rabin to accept conditions minimally necessary for a Sinai agreement, both he and Ford were incensed.⁴¹

And if the Israelis were not going to cooperate with U.S. peacemaking efforts in the context of step-by-step diplomacy, a comprehensive approach was the logical alternative.

There were, after all, compelling advantages to this option. For starters, American policymakers still felt that Jerusalem’s own long-term interests would soon require a settlement. The Israelis, Kissinger had told French President Georges Pompidou in December 1973, pursued “a diplomacy which leads to suicide.”⁴² The Rabin government’s position was perhaps

³⁷ Memo for Record by Schlesinger, August 14, 1974, folder 8, box 57, James R. Schlesinger Papers, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. I thank Brendan Rittenhouse Green for providing me with a copy of this document.

³⁸ Memo from Scowcroft to Ford, November 3, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 453.

³⁹ The White House, in fact, believed that the Rabat decision could have been avoided had the Israelis shown a greater willingness to negotiate with the Jordanians for a West Bank disengagement agreement.

⁴⁰ Memo from Scowcroft to Ford, October 30, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 449. See also Draft Telegram from Kissinger to Scowcroft, undated, p. 442.

⁴¹ Jackson, “The Showdown That Wasn’t,” p. 144.

⁴² Quoted in Marc Trachtenberg, “The French Factor in U.S. Foreign Policy during the Nixon-Pompidou Period, 1969-1974,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2011), p. 46. Note also Kissinger’s comment that the United States could not afford to “risk everything for a suicidal policy—one which would bankrupt them.” See Memcon, September 6, 1974, p. 77. The Israelis, he told Scowcroft on another occasion, were “killing themselves [*sic*].” See Telecon, July 22, 1975, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book (NSA-EBB) No. 526,

understandable, but that did not change the fact that it was “disastrous.”⁴³ Jerusalem certainly had the upper hand militarily for the moment, Kissinger acknowledged, but, he believed: “[S]ooner or later the sheer numerical superiority of the Arabs will prevail. Take the historical view and this becomes clear. It may take 25 years but the Arabs will eventually catch up technologically and then Israel will be in the gravest danger.” “That is why,” CIA Director William Colby concurred, “they need to negotiate a settlement while there is still time.”⁴⁴ “I think at some point in the next few years,” Kissinger advised the Israelis, “you should consider a sweeping proposal. Especially when you still have something to give. And before you’re seen to be acting under pressure.”⁴⁵ A number of outside experts had formed a similar opinion.⁴⁶

In addition, American strategists feared that if they could not achieve an overall settlement in the near future, the opportunity for peace might be lost. For the moment, the White House considered the evolution in the Arabs’ position on a settlement quite promising. Sadat, of course, had by this time decided upon a political solution to Egypt’s conflict with Israel, but top policymakers in Washington also believed, despite their reputation, that opportunities existed

August, 19, 2015, Document 4-C, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB526-Court-Ordered-Release-of-Kissinger-Telcons/documents/4C%20%2007-22-75%20Scowcroft.pdf>. Pursuing the peace process, he said on another occasion, was the only way to ensure “Israel’s salvation.” See Memcon, September 6, 1974, p. 76.

⁴³ Memcon, March 22, 1975, folder: Vol. II (9), box 4, Middle East Memcons and Reports, Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553967.pdf>, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Memcon, “Subject: Israeli Military Requirements,” January 13, 1976, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 883. Note also Kissinger’s claims that alterations to the 1967 lines would “be an inconsequential addition to Israel’s security, particularly in an era of modern weapons, if Israel’s increasingly powerful Arab neighbors are bent on Israel’s destruction over an historical period.” See Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Subject: Discussion of Middle East Strategy,” April 21, 1975, folder: Middle East—General (8), box 1, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL. See also Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” January 14, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 483; and Memcon, December 9, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 466. U.S. officials, moreover, believed strongly that Israel’s settlements policy was contrary to Jerusalem’s own long-term interests, an opinion with which even Rabin agreed. See Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, p. 329.

⁴⁵ Memcon, March 20, 1975, folder: Vol. II (6), box 4, Middle East Memcons and Reports, Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553964.pdf>, p. 21.

⁴⁶ For example, see Hoffmann, “A New Policy for Israel.” In Quandt’s view, Hoffmann “brilliantly argued” his point in this article. See Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 469 n. 79.

with the Syrians.⁴⁷ Damascus, in fact, had expressed its willingness to accept non-belligerency in exchange for a return of the Golan Heights and, of even greater importance, had finally agreed to full peace in the context of an overall settlement.⁴⁸ Perhaps step-by-step diplomacy's "most significant achievement," Kissinger wrote at one point, was that it had resulted in Asad's willingness to discuss the demilitarization of the Golan Heights as part of a settlement.⁴⁹ The Syrian leader, in fact, had informed the secretary of state in March that he might even be willing to pursue negotiations for a separate peace with Israel.⁵⁰

U.S. officials, however, worried that "this situation [might] not last indefinitely."⁵¹ In a summary of a CIA report on the political trends in the Arab world, the basic conclusions of which Kissinger considered "very sound," the secretary of state informed Ford "that the wave of extreme ideology and emotionalism may have passed." The main Arab states, Kissinger's synopsis stated, were pursuing more pragmatic policies than they had in the past, a key manifestation of which was their greater "willingness to consider a realistic settlement with Israel." This favorable development, however, would be jeopardized by a breakdown in the

⁴⁷ As early as November 1970, Rogers had written that Asad's coming to power would be "advantageous" to U.S. interests, given the Syrian military's "more pragmatic and less doctrinaire" predilections. Under "certain circumstances," it was even conceivable at this early date that Damascus could be brought to accept Resolution 242. See Memo from Rogers to Nixon, "Subject: An Analysis of Latest Events in Syria," November 19, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1969-1972* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2015), p. 644.

⁴⁸ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 403. Asad, Kissinger reported to Ford on March 15, had "made an impressively eloquent statement in front of his colleagues of why Syria for the first time has said publicly it wants peace." See Memo from Scowcroft to Ford, March 15, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 540. Note also Syrian Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam's strong hints that for the 1967 lines and a solution to the Palestinian question, Syria would accept peace with Israel. See Memcon, June 20, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 733; and Memcon, June 21, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 735.

⁴⁹ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, "Discussion of Middle East Strategy."

⁵⁰ Memcon, August 23, 1975, folder: Vol. I (4), box 4, Middle East Memcons and Reports, Ford Digital Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553971.pdf>, p. 22. On Syria's views on the question of war and peace during this period, see also Jerome Slater, "Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Israel and Syria, 1948-2001," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2002), pp. 92-94. Note also that when he had visited Damascus in June, Nixon had implied in strong terms to Asad that the United States would support a return of the Golan Heights to Syria, a pledge which had reportedly delighted the Syrian leader. See Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 1134. I thank William Quandt for discussing the importance of this meeting with me.

⁵¹ Memo from Scowcroft to Ford, "Meeting with Golda Meir," May 19, 1976, folder: Israel (28), box 16, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL.

negotiations and a resumption of hostilities, which “would tend to radicalize Arab regimes.”⁵² As the report put it: “The Arab-Israeli dispute remains the factor most seriously capable of nullifying the continued predominance of a relatively moderate and pragmatic leadership in Arab lands.”⁵³ Because they had been essentially left out of the peace process, Scowcroft similarly indicated to Ford at one point, the Palestinians had begun “tending toward greater extremism.”⁵⁴

What was even more important, however, was that U.S. decision-makers felt that the fundamentals of the Middle East dispute would, probably in the not-so-distant future, have to be dealt with forthrightly. The disengagement agreements had been significant inasmuch as they had stabilized the postwar ceasefire and established a foundation upon which further negotiations could be based but, as Spiegel writes, they amounted “only [to] a formalized redeployment of troops at the end of a war.”⁵⁵ To make more dramatic progress, it was clear that basic *political* issues, rather than strictly *military* ones, would have to be addressed, and quite soon.⁵⁶

⁵² Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Subject: Summary of CIA Research Study: The Arab World in the 1980’s,” August 6, 1975, folder: Middle East—General (10), box 1, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL.

⁵³ Michael C. Pearson, “The Arab World in the 1980s,” undated, folder: Middle East—General (10), box 1, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL. The report estimated that the Palestinians would only be able to count on support from Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia for their moderate objectives. In practice, this would require the “recognition of Israel within the 1967 borders and a Palestine state in what remains.” Note also that NSC officials were optimistic that the more radical Palestinian elements were being sidelined by the growing influence of the United States and of the moderate Arab leaders. See Memo from Robert B. Oakley to Kissinger, “Subject: Contacts with the PLO,” October 1, 1974, folder: Middle East—General (2), box 1, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL.

⁵⁴ Memo from Scowcroft to Ford, “Meeting with Senator Javits,” April 14, 1976, folder: Jacob Javits, box 2, NSA Presidential Name File, 1974-1977, GRFL. Note also the findings of one State Department study: “If nothing happens this year, an irreversible process of political deterioration in the Arab world and in our relations with the Arab world—the beginnings of which are already discernible—will gather momentum through 1976 and 1977, and the positions of the U.S. and Israel will become further isolated. This process will have profoundly unhelpful effects on the willingness of political opinion in Israel and in the United States to support moves toward peace with the Arabs.” On the latter point, the report added: “The Israeli lobby can effectively use these unfair international actions to counter suggestions that Israel should show greater flexibility in negotiations.” See Memo from Oakley to Scowcroft, “Subject: Middle East Strategy Paper,” February 23, 1976, folder: Middle East—General (14), box 1, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL.

⁵⁵ Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America’s Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 283.

⁵⁶ It is worth noting that Kissinger, following the October War, had initially thought that he would achieve a great deal more progress in the Middle East than he ultimately did.

In this regard, the Palestinian question loomed large. The problem was, of course, enormously complex and would certainly be the most difficult aspect of the dispute to resolve, but the Americans felt that it could not be ignored indefinitely. As early as Nixon's first full month in office, U.S. officials had observed that the Palestinian attitude was becoming "increasingly relevant" and that it was not at all clear whether King Hussein could "maintain the necessary flexibility to enter into a settlement in the face of fedayeen opposition."⁵⁷ The United States, Richardson believed, had potentially "missed the boat earlier in thinking only of the Palestinians as refugees."⁵⁸ And even in the immediate aftermath of Black September, American strategists felt that a moderate solution might be possible, provided the Palestinians were given an incentive. "I think the Palestinians—not necessarily the Fedayeen," Sisco had said at the time, "can be brought around in the hope that there is light at the end of the tunnel."⁵⁹

Following the Rabat announcement, the problem had become increasingly urgent. The question of how to deal with the PLO, the Americans now stressed to the Israelis with greater frequency, would "have to be faced up to at some point."⁶⁰ "The issue," Saunders testified before a Congressional subcommittee using a statement that Kissinger had cleared personally, "is not whether Palestinian interests should be expressed in a final settlement, but how. There will be no

⁵⁷ Paper Prepared by the Interdepartmental Group for Near East and South Asia, NSCIG/NEA 69-2A (Revised), "Further Studies on Middle East Policy," February 20, 1969, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 33.

⁵⁸ Memo for the Record, "Subject: NSC Meeting, Wednesday, June 10, 1970—Middle East," June 10, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 428.

⁵⁹ Minutes of a Senior Review Group Meeting, "Subject: Middle East," November 13, 1970, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 636.

⁶⁰ "Talking Points [for Use with Allon]," April 21, 1975, folder: Israel—Items #63-#68, 4/5/75-4/22/75, box 17, NSA Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, 1969-1977, GRFL. The role of the Palestinians in an overall settlement, Kissinger similarly wrote to Ford in a preparatory memorandum for the president's meeting with Rabin, "cannot be ignored." See Memo from Kissinger to Ford, "Subject: Your Meetings with Prime Minister Rabin—June 11," June 10, 1975, folder: Israel—Items #74-#76, 5/17/75-6/10/75, box 17, NSA Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, 1969-1977, GRFL.

peace unless an answer is found.”⁶¹ The prevailing situation, Kissinger knew, was unsustainable: “We could co-exist with the PLO. It is indeed historically inevitable.”⁶² That the Americans had formed such a view is hardly surprising, as even many Israelis seemed “aware that [the] effort to maintain [the] status quo on [the] West Bank is running against [the] tide of history.”⁶³

Above all, there was perhaps no better way for the White House to sustain détente than by offering the Soviets a genuine role in the diplomacy. Ford and Kissinger, after all, had grown extremely concerned that Moscow, which by this time still had little to show for its U.S. policy, might eventually abandon its restrained posture and face the United States with a set of excruciating dilemmas. “A potential confrontation in the Middle East,” Ford told Allon, “I don’t know where that would go with the Soviet Union.” Aside from the “dire consequences” that would result from another oil embargo and the diplomatic isolation of Israel and the United States, the president was unsure whether he would have the support domestically to meet a major USSR challenge if the Kremlin chose to intervene. “[L]ook at the last years of Vietnam,” he said. “The aftermath of that doesn’t indicate that a President would get public support.”⁶⁴

Indeed, the deterioration of U.S.-Soviet relations made the situation increasingly worrisome for the Americans. Kissinger was skeptical of intelligence estimates indicating that Moscow would again act with restraint in the Middle East if another war erupted, in great part because its commitment to détente was “weakening considerably.” Brezhnev was probably in

⁶¹ Quoted in Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, p. 213. On Saunders’s statement, see also Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 306. The tone of the declaration was especially significant, for it clearly implied that the United States was reconsidering its approach to the Palestinian question.

⁶² Memcon, “Subject: The Middle East,” November 28, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 871.

⁶³ Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, “Subject: Israel—A Hard Year Ends, a Tougher One Begins,” December 1974, folder: Israel—State Department Telegrams to SECSTATE-EXDIS (1), box 18, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL.

⁶⁴ Memcon, December 9, 1974, p. 468. See also Memcon, July 30, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 390; Memcon, September 6, 1974, p. 77; and Memcon, March 31, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 604. Note also Kissinger’s comments to Allon on the necessity of fostering “the right psychological climate” in the United States to ensure adequate support in a Middle East crisis. See Memcon, October 13, 1974, p. 157.

trouble with his colleagues, the secretary of state surmised, due to USSR setbacks in the region and the failure of the MFN bill. As a result, he might not be able to justify staying on the sidelines in another Arab-Israeli military conflict. Moreover, Kissinger believed that the United States would be “dead” in the Middle East if the Soviets decided to help its Arab clients push the Israelis back to the 1967 lines. Such a scenario, he said, represented his “nightmare.” And, most problematically, Washington still lacked viable options for how to meet such a challenge. The American public, Kissinger and his colleagues believed, would not countenance a major U.S. military operation in the Middle East. Thus, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff George Brown concluded, the United States’ only choices would be to risk starting “World War III” by using American air power directly against USSR forces, or “to dust off the nuclear option.”⁶⁵

One would think, given these pressures, that the administration would have welcomed the opportunity to minimize the dangers it faced in the area by seeking an accommodation with Moscow on the issue. The American conception of *détente*, Kissinger had told Ford soon after he

⁶⁵ Minutes of a WSAG Meeting, January 14, 1975, pp. 478-479, 484, 486-488. For additional evidence of the administration’s concerns that the combination of the erosion of *détente* and the Soviet Union’s setbacks in the Middle East might lead the USSR to intervene in the event of another Arab-Israeli war, see Talking Points Prepared in the Department of State, Soviet Chargé: Yuly Vorontsov—Minister Counselor,” undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 4; Memcon, August 12, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 20; Memcon, September 6, 1974, p. 76; Memcon, September 11, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 84; Memcon, October 13, 1974, p. 155; Memcon, “Meeting with Academicians,” December 19, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 391, 401; and Minutes of an NSC Meeting, “Middle East and Southeast Asia,” March 28, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 584. Note also Kissinger’s comment during a December 19 meeting with Ford: “My nightmare is that so far we have bluffed them out of every crisis; what if they take the next one down to the wire? If they put three divisions in, we couldn’t meet them.” See Memcon, December 19, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 388. See also Memcon, December 9, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 466. Despite Kissinger’s anxiety over this possibility, American intelligence analysts continued to evaluate the probability of the USSR intervening in a future Arab-Israeli war as quite low, unless the Western powers looked to be “reestablishing their hegemony in the Middle East or if Israel not only defeated but was threatening to force the total capitulation of Egypt or Syria.” Even then, Moscow would seek to prevent the conflict from escalating. In short, the basic assessment of U.S. officials was that if hostilities recommenced: “[T]he USSR would probably react with caution and a strong desire not to provide the West with a clear-cut threat.” See Defense Intelligence Agency Appraisal 11-75, “Soviet Capabilities to Project Military Forces to Egypt and Syria (U),” February 3, 1975, folder: Middle East—General (5), box 1, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL. See also Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, “Subject: Macovescu’s View on Possible Soviet Military in Mid East,” November 6, 1974, folder: Israel—State Department Telegrams to SECSTATE—NODIS (1), box 18, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL.

had become president, was “the toughest policy sustainable in this [domestic] climate.” The United States, he emphasized, had been using “détente to act very tough. We need some carrots. Some of the economic deals are in their favor, but in politics we have been pushing them everywhere.”⁶⁶ Indeed, Kissinger argued, Moscow had been “better off in the Cold War.”⁶⁷ The Soviets, he noted, were growing increasingly uncertain about the value of their détente policy toward Washington, in no small part because they had been forced to watch “our influence rise and theirs fall” in the Middle East, “an area of great interest to them and where they have traditional ambitions.”⁶⁸ What better way could there have been to mitigate this problem than to offer the USSR a real role in the diplomacy of the Arab-Israeli issue?⁶⁹

If these considerations were not enough, the step-by-step program appeared to have run its course. Despite their having expended a tremendous amount of time and energy on the problem, Ford and Kissinger had been unable to persuade the Israelis to accept another partial agreement with the Egyptians. The Rabin government, it was now abundantly clear, was not going to carry out another withdrawal in Sinai unless the United States first offered it significant military, economic, and diplomatic inducements or exerted heavy pressure on Jerusalem. Under either scenario, the White House believed that its ability to sustain the momentum of the peace process would be severely degraded, for it would lack the leverage necessary to obtain additional

⁶⁶ Memcon, August 14, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 25. The debate over détente in the United States, Kissinger had stressed, was “based on misunderstanding.” The White House had been using the policy to “paralyze the left.” See also Memcon, January 6, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 424.

⁶⁷ Memcon, December 19, 1974, p. 391.

⁶⁸ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Meeting with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, Wednesday, August 14, 1974,” undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 26. See also Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Your Meeting with Foreign Minister Gromyko,” pp. 96-101.

⁶⁹ Conversely, U.S. officials understood that an agreement mediated unilaterally, especially if it involved a unilateral American enforcement mechanism, would have the opposite effect. See Memo from Oakley to Scowcroft, “Subject: Guaranteeing an Interim Sinai Agreement,” July 10, 1975, folder: Israel (12), box 15, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL.

Israeli concessions. Indeed, the eventual objective of a comprehensive settlement might be put in jeopardy. Thus, Kissinger was “reluctant to spill any blood on an interim.”⁷⁰

And it was by no means clear what the long-term value of another partial agreement would be, even if one were possible, given the administration’s recognition that the Arabs would soon insist that the focus of the negotiating process be geared toward an overall settlement. “We honestly don’t think the step-by-step [approach] is feasible,” Ford told British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, “except under the umbrella of a comprehensive proposal.”⁷¹ The United States, Kissinger had said in January, would still “be set up for another crisis next year” even if it succeeded in mediating another interim deal. The White House, the secretary of state had stressed, would “have trouble again” in 1976, as the Israelis would “be sitting here just like this next year.” The structure of the problem, thus, seemed to be pushing him to think in comprehensive terms. Even though it would be “very brutal” for the United States “to impose a solution,” Kissinger felt that U.S. interests might require just such an approach. “If there is a war,” he said, “we must keep the Soviets out at all costs and it is probably in our favor to have Israel win. But afterwards, we would have to impose ruthlessly a peace.”⁷²

There was, thus, a compelling case to be made for dropping the unilateral step-by-step approach and pursuing instead a comprehensive program jointly with the USSR.⁷³ But would the

⁷⁰ Memcon, June 17, 1975, NSA Memoranda of Conversation, 1973-1977, box 12, Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553126.pdf>. For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of the administration’s deliberations, see Jackson, “The Showdown That Wasn’t,” pp. 147-154, 158-159. See also Memcon, June 18, 1975, NSA Memoranda of Conversation, 1973-1977, box 12, Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553128.pdf>.

⁷¹ Memcon, “Subject: CSCE; Middle East; Energy; Concorde; Commodities; EC Poll,” May 7, 1975, NSA Memoranda of Conversation, 1973-1977, Ford Digital Library, box 11, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553063.pdf>.

⁷² Memcon, January 6, 1975, NSA Memoranda of Conversation, 1973-1977, Ford Digital Library, box 8, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1552902.pdf>. See also Memcon, December 9, 1974, p. 466; Minutes of an NSC Meeting, March 28, 1975, p. 589; and Department of State Briefing Paper, “Choices Related to Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations and Averting a Renewal of Hostilities.”

⁷³ With this in mind, this was the approach favored by most academics and outside consultants with whom Kissinger conferred during the administration’s reassessment. See Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 357; Sheehan, *The Arabs*,

Soviets actually be willing to cooperate with Washington? Would Moscow not simply try to complicate matters, as Kissinger frequently claimed, by aligning itself with the radical Arabs and attempting to isolate Israel and the United States at the Geneva Conference?⁷⁴

To be sure, the Kremlin leaders had grown deeply frustrated about their exclusion from the peace process. Washington's refusal to cooperate, Gromyko informed Kissinger, had created "a certain imprint on the relations between our two countries."⁷⁵ And Soviet influence in the region was still on the decline, with even Iraq moving away from Moscow. The USSR's new demand that the Arabs pay for their weapons in advance and in convertible currency, Iraqi President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr declared, would lead to the Soviets getting "a second Egypt."⁷⁶

But if anything, these trends had only strengthened the Kremlin's interest in working with the United States. The problem, Gromyko had told Ford and Kissinger during his visit to Washington in September, remained "a very serious one" that required the superpowers to join efforts. "We don't quite understand why the U.S. is reticent about cooperation with the Soviet Union in the Middle East," he said. "We feel it would be in the interest of both our countries." Moscow's position on a settlement, he had added, was unchanged. "As far as Israel itself is concerned," he reiterated, "we have said many times we favor the continued existence of Israel as a sovereign state with all possible guarantees. We are prepared to participate in such guarantees together with the US, or under the [UN] Security Council."⁷⁷

Israelis, and Kissinger, pp. 165-167; Memcon, March 16, 1975, folder: Vol. II (1), box 3, Middle East Memcons and Reports, Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553959.pdf>, p. 16; Memcon, March 31, 1975, pp. 606-609; Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), p. 634; and Hoffmann, "A New Policy for Israel."

⁷⁴ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 430-431, 433-434.

⁷⁵ Memcon, February 17, 1975, p. 495.

⁷⁶ Diary Entry of Anatoly S. Chernyaev, October 3, 1975, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB516-Anatoly-Chernyaev-Diary-1975-Uncertainty-Detente-Brezhnev/Anatoly%20Chernyaev%20Diary,%201975.pdf>.

⁷⁷ Memcon, "Subject: Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko's Call on President Ford," September 20, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 112.

As a result, the Soviets appeared cautiously optimistic about the U.S. policy review, as it suggested that the Americans might finally be coming around to their view of the situation. Brezhnev, Dobrynin related to Ford on May 9, was pledging that Moscow “would do everything in [its] power to help.” While reaching a settlement would of course be a major challenge, he said: “[W]e should do the whole thing rather than ordeal after ordeal.”⁷⁸ The USSR, moreover, was willing to pressure the Arabs to accept a reasonable settlement. As Gromyko vehemently responded to Kissinger’s claim that the Soviet position did not differ from that of the Arabs, “How many times we disagree with the Arabs, you know. How many! On recognition of Israel, and so many other questions.... That doesn’t exist.... There can be influence on the Arabs at the same time.”⁷⁹ And the Americans recognized that Moscow was genuinely interested in this sort of approach. As one paper prepared by the Policy Planning Staff observed, the Kremlin leaders probably now felt that the continuation of the Arab-Israeli dispute was “increasingly unprofitable for their policy” and, consequently, “their propensity to oppose a settlement is fairly low, especially if they could associate themselves with it in a prestigious manner.”⁸⁰

What was perhaps even more significant, contrary to Kissinger’s claims both at the time and in his memoirs, was that, more so than ever before, there existed no difference between the U.S. and USSR positions on the terms of a settlement. To the extent that there had ever been a disagreement between the two sides on the matter, it had always been the result of Washington’s reluctance to specify *openly* its basic views on the territorial and Palestinian questions. The White House’s policy reassessment, however, might result in the elimination of this obstacle.

⁷⁸ Memcon, May 9, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 557.

⁷⁹ Memcon, “Subject: SALT; Middle East,” May 20, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 593.

⁸⁰ Briefing Memo from Director of the Policy Planning Staff Winston Lord to Kissinger, “The Soviets and the Middle East,” October 16, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 839. See also Hoffmann, “A New Policy for Israel,” pp. 420-422. Note as well Gromyko’s apparent agreement to the American view of the nature of peace, which by this time had shifted to favoring a full normalization of Arab-Israeli relations. See Memcon, September 29, 1976, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 1068-1069.

In fact, the evidence demonstrates quite clearly that the peace plan that the White House was considering unveiling was indistinguishable from Soviet preferences. The U.S. position on final borders, Kissinger wrote in a June 10 memorandum to Ford, had “not changed since 1967.” The United States did not necessarily intend to declare its stance on this issue publicly, but the Americans nonetheless maintained that Israel ultimately would “have to withdraw essentially to pre-1967 borders if there is to be peace.”⁸¹ To protect American interests, the secretary of state repeated in a May 6 memorandum, Washington was “not prepared to support an Israel with boundaries much beyond the 1967 borders.”⁸²

The similarity of the substantive views held by the U.S. and USSR came out most clearly in an important memorandum, which Kissinger had sent to Ford on April 21.⁸³ If the president were to decide to pursue a comprehensive approach, the secretary of state had written, it would be necessary for him to give a major address to the nation to mobilize support for the White House’s policy. “The centerpiece of [this] speech,” Kissinger had stated, “would be a U.S. position that Israel should return essentially to 1967 borders.”⁸⁴ In addition, the issue of Jerusalem would have to be settled in such a way as to provide for “a distinctly Arab/Muslim role.” It was the consensus of the administration’s Middle East experts, he added, that Israel’s best hope of survival over the long term was to reach a settlement with its Arab neighbors and to gain a firm commitment from the international community to preserve its existence. “But,” Kissinger noted, “this is possible only on the basis of the 1967 boundaries for Syria and Egypt plus some form of Palestinian entity on part of the West Bank.” The idea that Israel could make

⁸¹ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Subject: Your Meetings with Prime Minister Rabin.”

⁸² Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Economic and Military Assistance Levels for Israel,” May 6, 1975, folder: Israel—Items #69-#73, 4/23/75-5/14/75, box 17, NSA Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, 1969-1977, GRFL.

⁸³ For further discussion of this document, see Jackson, “The Showdown That Wasn’t,” pp. 151-152.

⁸⁴ Any border changes would have to be “minor.” Specifically, Kissinger wrote, there could perhaps be adjustments in the previous Jordanian-Israeli line of “a kilometer or two.”

substantial territorial changes and also have peace, the document stressed, was “based on an unfeasible premise.”⁸⁵

The fact that this vision for peace was basically identical to the plan that the Soviets had been advocating for years was not lost on U.S. decision-makers. In substantive terms, Kissinger admitted to Gromyko, the USSR proposal for peace was “not one which presents unbridgeable difficulties with the United States.”⁸⁶ The Soviets, he had told Ford in November, “do have a point [about the Middle East].”⁸⁷ Moscow was correct in stating, Kissinger acknowledged to Brezhnev when they met in Helsinki, that the core of the disagreement between the superpowers about the Arab-Israeli problem was basically tactical in nature. “So I think,” the secretary of state said, “we are really reaching the point when we are converging on this issue.”⁸⁸ Aside from their differences over methods, American policy was “not inconsistent with your position.”⁸⁹

And if the United States decided to pursue a settlement along these lines, it would not only be able to extract maximal concessions from the Arabs, but would also enjoy the greatest degree of USSR cooperation. A comprehensive approach, Atherton had said at a key meeting on April 14, seemed the most sensible choice “because we can demand more from the Arabs.”⁹⁰ Aiming for an overall agreement, Kissinger wrote a week later, was probably Washington’s best option, in part because it would allow the Americans to “ask the Arabs for the most significant political concessions.” Moreover, the United States would be able to “use our position to elicit

⁸⁵ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Discussion of Middle East Strategy.” While discussing Ford’s upcoming meeting with Sadat, Kissinger likewise had stated: “You could promise him the principle of the [19]67 frontiers for Egypt and, with minor modifications, for the other frontiers.” See Memcon, May 24, 1975, NSA Memcons, box 12, Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553084.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Memcon, February 17, 1975, p. 498.

⁸⁷ Memcon, November 16, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 317.

⁸⁸ Memcon, “Subjects: US-Soviet Relations; Middle East; Emigration; Nuclear War,” July 30, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 695.

⁸⁹ Memcon, “Subjects: Cyprus; CTB and Ban on New Weapons Systems; Korea; MBFR; Middle East,” September 19, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 796.

⁹⁰ Memcon, April 14, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 640.

some Soviet cooperation in developing procedures that would make the Geneva Conference more manageable.”⁹¹ Thus, as Zbigniew Brzezinski, who at the time was a prominent professor at Columbia University and whose views on the Arab-Israeli issue Kissinger had sought, put it: “Once we make [our plan] known, it wouldn’t be hard to get it compatible with the Soviet position. Because they can’t enforce their own settlement.”⁹²

Conversely, seeking to cut the USSR out of negotiations entirely might result in serious opposition from Moscow, which could cause Washington major problems. The Kremlin, Kissinger’s adviser, Winston Lord, observed, considered its “vital interests engaged in the Middle East and will almost inevitably play a significant continuing role there.” Any attempt to exclude totally the Soviets from the diplomacy, therefore, might complicate the U.S. quest for a settlement, as such an effort “would increase the likelihood that they will look for opportunities to foment and exploit other tensions.” The fact that the USSR’s cooperation on an arms limitation agreement for the Middle East would be needed once a peaceful solution had been reached further underscored this point, for it provided Moscow with “strong leverage on the situation, especially since we will face serious problems in squaring restraints in the Arab-Israel context with our arms supply programs in the [Persian] Gulf.” When added to the fact that the Palestinians’ “unfulfilled” aspirations offered the Soviets “a prime opportunity” to reestablish an influential position in the Middle East, having the USSR’s help, rather than confronting its opposition, represented a major incentive for the Americans to pursue an overall approach.⁹³

⁹¹ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Discussion of Middle East Strategy.”

⁹² Memcon, May 1, 1975, folder: Zbigniew Brzezinski, 1970-75, box 1, NSA Peter Rodman Files, 1974-1977, GRFL.

⁹³ Briefing Memo from Lord to Kissinger, October 16, 1975, pp. 839-840. Gromyko made sure to highlight this point during his meeting with Kissinger in July. “If the Soviet Union were to set itself the goal,” he said, “it could paralyze all the step-by-step attempts. It would suffice merely to supply the requisite quantities of arms to the relevant Arab countries and they would understand what it was in reference to.” See Memcon, “Subject: CSCE; Middle East,” July 11, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 646.

Given the compelling logic that underpinned the comprehensive option, Ford and Kissinger were bound to give the idea serious consideration. Throughout the spring and into the early summer, in fact, this was the preference of both men. In all likelihood, they agreed on May 14, the United States would have to agree to reconvene the Geneva Conference with the Soviet Union.⁹⁴ “It looks to me,” Ford reiterated on June 17, “like we will have to go for the overall.”⁹⁵ If the president had to decide right away what to do, Kissinger reported to his advisers on Middle East policy on June 20: “[H]e would go on television against the Israelis.”⁹⁶

What, then, explains the administration’s ultimate decision to pursue another interim Sinai arrangement? The step-by-step program no longer had the same advantages that it once did and, in any case, Kissinger had always believed that eventually it would have to be subsumed under an overall umbrella anyway. Without “a fundamental solution,” he had repeatedly stressed since the October War, no amount of U.S. tactical maneuvering could ever lead to a “permanent” resolution of the matter.⁹⁷ In addition, there were major advantages to the comprehensive option, not the least of which was the Soviet Union’s willingness to work with the United States within such a framework. Hence, the White House’s choice to forsake this approach is deeply perplexing, and begs the question of how U.S. policy during this period is to be understood.

Putting the Nail in the Coffin

The main reason that the administration chose to back away from a confrontation with Israel and to restart its efforts at another Sinai disengagement had to do with U.S. domestic politics.⁹⁸ Aside from the reality that Ford was one of the weakest presidents of the Cold War period, tackling the

⁹⁴ Memcon, May 14, 1975, NSA Memcons, 1973-1977, box 11, Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553076.pdf>.

⁹⁵ Memcon, June 17, 1975.

⁹⁶ Memcon, “Subject: Middle East Strategy,” June 20, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 726. For a more detailed discussion of this meeting, see Jackson, “The Showdown That Wasn’t,” p. 167.

⁹⁷ Memcon, November 27, 1974, p. 314.

⁹⁸ I develop this argument in greater depth in Jackson, “The Showdown That Wasn’t.”

Arab-Israeli issue head-on was certain to require a politically costly battle at home.⁹⁹ The White House, Kissinger had told Ford on May 24, was “facing a massive onslaught by Israel.”¹⁰⁰

The problem was particularly acute when it came to the Palestinians. “[W]e have an extreme domestic problem when we deal with the Middle East,” Kissinger explained to Tunisian Prime Minister Hedi Nouira on May 1. “If we get involved with the issue of the PLO at this stage, it would undermine our efforts, because the PLO is still considered here as a terrorist organization.” Israel, he and Ford had added, would be only too happy if they raised the matter, because it would inevitably lead to deadlock. The issue, the president stressed, had to “evolve as other things are settled first.”¹⁰¹ The Palestinians, Kissinger emphasized to Sadat, were “regarded as murderers. We must start the process of rehabilitation of the Palestinians. If Israel can get the Arab-Israeli issue focussed [*sic*] on the problem of the Palestinians, it has succeeded.”¹⁰² Dealing with the Palestinians, he told a journalist, could “start a revolution in the United States.”¹⁰³

The shadow of the approaching 1976 presidential campaign strengthened greatly the case for a more cautious approach. Already by May, Ford had begun mapping out a strategy for how to use his foreign policy record to help win the election.¹⁰⁴ “At some time we have to put out a

⁹⁹ On Watergate’s impact during this period of the diplomacy, which was arguably even more pronounced than it had been prior to Nixon’s resignation, see Memcon, “Tête-à-tête Meeting between President H. Asad and Secretary of State Dr. Henry A. Kissinger,” August 23, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 813; Anwar el-Sadat, *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 294; Memcon, March 9, 1975, folder: Middle East Memcons and Reports, box 3, Vol. 1 (2), Ford Digital Library, p. 29; Quandt, *Peace Process*, pp. 154-156, 467 n. 56; Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, pp. 147-148, 151; Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 225, 282, 286, 313; and Joseph J. Sisco, Interview by Michael Sterner, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Washington, D.C., March 19, 1990, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/mss/mfdip/2004/2004sis02/2004sis02.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ Memcon, May 24, 1975.

¹⁰¹ Memcon, May 1, 1975, NSA Memcons, 1973-1977, box 11, Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553058.pdf>.

¹⁰² Memcon, “Subject: Meeting with President Sadat,” March 13, 1975, folder: Vol. I (7), box 3, Middle East Memcons and Reports, Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553955.pdf>, p. 4.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, p. 167.

¹⁰⁴ David Allen, “Realism and Malarkey: Henry Kissinger’s State Department, Détente, and Domestic Consensus,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2015), p. 192. See also Peter Golden, *Quiet Diplomat: A Biography of Max M. Fisher* (New York: Cornwall, 1992), pp. 343, 345-347.

comprehensive plan,” Kissinger told Ford in the midst of the policy reassessment. While the White House would still want to determine whether another Sinai step was possible, “The best time to settle the Middle East is the first year of the new term.”¹⁰⁵ “Our optimum course,” he likewise observed in a meeting with the president in early 1976, “is to go to the PLO. Any other year I would do it.”¹⁰⁶ The United States, he explained to Asad during his August shuttle that secured the Sinai II agreement, could not “tolerate any more a nation of 3 million [people] dictating to [the] U.S. policies which are not necessarily in our best interest.” Nevertheless, the secretary of state stressed, the issue of the PLO was a “delicate” one and, consequently, “timing was of the essence.”¹⁰⁷ The Arabs, Ford repeated to Sadat in October, would have to “work with us on timing. But I can assure you I will be as firm in the future as I have been in the past. There is no sense in taking a number of little steps when we can take a big step. That agreement [Sinai II] was a terrible strain. We might as well take a broader view.”¹⁰⁸

The delay, of course, meant that working with the Soviets was out of the question. The Palestinian question, a report drafted by Sonnenfeldt and Hyland correctly noted, remained for Moscow a “sine qua non” and “the crux of any successful defusing of the Middle East crisis.” The Kremlin’s well-founded suspicion that the United States might decide to stall until 1977 was, thus, cause for considerable frustration.¹⁰⁹ As the USSR had repeatedly emphasized, they were willing to pursue further partial steps, but only if they were linked to overall principles.

¹⁰⁵ Memcon, June 6, 1975, NSA Memcons, 1973-1977, box 12, Ford Digital Library, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553112.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ Memcon, January 29, 1976, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 913.

¹⁰⁷ Memcon, August 23, 1975, p. 812.

¹⁰⁸ Memcon, October 27, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 863-864. See also Memcon, August 16, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 797.

¹⁰⁹ Telegram from the Department of State to Kissinger, “Subject: Analysis of Recent Soviet Behavior,” March 13, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 525-526. Note also the remarkable exchange during which Kissinger informed Gromyko that the United States could not support even the idea of simultaneous recognition by Israel and the Palestinians. The latter, he emphasized, to Gromyko’s dismay, would simply have to take the first step. See

To say, however, that the domestic factor was what principally drove U.S. policy in the Middle East *as it related to the USSR role*, however, would be much too simplified. To be sure, the rapid decline in détente's popularity in the United States meant that collaboration with Moscow would have only exacerbated the administration's domestic problem. As one of Kissinger's aides observed, "Should we appear to be giving the Soviets a free ride by assigning them an unearned role in the settlement process, our Middle East and détente policies would both come in for domestic criticism."¹¹⁰ A stalemate, Kissinger told Gromyko, would make the administration "very popular in America—particularly if we can blame you."¹¹¹

Nevertheless, politics at home had little to do with the White House's stance toward the Soviets. What stands out most clearly when reviewing the American records from this period is the belief held by top U.S. strategists that a major benefit of securing another disengagement would be that it would contribute to the further reduction of Moscow's influence in the area.

Again, the evidence on this point is quite remarkable, particularly when one considers the considerable advantages to the comprehensive option. If the United States dissociated from Israel at Geneva, Kissinger fretted, it would be "portrayed as being the result of Soviet pressure."¹¹² It was the White House's hope, he and Ford told Javits on June 27, that the United States could

Memcon, "Subjects: Middle East; Angola; Japan; China; Limitation of New Weapons of Mass Destruction; PNE Negotiation; MBFR," January 23, 1976, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 976-979.

¹¹⁰ Briefing Memo from Lord to Kissinger, October 16, 1975, p. 839.

¹¹¹ Memcon, February 17, 1975, p. 504. On the collapse of domestic support for détente in the United States and the coalition of friends of Israel and neoconservatives who attacked the administration's Soviet policy, see also Isaacson, *Kissinger*, pp. 529, 533, 537-538, 607-629; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 622; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994), p. 406; Allen, "Realism and Malarkey"; Julian E. Zelizer, "Détente and Domestic Politics," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2009), pp. 653-670; and Dan Caldwell, "The Legitimation of the Nixon-Kissinger Grand Design and Grand Strategy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2009), pp. 648-652. The issue of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union ultimately became bound up with this larger question. See Noam Kochavi, "Insights Abandoned, Flexibility Lost: Kissinger, Soviet Jewish Emigration, and the Demise of Détente," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2005), pp. 503-530. By early 1976, détente had grown so unpopular in the United States that Ford decided to remove it from his public lexicon. See Transcript of Interview with Ford, March 1, 1976, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 1014.

¹¹² Memo from Kissinger to Ford, "Discussion of Middle East Strategy."

prevent the conference's reconvention, in part because going to Geneva would mean including the USSR in the negotiations.¹¹³ A Sinai deal remained a key option, Kissinger stressed, because it was "still the best way to reduce the influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East."¹¹⁴

Indeed, this element of the administration's thinking seemed at times to dominate all others. The United States, Kissinger argued, needed more progress so that it could "get the Soviets out of the Middle East.... Our policy is tough. If they did to us what we are doing to them in the Middle East, we would be mad." Washington had to be careful, he went on, to not "publicly humiliate" the Kremlin leaders further, as they would eventually have no choice but "to strike back." Conservatives in the United States, he said, had to "understand that we are squeezing the Soviets like never before."¹¹⁵ It was a "mug's game," in his view, to score "little victories against the Soviets.... We are going to humiliate the Soviet Union enough in the Middle East that we just shouldn't overload the circuit."¹¹⁶ In short, it was a core assumption that the United States had "a strong interest in circumscribing Soviet involvement" and that it needed to adopt policies that would provide the regional states with incentives "to limit the Soviets."¹¹⁷

The White House's disdain for the idea of bringing the USSR into the negotiating process was so strong that it even weakened the administration's leverage in its interactions with the Israelis. The threat to reconvene the Geneva Conference was, of course, Ford and Kissinger's

¹¹³ Memcon, June 27, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 750-751. See also Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 406; and Isaacson, *Kissinger*, p. 634.

¹¹⁴ Memo from Scowcroft to Ford, August 28, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 822. See also Memo from Scowcroft to Ford, August 23, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 808.

¹¹⁵ Memcon, June 6, 1975.

¹¹⁶ Memcon, June 10, 1975, NSA Memoranda of Conversation, 1973-1977, box 12, Ford Digital Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553115.pdf>.

¹¹⁷ Briefing Memo from Lord to Kissinger, October 16, 1975, p. 839.

principal tool for exerting pressure on Jerusalem. If Israel refused to compromise, they warned Rabin, the United States would have to reassemble the parties and issue its own peace plan.¹¹⁸

Rabin, however, understood as well as anyone the administration's determination to keep the Soviets on the sidelines and was for this reason unconvinced that the American threat was credible. "I could not believe," the prime minister later wrote, "that the United States was truly interested in a format that would literally invite the Soviet Union to reassume a position of primary influence in Middle Eastern affairs."¹¹⁹ The White House's preoccupation with keeping Moscow out of the diplomacy had actually hindered its negotiating efforts with the Israelis.

So the administration's domestic concerns were the primary cause of its decision to hold the comprehensive option in reserve until after the 1976 presidential election, but they were largely epiphenomenal to its thinking about the USSR role in the Middle East. Ford and Kissinger, after all, did not consider the political constraints they faced at home insuperable.¹²⁰ The two men had all but given up hope that they would enjoy any backing from Israel's American supporters during the electoral contest anyway. Those individuals who opposed the White House's Middle East policy, they agreed, were incapable of defeating the president politically. If Ford chose to challenge openly the Rabin government, Kissinger asserted, it would "be an asset to you." There was even a possibility, he added, that it would make Ford "a national hero."¹²¹ Neither the Israelis nor the American Jewish community, he believed, would "survive

¹¹⁸ See Memo from Kissinger to Ford, "Subject: Your Meetings with Prime Minister Rabin—June 11"; Memo from Oakley to Scowcroft, "Middle East Strategy Paper"; Jackson, "The Showdown that Wasn't," pp. 157-159; and Abraham Ben-Zvi, *The United States and Israel: The Limits of the Special Relationship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 98.

¹¹⁹ Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), p. 263. See also Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 177-178.

¹²⁰ This is the core argument I advance in Jackson, "The Showdown That Wasn't."

¹²¹ Memcon, "Subject: Soviet grain deal; economic summit; Middle East; PFIAB," August 8, 1975, NSA Memoranda of Conversation, 1973-1977, box 14, Ford Digital Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553209.pdf>. See also Memcon, January 6, 1975;

the struggle” against the White House. And Ford, who came extremely close during the spring and summer to authorizing the comprehensive option, had reached the same conclusion. “They can’t,” he had said confidently on June 15, “win the confrontation between the Congress and the President.”¹²²

Thus, undercutting the Soviet Union in the Middle East was in its own right a major administration objective. Even though Moscow had offered its assistance and there was no real difference between the U.S. and USSR positions on the terms of a settlement, Ford and Kissinger did not view the problem as one to be resolved via cooperation. From the administration’s standpoint, in fact, a key benefit of Sinai II, which was concluded in early September, was that it contributed to the attainment of that objective. Thus, as Kissinger put it, the White House’s “whole policy” had been designed to *avoid* “settling it cooperatively with the Soviet Union.”¹²³

“On the Ragged Edge on Détente”

Ford and Kissinger’s achievement, of course, had not come without cost. The Egyptian-Israeli agreement, in fact, had required Washington to provide Jerusalem with substantial inducements, ones that would ultimately limit the U.S. ability to proceed toward a comprehensive solution. As one informed observer wrote at the time, the United States had been forced to offer the Israelis political concessions that “amounted almost to a marriage contract. If America must pay a dowry so large for a small fraction of the Sinai, what must it pay for real peace?”¹²⁴ “[T]he package of inducements introduced in 1975,” one prominent scholar concurs, “was of such magnitude and clarity as to severely constrain American diplomacy in several crucial dimensions, including its

Memcon, “Subject: Soviet grain; Mike visit; SALT; Middle East; CSCE,” July 22, 1975, NSA Memoranda of Conversation, 1973-1977, box 14, Ford Digital Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553177.pdf>; and Jackson, “The Showdown That Wasn’t,” p. 134 n. 16.

¹²² Telecon, June 15, 1975, NSA-EBB No. 526, Document 4-B, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB526-Court-Ordered-Release-of-Kissinger-Telcons/documents/4B%206-15-75%20Ford.pdf>.

¹²³ Memcon, “Subject: China,” July 6, 1975, in *The Kissinger Transcripts*, p. 382.

¹²⁴ Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, p. 191.

course vis-à-vis the PLO.”¹²⁵ It was for precisely this reason that many experts, in particular Ball, felt that the deal had potentially jeopardized Washington’s long-term goals.¹²⁶

One gets the sense that Kissinger felt compelled to draw attention away from these costs when describing the Sinai II disengagement in his memoirs. It was, he claims, “the most significant Middle East agreement of both the Nixon and Ford Administrations.”¹²⁷ Such positivity, however, had not characterized his thinking at the time. “My enthusiasm for this agreement is very little at this point,” he had stated on August 22. “They’re exacting an awfully high price,” Sisco agreed. “And almost minimally altering their strategic situation.”¹²⁸

Kissinger, in fact, began to have serious doubts about whether the deal was really worth the expenditure of political capital it would require. “I want a memo to the President,” he said. “There is a limit beyond which the U.S. cannot be pushed by client states.”¹²⁹ The manner in which the Israelis were approaching the peace process, he asserted, was “beyond the dignity of the United States.”¹³⁰ The secretary of state no longer felt that his negotiations with the Israelis were being conducted in a spirit of friendship and he resented that Jerusalem “massively interfere[d] in our Congressional affairs to a degree that no foreign government ever has or would ever be accepted.”¹³¹ More importantly, the negotiations had reached the point where the

¹²⁵ Ben-Zvi, *The United States and Israel*, p. 102.

¹²⁶ Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 304-305; and Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, pp. 198-200. On the costs of the Sinai II agreement to the United States, see also Jackson, “The Showdown That Wasn’t,” pp. 161-163.

¹²⁷ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 454. Note also Kissinger’s description of the agreement at pp. 453, 457-458, as well as his downplaying of its costs at p. 456. See also Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land: America’s Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2008), p. 152.

¹²⁸ Memcon, August 22, 1975, pp. 22, 34.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹³⁰ Memcon, August 30, 1975, folder: Vol. III (6), box 5, Middle East Memcons and Reports, Ford Digital Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553986.pdf>, p. 20.

¹³¹ Memcon, August 26, 1975, folder: Vol. II (1), box 4, Middle East Memcons and Reports, Ford Digital Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553975.pdf>, p. 4. Personal relations between U.S. and Israeli negotiators had by this time frayed considerably. Following Ford’s meeting with Rabin on June 10, Kissinger had informed Sisco that the prime minister’s performance had made him “almost blind with rage.” Jerusalem’s behavior, he said, was undermining the very “integrity of our foreign policy.” The way the Israelis had handled their

outcome for the United States was “the absolute margin of what is tolerable.” It was, he said, “marginally, slightly marginally better for the U.S. to do [the deal] than not to do it.”¹³² Given that the White House’s foremost consideration throughout this phase of the diplomacy had been to ensure that a partial agreement would neither cost the United States heavily nor restrict its ability to achieve an overall settlement at a later date, it seems quite clear that Kissinger had serious doubts about whether the price that the Sinai II deal had exacted had been justified.

And the agreement had been a costly one in another, probably more important, dimension, for it had caused additional serious strains in U.S.-Soviet relations. To be sure, despite its capacity to derail U.S. peacemaking efforts, the Kremlin, rather remarkably, had made no attempt to do so. The Soviets, Gromyko pledged, could not be expected to express their support for the deal, but neither would they seek to subvert it.¹³³ Moscow, Kissinger acknowledged, had “been very quiet on the Middle East.”¹³⁴

This did not mean, however, that the way in which the administration had managed the negotiations had left U.S. relations with the USSR unaffected. The administration’s decision to sideline Moscow, unsurprisingly, had left Brezhnev and Gromyko “furious.”¹³⁵ Given the way Washington had chosen to handle the Arab-Israeli issue since the October War, Ford and Kissinger’s protestations that the United States was not seeking to cut Moscow out of the diplomacy were no longer credible. The administration, Gromyko complained, was not only

interactions with the Americans, he complained, was “outrageous.” For his part, the president had been “offended” by Rabin’s attitude. See Telecon, June 11, 1975, NSA-EBB No. 526, August, 19, 2015, Document 4-A, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB526-Court-Ordered-Release-of-Kissinger-Telcons/documents/4A%206-11-75%20Joe%20Sisco.pdf>; and Telecon, June 15, 1975. See also Jackson, “The Showdown That Wasn’t,” p. 162.

¹³² Memcon, August 26, 1975, folder: Vol. III (7), box 5, Middle East Memcons and Reports, Ford Digital Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0331/1553987.pdf>, pp. 3, 5.

¹³³ Memcon, “Subject: Foreign Minister Gromyko’s Call on The President,” September 18, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 767.

¹³⁴ Memcon, August 8, 1975.

¹³⁵ Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, p. 349. See also Message from Scowcroft to Kissinger, September 1, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 736-737.

failing to address the core aspects of the dispute but, contrary to prior U.S.-USSR agreements, had “simply decided to ignore the Soviet Union and its role in that area.” The Middle East, he emphasized, had begun to cast a shadow over the two countries’ broader relationship.¹³⁶

Indeed, Kissinger now worried that the White House might be forcing Brezhnev to turn against the United States because the Americans appeared to be “screwing him on détente.” Washington was, he believed, “on the edge of what we can get away with on détente. To push much further will force a reversal from the Soviets.”¹³⁷ After all, the secretary of state recognized, the Middle East had been “a humiliation” and Moscow was “getting nothing out of détente.” Since Ford had taken office, “[A]ll the concessions have been theirs. If we don’t give way on something, it may be all over.” The Americans, in short, were “on the ragged edge on détente,” in great part because of the manner in which they had handled the Arab-Israeli issue.¹³⁸

The administration, in fact, actually was rather sympathetic to the USSR position. Moscow had exhibited considerable restraint in the Middle East and with the exception of their policy in Angola, Kissinger believed that the Soviets were “getting a bum rap.”¹³⁹ Détente, he asserted, was the “right” policy for the United States, for it “really isn’t so that they are being irresponsible—except in Angola.”¹⁴⁰ The administration’s policy toward the Kremlin, he argued, had “essentially worked.” In fact, the secretary of state asserted that he could “make a strong case” that détente had “been a one-way street.... It has been a one-way street in our direction rather than theirs.” The Americans, he stressed, were “beginning to use up [their] fat.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Memcon, September 18, 1975, pp. 765-767.

¹³⁷ Memcon, August 16, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 731. See also Memcon, October 14, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 827.

¹³⁸ Memcon, September 8, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 748.

¹³⁹ Memcon, March 18, 1976, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 1024-1025.

¹⁴⁰ Memcon, April 15, 1976, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 1039.

¹⁴¹ Memcon, April 9, 1976, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 1035.

With this in mind, U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union in the Middle East is perplexing from a power political standpoint. Despite the advantages to the comprehensive option, the USSR's willingness to assist, and considerations for détente, Ford and Kissinger were adamant about keeping the Soviets excluded. One gets the sense that, regardless of what substantive position Moscow had taken with respect to the Middle East, the Americans would never have accepted freely its involvement in the peace process.

How is all of this to be understood? The American domestic context was of course extremely important, but this aspect of the matter was by 1975 no longer an obstacle to superpower cooperation. What, then, explains Ford and Kissinger's almost reflexive resistance to the very idea of involving Moscow in the negotiations? Did the United States miss an opportunity to cooperate with the Soviet Union on a problem of global importance, one that was tied directly to the broader relationship between the superpowers?

The answer to the latter question is, in a way unknowable, given the perils of counterfactual analysis. An unforeseen roadblock, one could argue, might have ultimately thwarted a joint U.S.-USSR approach to the matter. What seems clear, however, is that the Middle East conflict had been perhaps as conducive to resolution during this period as at any time since the creation of the state of Israel. And contrary to what many scholars have argued, the Soviet view of a final settlement mirrored that held by the United States. A substantial, combined effort on the part of the great powers, therefore, might have stood a real chance of paving the way to peace. At the very least, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that a significant opportunity had existed for the Americans and Soviets to reach a common position on what an overall agreement in the Middle East would entail.

It is answers to the other questions that surround this whole issue that elude the analyst. The White House's domestic problem, one might posit, was perhaps more constraining than the empirical conclusions presented above suggest. Yet even if true, such an objection cannot account for the Ford administration's strong opposition to collaborating with the Soviets. Moscow, after all, had offered many times to keep any agreement on the Middle East that it reached with Washington secret and, while it would have regretted the need for delay, the Kremlin almost certainly would have accepted a private deal calling for the superpowers to concert on the matter after the 1976 presidential election. And given the USSR's persistent exertions to demonstrate its basic agreement with the United States, the idea that the Americans had resisted a joint approach due to misperception or mistrust hardly seems persuasive.

One is thus left with the impression that U.S. officials, especially Kissinger, were simply wedded to the notion that cooperation with the Soviet Union on international issues of crucial political significance was simply undesirable. This attitude, particularly from a statesman with a major reputation for being a traditional realist, is confounding. The way in which the United States navigated in the Middle East during this period not only wound up in some ways complicating the task of advancing toward an overall settlement, but also antagonized its principal global adversary at a time when Moscow appeared to be pursuing a strategy of accommodation with Washington. In the end, the whole way in which this story unfolded begs the question of whether the Americans were actually pursuing a policy consistent with realist principles during this period of the Cold War. U.S. officials' strong anti-Soviet inclinations, in short, appear to have simply run too deep to permit Washington to make a genuine effort to transform the nature of the great power politics of the period, at least in the Middle East.

Chapter 6: Déjà vu All over Again

In general, I should note, the Americans wanted to talk with us about the Middle East only when they had problems in the region.

—Anatoly Dobrynin¹

[S]ince the element of rivalry remains a reality, [détente] cannot be the basis for coping with global problems.

—Zbigniew Brzezinski²

Despite the monumental changes that had taken place in the Middle East since the late 1960s, by 1977 George Ball still believed that if the superpowers could cooperate, a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement would be possible. In an article that appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, Ball, who had been seriously considered for the post of secretary of state by the incoming Carter administration before being ruled out—in large part because his views on the Middle East were unpopular with Israel’s American supporters—repeated many of the arguments he had made eight years earlier.³ The parties to the dispute, he observed, remained wholly incapable of resolving their differences on their own, which meant that the United States would have to define the terms of any agreement by setting forth its own proposals.⁴

In addition, Ball still favored affording Moscow an important role in the peace process. The Soviets, he pointed out, could always obstruct a final agreement by reopening their arms pipeline to the Arabs. More importantly, the Kremlin leaders would likely back a joint approach, as they remained wary of continued instability in the region. “Today there is considerable reason to believe that if the Soviet Union had to choose between the maintenance of a half-peace in the Middle East... or cooperation in seeking a peaceful solution,” Ball thus concluded, “it would

¹ Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents, 1962-1986* (New York: Times, 1995), p. 399.

² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), p. 7.

³ On how Ball’s position on the Arab-Israeli dispute hurt his chances of becoming secretary of state, see James A. Bill, *George Ball: Behind the Scenes in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 90. Note that criticism of Ball’s views about the Middle East from the American Jewish community had begun much earlier. See Peter Golden, *Quiet Diplomat: A Biography of Max M. Fisher* (New York: Cornwall, 1992), p. 174.

⁴ George W. Ball, “How to Save Israel in Spite of Herself,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (1977), pp. 453-471.

elect to support—or, at least not sabotage—a peace proposal that accorded with Resolution 242, especially if it were given some recognition for its peacekeeping role.” At the very least, this was “a reasonable hypothesis” that had “not recently been tested.”⁵

In light of Kissinger’s legacy, there was little reason to expect that the Americans would follow this sort of policy. With the election of President Jimmy Carter, however, there was at least the possibility that U.S. thinking about the matter could shift. The consensus among the new president’s advisers was that the step-by-step approach had run its course, meaning a comprehensive solution would need to be pursued. Administration officials recognized not only that the Soviet Union could not be left out in such circumstances, but also that Moscow could still work to block U.S. peacemaking efforts. Conversely, if the United States ran into trouble managing the negotiations, the USSR’s assistance might prove crucial with Syria and the PLO. And with détente very much on the decline, cooperation in the Middle East would be of fundamental importance to arresting the negative trends in the overall U.S.-Soviet relationship.

Despite the new administration’s initial disinclination to join efforts with Moscow, the latter’s sustained moderation and helpfulness in pressuring the Arabs ultimately convinced Washington that a combined approach could achieve positive results. Indeed by the fall of 1977, the prospects for U.S.-Soviet cooperation were perhaps stronger than at any moment since the outset of Nixon’s second term. For the first time, the superpowers were able to agree on a set of principles governing how the Arab-Israeli dispute would have to be settled. And with the key Arab states now willing to accept a peaceful solution, provided their principal demands for the

⁵ Ibid., pp. 468-469. See also Letter from Ball to President Jimmy Carter, March 30, 1977, folder: CO 1-7 Executive 4/1/77-5/31/77, box CO-6, White House Central Files (WHCF) Country Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Georgia (JCPL, or NLC if the document was located using the library’s Remote Archive Capture system); George W. Ball and Philip M. Klutznick, “Imposing a Middle East Peace,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (1977), pp. 888-890; and George W. Ball and Edmund Ghareeb, “American Policy on Trial: An Interview with George Ball,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1978), pp. 17-30. See also George W. Ball, “The Coming Crisis in Israeli-American Relations,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (1979), pp. 231-256.

retrocession of the territories they had lost in 1967 and a just solution to the Palestinian question were met, an overall settlement facilitated by the superpowers was seemingly within grasp.

To perhaps an even greater extent than had been the case during the period following the October War, however, the Middle East was to become an issue that exacerbated tremendously Cold War tensions. At precisely the moment when the superpowers appeared to have come finally to an understanding on the Arab-Israeli issue, their cooperative efforts completely unraveled. Within months, the United States was not only moving unilaterally and aiming to keep Moscow out of the negotiations, it was once again doing so with the goal of undercutting USSR influence in the area. What is more, American strategists followed such a course in the full knowledge that it could not possibly lead to a comprehensive resolution. The result was not only a strictly bilateral Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement—one that in no way touched the Palestinian aspect of the conflict—but a further significant deterioration in U.S.-Soviet relations.

This outcome is puzzling, arguably even more so than the earlier period of the diplomacy. The superpowers not only agreed on every facet of the issue and no longer differed in any way on how to handle it tactically, they had actually negotiated a joint document on how to solve the problem, which placed considerable pressure on the parties to the dispute. Why did everything fall apart so suddenly? The evidence shows overwhelmingly that Carter administration officials were appreciative of the Soviet Union's efforts with the Arabs, so what accounts for the Americans' decision to change course? Why was the opportunity not seized?

Carter's Vision for Middle East Peace

Carter took office with a conception of an Arab-Israeli settlement clearer than any of his predecessors. Although he had implied in strong terms during his campaign for the presidency that he would refrain from exerting pressure on Israel, his aim was a comprehensive peace that

would require essentially a full evacuation of the territories occupied since June 1967.⁶ The keys to a settlement, he wrote in the margin of an early peace plan draft, were an Israeli withdrawal to the prewar lines with only “minor adjustments,” “real peace” from the Arabs, and a “Palestine homeland.” With respect to the latter, his ideal solution would be a confederative arrangement between Gaza, the West Bank, and Jordan. In Carter’s mind, such an entity would look essentially like “[a] little more than one of [the] United States.”⁷

For several reasons, a settlement in the Middle East was arguably the administration’s top foreign policy priority. First, the Carter team was deeply concerned about U.S. energy interests and perceived the Arab-Israeli issue as intimately connected to the matter. “[I]t is impossible,” National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski had written before taking office, “to seek a resolution to the energy problem without tackling head-on—and doing so in an urgent fashion—the Arab-Israeli conflict. Without a settlement of that issue in the near future, any stable arrangement in the energy area is simply not possible.”⁸ The Arabs, he believed, now possessed considerable leverage “as a consequence of the new symbiotic relationship created by the

⁶ During a meeting with members of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in July 1976, Carter had pledged that he would not use military aid as a lever with Israel, nor would he impose a settlement. The Democratic candidate had added that an independent Palestinian state would be a threat and claimed to have no specific ideas about the ingredients for Middle East peace. See Memorandum (Memo) from the President’s Deputy Assistant for Policy Analysis Mark Siegel to White House Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan, “Subject: Middle East,” October 3, 1977, folder: Middle East, 1977 (1), box 35, Hamilton Jordan Files, JCPL. Note also Carter’s criticism of Ford and Kissinger during the second presidential debate. See Debate Transcript, October 6, 1976, Commission on Presidential Debates, <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-6-1976-debate-transcript>. See also William B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1986), pp. 31-32 n. 3.

⁷ Report from William Quandt of the National Security Council (NSC) Staff to Carter, undated, folder: Middle East—Possible Elements of a Solution (Proposal, ca. 2/77), box 14, Zbigniew Brzezinski Donated Papers (BDP), Geographic File, JCPL.

⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Recognizing the Crisis,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 17 (1974-1975), p. 67.

industrialized world's dependence on Arab oil."⁹ Although the United States could survive an oil cutoff, Carter said publicly in March, its Japanese and European allies would suffer badly.¹⁰

In addition, it remained the consensus of U.S. officials that a settlement was in Israel's own interest. It was not sustainable, Brzezinski asserted, for three million Israelis to "base their security on permanent control over one million Arabs." The Middle East, he believed, had reached a "watershed," and Jerusalem's choice was either to have the Arab world on good terms with the United States and accepting of Israel, or "increasingly radicalized, hostile to the West, friendly to the Soviet Union, and dangerously hostile to Israel."¹¹

Above all, administration officials had the memory of October 1973 fresh in their minds. Even before Carter had taken office, the outgoing Ford administration had prepared a detailed report summarizing the perils generated by the continuation of the Arab-Israeli dispute. Without movement toward a settlement by the end of 1977, it stated, the Arabs would likely try to break the stalemate militarily and exert economic pressure on the United States.¹² "Of all the regional conflicts in the world," Carter thus declared before the United Nations General Assembly, "none holds more menace than the Middle East. War there has already carried the world to the edge of nuclear confrontation."¹³ Although it was rarely mentioned explicitly, Quandt, now an assistant to Brzezinski, later wrote, administration officials recognized "that full-scale war in the Middle

⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, François Duchêne, and Kiichi Saeki, "Peace in an International Framework," *Foreign Policy*, No. 19 (1975), p. 7.

¹⁰ Carter's Clinton, Massachusetts Remarks and Question-and-Answer Session, March 16, 1977, American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7180>.

¹¹ Memo from Brzezinski to Quandt and Deputy National Security Adviser David Aaron, "Subject: Fireside Chat on the Middle East," March 27, 1978, folder: Middle East, 1-3/78, box 50, BDP, Country File, JCPL. As the title of his article implies, this was also Ball's basic contention. See Ball, "How to Save Israel in Spite of Herself." See also Brzezinski, Duchêne, and Saeki, "Peace in an International Framework," pp. 7-9; and Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 323.

¹² Report, "Arab-Israeli Dispute," January 14, 1977, NLC-17-111-6-2-2. For an estimate of what such a conflict would look like, see Steven J. Rosen, "What the Next Arab-Israeli War Might Look Like," *International Security*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1978), pp. 149-173.

¹³ Carter's Address to the United Nations General Assembly, October 4, 1977, American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=6744>.

East could one day involve the use of nuclear weapons. This possibility made the region exceptionally dangerous and added a strong impulse to peacemaking efforts.”¹⁴

And the White House believed there now existed a major opportunity to clinch a comprehensive settlement, for it felt that the key Arabs were ready to accept the sort of deal it envisaged. Israel’s neighbors, the Ford administration summary had indicated, were “probably prepared to sign a formal agreement accepting the reality of Israel’s presence and to allow the Jewish state to continue as a fact, so long as they get back substantially all the territories they lost in 1967 and if the Palestinians receive at least minimum satisfaction of their ‘rights.’”¹⁵ The United States, Carter stated, was “happy with the cooperation of the Arabs.”¹⁶ “The present Arab leadership,” Brzezinski agreed, “is the most moderate that has existed since 1947.”¹⁷

The Americans even believed that Asad, who Carter would later blame for sabotaging U.S. peacemaking efforts “by refusing to attend [the Geneva Conference] under any reasonable circumstances,” was willing to accept a moderate package.¹⁸ So long as the United States could deliver the sort of settlement Carter had outlined in his public statements, U.S. officials believed, Damascus would “give the new administration’s peace efforts every opportunity to succeed.” Indeed, under such conditions Asad would even be willing to press the PLO to demonstrate

¹⁴ William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 179. The election of the Likud Party, Quandt wrote in a memorandum to Brzezinski, made the situation only more dangerous, as the new government was likely to be “significantly more assertive in its policies concerning... nuclear weapons.” See Memo from Quandt to Brzezinski, “Subject: Israeli Elections,” May 18, 1977, folder: Israel, 4-6/77, box 34, BDP, Country File, JCPL. I again thank Dr. Quandt for discussing this aspect of the issue with me.

¹⁵ Report, “Arab-Israeli Dispute,” January 14, 1977.

¹⁶ Memorandum of Conversation (Memcon), “Subject: Summary of President’s Meeting with French Prime Minister Raymond Barre,” September 15, 1977, NLC-7-35-5-10-0.

¹⁷ Memcon between Dr. Brzezinski and Leaders of the American Jewish Community, May 16, 1977, in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1977-1980*, Vol. 8: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1977-August 1978* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2013), p. 263.

¹⁸ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam, 1982), p. 286. See also Memcon, “Subject: Summary of the President’s First Meeting with King Hussein of Jordan,” June 17, 1980, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, August 1978-December 1980* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2014), pp. 1266-1267.

moderation and could agree to demilitarization. The Syrian leader would, in short, “take risks to recover the Golan Heights through negotiations if he believes such risks are warranted.”¹⁹

The U.S. assessment of the PLO’s position was quite similar. To be sure, the administration could not justify the use of pressure on Israel at a time when Arafat still refused to recognize publicly Israel’s right to exist or to accept Resolution 242.²⁰ Nevertheless, there was little in the organization’s privately expressed position, which had evolved since the October War, to which the Carter administration could object. “The present PLO leadership,” Quandt was informed by an aide to Arafat, “is prepared to go ‘all the way’—acceptance of 242, recognition of Israel, acceptance of demilitarization, limits on external relations—provided that it get [*sic*] a sovereign Palestinian state in return.” The organization understood “the historical importance of the present moment,” but could not commit “political suicide.”²¹

The PLO’s declaratory policy was, then, a real problem, but not an insurmountable one. The Americans, after all, understood and to a certain degree even sympathized with Arafat’s reluctance to play his only bargaining chip when the United States refused to guarantee that the PLO would be represented at Geneva, let alone that the Palestinians would get a homeland.²² If Arafat could be persuaded that the Israelis would withdraw, the matter could likely be resolved. In any case, the other key Arab leaders—Sadat, King Hussein, Saudi King Khalid, and Asad—

¹⁹ Memo from the Office of Regional and Political Analysis to Quandt, “Subject: The Carter-Asad Meeting—The Syrian Perspective,” May 2, 1977, NLC-25-88-6-7-5. It is worth reiterating that this had been Ford and Kissinger’s assessment as well.

²⁰ The problem was exacerbated by a critical concession Kissinger had made on this issue as part of the Sinai II package.

²¹ Memo from Quandt to Brzezinski, “Subject: My Meeting with Walid Khalidi,” September 13, 1977, NLC-25-74-11-6-4.

²² Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America’s Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 189; Telegram from Ambassador to Lebanon Richard Parker to Quandt, “Subject: CODEL Findley Conversation with PLO Leader Arafat,” January 1978, NLC-25-75-1-3-7; Letter from Parker to Atherton, August 19, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, pp. 481-484; Telegram from the Embassy in Lebanon to the Department of State, “Subject: PLO and 242,” August 23, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, pp. 487-489; and Memo from Quandt to Brzezinski with Attachments, “Subject: Full set of notes from Landrum Bolling,” September 19, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, pp. 498-517.

had indicated that they could accept a confederative solution, which would link loosely the West Bank and Gaza to Jordan. This, of course, was Carter's preferred outcome.

Still, for the administration to be effective it would need to be able to point to a moderate Arab position. Due to "domestic restraints," the NSC staff felt, the White House would have difficulty pressuring Jerusalem unless it could "proceed farther in the negotiations to the point where a credible and authentic peace appeared to be available to Israel if it would make the necessary concessions."²³ The new government of Prime Minister Menachem Begin would only budge, one U.S. official noted, if it confronted "the real choice of either going forward or having total stalemate. In my view, we first have to get on the table a forthcoming Arab position. This could create the environment for the United States to use its influence with Israel." The Americans, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance agreed, would need to "work on the Arabs first."²⁴

It was in precisely this area that the Soviet Union could be helpful. To be sure, Moscow's influence had declined significantly in the Middle East since 1973, especially in Egypt, but it retained a considerable capacity to shape the behavior of both Syria and the PLO. But would the USSR actually countenance the sort of settlement the Carter administration had outlined? Now that the Americans appeared willing to be specific regarding the territorial and Palestinian questions, would the Kremlin assist in the achievement of a settlement, or would it move to undermine U.S. efforts in order to strengthen its position with the Arabs?

"Our Common and Weighty Word"

Moscow's moderation in the Middle East, which U.S. officials readily recognized, had not yielded positive results for the Kremlin since the October War. To the contrary, the Soviet

²³ Memo from NSC Staff to Walter Mondale, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, and CIA Director Stansfield Turner, "Subject: Discussion Paper for July 5 PRC Meeting," July 1, 1977, NLC-25-132-6-1-1.

²⁴ Minutes of a Policy Review Committee (PRC) Meeting, "Subject: Middle East," June 10, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, pp. 306-307.

position in the region had deteriorated badly following the conflict. Sadat's unilateral abrogation of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in March 1976 had been an especially discouraging signal, and Moscow's connection to Damascus had likewise been strained due to Syria's intervention in the Lebanese Civil War. The Politburo had attempted to make up for its losses in these areas by expanding its support for the PLO and establishing closer connections elsewhere in the Arab world, but there was no escaping the fact that Soviet influence had taken a hit.²⁵

Rather than shift course and align more closely with radical elements, however, the USSR maintained a strong interest in a comprehensive settlement. If anything, the Kremlin's support for such a solution only increased. The problem, Brezhnev wrote Carter soon after the latter's inauguration, remained of "prime importance." The Middle East, the general secretary observed, was still an area where "new dangerous outbreaks—as it happened in October of 1973," could occur at any time, which meant that the superpowers needed to cooperate.²⁶

The USSR seemed determined, American actions during the previous three years notwithstanding, to work together with the United States for an agreement. Gromyko, Dobrynin would later say, had been given strict instructions "to do his best to come to an agreement with Cy Vance, to find common ground for a Middle East settlement, through joint or parallel actions. This was our basic policy."²⁷ "[T]he notion," one former USSR official agreed, "that the Soviet Union was interested in high level confrontation is wrong. We could not get anything good from

²⁵ Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile: The Soviet-Egyptian Influence Relationship since the June War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 313-316, 324-326; Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War II to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 151-153; and Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Arab World* (London: William Collins Sons, 1978), pp. 12-14.

²⁶ Letter from Brezhnev to Carter, February 4, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6: *Soviet Union* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2013), p. 15.

²⁷ Transcript of the Proceedings of a Conference of Russian and U.S. Policymakers and Scholars held at Harbor Beach Resort, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, "Global Competition and the Deterioration of U.S.-Soviet Relations, 1977-1980," March 23-26, 1995, Svetlana Savranskaya and David A. Welch, eds., Sponsored by the Carter-Brezhnev Project, Center for Foreign Policy Development, Thomas J. Watson, Jr. Institute for International Studies, Providence, Rhode Island, http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/carterbrezhnev/docs_global_competition/part7.pdf, p. 101.

that.... To have that confrontation with the danger of having another flare-up, another conflict and another request for sending our weapons—always it was an expensive and very dangerous adventure.”²⁸ “It seems to me,” an analyst in the International Department later recalled, “that at that time the Soviet Union was interested in a peaceful solution even more than ever before.”²⁹

But had the Politburo leaders adjusted their terms for a settlement in order to recoup the losses they had suffered with their clients? In fact, Moscow’s terms remained remarkably consistent. In the spring, Brezhnev publicly reaffirmed the Soviet view that the basic elements of a solution were a restoration of essentially the 1967 boundaries, security arrangements, and great power guarantees. The Kremlin, moreover, was privately pressing the PLO to accept Resolution 242 and, in an effort to clear a major procedural hurdle, had agreed that the issue of Palestinian representation at the Geneva Conference could be settled during the assembly’s first stage without the PLO in attendance.³⁰ The USSR, Gromyko told Vance during the latter’s visit to Moscow in March, would still support an arms limitation agreement and reestablish diplomatic relations with Israel once a settlement had been reached. Moscow, he added, would now even support the principle of “normal relations,” rather than simply an end to the state of war.³¹

The similarity of the Soviet position to that taken by the Carter administration, then, was quite striking. Despite what had happened following the October War, Gromyko told Vance, the

²⁸ Transcript from a Workshop at Oslo, Norway, “US-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy toward the Middle East and Africa in the 1970s,” October 1-3, 1994, Odd Arne Westad, ed., p. 67.

²⁹ Transcript, “Global Competition and the Deterioration of U.S.-Soviet Relations,” pp. 118-119.

³⁰ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, p. 105. It is worth noting that this obstacle had only arisen in the first place as the result of previous U.S. pledges to Israel regarding procedures at Geneva.

³¹ Memcon, “Subject: Middle East, Arms Control,” March 29, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, pp. 84-86. For further evidence on this point, see, Excerpt on Middle East, “Record of the Main Contents of A.A. Gromyko’s Negotiations with the Secretary of State of the USA C. Vance,” Geneva, May 19, 1977, Carter-Brezhnev Project, Digital National Security Archive, http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/carterbrezhnev/docs_global_competition/TAB%203/doc03%20-%2019770519%20-%20Record%20of%20the%20Main%20Contents%20of%20AA%20Gromykos%20Negotiations%20with%20the%20Secretary%20of%20state%20of%20the%20USA%20C%20Vance.pdf. This concession probably did not actually constitute a major shift in Soviet policy on the nature of peace question. Moscow, of course, had said all along that if the territorial dispute could be resolved, it would be flexible on all other aspects of a settlement.

USSR remained eager to cooperate. Provided Washington still supported a restoration of the 1967 lines and a viable solution to the Palestinian issue, the foreign minister said: “The Soviet Union was deeply convinced that it would be much more promising for the United States and the Soviet Union to take a joint action to promote peace.... What was missing now was our common and weighty word.” Having listened to Gromyko’s presentation, Vance took no issue with the USSR position. Aside from the procedural question of how the Palestinians would participate at Geneva, the secretary of state concurred entirely with what the foreign minister had said.³²

And the Soviets were willing to press their clients in this direction. Although it created real aggravations in its relations with the PLO, Moscow continued to encourage the organization to accept Israel’s right to exist and to support the 1967 lines; provided only lukewarm backing for its stance on the questions of refugees and Jerusalem; refused to distance itself from the idea of a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation; and opposed strongly the PLO’s resort to terrorism.³³ To be sure, the Kremlin encountered difficulties with the Syrians and Palestinians. Damascus, a USSR official nevertheless later recollected, was “always a difficult partner.... But if the United States and Soviet Union simultaneously would put some pressure on Israel and Syria, then I think a lot could have been achieved.”³⁴ In short, if Washington were interested in reviving the joint American-Soviet approach, it would find a willing and helpful partner in Moscow.

The Road to the Joint Statement

The White House, however, at first saw no need to involve the USSR in the negotiations in any meaningful way. Kissinger’s strategy of excluding the Soviet Union from the peace process had,

³² Memcon, “Subject: MBFR; Middle East,” March 29, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, pp. 77-83. Unlike Kissinger, Vance conceded that the issue of Israeli recognition of Palestinian rights was linked to the question of PLO recognition of Israel.

³³ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, pp. 110-118.

³⁴ Transcript, “US-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy,” p. 62. See also Transcript, “Global Competition and the Deterioration of U.S.-Soviet Relations,” pp. 113-114, 120.

after all, been extremely popular domestically. Moreover, the administration was like its predecessors, suspicious of Moscow. And because the Americans were in command of the diplomacy, the Soviet aspect of the issue was at first viewed as only marginally important.

To be sure, administration officials comprehended the Kremlin's ability to impede considerably the achievement of U.S. goals and hoped to avoid needlessly antagonizing Moscow. A 1975 study group directed by the Brookings Institution, in which Brzezinski, Quandt, and CIA analyst Robert Bowie participated, had concluded that if the Soviets were willing to be helpful, their involvement might be beneficial. The Kremlin, it asserted, had become "increasingly annoyed" and "certainly resentful" about its exclusion from the peace process. More significantly, the report noted, the Soviets maintained important influence with Syria and the PLO and, consequently, possessed "a considerable capacity for complicating or even for blocking either further interim steps or progress toward an overall settlement." "Soviet cooperation would," then, "be most desirable to the extent the USSR is willing to play a constructive role." And while Moscow's intentions remained "the subject of considerable controversy," the United States might benefit from an effort to glean USSR motives through rigorous "testing," especially because the Kremlin might support a settlement that protected Arab interests and in the negotiation of which it had played "a respectable part."³⁵

The administration, however, was skeptical of Soviet aims. Brzezinski, one academic report observed, had prior to taking office subscribed to the "no-war-no-peace" theory regarding USSR Middle East policy. Moscow, in his view, did not want a confrontation with the United States, but neither did it want a settlement, as peace "would inevitably reduce the dependence of

³⁵ "The Brookings Report on the Middle East," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1977), pp. 198, 201, 202. See also Brzezinski, Duchêne, and Saeki, "Peace in an International Framework," pp. 12-13; Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 164; and John C. Campbell, "The Soviet Union in the Middle East," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (1978), pp. 1-12.

the Arabs on the Soviets.” The Kremlin, as a result, would try to “[k]eep aflame the Middle East crisis.” And with their achievement of nuclear parity, the Soviets could run greater risks in the region.³⁶ The report, Brzezinski acknowledged, represented “a fair representation of my views.”³⁷ “Until now,” the national security adviser indicated in a February 23 memorandum to Carter, “[the Soviets] have always adopted the position of the most radical Arabs. They have not used their influence for peace.” Consequently, he concluded: “*Until we have an understanding with the Soviets that they will, in fact, play a constructive role, we should avoid getting publicly committed to holding the Geneva Conference.*”³⁸ If the United States did not resolve the major substantive issues prior to the reconvention of the conference, Brzezinski believed, the Soviets would “try to exploit the situation.”³⁹

U.S. intelligence analysts had drawn similar conclusions. Moscow, the CIA estimated, would probably refuse to assist the Americans at the Geneva Conference, as the Kremlin would be reluctant to separate itself from its clients. More problematically, because the Soviets tended to benefit politically from the instability created by the Arab-Israeli conflict, they “probably believe that convocation and subsequent failure of negotiations would serve their interests, perhaps most of all by discrediting the US and moderate Arab leaders. Soviet influence and presence have grown best in the region during periods of tension and ‘no war-no peace.’ There is every reason to believe this is still the Soviets’ preferred option.” Thus, although Moscow might

³⁶ Ran Marom, “Brzezinski’s View on the Middle East Crisis: 1970-1976,” undated, folder: Middle East (5/77-12/77), box 12, BDP, Geographic File, JCPL.

³⁷ Memo from Brzezinski to the President’s Assistant for Domestic Affairs and Policy Stuart Eizenstat, “Subject: Views on the Middle East,” June 22, 1977, folder: Middle East (5/77-12/77), box 12, BDP, Geographic File, JCPL.

³⁸ Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, “Subject: Follow-up on NSC Meeting on the Middle East,” February 23, 1977, *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 131 (emphasis in original).

³⁹ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” February 23, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 128. See also Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, March 7, 1977, p. 146; Memcon, “Subject: President’s Meeting with King Hussein of Jordan, Cabinet Room,” April 25, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 222; and Minutes of a PRC Meeting, June 10, 1977, p. 306.

advocate “superficially positive diplomatic positions,” it could “not be expected to play a positive role once peace negotiations are underway, either at Geneva or elsewhere.”⁴⁰

With this in mind, the administration from the outset decided that it would emulate the Ford-Kissinger strategy and aim to keep USSR involvement in the negotiations to a minimum. At a February 4 meeting of the Policy Review Committee (PRC), the consensus among U.S. officials was that Moscow’s objective would be to sabotage U.S. peacemaking efforts. The Soviets, Acting CIA Director Enno Knoche claimed, were only looking to get the negotiations back to the Geneva forum so that they could pose as “the champion in Egypt and Syria.” There was, he said, no evidence to suggest that the Soviets would play a constructive role at the conference: “They will build their strategy on the Arab position.” “That means,” Vice President Walter Mondale replied, “they will join with the most militant. . . . They will just stir up the rhetoric.” The initial talks, Brzezinski therefore argued, should be held “without the Soviets.” If the United States reconvened Geneva prematurely, he said: “[T]he Soviets will wreck it.” The Americans, in sum, would keep Moscow “informed” of its efforts, but it was decided that the USSR “should not be involved in the substance of negotiations at this stage.”⁴¹ Carter, evidently, agreed. “If we go to Geneva with lots of loose ends and the Soviets present,” he told Sadat in early April, “there is little chance of reaching harmony there.”⁴²

U.S. strategists believed they could safely ignore the Politburo’s preferences during the initial substantive phase of the negotiations because they recognized that the USSR position in the Middle East had weakened considerably. The reduction in Egyptian and Syrian dependence

⁴⁰ CIA Report PS 77-10004, “Soviet Role in the Middle East,” June 1977, NLC-6-50-2-9-9. See also Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Egypt, “Subject: Fahmy’s Talks in Moscow,” June 30, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, pp. 322-323.

⁴¹ Minutes of a PRC Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” February 4, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, pp. 7, 15, 18. See also Memcon, June 23, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, p. 142; and Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 191.

⁴² Memcon, “Subject: President’s Meeting with President Anwar Sadat of Egypt,” April 5, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 190.

on Moscow, made possible by Saudi Arabia's financial support for Cairo and Damascus, meant that Soviet influence in the area had depreciated "markedly."⁴³ The USSR position, the CIA believed, showed "no sign of early improvement," and the Kremlin's strained relations with Sadat represented "an important failure of Soviet foreign policy under General Secretary Brezhnev." And because even Soviet-Syrian relations were undergoing strain, "Moscow ha[d] neither the desire nor the ability... to force the Arabs or Israelis to make the political concessions that will be necessary to restart the [Geneva] conference."⁴⁴

Because the Americans understood, however, that the Soviet Union could always undercut their diplomatic strategy, they did not want to leave the impression that they planned to cut the Kremlin out of the peace process completely. Washington's goal was to give the Politburo leaders just enough of an incentive to keep a restrained posture, but no more. At the appropriate time, which meant after the United States had worked everything out on its own, the USSR could be brought in to help legitimize and enforce a settlement at Geneva.

Carter's approach to this aspect of the issue, in other words, did not differ from that pursued by his predecessors in any great way. The USSR, the Ford administration had advised

⁴³ Top Secret Weekly Review Report, "USSR: Relations with Arab States," April 1, 1977, NLC-25-87-5-3-1. The Soviet Union's expanded arms supply relationships with states like Algeria, Libya, and Iraq were, this report claimed, less a result of improved political relations than a function of Moscow's increased demand for hard currency.

⁴⁴ CIA Report, PS 77-10004, June 1977. See also Letter from CIA Director Stansfield Turner to Brzezinski, June 22, 1977, folder: Middle East, 4-6/77, box 50, BDP, Country File, JCPL. On the U.S. awareness of the extreme deterioration in Soviet-Egyptian relations, see also Memcon, February 17, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, pp. 67-68, 71; Telegram from Vance to the Department of State, "Subject: Discussions in Egypt," February 17, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 82; Department of State Briefing Paper, "Egyptian-Soviet Relations," March 1977, NLC-133-157-3-4-3; Memcon, "Subject: President's Meeting with President Anwar Sadat of Egypt," April 4, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 67; Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, "Subject: Sadat's Latest Thinking, August 22, 1977, NLC-6-18-1-35-7; Telegram from the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, "Subject: Sadat—The Man," August 1978, NLC-25-7-5-1-0; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 335; and Vance, *Hard Choices*, p. 161. See also Ismail Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 170-187; and Mohamed Ibrahim Kamel, *The Camp David Accords: A Testimony* (London: KPI, 1986), pp. 22, 37, 42, 76. Note also Asad's comment to Vance "that Syrian/Soviet relations were passing through a stage of frigidity" due to Moscow's opposition to Syria's involvement in Lebanon. See Memcon, February 20, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 120.

when leaving office, did “not seem essential to the negotiating process itself, although that does not rule out the possible importance of Soviet involvement in guaranteeing, endorsing, or supporting the enforcement of a final settlement.” To decrease the likelihood of Soviet disruption, however, it was important to consider carefully the “strong temptation... to keep the USSR in a subordinate position through the negotiations in order to make clear that the U.S. is the major outside arbiter of events in the Middle East.” Given that this was generally understood, there would be little downside to the “cosmetic involvement of the USSR.” The United States, in short, could retain “much of the substance” for itself without “paying any special price in the Middle East context” for the pretext of serious Soviet involvement.⁴⁵

The principal decision-makers in the Carter administration initially viewed the matter in strikingly similar terms. The Soviet Union, Brzezinski argued, would eventually need to be included at Geneva, but only after the United States had clinched a settlement on its own. “The issue is not whether or not to leave them out,” he said, “the issue is when to bring them in.... There is merit in focusing first on a substantive discussion without the Russians. But in the final play, the Russians should participate and, indeed, should be guarantors of a settlement.”⁴⁶ Even though American strategists believed that “Soviet rigidity in negotiating technique” could hinder the peace process and doubted whether Moscow would separate itself from its clients, an agreement from which they were excluded entirely would be “dangerously incomplete,” whereas a USSR pledge to help guarantee a settlement “could be of considerable importance.” The Kremlin, then, would be kept in a subordinate position, but the United States would at least have to be concerned with “how the Soviets can be most useful in bringing about a settlement rather

⁴⁵ Report, “Arab-Israeli Dispute,” January 14, 1977.

⁴⁶ Minutes of a PRC Meeting, February 4, 1977, p. 18. See also Memcon, “Subject: President’s Meeting with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy,” September 21, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 553; and Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, “Subject: Your Meeting with Golda Meir, November 8, 1977, 10:30 am,” November 7, 1977, folder: Israel, 11-12/77, box 35, BDP, JCPL.

than with probably fruitless efforts to keep them out of the area by keeping them out of the negotiations.” Even still, this meant involving the Soviets only minimally, “not enough to permit them to obstruct it with their cumbersome style or their tendency to play for short-run propaganda advantage, or by efforts to make the peacemaking activity subject to the ups and downs of their relationships with their Arab clients, or erstwhile clients.”⁴⁷ In short, the Soviets would only be permitted to participate to the degree necessary to help them “save their faces.”⁴⁸

Carter administration officials, however, could not maintain their skeptical assessments of USSR aims in the Middle East in the face of repeated efforts by Moscow to be helpful. As early as February 8, an INR report had noted that the Politburo’s refusal to provision Egypt with arms had less to do with Sadat’s turn to the United States than with its anxiety that such a policy would raise the chances of a dangerous war. The best way to deal with this dilemma, the study observed, would be for the Kremlin to seek “active participation, as co-chairman of the Geneva Middle East Peace Conference, in the Arab-Israeli negotiating process, which, the USSR clearly believes, would guarantee Moscow not only a voice in the settlement process itself but also a position of lasting influence in a post-settlement Middle East.”⁴⁹ The Soviets, another INR study found, were in fact taking steps to induce the PLO to demonstrate greater flexibility in order to prevent the Geneva Conference from bogging down over procedural matters. Indeed, it was

⁴⁷ Presidential Review Committee, Session on Presidential Review Memo/NSC 3: Middle East, Chaired by Secretary Vance, February 4, 1977, NLC-132-25-1-3-3.

⁴⁸ Memcon, February 16, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 32. See also Memcon, “Subject: Secretary’s Luncheon with President Sadat,” April 4, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 179; and Memcon, “Subject: Soviet Jewry and Secretary’s Trip to Moscow,” April 8, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, p. 125. There is broad consensus in the secondary literature on this point. See Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994), pp. 579-580; Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 322; Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 212; and Quandt, *Camp David*, p. 61.

⁴⁹ Department of State Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) Report No. 722, “Arms Supplies and the Soviet-Egyptian Relationship,” February 8, 1977, NLC-21-16-14-14-1.

Moscow's belief that the organization had to "*take a moderate stand so that world public opinion will force Israeli acceptance of the PLO as an independent delegation to the talks.*"⁵⁰

In the face of sustained USSR support for the type of settlement Carter had advocated, American officials began to adjust their earlier appraisals. While he could not read their minds, Vance told Dayan, now Israel's foreign minister, "to the extent that the Soviets act responsibly you have to accept that as reality. So far they have acted responsibly."⁵¹ Moscow, he observed, was now willing to accept publicly the idea of normal relations between Israel and the Arabs as part of a settlement, and would reestablish diplomatic relations with Jerusalem in such circumstances. The Kremlin, he added, was not particularly concerned about "the structure of Geneva, but they are concerned about being left out." It was "the Russians' greatest fear," he said, "that they will be excluded from the negotiations."⁵² Moscow, the NSC staff noted as late as November 8, was expressing to the Arabs "a keen Soviet interest in getting to Geneva as soon as possible, with careful advance preparation to insure its success."⁵³ So far, Carter admitted, the Soviets had "been very helpful and have not obstructed progress."⁵⁴ The president, in fact, had "been pleased with the Soviet attitude.... They could, of course, obstruct a Geneva Conference but we see no evidence that that is their intention. They have played a constructive role as

⁵⁰ INR Intelligence Summary, February 24, 1977, NLC-6-50-1-6-3 (emphasis in original).

⁵¹ Memcon, September 30, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 629.

⁵² Memcon, September 26, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, pp. 584-585, 592-593. See also Memo from Vance to Carter, "Subject: Talks with the Arab and Israeli Foreign Ministers," August 30, 1977, NLC-6-55-7-21-5. The Soviet position had actually grown even more moderate than Vance had described, for on September 23, Begin had informed the Americans that the USSR now intended to reestablish diplomatic relations with Israel on the day the Geneva Conference reconvened. See Quandt, *Camp David*, p. 120. This concession undercuts Brzezinski's assertion that Moscow had engaged in suspect behavior at this point in the negotiations. See Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 106.

⁵³ Memo from Middle East Staff to Brzezinski, "Subject: Evening Report," November 8, 1977, NLC-10-6-4-13-6.

⁵⁴ Memcon, "Subject: Summary of the President's Meeting with the Jordanian Delegation led by Royal Court Chief Abdul Hamid Sharaf of Jordan," September 28, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 611. Note also Carter's comments on this issue to French representatives. See Memcon, September 15, 1977.

compared to the past and are now eager to move to overcome the problem we have with Syria.”⁵⁵ Moscow, the CIA reported, was pressuring the PLO to “accept UN Resolution 242, with the reservations proposed by the United States. Such an announcement of acceptance would deny the Israelis and the United States the justification that they have so far used to keep the Palestinians out of the negotiations towards a settlement of the Middle East question.” Indeed, “PLO officials noted the significant escalation of Soviet pressure from that of urging ‘flexibility’ to that of specifically urging the PLO to accept the US position on 242.”⁵⁶

And quite aside from the administration’s recognition of Moscow’s efforts at cooperation, U.S. decision-makers believed that the Soviets might be crucial to Geneva’s success. Even during his campaign for the presidency, Carter had stated: “After unpublicized negotiations between us and the Soviet Union, we might jointly make a public proposal of a solution to the Middle East.... The Soviet Union is going to have to participate in a forceful way before Syria will be answerable to any productive negotiations with Israel.”⁵⁷ Damascus, Vance believed, would probably insist on having the USSR play a substantive role at Geneva as a “tactical counterweight to the U.S.”⁵⁸ Even the Saudis, the virulence of their anti-Soviet inclinations notwithstanding, felt that Moscow would have to be involved in the peace process so long as the Americans maintained a Palestinian policy that the other Arabs could not accept.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Memcon, “Subject: Summary of the President’s Meeting with the Romanian Foreign Minister,” November 23, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 768. Note also Carter’s marginal comment regarding the Soviet role in the peace process on a memorandum from Jordan. See Memo from Jordan to Carter, “UN Resolution on Illegal Settlements,” October 26, 1977, folder: Middle East—Israeli Settlements, box 35, Jordan Files, JCPL.

⁵⁶ CIA Intelligence Information Cable, “Subject: (1) Current PLO position on 242 (2) Soviet and Arab advice to PLO on 242,” August 20, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 486.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, p. 305 n. 134.

⁵⁸ Memo from Vance to Carter, “Subject: Your Meeting with Asad, May 9,” undated, NLC-25-104-7-1-1. Note also that Carter requested as late as November 4 that the Soviet Union help moderate the Syrian position. See Letter from Carter to Brezhnev, November 4, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, p. 220.

⁵⁹ Telegram from the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State, August 10, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9, p. 5.

Given their own difficulties dealing with the problem, American officials also hoped that the Soviets might facilitate the task of bringing the PLO to a more moderate position. Given the perception of the organization in the United States and the resultant domestic constraints it placed on Carter's freedom of maneuver, any assistance from the USSR on the Palestinian question would be a welcome development. The issue was, of course, so sensitive that Vance was reluctant even to discuss it privately. The matter, Brzezinski agreed, was "very explosive." And Moscow, Vance admitted, not only enjoyed influence with Arafat, it also had a point when it asked that in exchange for PLO recognition of Israel, Jerusalem should be required to reciprocate. "Arafat," he said, "might actually make that concession." The Kremlin, even Brzezinski agreed, "might help influence Arafat and company." "Recently," CIA Director Stansfield Turner added, "[the] Soviets have become more supportive of the peace effort."⁶⁰

The administration, thus, was bound to consider more seriously the idea of working jointly with Moscow in the Middle East. U.S. peacemaking efforts, after all, had stalled by the fall of 1977, and there was a real danger that the negotiations might grind to a halt. With the Kremlin clearly interested in cooperating and, more importantly, willing to press Syria and the PLO to accept a moderate solution, Washington decided to concert its actions with the USSR.

Thus on October 1, the superpowers issued a joint communiqué that, even from the American perspective, was remarkably moderate. As David Korn of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff later recalled, "The Russians caved in on just about everything we wanted because they were concerned that Sadat was going to leave them out."⁶¹ "To read the text of the communiqué several years later," Quandt agrees, "is to wonder what all the fuss was about. The

⁶⁰ Minutes of a PRC Meeting, "Subject: Middle East," April 19, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, pp. 192, 199, 201-203.

⁶¹ Quoted in Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, p. 213.

words themselves are innocuous.”⁶² The State Department, another U.S. official later recollected, “had seen the Soviet approach as constructive and offering promise.”⁶³ The joint statement, Vance believed, represented a “very concrete, positive step.”⁶⁴ The document, the secretary of state said, had been “a major Soviet step forward.”⁶⁵ Even Brzezinski, the member of the administration most skeptical of cooperating with Moscow, and who claims in his memoir that he regretted not making more of an effort to prevent the communiqué’s adoption, at the time had considered it a major achievement of American diplomacy.⁶⁶ He was, he told a former colleague, “very enthusiastic about the October 1 declaration. He was describing the potential of the U.S.-Soviet terms in quite an upbeat fashion at that point.” Whereas the Soviet Union hitherto had favored a state of controlled tension, the national security adviser believed that “we had now moved beyond that circumstance, and it was very much in the U.S. interest.”⁶⁷

The document, after all, was even closer to the American position than the initial statement the Soviets had proposed, which itself had pleasantly surprised U.S. negotiators. The Kremlin had not only agreed to drop its demand for a reference to the Palestinians’ entitlement to self-determination and an independent state, it had also acquiesced to Washington’s insistence that the wording of the document be kept extremely vague. The statement merely repeated the language from Resolution 242 regarding the territorial issue; stressed that in return the Arabs were obligated to terminate the state of war and establish “normal peaceful relations” with Israel; and mentioned only that “the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people” would have to be taken

⁶² Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 189.

⁶³ Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 582.

⁶⁴ Transcript, “Global Competition and the Deterioration of U.S.-Soviet Relations,” pp. 94-95.

⁶⁵ Memcon, “Subject: Arab-Israeli Peace Efforts; Israeli Domestic Politics,” October 13, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 696. See also “Notes on US-Soviet Joint Statement,” undated, folder: Middle East, 1977 (1), box 35, Jordan Files, JCPL.

⁶⁶ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 110.

⁶⁷ Transcript, “Global Competition and the Deterioration of U.S.-Soviet Relations,” pp. 97, 99. See also Memcon, “Subject: Summary of Dr. Brzezinski’s Meeting with Foreign Minister Huang Hua,” May 21, 1978, NLC-26-31-4-5-9. Vance later confirmed that Brzezinski had supported the joint statement at the time it was announced.

into account as part of a settlement, a formula to which even Begin later agreed when he signed the Camp David Accords.⁶⁸ In fact, the Arabs, though they generally welcomed the statement, were somewhat less enthusiastic about it because they recognized that the USSR had backslid.

The declaration, moreover, seemed to have a real chance of moving the negotiations in a favorable direction. The administration, Quandt wrote Brzezinski soon after its issuance, had “some evidence that the US-Soviet statement is inducing moderation on the part of Syria and the PLO.”⁶⁹ Moscow, Dobrynin later told Vance, had actually succeeded in persuading Asad to attend the Geneva Conference on the basis of the communiqué.⁷⁰ Likewise, USSR negotiators had pressed PLO representatives intensely in the days following the declaration’s publication to support its substance, exertions which ultimately paid off.⁷¹ “The Syrians, of course,” one Soviet official later recalled, “objected after we had signed this statement, and were very angry with us. But we could handle that, as the Americans should have handled Israel.”⁷²

The United States and the Soviet Union, thus, had finally come to an understanding on the Arab-Israeli question. To be sure, the October 1 communiqué was ambiguous on the key items relating to a settlement, but that was only because the Carter administration feared that being too explicit would leave it vulnerable at home to the charge that it had attempted to impose

⁶⁸ Joint Communiqué by the Governments of the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, October 1, 1977, in Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 343-344.

⁶⁹ Memo from Quandt to Brzezinski, “Subject: Significance of US-Israeli Agreement on Procedures for Geneva,” October 5, 1977, folder: Middle East-Negotiations (10/77-12/77), box 13, BDP, Geographic File, JCPL. See also Quandt, *Camp David*, p. 133; and Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, pp. 116-117.

⁷⁰ Memcon, “Subject: Middle East, Horn of Africa, SALT, Other Multilateral Matters,” March 16, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, p. 304. I have not been able to verify the veracity of this claim. On the other hand, it cannot be dismissed out of hand, especially because Asad would not have desired to have this concession made public prior to Geneva’s reconvention. In addition, as late as October 31, Vance had told Dobrynin that the Syrians were still seriously involved in the discussion of how to reconvene Geneva. See Memcon, “Subject: Lithuanian Governor; Middle East; Non-First Use, Part I of II,” October 31, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, p. 214.

⁷¹ Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East*, p. 235.

⁷² Transcript, “US-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy,” p. 56.

a peace in the Middle East; substantively, the U.S. and USSR positions were identical.⁷³ In addition, the joint declaration seemed to be having an effect with the more recalcitrant Arabs. With the superpowers now in agreement, the Syrians and PLO would have little choice but to go along or be left out of the peace process. The negotiations, in other words, appeared to be coming to a head, with Washington and Moscow using their influence behind the scenes. Why, then, was no settlement reached? Why instead did the joint scenario immediately collapse?

Explaining the Retreat: The Administration's Domestic Failure

The quest for a comprehensive solution ultimately fell apart because of Sadat's concerns that the Geneva format would limit his freedom of action and prevent Egypt from negotiating. The idea that Sadat had been fundamentally opposed to involving the Soviets in the diplomacy and that the October 1 joint statement had contributed to his decision to travel to Jerusalem in November, however, is wholly without foundation. To be sure, there was no love lost between the Egyptian president and the Kremlin leadership. By December, Sadat was "reportedly convinced that the Soviets have never wanted the peace process to succeed because that would mean their loss of influence in most of the Arab world." Egypt, U.S. officials believed, was "delighted" that it "no longer had to consider [the Soviets] as part of the negotiating process."⁷⁴

The attitude of the moderate Arabs toward the U.S.-USSR joint declaration, however, had initially been extremely positive. "The environment for negotiation that existed after the US-Soviet communiqué," the Saudi foreign minister told Carter on October 25, "came close to creating a consensus among the Arabs of the sort that you said was needed. Even the Palestinians

⁷³ On the administration's tactical decision to reconvene the Geneva Conference prior to taking a more specific stance on the terms of a settlement in order to shield itself domestically, see Galen Jackson, "The Importance of Playing the Two-Level Game: U.S. Domestic Politics and the Road to a Separate Peace, 1977-1978," *Journal of Cold War Studies* (forthcoming). See also Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 87, 94-95, 115-118, 121, 143, 146.

⁷⁴ Memo from the Situation Room to Brzezinski, "Subject: Information Items," December 10, 1977, NLC-1-4-7-6-3. See also Memo from Vance to Carter, "Subject: Analysis of Sadat-Begin Talks," November 24, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 781.

reacted well.... The US-Soviet statement had created great expectations.”⁷⁵ More importantly, Sadat’s first impression was that the joint superpower effort had opened up real opportunities through its generation of serious pressure on the Syrians and by its calling attention to the need to protect Palestinian rights. The October 1 document, he reportedly said, had for these reasons been a “brilliant maneuver.”⁷⁶ The statement, he later told Carter, had been “‘marvelous,’ because he believed that it opened the framework for peace negotiations.”⁷⁷

The Arabs, however, had been severely disillusioned by Carter’s hasty retreat from the substance of the October 1 statement. “What shocked people, especially the Palestinians, who had gone so far as to praise the US-Soviet communiqué, was the subsequent joint US-Israeli statement,” the Saudi foreign minister noted. “This seemed to be putting the United States in the position of aligning itself with one of the parties. This caused concern which was reflected in the Syrian comments at the time.”⁷⁸ Asad, the U.S. ambassador in Damascus relayed to Washington, remained committed to a political solution, but now considered Carter “politically incapable” of delivering such an outcome due to the influence of the “Jewish lobby.”⁷⁹ Syria, an adviser to Asad informed the Americans, had “detected [a] subsequent ‘clear retreat’ by the U.S. administration” in the face of the “sharp reaction of [the] American Jewish community and [the]

⁷⁵ Memcon, “Subject: President’s Meeting with Prince Saud ibn Faisal al-Sa’ud, Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs,” October 25, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 721. See also Memo from Quandt to Aaron, “Subject: Briefing Material,” October 7, 1977, folder: CO 1-7 Confidential 1/20/77-12/31/77, box CO-6, WHCF Country Files, JCPL.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Quandt, *Camp David*, p. 123.

⁷⁷ Memcon, “Subject: President’s Meeting with President Anwar Sadat,” February 4, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 989. See also Telegram from the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, November 10, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 751; and Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), p. 112.

⁷⁸ Memcon, October 25, 1977, p. 721.

⁷⁹ Telegram from the Embassy in Syria to Brzezinski, “Subject: Syrian Perceptions Threaten Settlement Process,” November 18, 1977, NLC-16-40-6-9-5.

Israelis” following the issuance of the U.S.-Soviet joint statement. Damascus, consequently, was now displaying “marked suspicion... and snideness [*sic*] about ‘U.S. backsliding.’”⁸⁰

And Sadat had been alarmed to an even greater degree. In fact, the Egyptian president’s dramatic announcement that he would journey to Jerusalem to address the Knesset resulted in large part from his impression that the White House had lacked the requisite political support to stand firmly behind the joint communiqué, not from an objection to the document itself.⁸¹ “I took the [Jerusalem] initiative,” he later explained, “because Carter was under attack from the Jewish lobby and also in the Arab world.”⁸² Sadat’s bold move, the U.S. ambassador in Cairo, Hermann Eilts, reported on November 10, had been “forced upon him by Israeli ‘intransigence’ and [the] need of [the] US administration for Arab support in [the] face of Zionist pressures.”⁸³ “It was not,” Quandt thus concludes, “the U.S.-Soviet communiqué that disillusioned [Sadat]; it was Carter’s apparent inability to stand up to Israeli pressure.”⁸⁴ The October 1 formula, in short, had

⁸⁰ Telegram from the Embassy in Syria to Brzezinski, “Subject: Mid-East Peace Process,” November 18, 1977, NLC-16-41-1-17-0. See also Telegram from the Embassy in Jordan to Brzezinski, “Subject: Zaid Rifai-Asad Visit,” November 23, 1977, NLC-16-41-3-21-3.

⁸¹ Carter, of course, had urged Sadat on October 21 in “a personal appeal” to help him save the peace process, which was a clear indication that U.S. peacemaking efforts had completely unraveled. For a copy of Carter’s handwritten letter to Sadat, see Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 140-141.

⁸² Memcon, April 9, 1980, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9, p. 1141. See also Telegram from the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, “Subject: Sadat Visit to Israel and Message for Sadat,” November 1977, NLC-16-41-4-28-5; and Memo from the Situation Room to Brzezinski, “Subject: Information Items,” December 10, 1977, NLC-1-4-7-6-3.

⁸³ Telegram from the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, “Subject: Sadat’s Nov[ember] 9 Speech—Geneva or Bust,” November 10, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 753. See also Telegram from the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, “Subject: Letter from President Sadat to President Carter,” November 3, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 741 n. 2.

⁸⁴ Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 189. For like interpretations, see Quandt, *Camp David*, p. 125; Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 192-193; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 109-110; Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 235, 240; Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, p. 220; Patrick Tyler, *A World of Trouble: The White House and the Middle East—from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), p. 192; Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land: America’s Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2008), p. 171; and Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York: Vintage, 2001), p. 448. There is some evidence to suggest that Sadat made his decision based on the mistaken assumption that the Israelis were prepared to withdraw to the 1967 lines. See Lawrence Wright, *Thirteen Days in September: The Dramatic Story of the Struggle for Peace* (New York: Vintage, 2014), pp. 49, 77.

not broken down because, as Saunders later claimed, the Soviets had proved unwilling to help move matters forward, but rather due to Carter's hasty retreat from the U.S.-USSR agreement.⁸⁵

Why had the president backed away so quickly from the October 1 communiqué, which seemed to have generated real momentum? The Arabs, it turns out, were somewhat justified in doubting the White House's capacity to sustain support at home for its Middle East policy, in large part because of the way it had mishandled this aspect of the problem throughout 1977.⁸⁶

The joint statement, after all, had precipitated a major backlash from a coalition of Israel's American supporters and neoconservatives, with the latter resistant to the very idea of involving Moscow in the negotiations. The administration, one prominent journalist charged, had sold out Israeli interests under USSR pressure, and was now attempting to impose a solution at Jerusalem's expense.⁸⁷ The chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Alexander Schindler, was "profoundly disturbed" by the October 1 communiqué, which, he said, represented "an abandonment of America's historic commitment to the security and survival of Israel."⁸⁸ "No single act," the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) claimed in an official statement, "is more likely to damage the chances for a lasting settlement than the sudden inclusion of the USSR in the peace process."⁸⁹ Similarly, Senator Henry Jackson vocalized the concerns of many Cold War hardliners and friends of Israel when he said: "The fox is back in the chicken coop. The American people must certainly raise the question of why bring the Russians in at a time when the Egyptians have been throwing them

⁸⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in Saudi Arabia to the Department of State, "Subject: Talk with King Hussein," October 18, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9, p. 311.

⁸⁶ For a more detailed discussion of Carter's domestic problems as they related to Arab-Israeli diplomacy, see Jackson, "The Importance of Playing the Two-Level Game."

⁸⁷ William Safire, "Selling Out Israel," *New York Times*, October 6, 1977, p. 27.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Tyler, *A World of Trouble*, p. 191.

⁸⁹ Memo from Jordan to Brzezinski and Aaron, "AIPAC's Critique of US-Soviet Statement," October 1977, folder: Middle East, 1977 (1), box 35, Jordan Files, JCPL.

out.” The joint statement, he emphasized, had been “a step in the wrong direction.”⁹⁰ The document, Carter’s assistant, Mark Siegel, pointed out, “had a devastating effect in the American Jewish community.” Carter’s standing with the group, he observed, had fallen “substantially below any U.S. President since the creation of the State of Israel, and I’m including in that statement Eisenhower’s stock after he forced Israel to withdraw from Sinai in 1956.” “The talk in the American Jewish community,” Siegel added, “is getting very ugly. The word ‘betrayal’ is being used more and more.”⁹¹ The administration, Carter’s chief of staff, Hamilton Jordan, wrote, now had to be cautious even about criticizing Israeli settlement expansion, as the atmosphere created by the joint statement meant that voting against Israel at the UN would probably “*precipitate a political confrontation in the Congress.*”⁹²

Already heavily on the defensive domestically due to his earlier mismanagement of the issue, Carter was in no position to take a firm stand against such opposition.⁹³ As a result, when he met with Dayan on the night of October 4-5, he felt he had no choice but to back down from a confrontation with the Begin government. The foreign minister, Brzezinski later recollected, “in effect blackmailed the President” by threatening to take Israel’s case to its supporters in the United States unless the administration met certain demands.⁹⁴ The October 1 statement, Dayan told Carter, had been “taken very badly” and created “a terrible mood in Israel.” The Begin

⁹⁰ “Mideast Moves Criticized,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 3, 1977.

⁹¹ Memo from Siegel to Jordan, October 3, 1977.

⁹² Memo from Jordan to Carter, October 26, 1977 (emphasis in original). On the intense domestic reaction to the October 1 statement, see also Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 338; Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, p. 170; Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, pp. 217-218; Quandt, *Peace Process*, pp. 188-189; Quandt, *Camp David*, p. 123; Jerome Slater, “The Superpowers and an Arab-Israeli Political Settlement: The Cold War Years,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 105, No. 4 (1990-1991), pp. 575-576; and Abraham Ben-Zvi, *The United States and Israel: The Limits of the Special Relationship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 103-122. It is worth noting that not a single member of Congress supported the communiqué.

⁹³ For details of how the administration had planned to defend the joint statement publicly and to the Congress, see Memo from Frank Moore to Carter, “Subject: Meeting with Senators on Middle East,” October 6, 1977, folder: CO 1-7 Executive 10/1/77-11/10/77, box CO-6, WHCF Country Files, JCPL; and Memo from NSC Staff to Brzezinski, “Subject: Reply to Letter to Vice President from Maxwell E. Greenberg,” October 21, 1977, folder: CO 1-7 Executive 10/1/77-11/10/77, box CO-6, WHCF Country Files, JCPL.

⁹⁴ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 108.

government, he stressed, had no intention of withdrawing from the West Bank and unless the president pledged not to pressure Jerusalem, there would “be screaming [in the United States] and in Israel.... We need to have some agreed formula, but I can go Israel and to the American Jews. I have to say that there is an agreement and not a confrontation.”⁹⁵ When Carter, as a result, chose to avoid a showdown with Begin, the U.S.-USSR agreement collapsed.⁹⁶

The Dénouement

After more than a decade, the announcement of Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem and Washington’s subsequent decision to support strictly bilateral Egyptian-Israeli negotiations finally ended any chance of U.S.-USSR cooperation in the Middle East. Aside from the fact that Moscow suspected that the United States and Egypt had secretly colluded to exclude the Soviet Union from the peace process, the Kremlin leadership felt that it could not endorse talks that would inevitably lead to a purely separate Egyptian-Israeli agreement, especially one that would arise from negotiations from which it had been left out. More fundamentally, despite the USSR’s efforts throughout 1977 to assist in the region, the Americans once again concluded in the aftermath of Sadat’s Jerusalem initiative that they would benefit from the reduction of Soviet influence with the Arabs. Unsurprisingly, the final result was the further erosion of détente.

In part, the Carter administration’s decision to proceed unilaterally resulted from its belief that involving Moscow would further complicate its already severe domestic problems. The White House, of course, would have to build a far stronger base of support at home to achieve its goals in the Middle East, and it was the feeling of most U.S. officials that working

⁹⁵ Memcon, “Subject: Summary of the President’s Meeting with Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan,” October 4, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, pp. 653, 656, 674. See also Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt-Israel Peace Negotiations* (New York: Knopf, 1981), pp. 66-72.

⁹⁶ Administration officials calculated that the White House could not sustain domestic support for its policy or put pressure on Israel unless the parties had already reassembled at Geneva. But without some credible indication that the United States would adhere to the sort of policy Carter had outlined prior to the conference, the Soviets had difficulty convincing the Syrians and PLO to attend. On this point, see Jackson, “The Importance of Playing the Two-Level Game.”

with the Soviets could only harm its efforts in this area. Moving jointly with the Kremlin, a year-end NSC report noted, had “set off a storm of protest, bringing together traditional anti-Soviet forces and supporters of Israel.” The administration, therefore, had been forced to deal with a “domestic crisis of confidence.” With Sadat’s initiative, moreover, “the prospects for US-Soviet cooperation in promoting a comprehensive settlement have... dimmed.” The Syrians and PLO could temporarily be ignored, and the White House now felt there was little reason to “go out of our way to bring the Soviets into the negotiations.”⁹⁷ Likewise, after meeting with several American Jewish leaders in December, Brzezinski had found strong support for his suggestion that the United States keep Syria and the Soviet Union out of the peace process.⁹⁸ There were, Carter told Dobrynin as late as November 18, “no differences between [the superpowers]” on the issue. The problem, the president said, was “that the public was uncertain about it.”⁹⁹

A more critical driver of U.S. strategy, however, was the belief held by American officials, now that the Geneva formula had failed, that at least an Egyptian-Israeli agreement was needed to bolster Washington’s position vis-à-vis Moscow in the Middle East. Whereas leading up to the October 1 joint statement administration officials had hoped to take advantage of the Kremlin’s willingness to cooperate, following Sadat’s Jerusalem initiative they worried that the Soviets might move to reestablish their position in the region. That the White House would reach such a conclusion is baffling, given that Moscow had made repeated efforts to demonstrate its desire to work with Washington for a moderate solution.

Indeed, American strategists clearly understood that the Politburo’s key objective was still to participate in negotiations leading to an overall settlement. “The Kremlin,” Atherton

⁹⁷ NSC Annual Report, undated, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, pp. 802-804.

⁹⁸ Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, “Subject: Information Items,” December 8, 1977, NLC-SAFE 17B-6-31-9-5.

⁹⁹ Memcon, “Subject: Brezhnev Letter and the Middle East,” November 18, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, p. 230.

rightly observed on November 19, “seems most concerned that Sadat’s bold move, which Moscow apparently did not anticipate, may undermine prospects for Geneva talks.”¹⁰⁰ “[The Soviets’] fundamental problem,” another U.S. official observed in December, “is they don’t want to be excluded from an area where they have important interests.”¹⁰¹ “The Soviets,” Quandt observed, “are most unlikely to support any separate Egyptian-Israeli deal that does not provide for complete Israeli withdrawal to [the] pre-1967 borders on all fronts and [the] establishment of a Palestinian state on the West Bank.” Nor, he added, could the Kremlin leaders back a settlement that had resulted from “negotiations in which they have not played a leading role.”¹⁰²

Nevertheless, the conclusion drawn by the Americans was that Moscow, while perhaps not being deliberately obstructive, had taken an unconstructive attitude towards Sadat’s initiative. The Politburo’s complaint that Washington had abandoned the opportunity created by the joint statement, Carter claimed, was for this reason totally unjustified: “How can [they] say this? The Soviets have been playing grab-ass for a month instead of helping us all go to Geneva, including the Syrians.”¹⁰³ Likewise, during his December visit to Moscow, one U.S. official “had charged the Soviets with negativism.” If the USSR was truly interested in peace, he had told his hosts, it “should not object to [Sadat’s initiative].”¹⁰⁴ The Soviet attitude toward what the Egyptian leader had done, a State Department paper later claimed, had “not been helpful.” “The

¹⁰⁰ Department of State Briefing Memo from Atherton to Saunders and Vance, “Analysis of Arab-Israeli Developments No. 295, November 19, 1977,” undated, NLC-SAFE 17 B-6-29-1-6.

¹⁰¹ Memcon, “Subject: Secretary’s Meeting with Prime Minister Begin,” December 10, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 818. See also Memcon, “Subject: Secretary’s Meeting with King Hussein,” December 12, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 830.

¹⁰² Memo from Quandt to Brzezinski, “Subject: Analysis of Negotiating Outcomes,” March 20, 1978, NLC-6-50-5-20-3. See also “Looking Beyond the Next Round of Middle East Talks,” undated, NLC-133-185-3-11-4; and Carter-Brezhnev Project, National Security Archive, CIA NIE, “Soviet Goals and Expectations in the Global Power Arena,” No. 11-4-78, May 1978, http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/carterbrezhnev/docs_global_competition/TAB%203/doc12%20-%20197805%20-%20Soviet%20Goals%20and%20Expectations%20in%20the%20Global%20Power%20Arena.pdf.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 112.

¹⁰⁴ Memcon, “Subject: Secretary’s Meeting with President Sadat,” December 10, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 808.

USSR,” it stated, “excluded itself from the process by failure to pursue with us the Sadat initiative.” If the Soviets wanted to reenter the diplomacy, they would have to apply greater pressure on Syria and the PLO to accept more balanced terms: “What is needed now is for the Arabs to moderate their all-or-nothing approach to the process and for the Palestinians to take up the unique opportunity which the autonomy negotiations offer.”¹⁰⁵

Given this view of Soviet behavior, the Americans moved once again to undercut the Soviet position in the Middle East. A stalemate in the negotiations, one strategy paper composed prior to the September 1978 Camp David conference argued, would “provide the Soviets with opportunities to reestablish their position in Egypt. This could have serious long-term strategic consequences for Israel and the US.”¹⁰⁶ The goal of preventing Soviet hegemony in the region, American officials told their Chinese counterparts, remained “of fundamental importance, and we attach great significance to the fact that Egypt, the most powerful Arab country, has decisively moved away from the Soviet Union since 1974.” It was crucial that Sadat’s initiative succeed, as otherwise the Arab moderates would be discredited and the result would be “a return of Soviet influence in Egypt.”¹⁰⁷ “Our premise is that what hurts U.S. power helps the Soviets and hurts our friends,” Brzezinski told Jordanian officials on the eve of the signing of Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in March 1979. “The external threat is the Soviet ability to extend its power, to increase its military strength.”¹⁰⁸ “Should the Soviets be in?” Carter asked King Hussein as his presidency neared its end. “This is impossible.”¹⁰⁹ Was it even worth the energy, he had asked on

¹⁰⁵ Department of State Briefing Paper, “Middle East,” undated, NLC-23-26-2-3-3.

¹⁰⁶ Briefing Paper, “Consequences of Failure of Peace Negotiations,” June 26, 1978, NLC-133-184-2-27-9.

¹⁰⁷ Briefing Paper, “Middle East Issues,” May 12, 1978, NLC-4-38-7-2-7.

¹⁰⁸ Memcon, March 18, 1979, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9, p. 751. See also Letter from Carter to Brown, February 9, 1979, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9, pp. 593-594; and Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 83, 120.

¹⁰⁹ Memcon, “Subject: Summary of the President’s Second Meeting with King Hussein of Jordan,” June 18, 1980, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9, p. 1281.

the eve of the Camp David summit, to “[i]nform [the] Soviets at all?”¹¹⁰ Egyptian-Israeli peace, the president wrote in March 1979, would be a “blow to [the] USSR [and a] victory for me [and the] U.S.”¹¹¹ Thus, Brzezinski’s immediate instinct following Sadat’s move had been that the United States could take advantage to “gradually [squeeze] the Soviets out of the game.”¹¹²

Moscow, of course, could only react with dismay to these developments. The Soviet leadership had been close to elated by the Carter administration’s willingness to cooperate, believing that the October 1 declaration had paved the way for real progress. Having gone to great lengths to get the PLO on board and exercised their influence with the Syrians, USSR officials felt that the Americans had let pass a major opening. The superpowers, one member of the International Department later said, had “lost a historic chance.”¹¹³ Moscow, he argued subsequently, likely could have brought the Syrians along, “*if* we had some guarantees from the United States.”¹¹⁴ “I believe,” Dobrynin writes in his memoir, “it was one of the missed opportunities for joint action during the Carter administration, and it grew out of American domestic controversies and the inconsistency of the administration itself.”¹¹⁵

Naturally when the Americans quickly backed away from the agreement, the Soviets were severely disappointed. Moscow, Dobrynin would later say, had received the news of Washington’s approval of the October 1 communiqué “with true satisfaction, because it was very unusual to have an agreement on the Middle East.” The White House’s immediate abandonment

¹¹⁰ Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, “Subject: Camp David,” August 17, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9, p. 31 n. 2.

¹¹¹ Handwritten Note by Carter, undated, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9, p. 662.

¹¹² Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 113. The United States could afford to take this attitude because it understood that the USSR capacity to block progress was limited so long as Israel and Egypt both desired a bilateral framework. See Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Egypt, “Subject: Instructions to Ambassador for Meeting With Sadat,” November 25, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, p. 784.

¹¹³ Transcript, “Global Competition and the Deterioration of U.S.-Soviet Relations,” p. 112. See also Transcript, “US-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy,” p. 59.

¹¹⁴ Transcript, “US-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy,” p. 62 (emphasis in original).

¹¹⁵ Dobrynin, *In Confidence*, pp. 398-399.

of the initiative, however, “had negative effects on our relationship. We really believed that you broke your promise—that you just went your own way without us.” By gutting the joint agreement, the Americans had wrecked what the Kremlin viewed as the only acceptable basis for reconvening the Geneva Conference. Consequently, one official recalled, the USSR leadership took what happened “very painfully. It was a new blow against trust—although there was very little trust anyway; I suppose I should say that it strengthened the mistrust. I think it played a role in the further deterioration of détente.”¹¹⁶ “I don’t understand what’s going on,” Gromyko told Dobrynin when he learned of Carter’s abandonment of the joint statement. “We seem to have an agreement, we seem to be certain on our course, and then nothing.” There was, one Soviet negotiator therefore remembered, “a sense of disappointment and anger.”¹¹⁷ The United States, Gromyko told Vance in April, had “violated” their joint understanding and taken “a rather lackadaisical attitude” toward the document. The superpowers had been on the verge of reassembling the parties at Geneva, the foreign minister said, but the Americans had refused to use their influence with the Israelis. The conference was, thus, “now ‘paralyzed.’”¹¹⁸ In short, as one expert writes, the Soviets “bitterly held it against the United States that, once their presence was no longer essential... the United States again froze them out of any participation.”¹¹⁹

And once it became clear that Washington intended to proceed unilaterally and without the Syrians or Palestinians involved, the Soviet Union turned decisively against the Carter

¹¹⁶ Transcript, “Global Competition and the Deterioration of U.S.-Soviet Relations,” pp. 102, 104, 108-112. See also Alexei Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East: From Messianism to Pragmatism* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1993), pp. 115-116.

¹¹⁷ Transcript, “US-Soviet Relations and Soviet Foreign Policy,” p. 65.

¹¹⁸ Memcon, “Subject: Vance-Gromyko Meeting,” April 21, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, p. 326. Note also Gromyko’s strong denial that an independent Palestinian state would pose a threat to Israel’s existence because it could serve as a Soviet base in the region at p. 327. Importantly, U.S. officials acknowledged the truth of the foreign minister’s point. See Hermann F. Eilts, “Improve the Framework,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 41 (1980-1981), p. 15. See also Telegram from Vance to the Department of State, “Subject: Secretary’s Meeting With Gromyko—Final Session July 13 on Middle East,” July 13, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, pp. 433-436.

¹¹⁹ Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 582.

administration's Middle East diplomacy. To be sure, Moscow had not immediately objected to Sadat's initiative, but once its misgivings that the move would result in its exclusion were confirmed, the Kremlin leadership felt it had no choice, especially because the rest of the Arab world had condemned the Jerusalem visit almost unanimously.¹²⁰ Moscow was not in principle opposed to what Sadat had done, but the USSR leaders continued to insist that the matter be dealt with comprehensively and through joint superpower action, procedures which would now be much more difficult to implement as a result of the Egyptian leader's initiative. The Kremlin, Dobrynin told Vance, of course did not want to see the negotiations drift into a bilateral framework, but Sadat's move had split the Arab world and blocked the path to Geneva. Pursuing the new course, the ambassador stressed, would weaken U.S.-Soviet joint efforts. "We were," he said, "quite close before this move; if we give our blessing to this kind of policy, it will encourage the split in the Arab ranks which will make it more difficult to convene Geneva." The new approach, Dobrynin concluded, would likely lead to a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace.¹²¹

With this in mind, it was hardly surprising that Moscow refused to support the agreement reached by the United States, Israel, and Egypt at the Camp David summit. Aside from the fact that the accords failed to address the Palestinian question or the Syrian front and were unanimously denounced in the Arab world, the Soviet Union had once again been excluded entirely from the negotiations. Even Dobrynin, who had consistently favored a policy of cooperation with the United States, pressed the Kremlin just prior to Camp David to call publicly

¹²⁰ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, p. 106.

¹²¹ Memcon, "Subject: Middle East," November 28, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, pp. 233-234. See also Telegram from Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher to Vance, December 9, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, pp. 236-237; Letter from Brezhnev to Carter, January 12, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, pp. 252-253; Carter-Brezhnev Project, National Security Archive, Memcon, "Subject: Horn of Africa; Middle East," January 26, 1978, http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/carterbrezhnev/docs_global_competition/TAB%203/doc10%20-%2019780126%20-%20Horn%20of%20Africa,%20Middle%20East.pdf; Letter from Brezhnev to Carter, February 27, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, pp. 287-288; and Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union, "Subject: Bessmertnykh Call on Shulman March 18," March 18, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, p. 307.

for the reconvention of the Geneva Conference. “By doing this,” the ambassador wrote, “we will soundly throw a wrench into the Administration’s current game.”¹²² “The Soviet side,” Kornienko told the U.S. Ambassador in Moscow, “considers the path of Egypt-Israeli talks to be a blind alley which can cause ‘dangerous complications’ in the Middle East.”¹²³ Even during the conference, Brezhnev informed Carter that the Kremlin still favored joint superpower action aimed at reaching a comprehensive settlement. “Any other steps, including the ones being taken most recently,” however, “do nothing but make the Middle East conflict still more deeply seated without solving its main issues.”¹²⁴ Washington, Dobrynin therefore told Vance on September 19, “could scarcely expect the Soviet Union to applaud.”¹²⁵

In the view of the USSR, then, the Camp David Accords failed to address the core aspects of the Arab-Israeli dispute, in particular the Palestinian issue, and in some ways had even made the achievement of a comprehensive settlement more difficult. And yet, even after the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, the Soviets made no attempt to destabilize the region. As Carter later acknowledged, Moscow subsequently took steps to help stabilize the

¹²² Political Letter by Dobrynin, July 11, 1978, Cold War International History Project, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111258>.

¹²³ Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State, “Subject: Message to Gromyko,” August 14, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, p. 441.

¹²⁴ Editorial Note of Message from Brezhnev to Carter, September 14, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9, p. 189.

¹²⁵ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union, “Subject: Secretary’s Meeting with Dobrynin, 19 September,” September 19, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, p. 456. See also Memcon, “Subject: Carter-Gromyko Plenary Meeting,” September 30, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, pp. 467-468. For the official Soviet response to the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, see Letter from Brezhnev to Carter, March 19, 1979, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, pp. 533-536. See also Memcon, “Subject: Fourth Plenary Meeting, International Issues,” June 17, 1979, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 6, pp. 609-610. Moscow took some solace in knowing that the separate peace agreement enjoyed no support in the rest of the Arab world. See Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, pp. 153-154; Cable from William G. Bowdler to Brzezinski, “Subject: Analysis of Arab-Israeli Developments: No. 554, September 7, 1978,” NLC-6-53-6-10-0; Interagency Intelligence Memo, “New Realities in the Middle East,” NI HM 79-10026, December 1979, NLC-6-51-7-7-5; Carter-Brezhnev Project, National Security Archive, CIA Intelligence Estimate, “Changes in the Middle East: Moscow’s Perceptions and Options,” June 1979, http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/carterbrezhnev/docs_global_competition/TAB%203/doc15%20-%20197906%20-%20Changes%20in%20the%20Middle%20East,%20Moscow%20Perceptions%20and%20Options.pdf; and Transcript, “Global Competition and the Deterioration of U.S.-Soviet Relations, p. 119.

situation in Lebanon.¹²⁶ Indeed, the Americans actually gave the USSR credit for maintaining a restrained policy. Moscow's behavior, one intelligence report observed, augured "well for the possibility of a continued Soviet effort to avoid flash point situations in the Middle East."¹²⁷ The Arab-Israeli question had undoubtedly been settled in a way that was wholly unacceptable to the Soviet Union and, consequently, had further contributed to the fall of détente, but the Kremlin nevertheless had no interest in stirring radicalism or in confronting the Americans in the area.

The Separate Peace

The Carter administration's USSR policy, Brzezinski claimed after leaving office, had by no means been perfect. But, he contended, any criticism in this area needed "to be coupled with a recognition of the major Soviet responsibility for the downturn in the American-Soviet relationship. The Soviet Union not only pressed forward with its expansionist moves, but it flatly turned down U.S. overtures which could have had the effect of tempering the confrontationist aspects of the relationship."¹²⁸ Moscow, Carter writes similarly in his memoir, had refused to deal with Israel fairly because it did not want to jeopardize its relations with the Arabs.¹²⁹ Even Vance, probably the most optimistic individual in the administration on the issue of U.S.-USSR relations, had taken office thinking that the scope for potential cooperation was "modest. The Soviet Union would continue to try to expand its influence when possible. Competition was, and would continue to be, the principle feature of the relationship." And after the USSR invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, "The tenuous balance between visceral anti-Sovietism and an attempt to regulate dangerous competition could no longer be maintained."¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 233.

¹²⁷ Intelligence Assessment PA 79-10264, "Soviet Foreign Policy on the Eve of the Summit," June 1979, NLC-4-22-6-11-5.

¹²⁸ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 517.

¹²⁹ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, p. 292.

¹³⁰ Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 28, 394.

In light of the foregoing story, such a characterization of USSR policy is difficult to accept, at least in the Middle East. The Kremlin had not only bent over backward to demonstrate to the United States its interest in a moderate solution, it had simultaneously utilized its influence with the Syrians and PLO to facilitate the reconvention of the Geneva Conference. The October 1 communiqué had diverged significantly from earlier Soviet policy statements precisely because Moscow was so interested in collaborating with Washington for a comprehensive settlement. And in the end, the Kremlin's objections to the Camp David agreement proved justified, as the accords failed to attract the interest of the other moderate Arabs and led to a purely separate Egyptian-Israeli peace. In fact, the Americans themselves had understood that the arrangement had no chance of being extended beyond a bilateral context. Prior to the signing of the treaty, the CIA had been "nearly unanimous in its rejection of the [Camp David Accords] as not sufficient from the Arab point of view.... Almost any treaty, therefore, will provoke Arab criticism."¹³¹

Why, then, did the Carter administration choose to pursue a course it knew Moscow would reject and which would also not be accepted by Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, or the Palestinians? To be sure, the United States could not possibly have opposed Sadat's dramatic Jerusalem initiative, which had not only been overwhelmingly popular both internationally and

¹³¹ Intelligence Memo RP M 79-10104X Prepared in the CIA, "Subject: Possible Arab Acceptance of an Egyptian-Israeli Treaty," February 27, 1979, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9, pp. 618-619. The CIA had decided to develop this estimate as a direct response to Carter's mistaken claim that Sadat's Arab peers would have no choice but to accept the Camp David Accords once Egypt had signed the peace treaty. See Memcon, February 25, 1979, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9, pp. 613-614. It is worth noting that a number of key U.S. decision-makers, including Vance, Brzezinski, and Quandt, also concurred with the Soviet estimate that a separate agreement would probably make the achievement of a comprehensive peace more difficult by reducing the pressure on Israel to make territorial concessions on the other fronts. See Quandt, *Camp David*, p. 188 n. 16; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 112, 276; and Memo from Vance to Carter, "Subject: Middle East Strategy," November 9, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9, pp. 422-423. The Begin government's basic strategy, of course, had been to detach Egypt from the rest of the Arab world to remove the latter's military option, which would thereby leave Israel free to maintain its hold on the other territories taken in 1967, especially the West Bank. As Dayan had told Carter during their testy meeting in October 1977, "'If you take one wheel off a car, it won't drive.' If Egypt is out of the conflict, there will be no war." See Memcon, October 4, 1977, p. 671.

domestically, but which had transformed the psychological context of the dispute. In addition, it is true that neither Egypt nor Israel desired Soviet involvement in the subsequent negotiations.

Nevertheless, Sadat had not objected to the October 1 statement. To the contrary, he had considered it an extremely helpful step, one that might help accelerate the momentum of the peace process by putting pressure on Syria and the Palestinians. It had been Carter's decision to back away from the document that had in the end pushed him to take matters into his own hands.

The principle obstacles to U.S.-Soviet cooperation on the Arab-Israeli problem, then, were essentially the same ones that had existed since 1967. First, the American domestic context proved an even more formidable constraint than it had been in the earlier period. Carter, who had mismanaged the domestic aspect of Middle East policy, was poorly positioned to confront opposition to his preferred course at home. As it was, the president reasoned, the White House would face an uphill battle when attempting to mobilize support for its strategy in the United States, as it would require significant pressure on Israel. Given that working with the Soviets would have made this task even more difficult, Carter decided that it would be easier to move unilaterally. The president, in short, accepted the costs Washington would suffer internationally—namely, the further alienation of Moscow and decreased cooperation from the USSR with the other Arabs—for the sake of improving his position domestically.

Second, U.S. strategists continued to view the reduction of Soviet influence in the area as a freestanding objective. To be sure, after repeated demonstrations of USSR moderation and Moscow's willingness to be helpful with the peace process, American officials decided that joint action could facilitate matters. But from the outset, the administration had pursued a policy of keeping the Soviets on the sidelines until it was absolutely necessary to involve them in the diplomacy. More significantly, the United States made little effort to work with the Kremlin in

the wake of Sadat's journey to Jerusalem and quickly reverted to the idea that one benefit of progress toward a settlement would be the erosion of the USSR position in the Middle East. By the middle of 1978, the Carter team considered additional progress in the negotiations imperative, in part because a failure would risk the expansion of Soviet influence in the region. With this in mind, U.S. strategy toward Moscow in the wake of Sadat's Jerusalem visit was inconsistent with power political considerations. To be sure, the United States could not have put pressure on the Israelis to carry out a full withdrawal until the Syrians and Palestinians had accepted a more moderate position.¹³² But to pursue a confrontational posture toward the Soviet Union, which was clearly interested in the sort of solution the administration favored, made little sense. And if the Americans had stood by the October 1 statement, it is quite conceivable that the other Arabs would ultimately have succumbed to the joint pressure of the superpowers. Carter, however, proved both extremely hesitant to press the Begin government—a policy which made the Soviet task with the Arabs much more difficult—and all too willing to follow a unilateral course at least partially aimed at undercutting the Soviets in the Middle East. The result, unsurprisingly, was another major blow to détente at a time when the U.S.-USSR relationship could not afford one.

¹³² Carter, however, could have pressured Begin to halt his expansion of settlements. On this point, see Jackson, "The Importance of Playing the Two-Level Game."

Conclusion: The Lost Peace

[W]hen I assess [Nixon and Kissinger's] activity in retrospect... I cannot escape the conclusion that they were not really thinking in terms of bringing about a major breakthrough in Soviet-American relations, and of ending the Cold War and the arms race.

—Anatoly Dobrynin¹

We have to do a lot of shadow-boxing to get into a position to take action when we are in a crisis. I say this only so you will distinguish between appearances and reality. We will not permit a strategic gain for Soviet power. We will attempt to reduce Soviet power where we can.

—Henry Kissinger²

The results of U.S. diplomatic efforts in the Middle East following the October 1973 War are often held up as extraordinary American foreign policy achievements. “[Kissinger’s] effectiveness in bringing the conflict to a close and relying on shuttle diplomacy to reduce Israeli-Egyptian and Israeli-Syrian tensions,” Robert Dallek writes, “were the greatest achievements of his tenure as national security adviser and secretary of state.” Egyptian-Israeli peace, he argues, would not have been possible without his exertions and, thus: “Kissinger was more deserving of a Nobel Peace Prize for his Middle East negotiations than for anything he did in Vietnam, which netted him the reward.”³ The secretary of state, Aaron David Miller agrees, “deserves high marks for his efforts.”⁴ In Niall Ferguson’s view, Kissinger’s “exclusion of the Soviets from the Middle East in 1973” constituted one of his “major achievements.”⁵

Scholarly and journalistic assessments of the Carter administration’s handling of the Arab-Israeli problem are typically no less glowing. According to Lawrence Wright, the agreement reached at Camp David represents “one of the great diplomatic triumphs of the

¹ Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents, 1962-1986* (New York: Times, 1995), p. 195.

² Memorandum of Conversation, November 26, 1974, in William Burr, ed., *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top-Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow* (New York: New Press, 1998), p. 290.

³ Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 619.

⁴ Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land: America’s Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2008), p. 139.

⁵ Niall Ferguson, “He Provided Strategic Vision in Dangerous Times,” *New York Times*, February 13, 2016.

twentieth century” and was Carter’s “signal achievement.”⁶ “Peace between Egypt and Israel... still stands as an extraordinary accomplishment,” Miller concurs. “Whatever [Carter’s] detractors say about him today, he deserves enormous credit for what he accomplished then.”⁷ Even Ball, who, unsurprisingly, lamented that the administration’s efforts had led merely to the signing of a bilateral Egyptian-Israeli deal, nevertheless termed what the president achieved at Camp David “spectacular.”⁸ Thus one historian, in titling his book *Heroic Diplomacy*, has captured the essence of the prevailing view among scholars of U.S. Middle East policy during this period.⁹

The evidence I have presented in this dissertation calls such effusively laudatory claims into question. To be sure, the separate peace that was reached in 1979 more or less eliminated the possibility of another major Arab-Israeli war, as Egypt’s removal from the dispute left the Arabs without a viable military option. On the other hand, the agreement in no way touched the other aspects of the conflict, in particular the Palestinian question. To the contrary, the bilateral settlement in many ways exacerbated the challenges involved in achieving a comprehensive peace. “By removing Egypt from the military conflict with Israel,” Quandt observes, “Camp David greatly strengthened Israel’s bargaining position vis-à-vis Jordan, Syria, and the Palestinians.... This result is precisely what Begin hoped to achieve with Camp David.”¹⁰ It should not be especially surprising, with this in mind, that as of this writing hardly any progress on the fundamentals of an overall Middle East settlement has been made since 1979.¹¹

⁶ Lawrence Wright, *Thirteen Days in September: The Dramatic Story of the Struggle for Peace* (New York: Vintage, 2014), pp. ix, 380.

⁷ Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, p. 190.

⁸ George W. Ball, “The Coming Crisis in Israeli-American Relations,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (1979), p. 243.

⁹ Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁰ William B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1986), p. 331.

¹¹ Even the 1994 Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty cannot be considered a major step in this direction. With the signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993, King Hussein could safely disengage from the conflict with Israel, as the

More significantly for the purposes of this dissertation, the manner in which the United States approached the problem throughout the era that followed the June 1967 Six-Day War had a tremendously deleterious impact on the prospects for a genuine superpower détente. The Soviet Union, it is clear, had attached great importance to the objective of reaching jointly with the Americans a settlement in the Middle East, so much so that it had sacrificed a number of important interests in the area to help move the process along. What is more, Moscow's terms for such a deal were strikingly similar to Washington's; in return for a restoration of basically the 1967 frontiers, the USSR was willing to accept a deal limiting arms shipments to the region, accept whatever security guarantees Israel and the United States believed were necessary, and, in the end, to demand that the Arabs agree to peaceful, normal relations with Jerusalem. And if the superpowers could have reached a common position on the problem, the parties to the dispute would have faced enormous pressures to accept a settlement of this type.

Yet Washington proved uninterested in managing the issue in concert with Moscow. With the exception of the October 1977 joint statement, from which Carter had retreated almost immediately, the United States had at no point agreed to cooperative action. To some extent, this reluctance stemmed from misperception, with the Johnson, Nixon, and Carter administrations initially skeptical of Soviet aims in the Middle East. In each instance, however, U.S. decision-makers eventually discovered that the USSR leadership was actually deeply interested in the sort of deal that they themselves envisioned. In power political terms, then, the ultimate outcome is puzzling, for the exercise of the combined influence of the superpowers might have made a decisive difference in moving the region from a state of war to a state of peace.

Palestinians were now in charge of their own fate. The agreement, in short, did little to address the core of the conflict.

When one examines the historical evidence, this result was primarily attributable to two factors. In great part, American domestic political constraints had impeded repeatedly White House efforts to approach the Arab-Israeli problem in a way that would have attracted Soviet interest. To gain maximum cooperation from Moscow, and to give the USSR the best chance to influence the Arabs, the United States would of course had to have pursued a balanced agreement, one in particular that would address adequately the territorial question.

Politics at home, however, regularly complicated this task. Already on the defensive politically due to Vietnam, Johnson was simply not going to launch an ambitious Middle East initiative following the Six-Day War in the absence of compelling evidence that his exertions stood a good chance of succeeding. Likewise, Nixon's concerns about the linkage between his administration's Arab-Israeli and Vietnam policies deterred him from taking serious action early on in his presidency. By the time the Soviets came forward formally with what he viewed as a reasonable proposal in September 1971, the president was too concerned about his reelection prospects to pursue the idea. Likewise, because of the lingering effects of the Watergate scandal, Kissinger had been forced to maneuver in the Middle East step-by-step to avoid triggering a domestic reaction. While he and Ford gave serious and prolonged consideration to the possibility of moving the negotiations into a comprehensive framework in the spring and summer of 1975, the shadow of the upcoming presidential election again induced great caution on the White House's part. And, perhaps most vividly, the domestic backlash against the October 1 statement, which came on the heels of a number of tactical missteps on the part of his administration, led Carter to distance himself quickly from a joint approach with the Soviets, a decision that would finally put an end to the possibility that the superpowers would work together for a solution.

The domestic factor was, then, of fundamental importance. A comprehensive deal was, U.S. strategists understood, undoubtedly going to require an American-Israeli confrontation. The domestic political linkage between the Middle East and other priorities; the influence of Israel's supporters in the United States; Congressional views on the matter; and the generally sympathetic state of the American public toward Jerusalem, all of which were linked to electoral concerns, were elements of the problem that the Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations had simply not been able to ignore. Such considerations appear to have had an especially noticeable impact on U.S. statecraft prior to Nixon's campaign for reelection, during the phase of the negotiations that followed the October War, throughout the 1975 policy reassessment, and on Carter's attempts to reconvene the Geneva Conference in 1977.¹²

To say, however, that politics at home explains entirely the policy pursued by the United States would be an oversimplification. Even aside from domestic politics, U.S. decision-makers tended to view the weakening of Soviet influence in the Middle East as a freestanding goal during the phase of the diplomacy that followed the October War, the period during which the prospects for joint action for a comprehensive settlement were brightest. Even though Moscow had tried to accommodate the White House's concerns by acquiescing to the step-by-step approach, one of Kissinger's principal aims had been to undermine the USSR position with the Arabs, especially Egypt. Even when the negotiations broke down in March 1975 and the Ford administration appeared poised to transition to an overall framework, the Americans had hoped to keep the Soviets sidelined to the maximum extent possible. This objective, in fact, was one of the leading considerations that ultimately led Ford and Kissinger to continue their pursuit of a second Sinai step, even at tremendous cost. And, arguably even more remarkable, once Carter's

¹² As discussed in chapter 4, Watergate was also crucially significant in this regard. The scandal, however, was a unique event in American politics.

efforts to convene the Geneva Conference had failed and Sadat made his dramatic Jerusalem visit, the Americans again moved to exclude the Soviet Union, with the idea that a major benefit of a separate Egyptian-Israeli agreement would be the further erosion of the USSR strategic position in the Middle East.

How should one think about this whole story? The United States, of course, had a major national security interest in a settlement. Constantly anxious about the U.S. ability to defend Israel, desirous of maintaining a balanced posture to protect Washington's position in the Arab world, worried about Western energy vulnerability, genuinely persuaded by the proposition that an agreement would benefit Israel itself, and, above all, cognizant that the structure of the conflict in the Middle East could lead to a superpower confrontation, American strategists in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s considered peace in the area one of their highest foreign policy priorities. For their part, Soviet decision-makers had reached similar conclusions. And given the issue's salience to the broader Cold War relationship, systemic forces had clearly generated powerful incentives for the two sides to cooperate.

The unavoidable conclusion, therefore, is that the United States, especially from 1973 onwards, had followed a course that had *not* been motivated by power political concepts. Realists, of course, do not deny completely the potential for domestic political factors to shape foreign policy decision-making. Even Kenneth Waltz, the father of neorealism, has written an entire book on the issue.¹³ Neoclassical realists, of course, frequently take such considerations into account when theorizing about how certain states behave in the international system.¹⁴

¹³ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992). Note also his distinction between a theory of international politics and a theory of foreign policy. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 121-123.

¹⁴ On neoclassical realism, see Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1998), pp. 144-172. For examples of this sort of work, see Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Thomas J. Christensen,

But the degree to which domestic level factors influenced U.S. strategy during this period went beyond what even neoclassical realists would tend to acknowledge as common.¹⁵ To be sure, such considerations did not constrain U.S. officials in absolute terms. Had it not been for Watergate, Nixon in all likelihood would have moved decisively following his sweeping victory in the 1972 election. The same might be said for Ford and Kissinger, who had taken a number of tactical steps to position the White House for just such a showdown in 1977. And Carter's domestic problems had much to do with his poor management of the issue at home, not just with the structural impediments inherent in the American political system.¹⁶ But taken as a whole, this variable clearly proved an important barrier to U.S.-Soviet cooperation in the Middle East, for it had continually prevented the United States from formally agreeing to a common position with Moscow and from exerting pressure on Jerusalem.

Moreover, Washington's focus on excluding the USSR from the diplomacy and undercutting its position with the Arabs ran counter to what mainstream realists would tend to expect. Top U.S. strategists, particularly in the post-October War phase of the peace process, seemed incapable of approaching the problem except through a competitive, Cold War mindset. The origins of such deeply anti-Soviet views are beyond the scope of this study, but the important conclusion here is that this variable impacted fundamentally the way in which the politics of the Arab-Israeli dispute ran its course. When combined with the domestic factor, this perspective steered the Americans away from the approach that would have been most likely to lead to a comprehensive

Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). For a skeptical view, see Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1999), pp. 22-34.

¹⁵ Ironically, however, two of the most prominent realist scholars in political science today go beyond the argument I advance. See John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).

¹⁶ Galen Jackson, "The Importance of Playing the Two-Level Game: U.S. Domestic Politics and the Road to a Separate Peace, 1977-1978," *Journal of Cold War Studies* (forthcoming).

peace settlement in the Middle East, to say nothing of a more stable and peaceful U.S.-Soviet relationship. In short, despite their potency, structural incentives were simply insufficient to push the United States into a cooperative posture. When viewed in this context, it should come as no great surprise that détente proved short-lived and that by the late 1970s, the superpowers were on their way to an intensified struggle.

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