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Douglas Little

THE MAKING OF A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP: THE UNITED STATES AND ISRAEL, 1957–68

On 20 February 1957, a grim-faced Dwight D. Eisenhower told a national television audience that America would support United Nations sanctions unless Israel pulled out of Gaza and all other Egyptian territory seized during the 1956 Suez Crisis. Stunned by this diplomatic thunderbolt, the Israelis quickly agreed to withdraw their forces. Yet ten years later, when a preemptive war against the Arabs brought Israel not only Gaza but also Jordan's West Bank and Syria's Golan Heights, the United States acquiesced. For two decades, this reversal of U.S. policy has usually been regarded as the handiwork of one man—Lyndon B. Johnson. Observers as diverse as Edward Tivnan, Cheryl Rubenberg, and I. L. Kenen, for example, have contended that Washington's tilt toward Tel Aviv during the mid-1960s stemmed in large measure from deepening ties between the Johnson White House and what many have come to call "the Israel lobby."¹ Scholars such as Ethan Nadelmann and William Quandt, on the other hand, have downplayed Johnson's preoccupation with interest-group politics and emphasized instead his admiration for Israel's muscular doctrine of self-defense.² Rare is the author who, like Donald Neff, has been able to capture the blend of domestic and diplomatic considerations that prompted Johnson to cement the special relationship with Israel. Rarer still is someone like Steven Spiegel, who has linked Johnson's pro-Israel policies to initiatives launched by his two predecessors in the Oval Office.³

Recently declassified documents, however, confirm that it was Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy who laid the groundwork for closer relations with the Jewish state and that they were far more concerned about long-term stability in the Middle East than about short-run domestic political considerations. Profoundly disturbed during the late 1950s by fresh signs of Kremlin inroads in the Muslim world, Eisenhower gradually came to regard the Israelis as potential allies in his struggle to contain Soviet-backed revolutionary Arab nationalism. Even more disturbed by signs during the early 1960s that Israel was on the verge of adding nuclear weapons to its arsenal, Kennedy moved to strengthen Tel Aviv's conventional deterrent by providing sophisticated military hardware and by pledging American assistance in the event of Arab aggression. By the time Lyndon Johnson took office in November 1963, the hope that a strong Israel might serve as a pro-Western bulwark against

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future Soviet gains in the Middle East and the fear that a weak Israel might “go nuclear” had combined to lay the groundwork for a special relationship that was cemented by the 1967 Six Day War. Ironically, however, Johnson’s decision to open wide the doors of America’s conventional arsenal and to embrace Israel as a “strategic asset” did nothing to prevent the Israelis from acquiring atomic weapons and did much to propel Arab radicals more fully into the Kremlin’s orbit. As a result, a quarter century after President Johnson departed Washington for the friendlier confines of his native Lone Star State, many U.S. policy makers seem to regard Israel as a nuclear-armed strategic liability.

I

In the wake of the Suez Crisis, only a diplomatic clairvoyant could have predicted that a quasi-alliance would unite the United States and Israel a decade later. Dwight Eisenhower’s first term had seen a series of stormy confrontations with the Jewish state that nearly produced a diplomatic breach after Israel attacked Egypt in October 1956. Outraged by Prime Minister David Ben Gurion’s refusal to heed a U.N. call to withdraw from Egyptian territory, Eisenhower warned that Israeli intransigence would impair friendly relations between Washington and Tel Aviv. Israel, however, refused to withdraw its troops until Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser guaranteed Israeli vessels free passage through the Straits of Tiran at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, something Nasser rejected out of hand in January 1957.⁴

With no sign of a settlement in sight by late February, Eisenhower threatened to support U.N. sanctions unless Israel evacuated all Egyptian territory at once. Shortly thereafter, Ben Gurion agreed to pull out if the United States would formally affirm Israel’s right of innocent passage through the Straits of Tiran and if the United Nations agreed to station an “emergency force” in the Sinai to patrol the Israeli–Egyptian border. Once these conditions were met, Israeli foreign minister Golda Meir announced on 1 March that her country would withdraw from Egyptian territory, narrowly averting sanctions.⁵ Although publicly Ben Gurion and Meir were bitter over Washington’s strong-arm tactics, privately both felt that the American pledge to support Israel’s access to the Gulf of Aqaba signaled a deepening U.S. commitment to Israeli security.⁶

In fact, well before Israel pulled out of Gaza, Washington and Tel Aviv had begun to edge toward a rapprochement based on a mutual desire to contain radical Arab nationalism. Top U.S. officials had been very impressed by the overwhelming military defeat the Israelis inflicted on Soviet-backed Egyptian troops during the Suez Crisis and hinted that Israel would be a prime beneficiary of the new Eisenhower Doctrine unveiled in early 1957. Growing Russian influence in the Arab world presented a grave threat to both America and Israel, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told a closed-door Senate hearing on 2 January. “If the United States does not make itself felt strongly in that area,” he explained, “I think it is ‘curtains’ for Israel.”⁷ Two months later Congress empowered the president to use military force and up to \$200 million in economic aid to assist any Middle Eastern state threatened by direct or indirect aggression “from any country controlled by international communism.”⁸

Twice before the summer was out, the United States took steps to thwart Arab radicals and shore up Israeli security. When pro-Nasser Jordanian officers attempted to dethrone King Hussein in late April and place the strategically important West Bank under the control of a regime sympathetic to Egypt, Eisenhower moved the Sixth Fleet from Naples to Beirut, hinted that he might use U.S. marines to save the rickety Hashemite dynasty, and privately assured Tel Aviv that American policy “embraced the preservation of the state of Israel.” Delighted by Eisenhower’s show of force, Ben Gurion promised that “Israel would play ball with the U.S. with respect to Jordan” and would not seize the West Bank.⁹

No sooner had relative calm been restored in Jordan, however, than radical officers seized power in Syria and pressed for closer ties with Cairo and Moscow. The prospect of a pro-Soviet regime in Damascus sent shock waves through Washington and Tel Aviv, where Ben Gurion implied that Israel might take matters into its own hands. Convinced that any Israeli intervention would backfire and undermine pro-Western governments in Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon, U.S. officials urged Israel to hold back and encouraged Syria’s Muslim neighbors to mobilize against the radical regime in Damascus.¹⁰ After some tense moments when it seemed that the Kremlin might intervene on Syria’s behalf, the crisis subsided. Gratiified by Israeli restraint, Eisenhower released a shipment of military spare parts frozen since the Suez Crisis and sent word that Ben Gurion should “have no doubt of deep U.S. interest in preservation [of] integrity and independence of Israel.”¹¹

These gestures did little to dispel Israel’s “feeling of desperate insecurity in the face of the Russian threat via Syria and Egypt.”¹² What was needed, Ben Gurion explained in late October, was American military hardware, a formal U.S. guarantee of Israeli security, and Washington’s agreement “that the NATO commitment should be extended to the Middle East.”¹³ The United States, John Foster Dulles replied in mid-November, was not yet ready to provide either the arms or the security guarantee Israel desired. But, he was quick to add, “we have made quite clear to the Soviet Union our deep interest in the maintenance of independence and integrity of all the states in the Near East, including Israel.”¹⁴

The new year was marked by increasingly violent outbursts of radical Arab nationalism that kept both Israel and the United States on the defensive and helped deepen the growing community of interests between them. First came Nasser’s announcement in February 1958, that Egypt and Syria had agreed to form the United Arab Republic (UAR), whose chief objective seemed to be to mobilize the entire Arab world against Western influence in general and “Zionist imperialism” in particular. Three months later in Beirut, pro-Nasser Muslims nearly toppled the government of Camille Chamoun, the American-backed Maronite Christian leader who had always been careful to steer Lebanon clear of confrontation with its Israeli neighbors. By June, Nasserite officers in Jordan were reportedly planning yet another coup against Hussein, whom Arab radicals castigated as increasingly pro-Western and insufficiently anti-Israel. Finally came the awful news on 14 July that radical officers had seized power in Baghdad, butchered Prime Minister Nuri Said and the royal family, and thrust Iraq out of Britain’s orbit and toward an alliance with Nasser’s UAR.¹⁵

Determined to prevent Chamoun and Hussein from sharing Nuri’s fate, Eisenhower sent 14,000 U.S. marines into Lebanon and pressed Ben Gurion to permit

Britain to airlift 2,000 troops from Cyprus through Israeli airspace into Jordan. Although British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan later claimed that some Israelis actually hoped Hussein would fall so that they could “then seize all territory up to the West Bank,” Tel Aviv approved the overflights on 17 July and helped save the King’s throne.¹⁶ Ben Gurion, however, regarded the operation as at best a stop-gap measure, and wrote Eisenhower to propose a remarkable scheme calling for Israel to work with Iran, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Turkey “with the object of establishing a strong dam against the Nasserist-Soviet torrent” in the Middle East.¹⁷

Here was a blueprint for what Ben Gurion called a “peripheral pact” that might transform Israel from a strategic liability to a strategic asset. The four countries in question, he explained, badly needed “effective internal security services . . . which would be able to frustrate any sudden attempt at a coup d’état, whether organized from within or from without.” Iran and Turkey had already expressed interest, but before proceeding further, Ben Gurion wished to ascertain whether “our efforts in this direction enjoy the support of the United States.”¹⁸ Delighted by the Israeli offer to help “erect effective sandbags” against the rising tide of radical Arab nationalism, John Foster Dulles informed Ben Gurion on 1 August that America welcomed his efforts “to strengthen the bulwarks of international order” in the Middle East and would review Israel’s latest arms request “with an open mind.”¹⁹

Shortly thereafter, U.S. policy makers discreetly began to encourage Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia to join Israel in a “Little Entente” composed of non-Arab states in the Middle East.²⁰ Meanwhile, Shimon Peres, director general of Israel’s Ministry of Defense, arrived in Washington with a shopping list that included recoilless rifles, half-tracks, tanks, submarines, and helicopters.²¹ The scope of the arms package Peres sought troubled the Pentagon, which pointed out that Israel already had “over-all quantitative superiority over the combined armed forces of the UAR, Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.”²² The State Department agreed that such huge Israeli arms purchases “might adversely affect delicate relations with the rest of the area.” Nevertheless, top American officials also recognized that “the Israeli government had been helpful to us in such matters as the recent overflights to Jordan” and regional defense. With these considerations in mind, the United States informed Israel on 26 August 1958, that it could purchase 100 recoilless rifles and “reasonable quantities” of half-tracks, but not tanks or other sophisticated hardware.²³

The autumn of 1958 brought still other signs of improving relations between Washington and Tel Aviv. Dulles, for example, was quick to assure Foreign Minister Meir on 2 October that “if Israel [were the] victim of unprovoked aggression to destroy it our response would be just as good as in [the] case of Lebanon.”²⁴ Two weeks later the United States agreed to sell Israel twenty-eight Sikorsky helicopters modified to a “military configuration.”²⁵ By the end of the year, Ambassador Abba Eban was confident that “a sense of common purpose” was emerging that would soon prompt America “to seek other ways of emphasizing its harmony with Israel.”²⁶

During the spring of 1959, Israel’s friends on Capitol Hill added their voices to the chorus heralding harmonious relations between Washington and Tel Aviv. In February, I. L. (“Si”) Kenen, a lobbyist with close ties to the Israeli government, established the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which pressed

hard in Congress for more U.S. aid for the Jewish state.²⁷ While Dulles lay dying of cancer in April, his successor, Christian Herter, jostled with Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, who wanted to make Israel eligible for a multimillion-dollar military assistance credit under the Mutual Security Program.²⁸ Still unwilling to conclude a major arms deal with Tel Aviv, Washington did agree later that summer to provide \$100 million in technical and financial assistance over the next two years, a sum larger than all previous American aid to Israel since 1948.²⁹

Further evidence that the thaw in Israeli–American relations was real came on 10 March 1960, when Ben Gurion arrived at the White House for informal talks with Eisenhower. Pointing out that a well-armed Israel could still play a crucial role in blocking Soviet subversion throughout the Middle East, the Israeli leader once again requested military hardware, including early warning radar and HAWK anti-aircraft missiles. But Eisenhower “questioned the desirability of the U.S. becoming the arsenal for Israel in its dispute with all of its neighbors” and suggested instead that Israel “look to the U.K., France, and West Germany” for help. Lest Ben Gurion “think that the U.S. is ‘indifferent’ to Israel’s arms need,” however, Eisenhower promised to have the State Department review Israeli security requirements.³⁰ In late May, Washington agreed to sell Tel Aviv \$10 million worth of sophisticated radar equipment. But Ben Gurion’s request for six batteries of HAWK missiles was rejected in August because such weapons might exacerbate Arab–Israeli tensions.³¹ Even though Eisenhower had not given Ben Gurion all he wanted, it did seem that, as Abba Eban put it long afterward, the two men had finally emerged from their post-Suez squabbling “with the basic elements of the American–Israeli partnership unimpaired.”³²

II

That partnership, however, soon faced new strains, because by late 1960 many in Washington feared that Israel might utilize the nuclear reactor it was secretly constructing with French help at Dimona in the Negev desert to develop atomic weapons. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) believed that when completed, the reactor could produce eight to ten kilograms of weapons-grade plutonium a year, enough for one atomic bomb.³³ Despite informal Israeli assurances that the Dimona facility would be used only for peaceful purposes, Secretary of State Herter was quick to point out that Israel was building something “considerably larger than any need for an experimental reactor.” Worse still, when Eisenhower demanded in mid-January 1961 that Israel “declare unreservedly that she had no plans to manufacture atomic weapons,” Ben Gurion balked. Insisting that the reactor was necessary to meet Israel’s growing energy needs, he indignantly told U.S. ambassador Ogden Reid that “you must talk to us as equals, or not talk to us at all.”³⁴

Eisenhower, of course, left office at the end of the month, leaving John F. Kennedy to do all the talking with Ben Gurion. Although he had won the hearts and votes of many American Jews in 1960 with his staunch support for Israeli security, Kennedy told Eisenhower during a transition briefing on 6 December “that an atomic development in Israel is highly distressing.”³⁵ Kennedy’s distress mounted during the spring of 1961 after he learned that Israel intended to buy medium-range

French bombers capable of carrying atomic weapons. Predictably, the Dimona reactor was the first issue Kennedy raised when he met Ben Gurion at New York City's Waldorf Astoria on 30 May 1961. Tel Aviv presently had no intention of developing a nuclear deterrent, Ben Gurion explained. But the recent arrival of Soviet MIGs in Cairo placed a higher premium than ever on remedying "Israel's desperate deficiency in advanced anti-aircraft weapons." Would Kennedy be willing to provide HAWK surface-to-air missiles? According to Israeli chargé d'affaires Mordechai Gazit, Kennedy "indicated some sympathy for the HAWK request and said he would look into it."³⁶

Despite Kennedy's sympathetic words, Israeli-American relations were far from smooth during the next twelve months. To be sure, in September the Pentagon did offer Tel Aviv a new military package that included electronic equipment, small arms, and spare parts. And just after Thanksgiving the State Department did propose a slight increase in U.S. economic aid for Israel.³⁷ But the HAWK request remained in limbo, in large part because of American unhappiness over Israel's frequent retaliatory raids against refugee camps in Jordan and Syria, camps that Ben Gurion claimed were harboring Palestinian guerrillas. After one particularly bloody Israeli reprisal against Syria in March 1962, the White House instructed Adlai Stevenson, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, to join other members of the Security Council in condemning Israel's action.³⁸

By dealing firmly with Israel on these and other matters, Kennedy signaled his intention to handle Middle Eastern problems in what he himself later called "a fair-minded and even-handed manner."³⁹ As early as the summer of 1961, Kennedy had begun to move toward a rapprochement with Nasser's UAR, which he felt held the key to a comprehensive regional settlement that would do far more to bolster Israel's security than a half-dozen batteries of HAWK missiles. At Kennedy's suggestion, Nasser quickly agreed to tone down his anti-Western rhetoric and to put his dispute with Israel "in the icebox," promises he kept even after his role as pan-Arab leader was challenged by Syria's secession from the UAR in September 1961. Washington responded by offering Cairo technical assistance for Egypt's latest five-year plan and \$500 million worth of surplus wheat.⁴⁰

Yet many U.S. officials feared that without real progress on the explosive question of Palestinian refugees, Nasser might be tempted to scrap his icebox approach toward Israel. Having personally persuaded Ben Gurion a year earlier that it was foolhardy to ignore "the tragic plight of the Arab refugees," Kennedy quietly asked U.N. Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld to entrust the complex refugee question to Joseph Johnson, the head of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace. After almost a year of shuttle diplomacy, Johnson unveiled a proposal in August 1962 calling for Israel to accept up to 100,000 Palestinian refugees over the next decade, provided Nasser pledged to continue his conciliatory policies.⁴¹

The Johnson Plan would surely have been dead on arrival in Tel Aviv had not Kennedy linked it to something the Israelis wanted badly—HAWK missiles. On 18 August, White House counsel Myer Feldman, Kennedy's informal liaison to the American Jewish community, flew to Israel to offer Ben Gurion the HAWKs in exchange for a promise to accept Joseph Johnson's plan to resolve the refugee dilemma.⁴² According to McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security adviser,

there was a second condition as well: "Israel would permit regular visits by Americans to Dimona, where they could judge for themselves whether or not the installation was part of a weapons program."⁴³

With the HAWKs at last within his grasp, Ben Gurion implied that Israel was willing to consider the refugee proposal and that it had no plans to develop a nuclear deterrent. Once the arms sale was made public in September, however, Foreign Minister Meir bluntly dismissed the Johnson Plan as a pro-Arab scheme that posed unacceptable risks for Israel.⁴⁴ Although Kennedy evidently felt he had been double-crossed, he was reluctant to rescind the HAWK sale, in part because off-year elections were only six weeks away. But he also seems to have feared that cancellation of the missile deal might tempt the jittery Israelis to go nuclear, with ghastly consequences not unlike those looming halfway around the world in Cuba. After all, Nasser had recently received a squadron of Soviet medium-range bombers capable of leveling Israel's cities in a matter of minutes. Worse still, Nasser had intervened in Yemen, an archaic land at the foot of the Arabian peninsula, to shore up a radical regime which many in Tel Aviv and Washington believed might serve as a springboard for further Egyptian adventures in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, or Britain's Aden protectorate.⁴⁵

Troubled by all this, Kennedy invited Meir to the winter White House at Palm Beach, Florida, just after Christmas. Likening Washington's "special relationship" with Tel Aviv to that with London, he made it "quite clear that in case of an invasion the United States would come to the support of Israel." In return, however, Kennedy hoped "that Israel would give consideration to our problems on this atomic reactor," not merely because "we are opposed to nuclear proliferation" in principle, but also because a dangerous new regional arms race would further complicate U.S. efforts to make progress on other Middle East issues, especially the delicate Palestinian problem. Before leaving, Meir assured Kennedy that "there would not be any difficulty between us on the Israeli nuclear reactor" and that she would take another look at the Johnson Plan.⁴⁶

Disturbing new developments in the Arab world during early 1963, however, stiffened Israel's resistance to any concessions regarding refugees. In January, mobs of angry West Bank Palestinians protesting King Hussein's relatively benign policies toward Israel nearly toppled the Hashemite monarchy and, in the process, torpedoed the Johnson Plan. To make matters even worse, pro-Nasser and anti-Israel officers seized power first in Iraq on 8 February and then in Syria a month later, heightening Israeli fears of encirclement by Arab radicals. Predictably, Tel Aviv began to press for still more explicit American guarantees of Israeli security, in the absence of which many U.S. officials fully expected the Jewish state to develop atomic weapons.⁴⁷

As early as 6 March the CIA warned that the increasingly unstable situation in the Middle East was likely to lead Israel to seek a nuclear deterrent "to intimidate the Arabs and to prevent them from making trouble on the frontiers." This in turn was bound to produce "substantial damage to the U.S. and Western position in the Arab world." Especially troublesome, in light of America's growing dependence on Middle East oil, was the possibility "that Arab resentment against the U.S. would lead to the confiscation of important U.S. properties in the area, or to their

destruction by local acts of violence.”⁴⁸ Deeply disturbed by the implications of Israel’s nuclear option, Kennedy created an interagency task force on 26 March “to develop proposals for forestalling the development of advanced weapons in the Near East.” While he awaited the task force’s report, Kennedy cautioned Nasser about “the risks—and costs—inherent in the Middle East arms spiral” and tried to reassure the Israelis that America remained committed to the security of the Jewish state.⁴⁹

An excellent opportunity to do just that came in early April, when Shimon Peres arrived in Washington for talks with top State Department officials. Regarded by some at the State Department as Ben Gurion’s heir apparent, Peres did not mince words. Israel wanted “Augmentation of Military Hardware” and a public guarantee that any Arab effort “to change the present territorial status quo would be met by immediate United States military intervention.” These assurances were especially important because of growing instability in Jordan. “Israel admires Hussein, but sees his position as ‘hopeless’,” Peres explained. And “an overthrow in Jordan,” he added ominously with his mind’s eye riveted on the West Bank, might force Israel to take “unilateral action.”⁵⁰

Peres was blunter still about Israel’s need for an explicit American security guarantee when he saw Kennedy on 3 April. Kennedy was quick to recall the private assurances he had given Foreign Minister Meir the previous December, but he shied away from a public declaration that might prompt the Soviets to issue similar pledges to their Arab clients and trigger a superpower confrontation in the Middle East. What concerned Kennedy most in the short run, however, was “Israel’s position in the event of ‘unexpected developments’ in Jordan which might put an end to Hussein’s rule” on the West Bank. “Israel,” Peres replied, “had already made it clear that she would not stand by idly.” Obviously “very worried about the future of Jordan,” Kennedy quipped that he had never expected to be reduced to “praying for the lives of kings.”⁵¹

Before the month was out, King Hussein would need more than Kennedy’s prayers. On 17 April Nasser announced the formation of a Syro–Iraqi–Egyptian “union for the liberation of Palestine.” The next day, Palestinian mobs took to the streets of Amman demanding that Hussein join Nasser’s crusade against Israel or step down. As the Jordanian crisis deepened, the Kennedy administration urged Israel not to overreact. Ben Gurion, however, insisted that the “situation in [the] Mideast assumes gravity without parallel” and hinted that he might launch a pre-emptive strike on the West Bank unless the United States took steps to guarantee the “territorial integrity and security of all Mideast states.”⁵²

On Saturday, 27 April, Kennedy and his top aides met to weigh their options. A public commitment to defend Israel would poison relations with Nasser and propel the Arab radicals into the Kremlin’s orbit, yet without such a commitment Ben Gurion seemed certain to seize the West Bank, igniting a general Arab–Israeli conflagration. Military support for beleaguered King Hussein emerged as the most attractive option. Kennedy accordingly ordered the U.S. Sixth Fleet into the eastern Mediterranean with several hundred troops on board “prepared to move to Jordan immediately.” Bolstered by this American show of support, the king was able

to put down the Palestinian disturbances within forty-eight hours without the help of the U.S. marines.⁵³

Although relative calm had been restored in Jordan, the recent crisis left the Israelis and their friends in Washington more insistent than ever about the need for an explicit American security guarantee. In early May, Kennedy personally assured Ben Gurion that America would never permit the destruction of Israel, while Myer Feldman promised AIPAC officials that Washington would assist Tel Aviv at once in the event of an “unprovoked attack on its territory.”⁵⁴ But Israel’s supporters in the U.S. Senate wanted more. On 6 May, the White House learned that New York’s Jacob Javits and Minnesota’s Hubert Humphrey intended to propose “collective defense arrangements with Israel.” The president managed to hold the Senate in check temporarily by confirming publicly on 8 May that “we support the security of both Israel and her neighbors.”⁵⁵ When Israeli chargé d’affaires Mordechai Gazit arrived at the White House a week later, however, he informed Robert Komer, Kennedy’s Middle East expert, that the president would soon be receiving a message from Ben Gurion expressing “Israel’s desire for a formal defense pact plus arms aid.” The “hullabaloo” on Capitol Hill, Gazit warned, “was likely to get worse unless we did ‘something’ to meet Israeli security requirements.”⁵⁶

Like most other U.S. officials, Komer believed the Israelis were exaggerating the Arab threat. As recently as 2 May the CIA had concluded that “Israel will probably retain its overall military superiority vis-à-vis the Arab states for the next several years” because Soviet influence in the region was ebbing.⁵⁷ Could “recent statements by BG, [Moshe] Dayan, and others about the need to strengthen Israel’s defenses,” Komer asked Gazit on 14 May, “be part of a campaign to justify Israeli development of nuclear weapons?” According to Komer, “Gazit grinned.” Komer was stunned. “The one thing we didn’t want was for the Israelis to go nuclear,” he recalled long afterward, because Egypt might have responded by “increasing [its] dependence on the Soviet Union for its security.”⁵⁸

Fortunately, the interagency task force Kennedy had created in March was scheduled to present a plan “to stop nuclear/missile escalation” in the Middle East at a White House meeting on 17 May. “Preventing proliferation [of] nuclear weapons,” Secretary of State Dean Rusk explained, would require that America “allay Israel’s concerns for its security” while demonstrating “continued even-handedness in overall U.S. policy in the area.” To achieve these goals, the task force recommended that Kennedy send John J. McCloy, his special coordinator for disarmament, on “a highly secret probe” to Cairo to warn Nasser that only by pledging not to acquire guided missiles could Egypt forestall Israeli plans for the “development of nuclear weapons.” Then McCloy would inform Ben Gurion that the United States was willing to consider a security guarantee if Tel Aviv promised “no movement of forces outside Israel (e.g., into West Bank)” and “no nuclear weapons.” If all went according to plan, by midsummer the White House would be well on the way toward achieving “a UAR–Israeli arms limitation arrangement and security guarantee.”⁵⁹

After spending the weekend at Camp David pondering an “arms race in [the] ME,” Kennedy approved the disarmament scheme and arranged to meet McCloy

on 27 May to discuss "Israel & [the] bomb."⁶⁰ Meanwhile, Secretary of State Rusk briefed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about the crisis brewing in the Middle East. "We just can't imagine anything more disastrous from our point of view than if Israel were to explode a nuclear device," he told a closed-door hearing on 5 June. "I can't think of anything that would drive the Arab world more tumultuously into the arms of the Soviet."⁶¹ Because Nasser saw Arab nationalism as incompatible with communism, the State Department believed he would welcome the McCloy mission as the best way to avoid making a Hobson's choice between a nuclear Israel and an Egyptian alliance with the Kremlin. According to the State Department, McCloy's biggest problem would be "the inevitable request from Ben Gurion for a United States security guarantee." The Israelis have "already put us on notice," Rusk told Kennedy in mid-June, that a formal guarantee was "the price of cooperation in an arms limitation arrangement which would mean foregoing the technological advantages Israel has over the Arab states."⁶²

When McCloy and Hermann Eilts, a State Department Middle East specialist, arrived in Cairo at the end of the month, however, Nasser proved far less accommodating than the Kennedy administration had hoped. Although he shared American concerns about nuclear proliferation, Nasser insisted that in light of Kennedy's decision to sell HAWKS to Israel, Egypt must obtain missiles of its own. Unable to persuade Nasser that this would exacerbate Arab-Israeli tensions, McCloy and Eilts returned to Washington in early July empty-handed, having not even bothered to stop in Tel Aviv.⁶³

Nasser's rebuff of McCloy increased the danger of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and helped convince Kennedy to rethink his even-handed approach toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. With 70,000 Egyptian troops in Yemen and with Nasser committed to an ambitious missile program, Israel's insistence on a security guarantee in exchange for its own promise to forego nuclear weapons seemed less and less unreasonable. Levi Eshkol, the soft-spoken moderate who succeeded the combative Ben Gurion as prime minister on 16 June, capitalized on the growing rift between Washington and Cairo by suspending Israeli retaliatory raids against Palestinian refugee camps on the West Bank and by reiterating that Israel was not building an atomic bomb at Dimona.⁶⁴ Eshkol's newfound cooperativeness and Nasser's born-again rejectionism soon evoked fresh American assurances that "the United States has a moral and political commitment to both the integrity and well-being of Israel" and would "come to Israel's assistance if Israel were the victim of aggression."⁶⁵

Kennedy himself evidently spelled this out even more explicitly in a still-classified letter to Eshkol dated 7 October 1963. According to American and Israeli diplomats then in positions to know, Kennedy promised that "the United States would militarily assist Israel in case of attack," provided Tel Aviv refrained from developing a nuclear deterrent.⁶⁶ Like Eisenhower before him, Kennedy now felt that a strong Israel would be a strategic asset in America's struggle against Soviet-backed Arab radicals and that a weak Israel might acquire atomic weapons. By the time Kennedy left for Dallas six weeks later, then, Egyptian adventurism from the Arabian peninsula to the banks of the Jordan and Israeli mastery of nuclear tech-

nology had led him to scrap his even-handed policy in the Middle East in favor of a much franker recognition of America's emerging special relationship with Israel.

III

"The United States will continue its warm friendship with Israel," Lyndon B. Johnson assured Golda Meir at the reception following Kennedy's funeral on 25 November 1963. "Israel can count on this."⁶⁷ Time and again over the next five years, Johnson would make good on that promise, selling Israel tanks and jet planes, cold-shouldering Nasser and the Arab radicals, and acquiescing in Tel Aviv's territorial gains after the Six Day War in June 1967. Johnson's sympathy for Israel dated from his stint as Senate majority leader during the Eisenhower era. He opposed U.N. sanctions against Israel during the 1957 Gaza crisis and proposed U.S. military aid for Tel Aviv two years later.⁶⁸ By the early 1960s, AIPAC's Si Kenen recalled long afterward, the Israel lobby counted Vice-President Lyndon Johnson among its most loyal allies in Washington. "You have lost a great friend," Johnson told an Israeli diplomat shortly after Kennedy's death, "but you have found a better one."⁶⁹

The new president made it a point to place other friends of Israel in key posts in his administration. Much to the delight of the Israelis, Johnson selected Hubert Humphrey, a longtime advocate of closer U.S. ties with Tel Aviv, as his running mate in 1964. A year later Johnson named Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg, an enthusiastic Zionist, as America's new ambassador to the United Nations, an organization with a growing reputation for being pro-Arab. By 1966, the avowedly pro-Israel Rostow brothers had been assigned influential positions on Johnson's foreign policy team—MIT economist Walt Rostow as national security adviser and Yale-educated lawyer Eugene Rostow as undersecretary of state for political affairs. Brandeis University's John P. Roche, among the most outspoken supporters of Israel in the academic world, joined the White House staff in 1967 as full-time speech writer and part-time presidential confidante. Hollywood mogul Arthur Krim and Wall Street financier Abraham Feinberg, Democratic party bigwigs well connected with the American Jewish community, held seats in Johnson's informal "kitchen cabinet." And Ephraim Evron, Israel's deputy chief of mission in Washington, was a frequent guest at the LBJ ranch.⁷⁰

With so many supporters of Israel among his staff and friends, it is actually surprising that Johnson rebuffed Tel Aviv's initial bid for expanded U.S. military assistance in early 1964. Following a controversial Israeli decision unilaterally to divert the waters of the Jordan River to irrigate the Negev desert, Nasser had convened an Arab summit in Cairo, where in mid-January he unveiled plans to create a Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).⁷¹ Nasser's move prompted an urgent Israeli request for 200 M-48 tanks and triggered a debate inside the Johnson administration. The CIA warned that selling tanks to Israel would not only "produce sharp and violent reactions in virtually all the Arab countries" but would also "give the Soviets opportunities . . . to improve their position in the Middle East."⁷²

Secretary of State Rusk agreed and cautioned Johnson that selling Israel "advanced U.S. tanks and other offensive weapons" was certain to spark a regional arms race.⁷³ Ironically, two holdovers from Kennedy's staff tried to persuade Johnson to supply the tanks, Myer Feldman by citing America's moral commitment to Israel, Robert Komer by pointing to the 1964 presidential campaign.⁷⁴

By May 1964, however, Johnson had decided that, at least for the time being, geopolitical considerations must take precedence over domestic politics. Instead of providing American tanks, he would encourage West Germany to sell M-48 tanks to Israel. By consciously rejecting direct military assistance for the Israelis in an election year and opting instead for indirect aid via the West Germans, Johnson proved more willing to sacrifice short-term political gains for long-term diplomatic objectives than either the Arabs or the Israelis had expected.⁷⁵ Like his two predecessors, Johnson realized that outright support for Israel would poison U.S. relations with the Arab world. Yet he seems also to have shared Eisenhower and Kennedy's fears that without such support, the Arabs might launch an anti-Israel variant of the Soviet-backed "wars of national liberation" already plaguing America in Vietnam, a crusade that virtually guaranteed Israeli development of nuclear weapons.

A Soviet-Arab joint venture to destroy Israel and rid the Middle East of Western influence did not seem at all farfetched in Tel Aviv or Washington during 1964. Throughout the spring, Nasser encouraged Palestinian leader Ahmed Shuqairi's efforts to bring the PLO into being and secretly funneled aid to Marxist rebels who sought to sabotage Britain's plans to convert its Aden protectorate into an independent pro-Western South Arabian Federation.⁷⁶ As early as 12 May, U.S. and Israeli diplomats agreed there were "dangerous potentialities in Shuqairi's movement to launch a Palestinian entity."⁷⁷ Those dangers loomed even larger later that month after Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev visited Egypt, where he joined Nasser in defending "the inalienable rights of [the] Palestinian Arabs" and in demanding the "liquidation of foreign military bases in Libya, Oman, Cyprus, [and] Aden."⁷⁸ By the end of the summer, the CIA saw Nasser "intensifying his drive to remove the remaining vestiges of colonialism in the Arab world," while the State Department worried that his support for the PLO might "provoke preemptive action by Israel."⁷⁹

In early September, Nasser convened a second Arab summit at Alexandria, where he promised Shuqairi a multimillion-dollar subsidy for a "Palestine Army to be trained in Sinai and [the] Gaza Strip."⁸⁰ Nasser may have hoped that by bankrolling the PLO, he could prevent it from translating his own anti-Israel rhetoric prematurely into action. If so, he miscalculated badly, for in early 1965, Fatah, a shadowy group loosely affiliated with the PLO and led by Yasser Arafat, had begun to launch raids against Israeli targets from base camps in Jordan. After Ba^cthist officers seized power in Syria in February 1966, Fatah was able to step up its attacks on Israel from sanctuaries in the Golan Heights.⁸¹

Given America's deepening involvement in Southeast Asia, it was only natural for Johnson to compare Fatah to the Vietcong and the increasingly pro-Soviet regime in Damascus to North Vietnam. "A radical new government in Syria," Johnson recalled in his memoirs, with a nod toward Hanoi, "increased terrorist raids against Israel . . . in flagrant violation of international law."⁸² Nasser's vocal support for

Syria and Fatah and his criticism of American imperialism in Vietnam merely highlighted the parallels between the conflicts in the Middle East and Southeast Asia.⁸³ With some radical Arabs calling for a war for Palestinian national liberation in the spring of 1967, White House aide John Roche reformulated the analogy in the vernacular of the Lone Star State. “I confess I look on the Israelis as Texans,” he told Johnson on 22 May, “and Nasser as Santa Ana.”⁸⁴

With the Arab radicals evidently assigned starring roles in “Ho Chi Minh Goes to the Alamo,” some in Washington feared that Israel might emerge as a 20th-century Sam Houston armed with nuclear weapons. From the very start of his administration, Johnson, like Kennedy, placed a high priority on preventing nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. As early as April 1964, Walt Rostow had sent Johnson a grim State Department forecast warning that “if Egypt believes that Israel has acquired or is about to acquire nuclear weapons, . . . it might seek a Cuba-type deal with the USSR.”⁸⁵ To be sure, the joint communiqué that Khrushchev and Nasser issued in late May “held no hint of any new military agreement.”⁸⁶ But Johnson was disturbed enough by the specter of atomic war in the Middle East to insist in early June that Levi Eshkol pledge that Israel would not “lend itself to escalation of the Near East arms race through acquisition of missiles or nuclear weapons.” In exchange, Johnson offered “renewed assurances of our willingness and capability to safeguard Israel,” including support for Israeli purchases of conventional military hardware in Western Europe.⁸⁷ In a midsummer show of good faith, Eshkol promised to allow U.S. inspectors to visit Dimona and Johnson secretly pressed West Germany to sell Israel 200 M-48 tanks.⁸⁸

Having kept Israel at least temporarily from going nuclear, Johnson sent John McCloy back to Cairo in September 1964 to seek an Egyptian pledge not to acquire atomic weapons. Although “there were no concrete results to show for the visit,” McCloy “found Nasser less suspicious and more willing to discuss this question” than during the ill-fated disarmament talks of June 1963.⁸⁹ Egyptian–American relations, however, soured in late November, when Nasserite students burned the U.S. Information Service library in Cairo. Johnson responded by suspending wheat sales to Egypt, prompting Nasser to retort that “those who do not accept our behavior can go and drink from the sea.”⁹⁰ U.S. officials, then, were disappointed but hardly surprised to learn in January 1965 that Nasser planned to build a 150-megawatt reactor near Alexandria with the “potential of producing fissionable materials which could be used for development of atomic warheads.”⁹¹

Renewed signs of Nasser’s aggressiveness were especially worrisome to the Israelis, who had come up empty-handed in Bonn after news of the proposed M-48 tank deal was greeted unfavorably by the West German press. Worse still, Israel discovered in early 1965 that the United States was preparing to sell Jordan’s King Hussein 250 M-48s to prevent him from buying tanks from the Soviets. On 25 February, ambassador-at-large Averell Harriman arrived in Tel Aviv for three days of talks with Eshkol and Meir, who bluntly informed him that unless Israel received a comparable number of U.S. tanks, a military imbalance would be created in the Middle East that might tempt the Arabs to start a war. Because portions of key documents remain classified, it is unclear whether the Israelis threatened to go nuclear if the United States refused to supply conventional weapons.⁹²

This possibility, however, worried American officials after Harriman returned to Washington with a new Israeli shopping list. The Pentagon, for example, was troubled by a request for B-66 medium bombers, which indicated that Israel might “be looking down the road toward an aircraft capable of carrying an Israeli developed nuclear weapon.”⁹³ When Nasser complained in mid-March about America’s evident willingness to sell Israel conventional arms, Dean Rusk replied that the major U.S. objective was to “keep up pressure on Israel not to go nuclear.”⁹⁴ No one, of course, could be certain that such pressure would work. Indeed, later that month U.S. intelligence noted that when Israeli officers were asked whether their new Jericho missile could be effective with only a conventional warhead, they had replied: “Don’t worry, when we need the right kind of warhead, we will have it . . . and after that there will be no more trouble in this part of the world.”⁹⁵

Convinced that a nuclear arms race would actually create more trouble in that part of the world, the White House moved quickly to make Israel eligible for almost any conventional weapon in the American arsenal. In late March, Washington and Tel Aviv initialed a “memorandum of understanding” confirming America’s willingness “to make selective direct arms sales to Israel on favorable credit terms . . . on a quiet case by case basis.”⁹⁶ On 19 April, Israel requested 210 M-48 tanks to offset those the United States had recently sold to Jordan and fifty combat aircraft comparable to those the Kremlin was delivering to Egypt. U.S. officials were willing to consider supplying the tanks, but declined to provide American jets until Israel learned whether similar aircraft were available in Western Europe. Lest the Israelis forget the major reason for the American’s more accommodating policy on arms sales, Dean Rusk reminded them that “we continue unalterably opposed to [the] proliferation [of] nuclear weapons.”⁹⁷ Although Prime Minister Eshkol was eager to “finish this tank business quickly,” the sale was held up for a month, long enough for the Johnson administration to satisfy itself that Israel was not accelerating its atomic research.⁹⁸

Delighted to learn in late May that the United States would provide 210 M-48s plus a \$34 million credit, the Israelis dutifully approached France about supplying jet aircraft. After the French refused, Israeli air force chief of staff Ezer Weizman flew to Washington in October 1965 seeking either A-4 Skyhawks or, preferably, F-4 Phantom jets capable of carrying nuclear weapons. Robert Komer questioned whether Israel needed such sophisticated aircraft and “urged that the GOI reexamine the question of nuclear assurances; what Eshkol did about Dimona . . . will have a tremendous influence on feelings here.”⁹⁹ After months of wrangling with the Israelis over the supersonic F-4s, on 23 March 1966, the United States agreed to provide “under favorable credit terms” forty-eight of the slower Skyhawks valued at \$72.1 million.¹⁰⁰ To no one’s surprise, the sale drew “heavy criticism from the Arabs” and “left a residue of distrust and suspicion” throughout much of the Muslim world. But as the State Department reminded Johnson in July 1966 on the eve of his meeting with Israeli president Zalman Shazar, “if Israel is unable to obtain its valid conventional arms requirements, those in Israel who advocate acquisition of nuclear weapons will find a much more fertile environment for their views.”¹⁰¹

The Arabs, of course, suspected by late 1966 that Israel intended to acquire atomic bombs whether it received U.S. tanks and planes or not. Johnson’s offer to

help Israel meet its water needs by constructing “a nuclear desalting plant” was hardly reassuring to Arab radicals, many of whom were eager for a military confrontation with the Israelis.¹⁰² In November, Fatah launched a series of bloody raids against Israel from the Golan Heights. Tel Aviv retaliated not by attacking Syria but rather by delivering a deadly reprisal against Jordan at the West Bank village of Samu. The Jordanians responded by moving their new American tanks closer to the Israeli frontier, while the Syrians urged the Kremlin to speed up deliveries of sophisticated Soviet weaponry, including MIG-21s.¹⁰³ Emboldened by the Arab show of support, Fatah stepped up its attacks, triggering an Israeli appeal in February 1967 for several hundred American armored personnel carriers. Washington had made no decision on this request when Israeli jets downed six Syrian MIG’s on 7 April in a dogfight over the Golan Heights. Nasser, who had until then done little to assist either Fatah or the Syrians, warned Tel Aviv later that month not to attack Damascus and began to mobilize Egyptian troops for a showdown with the Israelis.¹⁰⁴

Hoping to avert a full-scale war, White House troubleshooter Harold Saunders undertook a fact-finding mission to the Middle East in early May. The stakes had never been higher, nor had the prospects for peace ever been bleaker. Well aware that President Johnson had “a political need as well as a personal desire to maintain a warm relationship with Israel,” Saunders reported that the Israelis now saw “Arab terrorism as the greatest threat to their security today” and were insisting that America do everything possible to combat it. Once he crossed the Jordan River, Saunders learned that Israel’s fears were not unfounded. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking time will solve the refugee problem,” angry West Bank Palestinians told him as they swelled the ranks of Fatah. This meant that “the ‘war of national liberation’ as a technique has come to the Middle East,” not merely along Israel’s borders but also in Aden, where Marxist guerrillas battled British commandoes. Having seen Johnson invest so much blood and treasure “in demonstrating that he will not tolerate this brand of aggression” in Southeast Asia, his friends in the Middle East were now asking, “How can he stand against terrorist attackers in Vietnam and not in Israel or South Arabia?”¹⁰⁵

Moreover, unless the United States stood firm against the Arab radicals, how could Johnson expect Israel to endorse the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT) he was peddling in Tel Aviv and elsewhere? “Before signing an NPT,” Saunders predicted, the Israelis would “want assurances from the US and USSR that major arms suppliers will keep the lid on the Arab arms inventory while the conventional balance is still in Israel’s favor.” Few in Tel Aviv or Washington, however, expected Moscow to exercise that level of statesmanship. “What this adds up to,” he noted gloomily on 16 May, “is great pressure on us to join in a confrontation with Nasser and prediction that the US will lose its stature in the area if we refuse and fail to stop him, the USSR and the liberation armies.” Although he still felt “we’re better off talking than fighting,” Saunders knew that Johnson was sorely tempted “to conclude with our friends that Nasser is a lost cause and throw in the sponge on trying to deal with him.”¹⁰⁶

In less than a month, Johnson would do just that. The day after Saunders wrote his report, Nasser sent troops into the Sinai to replace the U.N. Emergency Force

that had patrolled the Egyptian–Israeli frontier since February 1957. When Israel mobilized to parry Egypt’s thrust, Johnson cautioned Eshkol not to overreact. Heeding this warning, the Israelis held back. Then, on 22 May, Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, a move Tel Aviv interpreted as an act of war. Johnson urged the Israelis to be patient while he organized a multinational flotilla to challenge Nasser’s blockade.¹⁰⁷ But after meeting with Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban on 26 May, Johnson remarked: “I failed. They’re going to go.” In a desperate bid to prevent war, Johnson persuaded Nasser to send Egyptian vice-president Zacharia Mohieddin to Washington for secret talks to commence on 7 June.¹⁰⁸

Just after dawn on Monday, 5 June, however, Israeli jets swooped in low over the Nile delta and knocked out the Egyptian air force before it had a chance to get off the ground. Israel’s surprise attack “astonished and dismayed” Dean Rusk, who flashed word to his Soviet counterpart, Andrei Gromyko, that the United States was working for an early cease-fire. “We were expecting a very high Egyptian delegation on Wednesday,” Rusk explained, “and we had assurances from the Israelis that they would not initiate hostilities pending further diplomatic efforts.”¹⁰⁹ Despite what seemed to be an Israeli double cross, American support for the Jewish state never wavered, even after Israel inexplicably attacked the USS *Liberty* as it gathered electronic intelligence off the Sinai coast on 8 June.¹¹⁰

Clearly, Johnson’s pro-Israel policies resulted in part from pressure from friends of Zion on the White House staff, in Congress, and among the American Jewish community. He also probably hoped that his staunch support for Israel would be popular enough to help quell mounting criticism of his increasingly unpopular policies in Southeast Asia. But domestic politics was only part of the story. Johnson seems to have taken vicarious pleasure from Israel’s ability to thwart an Arab war of national liberation not unlike the one America faced in Vietnam. Nor was the Texan unhappy about Tel Aviv’s humiliation of Nasser, who “had used the issue of Israel and the tragic plight of the refugees to advance personal ambitions and to achieve the dominance of Arab radicals over Arab moderates.”¹¹¹

In addition, Johnson and his top aides evidently hoped that a strong Israel convinced of its own invincibility would be more likely to compromise with Arab moderates such as King Hussein and less likely to go nuclear. Shortly after the shooting stopped on 10 June, Dean Rusk discussed a peace settlement with Abba Eban. Distressed to learn that the Israelis intended to keep much of the land seized from Jordan during the Six Day War, Rusk reminded Eban that Israel had always denied having any territorial ambitions. “We have changed our minds,” Eban retorted. Worried that Israel might also change its mind about the atomic bomb, Rusk shot back: “Don’t you be the first power to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East.” “No,” Eban replied with a smile, “but we won’t be the second.”¹¹²

This exchange symbolized the uneasy partnership that had emerged between Israel and America by 1967. As Eisenhower and Ben Gurion had prophesied as early as 1958, Israeli troops armed with American weapons could show friend and foe alike that Third World wars of national liberation need not always be successful. Yet the danger that the Israelis might develop atomic weapons continued to keep U.S. officials on edge, as it had since the early 1960s, when Kennedy tried to prevent a nuclear arms race in the Middle East by offering Israel HAWK missiles

and a security guarantee. Tensions between Washington and Tel Aviv mounted during late 1967, not only over nuclear matters but also over whether Israel would endorse the American-backed peace-for-land formula laid out in U.N. Security Council Resolution 242. Frustrated by Israel's inflexibility regarding negotiations with the Arabs, Johnson's top aides urged him to use Levi Eshkol's upcoming visit to the LBJ ranch to remind the Israelis that their special relationship with the United States must be a two-way street. "We'll make sure Israel has our political support and the equipment it needs to defend itself," Harold Saunders wrote Walt Rostow on 29 December. "But we can't tie ourselves to a 'fortress Israel,'" especially if "Israel gets SSMs or decides to build nuclear weapons."¹¹³

Levi Eshkol arrived at the Texas White House in January 1968 seeking 30 A-4 Skyhawks and 50 F-4 Phantoms. Although Johnson faced an uphill battle for a second term in just ten months, he seemed less concerned with election-year politics than with the dimming prospects for peace in the Middle East. "We can't support an Israel that sits tight," he told Eshkol on 7 January. The Israelis could enhance their own security most easily by "avoiding permanent moves in [the] occupied lands" and by forswearing "Nuclear Weapons and Missiles." Eshkol could have his Skyhawks, but unless Israel endorsed U.N. Resolution 242 and renewed its pledge not to go nuclear, there would be no Phantoms.¹¹⁴

And so there were not, despite one of the most hotly contested presidential elections in the 20th century. To be sure, deepening problems in Southeast Asia forced Johnson out of the race in March and left the weary president little time for what must have seemed far less pressing troubles in the Middle East. The Israelis and their friends in Washington, of course, hinted that by providing the Phantoms before election day, a lame-duck Johnson might still secure just enough extra votes to ensure a Democratic victory.¹¹⁵ Yet when Menachem Begin, minister without portfolio in Eshkol's coalition cabinet, pressed for the F-4s during a White House visit in June, he was told that the Israelis must first "reach out to their neighbors and help them rise from humiliation to some sort of peace settlement."¹¹⁶ Three months later Dean Rusk informed Israeli ambassador Yitzhak Rabin that Johnson would not release the Phantoms until Tel Aviv "dispelled the ambiguity" surrounding the fate of Arab territory seized during the Six Day War.¹¹⁷

The president's position softened somewhat in October after AIPAC persuaded seventy U.S. senators to sign a letter supporting the sale of F-4s to Israel. But there was no deal until 25 November, three weeks after Richard Nixon had eked out a razor-thin victory over the ardently pro-Israel Hubert Humphrey. The sticking point remained what it had been for nearly a year. "We are . . . concerned with Israel's missile and nuclear plans," Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Warnke told Ambassador Rabin during the last stages of the Phantom negotiations. "This is why we need to 'up-date' your assurances to us on these matters." The best assurance would have been Israeli ratification of the NPT. In the end, however, Washington settled for Tel Aviv's renewed pledge not to be the first nation in the Middle East to acquire an atomic bomb. This was a hollow victory for policy makers like Warnke, who noted recently that "at the time I believed, and subsequent information has tended to confirm, that Israel had in fact developed a small arsenal of nuclear weapons."¹¹⁸

Ironically, the desire to prevent nuclear proliferation had been one of the chief goals propelling America toward a special relationship with Israel for nearly a decade. To be sure, Republicans and Democrats alike had to take into account the pro-Israel proclivities of friends of Zion on Capitol Hill and Main Street. But for Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, the mathematics of election-year politics was tempered by the calculus of geopolitics. Eisenhower edged toward a partnership with Israel after 1956 not because he was concerned about the Jewish vote in New York, but because he saw the Jewish state as a strategic asset in his struggle to keep the Soviets out of the Middle East. Kennedy sold Israel HAWK missiles in 1962 not merely to win off-year elections, but more importantly to win assurances that the Israelis would not develop nuclear weapons at Dimona.

Lyndon Johnson inherited from Eisenhower and Kennedy what amounted to an informal alliance with Israel. Like Eisenhower, Johnson regarded the Jewish state as a potential partner against the spread of anti-Western radicalism throughout the Arab world. And like Kennedy, Johnson realized that only by providing conventional weapons and a security guarantee could the United States hope to prevent Israel from going nuclear. When Johnson judged that arms for Israel would undermine rather than promote these objectives, he twice made the Israelis wait until after election day, first in 1964 and then in 1968. For Lyndon Johnson, as for his two predecessors, combatting wars of national liberation and preventing nuclear proliferation were at least as important in shaping America's special relationship with Israel as winning elections.

Yet in the end, Johnson's efforts to convert Israel into a strategic asset seem to have backfired, leaving America with far less economic and military leverage and the Israelis with far more bargaining power than anyone in Washington could have imagined a generation ago. Pluses like Israel's support for King Hussein against Black September in 1970 have been offset by minuses like Tel Aviv's march on Beirut in 1982. Despite Eshkol's pledge that his country would not be the first in the Middle East to acquire atomic bombs, few in Washington today doubt that the Israelis possess nuclear weapons, and many worry that they might use them in a showdown with Saddam Hussein or Muammar Qaddafi. The special relationship first envisaged by Eisenhower and Ben Gurion thirty-five years ago was badly flawed from the very start because neither side could agree whether Israel should be America's proxy or its partner. Now that cold war in Europe and hot war in the Persian Gulf have come and gone, resolving that disagreement may well hold the key to preserving an American-Israeli relationship that more and more looks less and less special.

NOTES

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⁶Gideon Rafael, *Destination Peace: Three Decades of Israeli Foreign Policy—A Personal Memoir* (New York, 1981), 62–67; Eban, *Autobiography*, 254–56.

⁷Dulles testimony, 2 January 1957, in U.S. Senate, Historical Office, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 17 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1976–1991), 9:29.

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¹⁸Eban, *Autobiography*, 263–64; Ben Gurion to Eisenhower, 24 July 1958, "Middle East July 1958 (4)," Box 36, International Series, AWF, DDEL.

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²⁶Eban, *Autobiography*, 263–64.

²⁷Kenen, *Israel's Defense Line*, 66, 110, 144.

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³¹G. Lewis Jones (NEA) to Undersecretary of State C. Douglas Dillon, 26 May 1960, and Herter to Ben Gurion, 4 August 1960, *FRUS 1958–60*, 13:327–29, 359–61.

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³³On the background to the Dimona imbroglio, see minutes of the 470th NSC meeting, 8 December 1960, *FRUS 1958–60*, 13:391–92; George H. Quester, "Nuclear Weapons and Israel," *Middle East Journal* 37 (1983): 548–49; Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1991), 47–81.

³⁴Herter testimony, 6 January 1961, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 13:7; Eisenhower's message and Ben Gurion's rejoinder are quoted in Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion*, 271–72.

³⁵Memo for the record, 6 December 1960, "Memos of the Staff re Change of Administration," Box 1, Transition Series, AWF, DDEL.

³⁶Lucius Battle to McGeorge Bundy, 29 May 1961, and State Department cirtel, 2 June 1961, "Countries: Israel," Box 119, National Security Files, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Mass. (hereafter cited as NSF, JFKL); Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion*, 272–73. JFK and Ben Gurion are quoted in Mordechai Gazit, *President Kennedy's Policy toward the Arab States and Israel* (Tel Aviv, 1983), 38–41. For further discussion of JFK's concerns about Dimona, see Hersh, *Samson Option*, 105–13.

³⁷Lucius Battle to Myer Feldman, 15 September 1961; Battle to McGeorge Bundy, 28 November 1961, "Countries: Israel," Box 118, NSF, JFKL.

³⁸Stevenson to Wayne Morse, 26 April 1962, in *The Papers of Adlai Stevenson*, 8 vols, ed. Walter Johnson (Boston, 1979), 8:241–42; Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York, 1990), 380.

³⁹JFK to Nasser, n.d., appended to Dean Rusk to John Badeau (Cairo), telegram, 18 April 1963, "Countries: UAR," Box 127, President's Office File, JFKL (hereafter cited as POF, JFKL).

⁴⁰See Douglas Little, "The New Frontier on the Nile: JFK, Nasser, and Arab Nationalism," *Journal of American History* 75 (1988): 505–10.

⁴¹State Department cirtel, 2 June 1961, "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL; Herbert S. Parmet, *JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1983), 228–31; Spiegel, *Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 110–12.

⁴²Talbot to Feldman, 9 August 1962; Feldman to JFK, 10 August 1962; JFK to Ben Gurion, 15 August 1962; Feldman to JFK and Rusk, 19 August 1962, all in "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL.

⁴³McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York, 1988), 510. Feldman confirmed the link between the HAWKs and the Dimona reactor six years after he visited Tel Aviv; see *New York Times*, 16 June 1968, sec. 1, p. 5.

⁴⁴Tazewell Shepherd to JFK, 21 September 1962, "Countries: Israel," Box 119A, POF, JFKL; Adlai Stevenson to Rusk, telegram, 28 September 1962, Box 119, NSF, JFKL.

⁴⁵William J. Burns, *Economic Aid & American Policy Toward Egypt 1955–1981* (Albany, N.Y., 1985), 135–42; Spiegel, *Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 102–4; Little, "New Frontier on the Nile," 511–14.

⁴⁶State Department memcon, "Conversation with Foreign Minister Meir," 27 December 1962, "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL; see also Hersh, *Samson Option*, 118.

⁴⁷Komer to Bundy, 6 March 1963, "Meetings & Memoranda: Komer," Box 322, NSF, JFKL; "Syrian Coup," undated unsigned note to JFK, "Syria," Box 124A, POF, JFKL; "Near East Tour d'Horizon," 2 April 1963, "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL.

⁴⁸Sherman Kent (CIA), "Consequences of Israel Acquisition of Nuclear Capability," 6 March 1963, in Gazit, *Kennedy's Policy toward the Arab States and Israel*, 116–20.

⁴⁹On the disarmament task force, see Talbot to Rusk, 14 May 1963, "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL. On JFK's personal diplomacy, see JFK to Nasser, n.d., appended to Rusk to Badeau, telegram, 18 April 1963, "Countries: UAR," Box 126, POF, JFKL.

⁵⁰"Near East Tour d'Horizon," 2 April 1963, "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL.

⁵¹JFK quoted in Shimon Peres, *David's Sling* (London, 1970), 99.

⁵²Rusk to Barbour, telegram, 26 April 1963, in "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL. Rusk's cable contains a paraphrase of Ben Gurion's still-classified message to Kennedy.

⁵³Benjamin Read to McGeorge Bundy, 13 May 1963, "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL. For a different interpretation of the crisis, see Uriel Dann, *King Hussein and the Challenge of Arab Radicalism: Jordan, 1955–1967* (New York, 1989), 129–32.

⁵⁴Barbour to Rusk, telegram, 5 May 1963; Department of State, cirtel, 9 May 1963, both in "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL.

⁵⁵Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, 6 May 1963, "Meetings & Memoranda: Komer," Box 322, NSF, JFKL; JFK remarks at press conference, 8 May 1963, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Kennedy, 1963*, 373.

⁵⁶Komer, "Memorandum for the Record," 14 May 1963, "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL.

⁵⁷Komer to McGeorge Bundy, 2 May 1963, and Komer, "Memorandum for the Record," 2 May 1963, "Staff Memos: Komer," Box 322, NSF, JFKL.

⁵⁸Komer, "Memorandum for the Record," 14 May 1963, "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL; Komer, Oral History Interview, 22 December 1969, 75–76, JFKL.

⁵⁹Talbot to Rusk, 14 May 1963, and Rusk to JFK, 16 May 1963, both in "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL.

⁶⁰JFK, "Notes at Camp David," 18 May 1963, and "Oval Office Notes," 27 May 1963, "Doodles 1963," Box 43, John F. Kennedy Personal Papers, JFKL.

⁶¹Rusk testimony, 5 June 1963, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 15:341–42.

⁶²Rusk to JFK, n.d. (June 1963), *DDRS 1989*, Item 280.

⁶³Burns, *Economic Aid and American Policy toward Egypt*, 141–43; remarks by Hermann Eilts at the New England Historical Association (NEHA) Conference, 21 October 1989, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

⁶⁴Komer to McGeorge Bundy, 14 May 1963, "Meetings & Memoranda: Komer," Box 322, NSF, JFKL; Glenn Seaborg to Bundy, 1 July 1963; Barbour to Rusk, telegram, 16 August 1963; Read to Bundy, 24 September 1963, all in "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL.

⁶⁵Rodger Davies (NEA), "U.S. Security Guarantee for Israel," 11 September 1963, "Countries: Israel," Box 119, NSF, JFKL.

⁶⁶Kennedy's letter of 7 October 1963 is paraphrased in Gazit, *Kennedy's Policy toward the Arab States and Israel*, 53–54. Hermann Eilts recently confirmed that JFK offered Eshkol a security guarantee, but that "there was no automaticity in it." Eilts, remarks at the NEHA Conference, 21 October 1989, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

⁶⁷Talbot memcon, 25 November 1963, in University Publications of America, *Lyndon B. Johnson National Security Files: Israel*, microfilm edition, 3 reels (Fredricktown, Md., 1982), reel 1, frame 44 (hereafter cited as *LBJ–NSF: Israel* with the appropriate reel).

⁶⁸Kenan, *Israel's Defense Line*, 148–53; Spiegel, *Other Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 120.

⁶⁹Kenan, *Israel's Defense Line*, 173.

⁷⁰On pro-Israel sentiment among LBJ's advisers and friends, see Spiegel, *Other Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 128–29; Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, 83–84, 110–11; Tivnan, *The Lobby*, 59–60.

⁷¹Badeau to Rusk, telegram, 15 January 1964, "Countries: UAR," Box 158, National Security Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter cited as NSF, LBJL).

⁷²CIA Office of National Estimates, "Storm Warnings Up for US–Arab Relations," 25 February 1964, Box 1, Memos to the President File, LBJL.

⁷³Rusk to LBJ, 25 February 1964, "Countries: UAR," Box 158, NSF, LBJL.

⁷⁴Feldman to LBJ, 14 March 1964, and Komer to LBJ, 4 March 1964, Box 1, Memos to the President, NSF, LBJL.

⁷⁵McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, 12 May 1964, Box 1, Memos to the President, NSF, LBJL; Peres, *David's Sling*, 103–7.

⁷⁶Badeau to Rusk, telegram, 10 May 1964, "Countries: UAR," Box 158, NSF, LBJL.

⁷⁷Talbot memcon, 12 May 1964, *LBJ–NSF: Israel*, reel 3, frame 26.

⁷⁸Badeau to Rusk, telegram, 25 May 1964, "Countries: UAR," Box 158, NSF, LBJL.

⁷⁹CIA, "Nasir's Arab Policy: The Latest Phase," 28 August 1964, and State Department, "Major Issues in U.S.–U.A.R. Relations," n.d. (August 1964), both in "Countries: UAR," Box 159, NSF, LBJL.

⁸⁰William O. Boswell (Cairo) to Rusk, telegram, 12 September 1964, "Countries: UAR," Box 159, NSF, LBJL.

⁸¹On Nasser, Fatah, and the PLO, see William Quandt, Fuad Jabber, and Amy Mosely Lesch, *The Politics of Palestinian Nationalism* (Berkeley, Calif., 1973), 55–58; Alan Hart, *Arafat: A Political Biography* (New York, 1989), 160–78.

⁸²Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963–1969* (New York, 1971), 279–82.

⁸³On Nasser and the PLO, see Read to Bundy, 5 June 1965, "Countries: UAR," Box 159, NSF, LBJL; on Nasser and Vietnam, see Heikal, *Cairo Documents*, 307–12.

⁸⁴Roche to LBJ, 22 May 1967, "Middle East Crisis, Vol. 1, Tabs 11–20," Box 17, NSC History Series, NSF, LBJL.

⁸⁵William Polk (State Department Policy Planning Staff) to Rostow, 7 April 1964, attached to Rostow to LBJ, 14 April 1964, "Countries: UAR," Box 158, NSF, LBJL.

⁸⁶Badeau to Rusk, telegram, 25 May 1964, "Countries: UAR," Box 158, NSF, LBJL.

⁸⁷"Quid Pro Quo of Visit," 28 May 1964; Acting Secretary of State George Ball to LBJ, n.d. (late May 1964); Rusk, "Assessment Eshkol Visit," cirtel. 26 June 1964, all in *LBJ–NSF: Israel*, reel 3, frames 27–31, 85–88, 101–3.

⁸⁸On the Dimona reactor, see Fuad Jabber, *Israel and Nuclear Weapons: Present Options and Future Strategies* (London, 1971), 36; on the West German tanks, see John T. McNaughton to Komer, 15 July 1964, *DDRS 1988*, Item 3237.

⁸⁹Rusk to Barbour, telegram, 12 October 1964, "Countries: Israel," Box 139, NSF, LBJL.

⁹⁰For an excellent discussion of the deepening rift between Nasser and Johnson, see Burns, *Economic Aid and American Policy toward Egypt*, 157–63.

⁹¹U.S. Air Force Attache (Cairo) to Air Force Intelligence, telegram, 17 January 1965, "Countries: UAR," Box 159, NSF, LBJL.

⁹²"Harriman Mission to Israel," 25 February 1965, *LBJ–NSF: Israel*, reel 1, frames 381–88.

⁹³Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Peter Solbert to McGeorge Bundy, 8 March 1965, in *LBJ–NSF: Israel*, reel 3, frames 150–56.

⁹⁴Rusk to Ambassador Lucius Battle (Cairo), telegram, 18 March 1965, "Countries: UAR," Box 159, NSF, LBJL.

⁹⁵Air Force Attache (Tel Aviv) to Air Force Intelligence, telegram, 30 March 1965, *LBJ–NSF: Israel*, reel 1, frames 296–98.

⁹⁶"U.S. Draft Memorandum of Understanding," n.d. (late March 1965), *LBJ–NSF: Israel*, reel 1, frames 378–80.

⁹⁷Rusk to Talbot, telegram, 21 April 1965, *LBJ–NSF: Israel*, reel 1, frames 239–44.

⁹⁸Barbour to Rusk, telegram, 23 April 1965, and Rusk to Barbour, 8 May 1965, *LBJ–NSF: Israel*, reel 1, frames 258–59, 307.

⁹⁹Komer, "Memorandum for the Record," 18 October 1965, "Komer Memos, Vol. II," Box 6, NSF Name File, LBJL.

¹⁰⁰Rusk to Barbour, telegram, 14 October 1965; Barbour to Rusk, telegram, 29 October 1965; Benjamin Read (State Department Secretariat) to Walt Rostow, 30 April 1966, all in *LBJ–NSF: Israel*, reel 1, frames 282, 353–54, 513–15.

¹⁰¹"U.S. Arms Sale to Israel," n.d., attached to Rusk to LBJ, 29 July 1966, *LBJ–NSF: Israel*, reel 3, frames 318, 336–37.

¹⁰²On the nuclear desalting project, see Walt Rostow to LBJ, 12 August 1966, *LBJ–NSF: Israel*, reel 1, frames 560–61.

¹⁰³Spiegel, *Other Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 136; Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, 40–46; Dann, *King Hussein and the Challenge of Arab Radicalism*, 154–57; Snow, *Hussein*, 166–68.

¹⁰⁴On the armored personnel carriers, see Barbour to Rusk, telegram, 1 February 1967, *LBJ–NSF: Israel*, reel 2, frame 5; Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to LBJ, 17 April 1967, *DDRS 1987*, Item 1328. On Nasser's reaction to the Syrian–Israeli dogfight, see Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, 57–58; Spiegel, *Other Arab–Israeli Conflict*, pp. 136–37.

¹⁰⁵Harold Saunders, "The President's Stake in the Middle East," 16 May 1967, Box 16, Memos to the President, NSF, LBJL.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 290–93.

¹⁰⁸LBJ quoted in Eugene Rostow, Oral History Interview, 2 December 1968, 17–18, LBJL. On the Israeli reaction to the multinational flotilla, see Spiegel, *Other Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 138–41. On the Mohieddin visit, see Heikal, *Cairo Documents*, 245–46.

¹⁰⁹Rusk to Gromyko, telegram, 5 June 1967, 72D 192, Box 927, Dean Rusk Papers, Office of Freedom of Information, Privacy, and Classification, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁰Although Israel has always insisted that its forces attacked the *Liberty* by mistake, the two best accounts of the episode call the Israeli explanation into question; see James M. Ennes, Jr., *Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship* (New York, 1979); Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem*, 248–63. Ennes served on the *Liberty* and was seriously wounded in the Israeli attack.

¹¹¹Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 303–4.

¹¹²Rusk and Eban are quoted in Thomas J. Schoenbaum, *Waging Peace and War: Dean Rusk in the Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (New York, 1988), 463. For further evidence of Rusk's concerns about Israeli territorial and nuclear ambitions, see Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 343, 389.

¹¹³Saunders to Rostow, "Rough Sketch of Package for Eshkol," 29 December 1967, "Countries: Israel," Box 144, NSF, LBJL.

¹¹⁴Rostow to LBJ, "The Issues for Eshkol," 5 January 1968; "Notes on Meeting Between LBJ & Eshkol," 7/8 January 1968, both in "Countries: Israel," Box 143, NSF, LBJL.

¹¹⁵Etta Zablocki Bick, "Ethnic Linkages and Foreign Policy: A Study of the Linkage Role of American Jews in Relations between the United States and Israel, 1956–1968," Ph.D. diss. (City University of New York, 1983), 166–67.

¹¹⁶Saunders memcon, 17 June 1968, "Countries: Israel," Box 142, NSF, LBJL.

¹¹⁷Rusk to Hart, telegram, 19 September 1968, "Countries: Israel," Box 142, NSF, LBJL.

¹¹⁸Warnke, "Negotiations with Israel: F-4 & Advanced Weapons," 4 November 1968, "Countries: Israel," Box 142, NSF, LBJL; Warnke to author, 12 September 1989, in author's possession. On AIPAC's role in the Phantom negotiations, see Spiegel, *Other Arab–Israeli Conflict*, 161–64.