

139. Letter From President Johnson to Prime Minister Eshkol/1/

Washington, June 3, 1967.

[/1/Source: Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, Middle East Crisis, Vol. III. Secret. Rostow sent a draft letter, drafted by Battle and Sisco, with his handwritten revisions to the President at 7:25 p.m. on June 2. Johnson marked his approval on Rostow's covering memorandum. \(Ibid.\) Rostow sent him the letter for signature with a covering memorandum on June 3 at 2:50 p.m., noting that he understood Johnson wanted to read it again before it was sent and adding, "It may be urgent that we put this letter on record soon." \(Ibid.\) The final letter includes additional revisions, which, according to a handwritten note by Harold H. Saunders, were given to him by the President on the telephone on the afternoon of June 3. \(Ibid., NSC Histories, Middle East Crisis\) A copy of the draft with Saunders' handwritten revisions is filed *ibid.*, Memos to the President, Walt Rostow, Vol. 30. A handwritten note on the letter states that it was sent to the Department of State at 4:30 p.m. Also FRUS, Vol. XIX, Arab-Israeli Crisis 1967](#)

Dear Mr. Prime Minister:

I am grateful for your letter of May 30.[/2/](#) I appreciate particularly the steadfastness with which the Government and people of Israel have maintained a posture of resolution and calm in a situation of grave tension. All of us understand how fateful the steps we take may be. I hope we can continue to move firmly and calmly toward a satisfactory solution.

[/2/See Document 102.](#)

Our position in this crisis rests on two principles which are vital national interests of the United States. The first is that we support the territorial integrity and political independence of all of the countries of the Middle East. This principle has now been affirmed by four American Presidents. The second is our defense of the basic interest of the entire world community in the freedom of the seas. As a leading maritime nation, we have a vital interest in upholding freedom of the seas, and the right of passage through straits of an international character.

As you know, the United States considers the Gulf of Aqaba to be an international waterway and believes that the entire international maritime community has a substantial interest in assuring that the right of passage through the Strait of Tiran and Gulf is maintained.

I am sure Foreign Minister Eban has reported to you the written statement which I had prepared and from which Ambassador Harman made notes during our meeting of May 26.[/3/](#) The full text of that statement is as follows:

[/3/See Document 77.](#)

"The United States has its own constitutional processes which are basic to its action on matters involving war and peace. The Secretary General has not yet reported to the UN Security Council and the Council has not yet demonstrated what it may or may not be able or willing to do although the United States will press for prompt action in the UN.

"I have already publicly stated this week our views on the safety of Israel and on the Strait of Tiran. Regarding the Strait, we plan to pursue vigorously the measures

which can be taken by maritime nations to assure that the Strait and Gulf remain open to free and innocent passage of the vessels of all nations.

"I must emphasize the necessity for Israel not to make itself responsible for the initiation of hostilities. Israel will not be alone unless it decides to go alone. We cannot imagine that it will make this decision."

I explained to Mr. Eban, I want to protect the territorial integrity of Israel and other nations in that area of the world and will provide as effective American support as possible to preserve the peace and freedom of your nation and of the area./4/ I stressed too the need to act in concert with other nations, particularly those with strong maritime interests. As you will understand and as I explained to Mr. Eban, it would be unwise as well as most unproductive for me to act without the full consultation and backing of Congress. We are now in the process of urgently consulting the leaders of our Congress and counseling with its membership./5/

/4/Before Saunders added Johnson's revisions, the first two sentences of this paragraph read: I told Mr. Eban I could not foresee then, and I cannot now foresee, the specific steps which may prove desirable and necessary. I explained that I want to do everything I can to provide Israel with effective American support."

/5/Before Saunders added Johnson's revisions, the last two sentences of this paragraph read: "And, as you will understand, I cannot act at all without full backing of Congress. I am now in the process of urgently consulting the leaders of our Congress."

We are now engaged in doing everything we can through the United Nations. We recognize the difficulties of securing constructive action in the Security Council, but we are convinced that the world organization, which for the past decade has played a major role in the Middle East, must make a real effort to discharge its responsibilities for the maintenance of peace.

We are moving ahead in our diplomatic efforts, in concert with the United Kingdom and with your diplomatic representatives, to secure a declaration by the principal maritime powers asserting the right of passage through the Strait and Gulf. A copy of this declaration has been given to your Ambassador. Such a declaration could be an important step both in relation to the proceedings in the Security Council and also in the event those proceedings do not lead to a successful outcome.

We are also exploring on an urgent basis the British suggestion for the establishment of an international naval presence in the area of the Strait of Tiran. As I said to Mr. Eban, there is doubt that a number of other maritime powers would be willing to take steps of this nature unless and until United Nations processes have been exhausted. We must continue our efforts to mobilize international support for this effort. Our leadership is unanimous that the United States should not move in isolation./6/

/6/Before Saunders added Johnson's revisions, the last sentence of this paragraph read: "I would not wish the United States to move in isolation."

On the matter of liaison and communication, I believe our relations can be improved. We have completely and fully exchanged views with General Amit.

We will remain in continuing communication with Ambassador Harman and Minister Evron here in Washington and value greatly the exchanges we are able to have

through them with the Government of Israel, as well as through Ambassador Barbour in Tel Aviv.

Sincerely,

Lyndon B. Johnson