

**February 16, 1961**

**Department of State Memorandum of Conversation,  
'Israel's Security and Other Problems'**

**Citation:**

"Department of State Memorandum of Conversation, 'Israel's Security and Other Problems'", February 16, 1961, Wilson Center Digital Archive, RG 59, DF, 784A.5612/2-1661. Originally published in Avner Cohen and William Burr, eds., National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book #547 (April 21, 2016).  
<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123816>

**Summary:**

US National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy meets with Ambassador Harman to discuss the Israeli nuclear facility at Dimona.

**Credits:**

This document was made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY)

**Original Language:**

English

**Contents:**

Original Scan

## DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Approved by White House Memorandum of Conversation  
2/25/61

(38)

SUBJECT: Israel's Security and Other Problems

PARTICIPANTS: McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs

Avraham Harman, Ambassador, Embassy of Israel

Mordechai Gazit, Minister, Embassy of Israel

NE - William L. Hamilton

COPIES TO:

S/S - 1	S/AE - 8
G - 2	INR/C - 9
S/P - 3	Amembassy Tel Aviv - 10
NEA - 4	H - 11
NE - 5	
IO - 6	
D - 7	

(14)

Spores 12-14

Israel's Security Problem

Ambassador Harman remarked that the current quiescent state of affairs in the Middle East has prevailed for four years. Since 1958, the UAR's subversive efforts had been effectively checked in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. The recent Baghdad meeting of the Arab League had revealed the "roll-back" of UAR-inspired, nationalist trends among the Arabs, Nasser not having been able to dominate in the old manner. When Mr. Bundy said that perhaps the "roll-back" had "rolled" Nasser right down to the Congo, the Ambassador said the suggestion was not particularly far-fetched, that Nasser is a restless spirit and when checked in one area is obliged to seek an outlet elsewhere and Africa is now a major target.

Ambassador Harman said that despite the prevailing calm there are very important elements for anxiety in the Middle East, in general, and specifically for Israel. Of these, rearmament is the most sensitive. Egypt has been setting the pace since 1955, when it first began to acquire Soviet arms. Since the end of 1957 it has moved toward the acquisition of the Soviets' MIG-19, which by a large margin is a better plane than anything the Israelis have, and capable of delivering air-to-air missiles. When Mr. Bundy asked what type of missile, Ambassador Harman said that he is not informed on this point, but it is a certainty the MIG-19 would carry a missile because of its tremendous speed and high flight ceiling. It will out-match the Israelis' best jet, the French "Super-Mystere", and, accordingly, the Israelis are now dealing with the French for the "Mirage", which, however, cannot be delivered for another eighteen months.

The Ambassador

SECRET

INFORMATION COPY

CLASSIFIED FILE

784A.5612/2-1661

NONE

one copy rec'd in Egypt destroyed

- 2 -

The Ambassador said Israel has convincing evidence that the UAR already has the MIG-19's and that some may also have been delivered to Iraq. Furthermore, Soviet training crews have arrived in Egypt.

Asked if Israel believes the UAR's fighter-pilots are better qualified than formerly, the Ambassador said that the UAR has gone to tremendous and successful efforts to raise the quality of its training and inter-services coordination. The Egyptians had learned the most important lesson to be gained from their experiences in the Sinai, and have addressed considerable effort to improving the calibre of their officer corps.

Egypt's improved military posture has underscored a question, broached with the State Department over a year ago, of Israel's ability to meet a sudden air attack. The Ambassador described Israel as a small country with no defense in depth, a narrow ten-mile waist, and greatest dimensions no more than 50 miles by 350 miles. The UAR has twenty-six airfields in the two provinces, and by virtue of geographic advantage can shuttle back and forth over Israel, which has only three operational fields plus a fourth civilian airfield which could be pressed into use in a crisis. All this means that Israel's jet fighter capacity could be knocked out immediately and the country's communications system destroyed, thus creating great difficulties for man power mobilization, which depends on quick communications with a large reserve to augment a small standing army. Anticipating the vulnerability that is now rapidly developing, Israel a year ago asked the United States for anti-aircraft missiles.

Mr. Bundy asked the details of the Israel brief presented to the United States Government in support of its request. Ambassador Harman replied that Israel wanted the "Hawk", which he described as a purely defensive ground-to-air missile which cannot be used offensively but is ideally adapted to the purpose of defending Israel's airfields. The United States had expressed reluctance, according to the Ambassador, to introduce a missile of any kind into the area, but had assured the Israelis that if new factors emerged this decision could be reconsidered.

The situation is now developing as Israel feared, according to the Ambassador. The UAR has the MIG-19. Israel does not fear an immediate strike, but in its view must prepare for 1962 when the UAR will be ready to employ its new competence against Israel, if Israel by that time does not have a deterrent. The Israelis would like to begin preparing for this critical period by sending personnel to the United States for training in the operation and maintenance of the "Hawk". At the time the request was made, the Israelis had been informed that training facilities were "mortgaged" for some time to come, but if it were possible to begin training now, Israel would be in a state of preparedness from a man power standpoint, if at the time of maximum danger, the United States consented to provide the "Hawk".

Mr. Bundy asked the Ambassador how the latter would describe the present United States position.

Ambassador Harman said that the United States agreed Israel has a legitimate requirement for deterrent capacity; Israel's assessment that the situation is moving into a state of arms imbalance in the UAR's favor had not been contested in

Washington.

SECRET

INFORMATION COPY

SECRET

- 3 -

Washington. However, the United States did not wish to introduce offensive equipment in the Middle East and advised Israel to seek its major requirements from "traditional sources", principally the French and the British. The United States had agreed to sell early-warning equipment on three-year credit terms and an Israel electronics team recently completed a tour of United States installations and factories to become acquainted with the equipment. It has now returned to Israel, which is in the process of deciding whether or not to place an order.

At the same time, Ambassador Harman continued, the United States agreed to take into consideration the additional burden placed on the economy by Israel's defense requirements. While unwilling to finance such procurement directly, the Israelis had been informed, the United States would study the impact of arms expenditures in considering Israel's applications in the several categories of aid.

Mr. Bundy asked the Ambassador if he was reopening the request for missiles or merely signalling the fact that such a request was in the offing.

Ambassador Harman said he was not under instruction, even to signal the possibility of such a request, but that Israel is now reviewing its circumstances in the light of the UAR's acquisition of the MIG-19.

Ambassador Harman mentioned briefly the possibility of regional disarmament, which might be easily achieved in the Near East by agreement among the big powers, inasmuch as all countries there are obliged to look to the major powers for "deadly stuff". Because of the volatility of the area the introduction of each new device in the offensive field carries with it great changes.

#### Israel's Atomic Reactor

Mr. Bundy asked the Ambassador if Israel's construction of an atomic reactor does not represent the introduction of just the sort of sensitive factor he was speaking about.

Ambassador Harman said that Israel has no intention of manufacturing the bomb and the reactor itself is three or four years away from operation.

Mr. Bundy pressed the point of the development's impact on Arab opinion. Ambassador Harman replied that the manner of its revelation to the world had created unnecessary tension. It had "spilled out" in an unfortunate manner. Asked for details, Ambassador Harman said it had been leaked out quite unnecessarily, in truth had had an adverse effect in the area, Nasser threatening to mobilize four million men, all of which had been very unpleasant for Israel.

He said the sensational speculation was without foundation, and, as he had indicated to the Secretary of State, Israel has no intention for uses other than peaceful. A visit to the reactor, in which this Government had expressed an interest, probably would be arranged by Ben-Gurion if he were restored to power in the wake of the present Cabinet crisis. Mr. Bundy's suggestion that he had no doubt Ben-Gurion, who might be regarded as the Schumann-Heink of the political world,

SECRET

INFORMATION COPY



SECRET

- 4 -

world, will inevitably return to Israel's premiership was received good-naturedly by the Israelis. Mr. Bundy pressed Ambassador Harman on the question of the legitimacy of Arab concern with the atomic energy development.

Ambassador Harman deprecated its importance. He said it is a small reactor, and if the UAR were to announce a similar development, even one much larger, to be dedicated to the same purposes intended for Israel's, his Government would not be concerned.

Mr. Bundy remarked on the magnitude of the expenditure which must be represented by such a development, but Ambassador Harman said that it is modest in scope, to be devoted exclusively to scientific experimentation and the training of a corps of scientists who, fifteen years from now, would be an important asset, if by that time the great powers had made a "break-through" to establish peaceful uses on an economic basis.

Ambassador Harman suggested again that the United States would be well-advised to consider disarmament for the area. A subsidiary benefit would be halting the flow of Communist arms to Africa. He said Israel intelligence reveals that Communist elements in African countries are receiving arms, not directly from the Soviets but with the UAR as an entrepot.

#### The Jordan River Problem

Mr. Bundy asked the Ambassador how he assessed the Jordan Valley problem and the possibility of outside help for its solution.

Ambassador Harman reminded Mr. Bundy of the Eric Johnston mission's failure to achieve agreement among the several riparian states for an equitable division of the waters, the Plan having been agreed upon by the technicians but failing when submitted to the Arab governments. Since then, he said, the Department of State had agreed to a modus operandi under which it would assist separate but parallel developments in Israel and Jordan which would remain within the limits established by the Johnston Plan.

When Mr. Bundy asked if this approach is feasible to the ultimate, full realization of the Johnston concept, Mr. Gazit said that the imponderable is the question of Jordanian ability, from the standpoint of its relations with its neighbors, to view with equanimity Israel's taking from the Jordan system its share of the water, probably starting in late 1962 or 1963.

He described the essence of the Plan as Israel's use of the Jordan River and Jordan's use of the Yarmouk.

Ambassador Harman indicated that the degree of political danger surrounding the start of Israel's diversion of the river would depend on Jordanian circumstances at the time. There would be no explosion if Jordan by that time were in a stable, relatively viable position. Mr. Bundy asked if there is covert communication between Israel and Jordan on such problems and was informed that there is very little, so little, in fact, as to amount to "no more than telepathy".

The Ambassador

SECRET

INFORMATION COPY

- 5 -

The Ambassador described Jordan's economic development as important not only in the interests of the Jordanians' welfare but because Jordan's continued existence is essential to the stability of the entire area, and for that reason deserves any infusion of strength that the West is able to supply.

#### Arab Refugees

Discussion of Jordan's contribution to the stability of the area led directly to a statement volunteered by Ambassador Harman that Israel has interested itself in and has discussed with the Department Jordan's economic development and the possibility of coupling it with efforts to move forward with the Arab refugee problem. He described Jordan as an excellent proving ground for efforts to disperse the refugees because there are no political or civil barriers between the refugees and the rest of the populace. If a pool of 100,000 jobs could be created in Jordan, it would draw off enough of the refugees to begin a dispersal from the camps and the disappearance of the problem. Mr. Bundy asked the Ambassador if he believes the Arabs are any more willing than before to consider solutions, not involving a return to Israel. Ambassador Harman replied that he finds hope in the area's heightened interest in economic development, which might make things possible now that were out of the question some years ago. The whole area is development-minded.

Mr. Gazit suggested that an intelligent development of the Yarmuk would provide 40,000 of the 100,000 jobs mentioned by Ambassador Harman.

After an exchange of assurances that the preservation of the present relative tranquillity of the area is much to be desired, the Israelis departed with Mr. Bundy's assurances that he would be glad to receive them at any time. He remarked, however, that problems of the kind discussed should in the first instance be approached through the State Department.