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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Meeting of the NSC Special Review Group on the Middle East

Participants

- Elliot Richardson - Under Secretary of State
- David Packard - Deputy Secretary of Defense
- Lt. General John McPherson - JCS
- Richard Helms - Director, CIA
- Dr. Henry Kissinger
- Joseph Sisco - Assistant Secretary of State
- Warren Nutter - Assistant Secretary of Defense
- A. L. Atherton, Jr. - Deputy Assistant Secretary of State
- Robert Pranger - Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense
- Helmut Sonnenfeldt - NSC Staff
- Harold Saunders - NSC Staff

Date and Place

May 21, 1970, in the White House Situation Room.

Dr. Kissinger noted that this review was triggered by the President's commitment to Prime Minister Meir and to Ambassador Rabin that if the military balance in the Middle East changed the US would supply aircraft to Israel. There are three questions:

1. Has the balance changed in such a way as to require stop-gap measures?
2. What could be our long-range policy on military supply?
3. Where are we trying to go?

Mr. Packard felt that we should get away from the question of aircraft for a moment and talk about the larger problem of where we are trying to go.

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Dr. Kissinger agreed that that might be the case today except for one preliminary question: Is there some need before the President sees Foreign Minister Eban to agree to make a token commitment to Israel to supply 6-8 aircraft now to take the heat off while we made more basic decisions.

Mr. Sisco said he felt that we should try to find a course of action that: (a) does not look weak to the USSR and does not provoke the USSR and (b) provides a minimal reassurance to Israel. He felt that we needed to move simultaneously on the political and military tracks. On the political front, he would propose to Cairo a public declaration of ceasefire and commitment to make peace with Israel in exchange for an Israeli commitment in principle to withdraw. On the security front, we should inform Israel secretly that we would supply additional aircraft for two more months after the present deliveries run out -- that is, in August and September -- and that we would earmark an additional number of Phantoms and Skyhawks with the final decision to be made in the light of Israel's response to our diplomatic initiative. Meanwhile, we would respond quickly on Israel's basic logistical needs.

We would tell Nasser that we saw this as a non-escalatory step.

Mr. Richardson acknowledged that it would be difficult for the President to say that we are still thinking about this problem. But the problem was to say anything about the kinds of political steps we are thinking about until we have sorted ourselves out. Therefore he thought the proper line to take with Eban is to say that it is important for the US and Israel to reach some consensus on where we are going together.

Mr. Richardson continued that, developing this line, we might say that the US has a number of interests in the Middle East: maintaining the military balance because we will not abandon Israel; not turning the Arabs over to Soviet domination; preventing a continuing deterioration of the US position in the Middle East.

He felt that we could not simply batten down the hatches and ride out the present situation indefinitely. We have to have a settlement. There is no other way of solving the problem.

Dr. Kissinger said that question was still at issue.

Mr. Richardson replied that he felt we need a settlement even if we have to squeeze Israel and even if this looked like a concession to the USSR. We cannot stand an extrapolation of present trends. A decision to provide large numbers of new aircraft to Israel could blow up our position in the Middle East.

As we look to other parts of the Middle East, Mr. Richardson noted, we see other Soviet objectives such as the Persian Gulf. We have already concluded that cooperation between the Shah and King Faisal is essential for stability in that area. For the US to destroy its relationship with Saudi Arabia over additional aircraft for Israel would upset any contribution we might make to stability in the Gulf.

Mr. Richardson felt that if one adds all this up, the President at least needs to signal to Foreign Minister Eban that some movement on Israel's side -- such as saying the word "withdrawal" -- is essential to our ability to help Israel.

Mr. Packard said he felt strongly that we have to move toward a political settlement; we have to do this now, or it will be too late. He said he did not feel that we could do this with any delivery of aircraft to Israel in the next couple of months. We could, however, assure Israel in general terms that we will not allow it to become defenseless.

Dr. Kissinger asked Mr. Sisco whether he believed that verbal assurances would do any good.

Mr. Sisco said that he disagreed with Mr. Packard. He felt that the proposal he was making would be a major concession to the Arabs and therefore deliveries of aircraft to Israel were essential to balance this.

Mr. Helms asked if we are creeping over our original contract for 50 Phantoms.

Mr. Sisco replied that three Phantoms had been lost, so three of the new planes could be justified as "replacements."

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Dr. Kissinger did not see how we could avoid publicity on this move. He did not see how we could expect Egyptian acquiescence. Of course, the Egyptians will mind if its enemy gets more weapons.

Mr. Sisco said he felt it was possible to hope that we might persuade Israel to talk about accepting the principle of withdrawal and beginning negotiations. In response to a comment from Mr. Packard, he said he did not believe we could realistically talk about symbolic Israeli withdrawal until after a peace agreement had been signed.

Mr. Helms said he did not think Israel wanted a cease-fire along the Suez Canal. That would simply give the Egyptians and the Soviets a chance to move SA-3 sites up to the Canal.

Mr. Sisco replied that any agreement to cease-fire would have to be coupled with an agreement that troops would observe a stand-still wherever they are.

Mr. Packard said he thought we should be thinking about trying to open the Suez Canal.

Dr. Kissinger asked Mr. Sisco if, in accepting the principle of withdrawal, Israel would be asked to include the Golan Heights.

Mr. Packard felt that all we could do at this point would be to try to get negotiations started.

Mr. Richardson said the issue is: What does "withdrawal" mean? We have emphasized the word "secure" in the phrase "secure and recognize boundaries". The purpose of the negotiation is to determine what constitutes "secure".

Dr. Kissinger said he felt we needed a strategy. We had had a year and a half of gimmicks. What if this proposal is not accepted?

Mr. Richardson agreed that we had to keep considering our strategy.

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Mr. Sisco said that this strategy is different from past efforts in two ways. First, this by-passes the major power talks of 1969. The strategy here is to go to both parties direct. He felt that getting negotiations started is more important than doing something like a symbolic withdrawal on the ground. Second, the strategy of the past year has been to acquiesce in the Israeli strategy of letting the Arabs come to Israel. Since the Israelis may be now beginning to think that they need a settlement, it may make some sense to try to get negotiations started by direct US intervention.

Dr. Kissinger said that Israel may prefer to fight from its present boundaries. What are we going to do about arms supply?

Mr. Richardson replied that he would give Israel as much as the traffic would bear and a lot more if Israel would go back to its pre-war boundaries.

Mr. Nutter asked whether we should take Nasser's peace appeal seriously.

Mr. Sisco replied that basically it was an appeal for the miracle that Nasser has been hoping for -- someone to press Israel to withdraw completely from the territories it occupied in 1967. The more important aspect of the "appeal" is the statement that in the absence of Israeli withdrawal the US cannot continue to support Israel economically, militarily or politically because Nasser had made this a test of US-Arab relations. We could not ignore the aspects of a threat in this statement.

Mr. Richardson said that his own version of the scenario would go as follows: He would tell Israel that we would extend existing contracts and earmark additional aircraft for Israel but this must remain secret. It could remain secret only if Prime Minister Meir were in a position to say publicly simply that she is satisfied with contingency arrangements that have been made. Then we would tell Nasser that he should not worry, we have completed our review. We remain committed to maintain the military balance. But the question of our ultimate response short of interim steps is being held in abeyance. The question in this approach is whether or not the Israelis are politically required to say that they have assurances of additional aircraft.

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Dr. Kissinger said he saw at least two problems. The scenario seemed to be based on an assumption that may not be true -- that a settlement will resolve the Middle East problem. One could assume that, if we respond to Nasser's peace appeal by a diplomatic initiative, then any later deliveries or prospect of deliveries would evoke some kind of similar blackmail.

Dr. Kissinger noted also that Israel may prefer to have its Armageddon now rather than wait until later.

The problem, as he saw it, is that we had to find a way of saying nothing to Eban that we would foreclose the Sisco option. He asked Mr. Sisco to provide talking points that do not commit us but do not foreclose the option. The other question is what to say about the replacement of aircraft lost. To say nothing may be impossible in the President's judgment.

Mr. Sisco said that he felt that his proposal would keep the lid on domestic Jewish community reaction.

Dr. Kissinger said that one of the assumptions that seems to underlie Mr. Sisco's proposal was that the way to get a settlement is to give Nasser what he wants.

Dr. Kissinger continued by saying that he felt it would be desirable to present to the NSC the assumptions and the courses of action envisaged in the Sisco policy and then in addition the assumptions and course of action in a counter model.

Mr. Richardson said it was important to get straight the fact that any public response to Israel's request would trigger a sharp Arab reaction.

Mr. Helms said that there is no question that Mr. Richardson is right.

Mr. Richardson said we could move the whole Middle East to the Soviets in a matter of months.

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Mr. Packard suggested that we try to give Israel defensive equipment in the interim. There were other types of aircraft that we might provide such as F104's or F5's.

Mr. Sisco said that this was to suggest something that Israel has no interest in.

Dr. Kissinger said that this might be possible in the context of a big long-term arms package, but it hardly met the needs of the interim problem.

Mr. Sisco said he felt that Israel has to think in terms of offensive weapons.

Mr. Packard said that, if they only do this, they may not now have a feasible strategy.

Mr. Helms noted that if it developed that the Soviets pushed their aircraft up to the Suez Canal that could change the whole situation.

Mr. Packard said that is why we have to move now.

Mr. Sisco said that it would be important in any effort to achieve a cease-fire to include a stand-still that would keep planes out of the Suez Canal area.

In concluding the meeting, Dr. Kissinger asked Mr. Sisco to send talking points for the President's meeting with Foreign Minister Eban. He said he would try to arrange an NSC meeting for the week after next which could discuss alternative approaches.

Mr. Sisco asked whether we would not need another meeting at this level.

Dr. Kissinger replied that there would be another meeting the middle of the following week to discuss the two alternative courses.

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Mr. Richardson said that the line he would suggest taking with Eban would be as follows: We are both embarked on a bleak course in the Middle East; the US and Israel must review its positions from the ground up. The main question is how we can work out together a strategy that will meet our separate interests.

HS.

Harold H. Saunders