A Self-Inflicted Wound? Henry Kissinger and the Ending of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War

Galen Jackson
Political Science Department
Williams College

Marc Trachtenberg
Political Science Department
University of California at Los Angeles

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The United States and the Soviet Union seemed determined in 1972 to put the Cold War behind them. The U.S. president, Richard Nixon, flew to Moscow that year and signed a number of important agreements with his Soviet counterpart Leonid Brezhnev—important above all for what they symbolized. At Moscow, Nixon declared, a foundation had been laid "for a new relationship between the two most powerful nations of the world"; a process had started which could lead to a lasting peace.[1] But the great hopes of 1972 faded rapidly and by the end of 1973 many Americans had begun to turn against the Nixon administration's détente policy. By 1976, Nixon's successor Gerald Ford was so embarrassed by the word "détente" that he announced he would stop using it.[2] And by 1980, as John Gaddis later noted, détente "was almost universally regarded as having failed."[3]

But why exactly had it failed? The many critics of the détente policy would not have found that question hard to answer. It had failed, in their view, because détente had been based on an illusion—on the view that the Soviet Union was now willing to coexist peacefully with the United States.[4] But the USSR's fundamental goals, the argument ran, had not changed. The Soviets still sought to bring about a "decisive shift in the world balance of power" in their favor. And détente had merely served to blind the western countries to that core reality: "the Soviet Union saw it as an opportunity to lull Western public opinion into a lack of vigilance towards the perils it was facing."[5] So from that point of view the

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[1] Richard Nixon, Address to a Joint Session of the Congress, June 1, 1972, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Nixon 1972*, p. 661 .

[2] See H. W. Brands, "The World in a Word: The Rise and Fall of Détente," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1998) (link), p. 55.

[3] John Lewis Gaddis, "The Rise, Fall and Future of Détente," *Foreign Affairs* 62, no. 2 (Winter 1983) (link), p. 362.

[4] Coalition for a Democratic Majority, Foreign Policy Task Force (Eugene Rostow, chairman), "The Quest for Détente," July 31, 1974 (link), p. 2. On this document, see Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) (link), pp. 102-103. As Vaïsse notes in that passage, one prominent scholar—Raymond Garthoff—characterized this document as the "first major head-on assault" on the détente policy by neoconservatives. See Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington: Brookings, 1985), p. 413. See also Eugene V. Rostow, "The Foreign Policy 'Debate,'" *Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 1975, p. 10. Rostow had served as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs from 1966 to 1969 and went on in the 1970s to play a key role in the public debate about détente.

[5] Robert Conquest, Brian Crozier, John Erickson, Joseph Godson, Gregory Grossman, Leopold Labetz, Bernard Lewis, Richard Pipes, Leonard Schapiro, Edward Shils, and P.J. Vatikiotis, "Détente: An Evaluation," *International Review* 1 (Spring 1974). This was reprinted by the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Arms Control, in June 1974 (link)—the quotations are on pp. 2 and 22 here—and is discussed in Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999) (link), pp. 247-48. Note also John Rosenberg, "The Quest against Détente: Eugene Rostow, the

collapse of détente was easy to explain: the policy was abandoned when the American people came to see Soviet policy for what it was and realized that a very different kind of policy was called for.

The champions of détente—especially Nixon's national security advisor Henry Kissinger, who, with Nixon, was the main architect of the policy—naturally took a very different view. As they saw it, the policy failed not because it was politically or morally defective but rather because it had been overwhelmed by anti-détente forces at home. As Kissinger put it when he was about to leave office in late 1976, "our difficulties have been almost entirely domestic" in nature.[6] The Nixon administration, he often argued, had tried to pursue a policy attuned to the nuances and ambiguities of international political life, but that kind of policy just did not sit well with the American public.[7] And many scholars take much the same view. "The Nixon-Kissinger variant of détente," one of them writes, "failed for primarily domestic political reasons."[8] Or as another scholar put it: "the foreign policy of détente drowned in the turbulent waters of domestic politics in the 1970s."[9] Gaddis made much the same point. Whereas Nixon and Kissinger had a "sophisticated and far-sighted strategy," despite their generally honest efforts to explain what it was "they never really succeeded in putting it across, whether to their own bureaucracies, the Congress, or the public as a whole."[10] But there is one basic problem with that line of argument: the country had no trouble supporting détente in 1972; it was only later that opinion turned against it; and you cannot explain a change by a constant. The shift must have been caused by something. Specific events must have played a major role in this process.

And the evidence strongly suggests that the events surrounding the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War were of fundamental importance in that regard. Attitudes toward détente, as reflected in the press, shifted quite sharply at that point. Indeed, by the end of 1973 some observers were already talking about how détente had failed.[11] And the critics

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October War, and the Origins of the Anti-Détente Movement, 1969–1976," *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 4 (September 2015) (link), p. 741 (for Rostow's claim in 1974 that Kissinger was "'lull[ing] Western public opinion' into a false sense of security").

[6] Quoted in Murrey Marder, "The Kissinger Years: A Search for Control in a Disordered World," *Washington Post*, November 14, 1976, p. 27.

[7] See Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown, 1982), pp. 235-46, 979-85, 1030-31; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 97-112, 1069-78; Henry Kissinger, "Between the Old Left and the New Right," *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 3 (May-June 1999) (link); and Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 745, 757, 761.

[8] Dan Caldwell, "U.S. Domestic Politics and the Demise of Détente," in Odd Arne Westad, ed., *The Fall of Détente: Soviet-American Relations during the Carter Years* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), p. 105.

[9] Julian Zelizer, "Détente and Domestic Politics," *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 4 (September 2009) (link), p. 653.

[10] Gaddis, "Rise, Fall, and Future of Détente," p. 365. See also David Allen, "Realism and Malarkey: Henry Kissinger's State Department, Détente, and Domestic Consensus," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 17, no. 3 (2015) (link).

[11] See, for example, Walter Laqueur, "Détente: What's Left of It?" *New York Times Magazine* (16 December 1973).

pointed above all to Soviet behavior in the Middle East. The USSR, it was said, had played a key role in bringing on the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war; one early attack on détente referred, for example, to the "incendiary Soviet role" before the war, and that charge remained a staple of the anti-détente literature well into the 1980s.[12] The Soviet leadership was also blamed for threatening to intervene unilaterally at the end of that war. Brezhnev made that threat in a famous letter he sent Nixon on October 24, 1973—the same day the ceasefire decreed by the U.N. Security Council finally took hold.[13] That threat, as is well known, led the United States to put its military forces around the world on alert. But if the U.S. government, the argument ran, had been forced to make that kind of move, the provocation must have been quite extraordinary; the USSR, it seemed, was as aggressive as ever and could only be restrained by a tough American policy.[14]

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[12] Coalition for a Democratic Majority, "The Quest for Détente" (link), p. 3. That view was often taken even by moderate politicians and respectable journalists. Note, for example, Senator Clifford Case's reference to the "enormous destructive actions that the Soviets took in encouraging [the Arabs to attack Israel in October 1973] in the first place." U.S. Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, "Détente" (colloquy with Kissinger), September 19, 1974 (link), p. 266. See also Robert Kaiser, "Détente: It Never Really Took Hold," *Washington Post*, January 15, 1980, p. A1 (link). The basic point here figured prominently in the conservative critique of détente not just in the 1970s but in the 1980s as well. For one typical example, see James Schlesinger, "The Eagle and the Bear: Ruminations on Forty Years of Superpower Relations," *Foreign Affairs* 63, no. 5 (Summer, 1985), p. 949. "In American eyes," Schlesinger wrote, "an early blow against détente occurred in 1973 with the Yom Kippur War. Soviet attempts to stimulate and to exploit that war were startling to many Americans. The culmination was the Brezhnev letter to Nixon threatening to move Soviet forces into the region and urging, in effect, a Soviet-American condominium over the Middle East. It resulted in the alert of America's military forces and, ultimately, a slow ebbing of the crisis. But the atmosphere of détente never thereafter fully recovered."

[13] Brezhnev to Nixon, October 24, 1973, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. 25, p. 735 (link). Henceforth documents in this collection will be cited in the form: Brezhnev to Nixon, October 24, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:735.

[14] See, for example, Robert Keatley, "U.S. Stares Down Middle East Threat by Soviet Union As Suspicions of Moscow's Interest in Peace Increase," *Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 1973, p. 2 (note especially the Muskie comment quoted there) (link); David Binder, "An Implied Soviet Threat Spurred U.S. Forces' Alert," *New York Times*, November 21, 1973, p. 1 (link); Michael Getler, "Soviet Moves Caused U.S. Military Alert," *Washington Post*, October 26, 1973, p. A1 (link); and Robert Keatley, "Diplomatic Rx: Only Major Accords by Kissinger, Soviet May Salvage Détente," *Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 1974, p. 1 (note especially the Cranston comment quoted there) (link). The letter containing Brezhnev's threat was leaked to the press in November. See Marilyn Berger, "Brezhnev Note: 'I Will Say It Straight,'" *Washington Post*, November 28, 1973, p. A1 (link). Rosenberg, "The Quest against Détente," sheds a good deal of light on these issues. This article focuses on the shift in Eugene Rostow's views about détente, but other key figures like Albert Wohlstetter and Paul Nitze are also discussed. For a good example of Rostow's views, see his article, "The Soviet Threat to Europe Through the Middle East," in Robert Conquest et al., *Defending America* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 60-61. In 1973, he wrote, the Soviets had decided that they could "safely carry through the plans for a decisive attack against Israel" which they had "made with President Sadat in 1972." The Brezhnev threat to intervene at the end of the war was another count in Rostow's indictment of Soviet policy. Richard Pipes, writing in 1981, made the same sort of argument, referring specifically to the "ominous ultimatum" the USSR had issued at the end of the war. Richard Pipes, preface to his book *U.S.-Soviet Relations in the Era of Détente* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), p. xiii. Note also the extract from James Schlesinger's 1985 article quoted in n. 12 above.

What are we to make of arguments of that sort? Kissinger at the time characterized the claim that the Soviets had instigated the October 1973 war as "absolutely preposterous."[15] And the evidence now available makes it abundantly clear that the Soviets had tried hard to work with the Americans in reaching a settlement that would have made the war unnecessary, had very much wanted to avoid a new Middle East war, and had warned U.S. leaders repeatedly that if nothing were done an armed conflict was unavoidable.[16] The implication is that if the Americans had been more forthcoming and more willing to work with the Soviets in dealing with the problem—that is, if they had pursued a policy more in line with what détente was supposed to be—the war would never have broken out in the first place.

As for the narrower issue of the Brezhnev threat, the real question here has to do with the degree to which the U.S. government was directly responsible for creating the situation that led the Soviet leader to send Nixon the October 24 letter. Kissinger, after all, had worked out a ceasefire agreement with Brezhnev during a visit to Moscow on October 21. The ceasefire was supposed to go into effect on the 22nd, and Kissinger flew directly from Moscow to Israel for talks with the Israeli leaders that day. But the ceasefire did not take hold, mainly because the Israelis very much wanted to continue military operations. Indeed, on the 23rd (as Kissinger put it the next day) the Israelis "grabbed a hunk of territory and cut the last supply line" for Egypt's Third Army.[17] And Brezhnev threatened to intervene unilaterally only after that Israeli policy had become clear. If Kissinger had encouraged Israel to ignore the ceasefire, as many people (including the Soviets themselves) suspected, then the Brezhnev threat can scarcely be viewed as an act of aggression pure and simple. And that in turn would imply that Kissinger himself should be held responsible for triggering the chain of events that led to the Brezhnev threat and the U.S. alert, with all their consequences, especially in terms of how people at home came to view détente.

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[15] Kissinger meeting with Sonnenfeldt et al., August 1, 1974, Digital National Security Archive, item no. KT01268. Henceforth material in this collection will be cited in the form: DNSA/KT01268, pp. 1, 4-5 (link). Note also Kissinger's discussion of this issue at the time in Secretary of State's Staff Meeting, October 23, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:693.

[16] See Galen Jackson, "The Lost Peace: Great Power Politics and the Arab-Israeli Problem, 1967-1979," unpub. dissertation, UCLA, 2016 (link), chapter 4, and the sources cited there. Note also Galia Golan, "The Soviet Union and the October War," in Asaf Siniver, *The Yom Kippur War: Politics, Legacy, Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) (link) and Victor Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

[17] Kissinger-Haig telephone conversation, October 24, 1973, 10:20 p.m., U.S. Department of State, Virtual Reading Room, Henry Kissinger Telephone Conversations collection (link to description) [henceforth: DOSKTC] (link to document). Also in Henry Kissinger, *Crisis: The Anatomy of Two Major Foreign Policy Crises* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), p. 347. Another collection of the Kissinger telephone transcripts is available through subscribing libraries on the Digital National Security Archive website (link).

So it is important to understand what actually happened at the end of the Arab-Israeli War in October 1973. Had Kissinger in fact given the Israelis a green light to continue their advance? For many years, in dealing with that issue, scholars have tended to accept Kissinger's claim that he had not deliberately encouraged the Israelis to violate the ceasefire, at least not in any major way. The account of the crisis Lebow and Stein gave in 1994 is a good case in point. In a passage dealing with Kissinger's meetings with the Israeli leaders on October 22, they note that some officials who had taken part in those talks claimed that "Kissinger quietly encouraged Israel to violate the ceasefire and continue its offensive, at least for several hours," while other participants "insist that Kissinger was tough and emphasized the importance of the cease-fire." They then point out that Kissinger himself "adamantly denies that he encouraged Israel to violate the cease-fire" and quote from an interview they conducted with him in 1991:

> I did not encourage the Israelis. I did not want to see the Third [Egyptian] Army destroyed. I thought that they [the Israelis] were emotionally exhausted and did not need a big sales pitch for a cease-fire. After all, they had gotten the direct negotiations they had always wanted. I didn't press them hard because I didn't think that they needed to be pressed. I did not encourage the Israelis with more than minor adjustments. It is quite possible that the commanders in the field ran away with [Israel Prime Minister] Golda [Meir].[18]

And it was largely on the basis on that testimony that Lebow and Stein concluded that Kissinger had not intentionally encouraged the Israelis to continue their advance. They state, for example, that Kissinger had "*inadvertently* created false expectations among Israel's leaders about" how much extra time they had for military operations. And they later say that "Brezhnev suspected, *wrongly*, that Kissinger had deliberately deceived him and encouraged Israel to violate the cease-fire."[19]

But important evidence at odds with Kissinger's account came out a few years after the Lebow and Stein book was published. Indeed, a number of writers concluded on the basis of that evidence that Kissinger had done more to sanction the Israeli violations than he had suggested in that interview with Lebow and Stein, in his memoirs, and

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[18] Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 216. Lebow and Stein were not, of course, the only ones to make this kind of argument. For other examples, see Marvin and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (Boston: Little Brown, 1974), pp. 486-87; and Edward Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger: A Secret History of American Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Crowell, 1976), pp. 36-37; and Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1992), p. 528.

[19] Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War,* 218, 243 (emphasis added). For another example, see William Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 171-72. In his October 22 meetings with the Israelis, Quandt wrote, Kissinger "was insistent that Israel move into defensive positions and not violate the cease-fire." See also Quandt's review of FRUS 1969-76, vol. 25, in H-Diplo, February 17, 2012 (link).

elsewhere.[20] But even then there was a certain tendency to minimize the importance of that evidence and essentially accept Kissinger's story. One document, for example, recorded a meeting Kissinger had with Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir just after he had worked out the ceasefire agreement with Brezhnev in Moscow. Meir said that if the Egyptians didn't stop military operations, Israel wouldn't either; Kissinger replied ("most tellingly," as one scholar put it): "even if they do . . . "[21] But that comment is generally not taken too seriously. As one of Kissinger's biographers put it in 2004, it was an "almost off-handed" remark. Even his assurance that the Israelis would not get "violent protests" if the fighting continued during the night is not seen as very important. It had been "designed reflexively to sweeten the ever-suspicious Israeli leader," another historian wrote, and Kissinger would soon regret what he had said.[22] Even scholars who do say that Kissinger deliberately gave the Israelis a green light to violate the ceasefire are often quick to qualify that conclusion in some way—by suggesting, for example, that the message he was giving was not explicit, or that he was okaying only minor, short-term, violations of the agreement, or that he quickly changed his mind and demanded that the Israelis put a stop to their offensive.[23]

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[20] For Kissinger's account, see Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 552-613, especially p. 569; Kissinger, *Crisis*, p. 308; and Kissinger's conversation with James Hoge, September 3, 2003, and broadcast on C-SPAN2's BookTV program (link), especially the part of the video that begins at 35 minutes and 9 seconds (henceforth cited in the form 35:09) and continues for another four minutes.

[21] Asaf Siniver, "US Foreign Policy and the Kissinger Stratagem," in Siniver, *Yom Kippur War,* p. 95 (link).

[22] Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 314 (link); and Alistair Horne, *Kissinger: 1973, The Crucial Year* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2009), p. 290. See also Zach Levey, "Anatomy of an Airlift: United States Military Assistance to Israel during the 1973 War," *Cold War History* 8, no. 4 (November 2008), p. 492 (link)

[23] On the first point, see Siniver, "US Foreign Policy and the Kissinger Stratagem," p. 95. Siniver first talks about how Kissinger "actively advocated that the Israelis violate" the ceasefire, but in the next paragraph suggests that the green light might only have been "implicit." On the second point, see, for example, National Security Archive press release, "Kissinger Gave Green Light for Israeli Offensive Violating 1973 Cease-Fire; U.S.-Israeli Decisions Touched Off Crisis Leading to 1973 U.S. Nuclear Alert; New Documents Correct Previous Accounts in Kissinger Books," October 7, 2003 (link). The press release began by pointing out that newly released documents showed that Kissinger had given the Israelis "a green light to breach a cease-fire agreement arranged with the Soviet Union." But in the next paragraph it went on to note that he had only told the Israelis that he could accept them "taking [a] slightly longer" time to comply with the ceasefire resolution, which was not really at odds with the story Kissinger had himself told in his memoirs. The press release announced the publication of the National Security Archive's Electronic Briefing Book no. 98, "The October War and U.S. Policy" (link) [henceforth cited as NSAEBB98]; the summaries of the two key documents in the briefing book dealing with this issue (documents 51 and 54) show that the editors still believed Kissinger had inadvertently encouraged the Israelis and soon regretted having done so. On the point about Kissinger quickly changing his mind (soon after his return to Washington on October 23), see Craig Daigle, *The Limits of Détente: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 318-19. None of this is to say that no scholar has argued that Kissinger deliberately green-lighted the continuing Israeli offensive. See, for example, Tom Blanton's review of three books on Kissinger, *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 4 (September 2009) (link), p. 772. Blanton says the "Soviets had good reason" to suspect that Kissinger was dragging things out until Israel's gains "could be consolidated"; this, he writes, was thus "another case in which Kissinger's duplicity had long-run costs for détente." Kenneth Stein seems more ambivalent. Although he says that Israel violated the ceasefire "with impunity and Kissinger's sanction," he had also just

How then are we to get to the bottom of this issue? Our plan here is to attack the problem on two levels. Given the importance of Kissinger's own testimony in supporting many historical accounts of the episode we are concerned with here, our first goal is to assess Kissinger's reliability as a source by examining a number of claims he has made over the years in the light of the massive body of evidence we now have access to. We will then take a close look at his specific claim that he "did not encourage the Israelis" to violate the ceasefire in 1973—not deliberately, at any rate, or in a way that really mattered—also in the light of the important body of declassified material now available.

A Reliable Source?

What in general can be said about Kissinger's reliability as an historical source? To get at that issue, we will look in this section at four claims he made on matters not directly related to the issue at hand. The first relates to his position on the Vietnam War. In an August 1968 *New York Review of Books* article, Hans Morgenthau had identified Kissinger as one of a number of supporters of the war who were now trying to "cover their tracks" and make it seem that their real position had been very different. That charge led to a private exchange of correspondence between the two men. In one letter, written just before Nixon asked him to serve as his national security advisor, Kissinger stated flatly that he had "never supported the war in public."[24] What was extraordinary here is that he had in fact defended America's Vietnam policy in a televised debate in December 1965, and that same month he, along with a large number of other academics, had signed a petition supporting the administration's conduct of the war.[25] Not just that, but in 1966 he had published a short opinion piece in *Look* magazine arguing that America had to prevent a Communist victory in Vietnam.[26] And that same year he told a group in North Carolina: "We have no choice now but to maintain our commitment to prevent a Communist takeover in the south."[27] Given all this, it is hard to understand why Kissinger would simply deny that he had

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said that Kissinger had only given the Israelis "tacit approval" to continue military operations and that he merely "acquiesced" in the Israeli actions. Kenneth Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999) (link), p. 92. In neither Stein's nor Blanton's case, however, is much evidence provided to support those views.

[24] Hans Morgenthau, "A Talk with Senator McCarthy," *New York Review of Books*, August 22, 1968 (link). Kissinger to Morgenthau, October 9, 1968; Morgenthau to Kissinger, October 22, 1968; and Kissinger to Morgenthau, November 13, 1968 (for the quotation); all available online in Hans Morgenthau Collection (link), box 4, folder 1, Leo Baeck Institute, New York (link).

[25] See Isaacson, *Kissinger*, p. 119. See also Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger,* vol. 1*: 1923-1968: The Idealist* (New York: Penguin, 2015) (link), pp. 670-72, 822.

[26] Henry Kissinger, "What Should We Do Now?" *Look*, August 9, 1966.

[27] Quoted in Ferguson, *Kissinger*, p. 672.

ever supported the war in public. But the fact that he did so certainly tells us something about his commitment to the truth as an end in itself.

The remaining three cases relate directly to the Middle East. Kissinger claimed, first of all, that on the eve of the October war he had not urged Israel not to attack preemptively. Rumors to the effect that he had insisted that the Israelis not strike first began to circulate very early on, but Kissinger from the start strongly denied that he had done any such thing. Meeting with a group of Jewish leaders a few weeks after the war, for example, he referred to "the great myth" that the U.S. government had "pressured them not to preempt."[28] But the "myth" did not disappear. It instead resurfaced in two apparently well-researched books by respected journalists that came out in the next few years. Kissinger, their authors argued, had made it clear to the Israelis, just as the war was about to break out, that they were not to strike first.[29]

Kissinger, however, did not give an inch, and over the years has repeatedly denied that America was in any way responsible for Israel's decision not to attack preemptively. In the second volume of his memoirs, for example, he quoted from a message the Israeli prime minister, Golda Meir, sent him on October 7, the second day of the war. Meir had strongly implied that it was because of American pressure that the Israelis had not taken "preemptive action," and that their failure to do so was "the reason for our situation now." Kissinger was clearly irritated by that claim. Yes, it was true, he wrote, that "in years past" he had expressed his "personal view" to the Israelis that "America's ability to help Israel in any war would be impaired if Israel struck first." But in the run-up to the October war "the subject of preemption had not been discussed." Meir, he said, had merely "volunteered" to the U.S. ambassador that "Israel would not preempt. The decision had been her own, without benefit of recent American advice."[30] Even in 2013 he was still taking the same line. Israel's decision not to preempt, he told an interviewer that year, had been "taken on its own volition and not at our request."[31] And that claim was not just for public consumption. In meetings with his staff at the time he denied having warned the Israelis not to strike first. "Since there will be all sorts of legends when this is over," he said on October 10, "one legend that has absolutely no foundation in fact is that we prevented an Israeli pre-emptive attack. We were authorized by the Israelis to inform the Arabs and the Soviets that they were not planning a pre-emptive attack, in order to

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[28] Kissinger meeting with Jewish intellectuals, December 6, 1973, reproduced in Zaki Shalom, "Kissinger and the American Jewish Leadership after the 1973 War," *Israel Studies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2002) (link), p. 199.

[29] See Marvin and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger,* p. 459, and Sheehan, *Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, p. 31.

[30] Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 477. For the message itself, see Meir to Kissinger, in Shalev-Kissinger meeting, October 7, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:340-41.

[31] Amir Oren, "Kissinger Wants Israel to Know: The U.S. Saved You During the 1973 War," *Haaretz,* November 2, 2013 (link) (alt. link).

comply with their wish that we prevent the war. But we made no recommendation to the Israelis about any course of action."[32] He made the same point in another high-level meeting in 1975: "We didn't keep them from preempting. That's a myth."[33]

What is to be made of that line of argument? On the one hand, the Israelis certainly did tell the Americans that they did not intend to strike first as soon as they learned that an Arab attack was imminent. And they did ask Kissinger to let the Soviets and the Arabs know about their intentions, since they thought Arab military preparations might have been rooted in an honest but mistaken fear that Israel planned to take military action against them.[34] These assurances had not been prompted by any direct American pressure related to this specific situation, since they were given well before the U.S. government believed war was imminent or even likely. So that part of the story is certainly in line with Kissinger's account.

What Kissinger failed to note is that he had not believed the Israeli report (about an imminent Arab attack) when he received it at around 6:00 a.m. on October 6. That report, he thought, might have been concocted as a cover for an Israeli attack—even though that attack would be launched on Yom Kippur. As he told White House chief of staff Alexander Haig that morning, when he received the report he thought at first that "it was an Israeli trick for them to be able to launch an attack although this is the holiest day." He had therefore "called the Israelis and warned them to restrain" and soon "got a return call from the Israelis giving us assurances that no pre-emptive Israeli [action] would be taken."[35] He had, in fact, urged the Israelis, just before 7:00 a.m. that morning, "not to take any pre-emptive action."[36] As he reported to Nixon a couple of hours later, he had emphasized "the essentiality of restraint on the Israeli part, and said

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[32] Secretary of State's Staff Meeting, October 10, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:428.

[33] Washington Special Actions Group meeting, January 14, 1975, FRUS 1969-76, 26:483.

[34] See Meir to Kissinger, October 5, 1973, and Quandt summary of Ambassador Keating's report of his meeting with Meir, October 6, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:284-85, 287; see also ibid., p. 287 n.2.

[35] Kissinger-Haig phone conversation, October 6, 1973, 8:35 a.m., in Kissinger, *Crisis*, p. 27. For facsimiles of the original, see DOSKTC (link) and DNSA/ KA10992 (link). Kissinger's reaction was not as idiosyncratic as one might think. At the first meeting of the high-level Washington Special Actions Group held (in Kissinger's absence) after the war broke out, a couple of people (including Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger) assumed that "the Israelis had jumped the gun and had started the fighting"; it took a while before anyone at the meeting took issue with that assessment. Oral history interview with Ambassador Alfred L. Atherton, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Summer 1990 (link), p. 150. The record of the WSAG meeting supports that view. See FRUS 1969-76, 25:295-96 (link). Note also Kissinger's discussion of that initial WSAG view in his interview with James Hoge (link), 12:40.

[36] Kissinger-Shalev phone conversation, October 6, 1973, 6:55 a.m., in Kissinger, *Crisis*, p. 18. For facsimiles of the original, see DOSKTC (link) and DNSA/KA10980 (link).

there must be no preemptive action."[37] As he told a high-level meeting that evening, he had made it clear that morning to the Soviets, the Egyptians, and the Israelis (including the Israeli foreign minister, then in New York) that "if Israel took preemptive action, we would oppose them."[38] All this, of course, is very much at odds with his claim that the U.S. government "made no recommendation to the Israelis about any course of action."

Those warnings, although issued after the key Israeli decision had been made, reflected a basic American attitude—an attitude which played a much more important role in shaping Israeli policy on this issue than Kissinger seemed willing to admit. As one well-informed writer has pointed out, the Americans had, after all, "consistently warned Israel that it must not be responsible for initiating a Middle East war."[39] And it is quite clear from Israeli sources that in considering whether to attack preemptively concerns about how the Americans would react played a fundamental role.[40] Kissinger himself, moreover, clearly knew that this was the case. The Israeli ambassador, Simcha Dinitz, who had just flown back from Israel, briefed him on the evening of the 7th about the Israeli leadership's discussion of the preemption issue on the eve of the Arab attack. Dinitz reported one particularly striking remark Meir had made. He had reminded her that Kissinger had always told him that "whatever happens, don't be the one that strikes first." And she had answered: "You think I forgot?"[41] All this has a direct bearing on how Meir's October 7 letter to Kissinger is to be interpreted. When she told him that he knew the reasons "why we took no preemptive action," she was almost certainly alluding to the general American attitude and not to the specific warnings issued on the eve of the war. But if that was the case, then Meir's point that the Israelis had held back in large part because the Americans had made their opposition clear was absolutely correct; in dismissing that point, it was Kissinger himself, and not Meir, who was giving a very misleading impression.

The next case has to do with an offer Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko made to Nixon and Kissinger in two important meetings in September 1971. According to Kissinger's later account, Gromyko had made what was "on

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[37] Kissinger to Nixon, October 6, 1973, 8:50 a.m. (for delivery at 9:00 a.m.), NSAEBB98 (link), doc. 10 (direct link).

[38] Washington Special Actions Group meeting, October 6, 1973, 7:22 p.m., FRUS 1969-76, 25:331.

[39] Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 151. Quandt had served under Kissinger at the NSC from 1972 to 1974.

[40] See Jeremy Pressman, *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics* (Ithaca, 2008), pp. 100-104.

[41] Kissinger-Dinitz meeting, October 7, 1973, 8:20 p.m., NSAEBB98 (link), doc. 18 (direct link). Israeli documents released in 2014 confirm this point here about how important the American attitude was in Israel's deliberations at this time. The new Israeli material was summarized in the Israel State Archive's blog entry for October 6, 2014, "From Low Probability to the Yom Kippur War: Telegrams from Golda's Bureau to the Israeli Embassy in Washington, 5-7 October 1973," http://israelsdocuments.blogspot.com/2014/10/despite-minor-successesthe-situation-is.html.

the surface" an attractive proposal. "In the event of a comprehensive settlement," Gromyko had said, the Soviets "were prepared to withdraw their forces from the Middle East, join in an arms embargo to the area, and participate in guarantees of a settlement." But in reality, Kissinger argued, "there was less to these proposals than met the eye." The basic problem was that the Soviets insisted that a comprehensive settlement would have to "involve total Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories of all Arab states." Since they were "still backing the maximum Arab position" and there was "no sign" that they were willing to press their "clients toward flexibility," America "had no incentive to proceed jointly with Moscow." The procedure Gromyko had in mind was also unacceptable: "the promised withdrawal of Soviet forces would come at the *end* of the entire process; in other words, we would have to execute our entire contribution to this arrangement before the Soviets had to do anything." "And even then," Kissinger said, "the Soviets made their withdrawal from Egypt conditional on the withdrawal of American advisers from Iran."[42]

What is to be made of those claims? The first point to note is that whereas in his memoirs he minimized the importance of the Soviet offer, at the time both he and Nixon thought it was very significant. Kissinger's first reaction, when Nixon briefed him on what Gromyko had said, was that this was a "tremendous step" on the Soviets' part; and after meeting with Gromyko to confirm the terms of the offer, he told the president that the Soviets had made "a major concession," and that these proposals were "the biggest steps forward in the [Middle East] that have been made in your administration."[43] Even after he had had time to reflect on the Gromyko offer, Nixon still thought it was very attractive. Getting the Soviets to withdraw their forces in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders, he said a few months later, was "a damn good deal for just a few hunks of desert."[44] And the documentation that is now available fully supports that very positive appraisal.

That material shows, in fact, that, contrary to what Kissinger suggested in his memoirs, with regard to the terms of the final settlement the two big powers saw things in much the same way.[45] The evidence on this point is quite overwhelming. Gromyko, in his one-on-one meeting with Nixon on September 29, said that "if some kind of framework" was reached that would provide for the "withdrawal of Israeli troops from all occupied territories," the USSR, for its part, "would agree on the limitation, or, if you wish, even on stoppage" of arms deliveries to the area, and would be willing to

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[42] Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 1288. Emphasis in original text.

[43] Nixon-Kissinger meeting and phone conversation, September 30 and October 1, 1971, FRUS 1969-76, 13:1060, 1079 (link).

[44] Kissinger-Nixon meeting, March 18, 1972, in editorial note, FRUS 1969-76, 14:214 (link).

[45] This is a major theme in Jackson, "Lost Peace." See especially pp. 260-62.

withdraw its military units from the Middle East, leaving only a small number of advisors there, "like you have in Iran." The Soviets, he added, were also prepared, together with the United States and other powers, and in the context of a general agreement, to work out security arrangements for Israel.[46] And this, it is important to note, was very much in line with the course of action Kissinger had himself laid out a year earlier: "We would require Israel's assurance that it would return essentially to her prewar borders, in exchange for Arab commitments and an enforceable peace. We would tell both the Soviets and Nasser [the Egyptian president at the time] that Soviet combat personnel would have to be withdrawn after an agreement."[47] Indeed, both he and other top U.S. leaders said many times, both before and after September 1971, that as part of a settlement Israel would have to pull back to her 1967 borders, with only minor modifications.[48] That latter provision, incidentally, was no problem for their Soviet counterparts: the Soviet government agreed that minor territorial changes, at least on the border with Jordan, were not out of the question.[49]

In the Soviet view, moreover, once the border issue was resolved everything else (as Brezhnev later put it) would "fall into place."[50] His government, in fact, was now taking an accommodating position on all the other issues involved in a settlement: refugees, the Golan Heights, direct Arab-Israeli talks, and Israeli passage through the Straits of Tiran (through a permanent international presence at Sharm el-Sheikh).[51] So now, in agreeing to remove their military forces

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[46] Transcript of Nixon-Gromyko meeting, September 29, 1971, ibid., pp. 1051-55, (link). One can also listen to the tape of this meeting (Tape 580-20) on Luke Nichter's nixontapes.org website (link) (direct link to mp3); the section of interest begins at 39:50 on this mp3 and goes on for about another five minutes. See also Kissinger-Gromyko meeting, September 30, 1971, FRUS 1969-76, 13:1072 (link).

[47] Kissinger to Nixon, June 16, 1970, FRUS 1969-76, 23:441 (link).

[48] Nixon speech to the United Nations, September 18, 1969, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Nixon 1969,* p. 727 (link). Saunders to Kissinger, July 2, 1970, FRUS 1969-76, 12:542 (link); Nixon-Gromyko-Rogers meeting, September 29, 1971, FRUS 1969-76, 13:1040 n.8 (Rogers and Nixon on borders) (link); Kissinger-Nixon meeting, March 18, 1972, summarized in editorial note; and Kissinger-Gromyko meetings, May 28, 1972; all in FRUS 1969-76, 14:214, 1191-93, 1195, 1203, 1211-12 (link). See also Kissinger-Gromyko meeting, May 8, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 15:437 (link); Kissinger-Gromyko meeting, June 23, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:216 (link); Kissinger-Dobrynin meeting, March 1, 1972 (Soviet account), in David Geyer and Douglas Selvage, eds., *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972* (Washington: GPO, 2007), p. 601; and Kissinger-Ismail meeting, May 20, 1973, p. 22, DNSA/KT00732 (link). Note finally Jackson, "Lost Peace" (link), pp. 93-94.

[49] Kissinger to Nixon, June 13, 1969, FRUS 1969-76, 12:179 (link); Gromyko in meeting with Nixon and Rogers, September 29, 1971, FRUS 1969-76, 13:1041 (link); Kissinger-Dobrynin meeting, March 1, 1972, FRUS 1969-76, 14:188 (link); NSC meeting, April 25, 1969, FRUS 1969-76, 23:90 (link).

[50] Nixon-Brezhnev meeting, June 23, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 15:539 (link) and FRUS 1969-76, 25:221 (link). See also Dobrynin to Kissinger, January 28, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:21 (link).

[51] On the refugee question, see Kissinger-Gromyko meetings, May 28, 1972, and June 23, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 14:1189 (link) and ibid., 25:213 (link). As Dobrynin pointed out in that latter meeting, the two sides had reached agreement on this issue in 1969. On Sharm el-Sheikh, see, for example, Kissinger-Dobrynin meeting, March 10, 1970, in Geyer and Selvage, *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years*, p. 134, and Kissinger-Dobrynin meeting, May 18, 1972, FRUS 1969-76, 14:941 (link). On the Golan Heights, see Kissinger-Dobrynin meeting, April 14, 1969, in Geyer and Selvage, *Soviet-*

from the area as part of a settlement, the Soviets felt they had taken a very important step forward. Their ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, called it "the most generous offer the Soviet Union would ever make." They were offering to withdraw their forces, limit arms shipments to the region, and guarantee the settlement: "What more could Israel possibly want?" The Soviets, he said, "would agree to almost anything" the Americans proposed by way of guarantees. And the USSR would be "extremely flexible" in negotiating the settlement; only on the border issue did it have a fixed position—and even on that point, as we just noted, its position was not fundamentally different from what the Americans had in mind.[52] The Politburo, Dobrynin told Kissinger, had in effect accepted the conditions for a peace agreement Nixon and Kissinger had laid down in July 1970: they were willing to withdraw Soviet forces from the area, and would "accept almost any settlement in terms of guarantees and other requirements in return for a solution."[53] It was thus scarcely the case, as Kissinger had claimed in his memoirs, that the USSR "was still backing the maximum Arab position" or that Gromyko had given "no sign of the Soviet Union's willingness to press its clients toward flexibility" or that he had given America "no incentive to proceed jointly with Moscow."[54]

Indeed, with regard to Kissinger's comment in his memoirs that "there was no possibility of agreeing now on the shape of the final settlement," it is important to note that he told Gromyko explicitly at the time that the two powers could move ahead on the basis of the proposal the Soviet foreign minister had laid out.[55] Nixon and Brezhnev, he suggested, might be able to "agree on the nature of the ultimate settlement" at their meeting in Moscow in May 1972. But this agreement would have to be kept very secret, since Nixon could not run the risk of a leak that year, before the presidential election in November. There certainly was "no possibility of implementing a final agreement before the American election."[56] That implied that implementation would take place in 1973, and Kissinger confirmed this point in a meeting with Dobrynin a month later: his understanding, he said, "was that we would not begin implementing the agreement on our side until after the elections; I had made this point clear to Gromyko that we could come to an understanding which of course on our side would have to be very binding, but that the actual implementation would be

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American Relations: The Détente Years, p. 51. On direct talks, see, for example, Kissinger-Gromyko meeting, May 28, 1972, FRUS 1969-76, 14:1206 (link).

[52] Kissinger-Dobrynin meeting, October 15, 1971, FRUS 1969-76, 14:14-15 (link).

[53] Kissinger-Dobrynin meeting, October 30, 1971, FRUS 1969-76, 14:26 (link).

[54] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1288.

[55] For the comment, see Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 1288.

[56] Kissinger-Gromyko meeting, September 30, 1971, FRUS 1969-76, 13:1073-74 (link).

left until 1973."[57] And in April 1972 he told Gromyko that implementation would take place "within the first six months" of 1973; he went on to specify that implementation could not "begin until January," clearly implying that it *would* begin at the start of the year.[58] All this is very much at odds with the impression a reader would have gotten from the passage in his memoirs dealing with the September 1971 meetings with Gromyko, which clearly suggested that, given Soviet policy, joint action of this sort was impossible.

There are, moreover, two other points where Kissinger's account of this episode is contradicted by the documents. He claimed in his memoirs that the "promised withdrawal of Soviet forces would come at the *end* of the entire process"—that is, after the full Israeli withdrawal had been completed. But in the record of his meeting with Gromyko the Soviet foreign minister agreed that all the measures he had proposed, including the withdrawal of Soviet forces, "would go into effect as part of an interim settlement"—that is, it would *not* have to wait until the entire process had been completed.[59] Kissinger had also said that the Soviets had made the withdrawal from Egypt "conditional on the withdrawal of American advisors from Iran." But in reality the point about Iran was rather different. The advisors from Iran would *not* have to be pulled out; all Gromyko had said was that the USSR could, after the agreement took effect, keep about the same number of advisors in Egypt as America had in Iran. So Kissinger's account of this episode turns out not to be very accurate.

The final but perhaps most interesting example has to do with Kissinger's account of his meetings with his Egyptian counterpart, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's national security advisor Hafiz Ismail. The two men met in February 1973 for two days of intense discussion. According to the account Kissinger gave in his memoirs the Egyptians were uncompromising. Ismail, he said, had come "less to discuss mediation—and therefore compromise—than to put forward a polite ultimatum for terms beyond our capacity to fulfill." "Above all," he wrote, "Israel had to agree, before anything else happened, that it would return to its 1967 borders with *all* neighbors, with some margin for adjustment, perhaps, on the West Bank. Only on that basis would Egypt join the negotiating process, and then only to discuss security arrangements." And if an Israeli-Egyptian agreement were reached, his country would only agree to end the state of war. Full peace "would have to await a comprehensive settlement with *all* the other parties, including Syria and the Palestinians," thus giving "the most intractable parties a veto, in effect, over the whole process." The Egyptian proposal,

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[57] Kissinger-Dobrynin meeting, October 30, 1971, FRUS 1969-76, 14:26 (link).

[58] Kissinger-Gromyko meeting, April 23, 1972, FRUS 1969-76, 14:578 (link).

[59] Kissinger-Gromyko meeting, September 30, 1971, FRUS 1969-76, 13:1072 (link).

he wrote, thus "left us with little reason for optimism." The policy Ismail had laid out was "not essentially different" from the policy that had produced the present deadlock, and he had little hope that it could lead to a negotiated settlement.[60]

But it is clear from the documentary evidence now available that the account Kissinger gave in his memoirs was again deeply misleading. As he told Nixon at the time, Ismail had in fact laid out a very new policy. "I thought the most important thing," he noted—and this was something Sadat "had never said to anyone and won't say to anybody"—was that the Egyptians were "willing to make a separate Egyptian-Israeli deal, because they know that afterwards the Jordanians and Syrians are going to follow the same procedure." This was the "first time" that the Egyptians had said anything of the sort. "Up to now" they had taken the view "that the whole package must be done as one: Syria, Jordan and Egypt."[61] To be sure, a comprehensive peace was still Egypt's long-term goal, but the connection with the Egyptian part of the settlement was, at least at first, to be fairly minimal. As one of the Egyptians taking part in the talks with Kissinger pointed out, there just had to be some indication in the Egyptian settlement "that we are going forward to a whole settlement"—just "some paragraphs" laying out basic principles of the sort contained "in the 242 document"—that is, in the basic U.N. Security Council resolution which had laid out in very general language the terms of settlement (and which Kissinger himself did not take very seriously).[62]

And, as the lengthy transcripts of his meetings with Kissinger make clear, Ismail *was* interested in serious negotiations under mainly American auspices. He certainly never said that Israel would first have to agree to return to its pre-1967 borders (with perhaps some modifications in its border with Jordan) before there could be any negotiations at all. One could begin, in Ismail's view, by working out what he called "heads of agreement"—basic principles that would govern the *Egyptian* part of the settlement, negotiated in talks with the Americans, with the Israelis being brought in in

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[60] Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 215-16. Emphasis in original text.

[61] Nixon-Kissinger conversation, February 26, 1973, quoted in editorial note, FRUS 1969-76, 25:85 (link). Note also his characterization of the Egyptian proposal in his meeting with the Israeli ambassador the next day: Kissinger-Rabin meeting, February 27, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:97 (link). On this episode in general, and especially for the point that Kissinger thought the proposals Ismail presented marked an important step forward, see Yigal Kipnis, *1973: The Road to War* (Charlottesville: Just World Books, 2013), chapter 2, esp. pp. 72, 77. (This book was originally published in Hebrew in 2012.)

[62] Kissinger-Ismail meeting, February 25, 1973, p. 20, DNSA/KT00681 (link). In his talks with the Israelis, Kissinger in fact exaggerated the degree to which the Egyptians were thinking in terms of a separate peace with Israel. The basic point here is also supported by the Israeli sources. "This time it is completely clear," he later told the Israeli ambassador. "The Egyptians are only concerned about themselves and do not tie an agreement with them to the other Arab countries." Kissinger to Dinitz, June 2, 1973, quoted in Kipnis, *1973*, p. 68.

some way at some point.[63] The "heads of agreement" would then be fleshed out in a more detailed written agreement; the Israelis would be more deeply involved in this stage. All this would be followed by talks about implementation. Once the "heads of agreement" with Egypt were worked out, an effort would be made to "start the motors" running with Jordan and Syria. The same basic process would unfold on those fronts, but "a step behind."[64] But what if Syria refused to come along? Well, that problem could be left for later. Ismail certainly did not suggest that Egypt would be held back forever by a Syrian veto, and he probably felt that after both Egypt and Jordan had made their own agreements with Israel, it would be hard for Syria to refuse to settle on similar terms. As for the Palestinians, he at one point told Kissinger that once Israel and Jordan reached an agreement, that would "bring down the curtain" on the whole Palestinian issue, at least as an international problem; it would then be a matter for King Hussein of Jordan and the Palestinians to settle internally.[65] But Kissinger could scarcely believe that Egypt could really wash its hands of the Palestinians in that way, and when he pressed Ismail on that issue, the Egyptian agreed to give more thought to the problem. The one point that comes across from this exchange, however, is that the Palestinians would not be allowed to prevent Egypt from moving forward toward at least a partial peace agreement with Israel.

The basic plan Ismail laid out, moreover, was not too different from the kind of strategy the Americans had favored for some time. From September 1971 on, the policy, at least in theory, had been to move quickly after the November 1972 elections toward a settlement, at least with Egypt and Jordan, based on the principles the United States and the Soviet Union already shared—principles, in fact, which had more or less been agreed upon in the Moscow talks in 1972; that settlement would be worked out in further talks involving the regional actors, with the big powers helping to move matters forward behind the scenes. The Egyptian plan was very much in line with that basic approach, although it emphasized the American role in pressing Israel and played down what the Soviets were expected to do. And in substantive terms (as noted above), the Americans had for some time accepted the principle that Israel would have to return to her 1967 borders, with only minor modifications; here too they saw eye-to-eye with the Egyptians. The Americans had proposed, however, that while Egyptian sovereignty over the whole Sinai peninsula could be recognized,

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[63] Kissinger-Ismail meeting, February 26, 1973, pp. 8, 11, and esp. 22-23, DNSA/KT00682 (link). Ismail, in fact, wanted to bring the Israelis in relatively quickly. "But we leave it to your feel," he told Kissinger, "as to the appropriate time—the development of these talks, the atmosphere. Because we won't want to leave the Israeli participation hanging on for a long time. I think that we would like them to come in and start to be in the picture as soon as it is practicable." There were no preconditions mentioned here. Ibid., p. 4 (link).

[64] Ibid., p. 7 (link).

[65] Ibid., pp. 14-15, 36 (link).

Israel's security needs in that area could not be ignored, and maybe a temporary Israeli presence in the Sinai could be part of the agreement. And the Egyptians seemed willing to work out some sort of compromise on that basis.[66]

One thus comes away from the lengthy transcripts of the February 1973 Kissinger-Ismail meetings with the sense that the Egyptians were serious about moving toward peace, that Kissinger had no fundamental objection to the course of action they had proposed—and that Ismail and Kissinger had, in fact, reached a near-understanding about how matters were to proceed. That point is particularly clear from the way Kissinger summed up where matters stood at the end of the talks:

> Dr. Kissinger: Now let me sum up where I understand we are, and see where we agree. And then we have to discuss who tells what to whom.
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> You have defined a process by which, during the course of the spring, you and we—we after discussing in general with the Israelis—would agree on some general principles, heads of agreement, whose practical concurrence would be to give some concrete meaning to 242, at least with respect to Egypt. Then when these heads of agreement have been achieved between you and us, then we should achieve Israeli acquiescence. We will have to reserve what the margin is. It may be impossible to ask us to get total acquiescence. More realistic would be to try to get the thrust of it maintained. But the spirit would be that the major thrust of it would be acceptable. After the heads of agreement are achieved, a process would start, with the Israelis engaged more, which would lead to the detailed provisions. After the heads of the agreement, then it might be possible to consider what we call an interim agreement—the initial phase. The heads of the agreement, and beginning the process of redeployment, and the opening of the Suez Canal might be agreed to by September 1.
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> Mr. Ismail: Or before that. June or July.
>
> Dr. Kissinger: Or before. Yes. I am just trying to envision. And, of course, outside parties, with good will, would try to help keep the process going. As you move towards the completion of the Egyptian-Israeli negotiation, you would think that the Syrian and Jordan negotiations should have at least reached the point of agreement on the heads of agreement. Hopefully.
>
> Mr. Ismail: Hopefully. Before we come to the final stage of agreement.
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> Dr. Kissinger: Yes. If those principles are well chosen, that might not be all that difficult. Because the concerns about sovereignty and security with respect to the Sinai might be the same

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[66] Dr. Muhammad Ghanim, another high Egyptian official who took part in the talks, was quite explicit in this regard. "We feel the basic obstacle to an Egyptian settlement," he said, "is to find how to compromise, how to reconcile the needs of the security of Israel with our sovereignty over Arab land." Kissinger-Ismail meeting, February 25, 1973, p. 20, DNSA/KT00681 (link). With regard to the rest of the settlement, the Egyptians were clearly open to compromise. As Ismail himself put it: "Well, as long as we put the question of land and sovereignty aside, I think we might be able to achieve some kind of reconciliation on the other elements." Kissinger-Ismail meeting, February 26, 1973, p. 32, DNSA/KT00682 (link). He reiterated the point in informal conversations with another U.S. official a little later. "The key to a compromise," Ismail said, was "the principle of Egyptian sovereignty in the Sinai. Sovereignty, he said, was "solid enough for them to defend to their own people, yet flexible enough to accommodate practical arrangements that may be necessary." "If basic principles were agreed upon," he added, "he was confident that some acceptable formula could be found for the practical arrangements." Roundup of Ismail comments made after Kissinger's talks with him, at dinner on February 26 and at the airport on February 27, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files [henceforth: HAKOF], box 135, folder "Rabin/Kissinger (Dinitz)," [3 of 3], Nixon Presidential Library [henceforth: NPL], Yorba Linda, CA (link).

as those for the Golan Heights. That is why a far-sighted view on your part might unlock the whole thing. With Syria it is only a security problem. The Jordan problem is more.

The completion of the Egyptian settlement might produce an end to the state of war. Its elements you have listed: free passage, an end to the boycott, a commitment against guerilla activities from Egyptian soil, an end of the reservation in international agreements, non-interference (which would include by radio). And incidentally, I might say that the more attractive that part can be made the better for us and the easier it will be. It is in that area that you can be of the greatest help to us if we are to play a role. The Jordanian settlement would be considered conclusive for the Palestine situation. Although Hussein will have to deal with the Palestinians, the question between the Palestinians and Jordan will not become a precondition for recognition.

Dr. Ghanim: It will still be an internal problem for Hussein in Jordan.

Dr. Kissinger: What we are concerned with is that the internal problem in Jordan not become an obstacle to a settlement between Israel and the other Arab countries. It is not part of this negotiation. This is what I am saying.

Mr. Ismail: Yes.

Dr. Kissinger: And at the end of that process, plus some acceptable solution of the refugee problem through the U.N., a state of peace would develop. But if I understand you correctly you said that once the Syrian and Jordanian issues were settled, then the recognition of Israel could follow that. Is that correct? Or does that also follow the refugee solution? I am a little confused.

Mr. Ismail: I will try to fix that point, that inter-relationship between recognition and the refugees at the end of the Syrian and Jordan settlements with Israel.

Dr. Kissinger: You will think about that?

Mr. Ismail: Yes. And try to make it more precise.

Dr. Kissinger: All right. So that is my present understanding of the general process as you envision it.

Mr. Ismail: Yes.

Dr. Kissinger: Now, you will do some thinking, and so will we, about some practical issues, such as who will talk to the Syrians. Don't volunteer me!

Mr. Ismail: No.

Dr. Kissinger: And at what stage. And when Israel should be brought in. But we will make a judgment of that. We will make a recommendation. We are probably the better judge. Then on the three issues I mentioned to you—the phasing of recognition, the various forms of security measures, and the precise definition of the end of the state of war. And then we should meet again around April 10.

So it really seems that Kissinger had no problem with Ismail's general approach, and appeared mainly concerned with how it could be fleshed out in practice.[67] One certainly does not get the impression that Ismail had merely "put

[67] Kissinger-Ismail meeting, February 26, 1973, pp. 35-37. In a letter to Ismail sent about four months later, Kissinger referred to the procedure Ismail had outlined in February and noted that he had "agreed that this could be a reasonable

forward a polite ultimatum for terms beyond our capacity to fulfill."[68] And in various specific ways Kissinger's account in his memoirs of Ismail's proposal is simply not supported by those documents. Ismail, for example, had not insisted that Israel agree basically to withdraw from all the occupied territories "before anything else happened." The process, in fact, was to begin before Israel was even brought in. Nor had he insisted that "full peace" with Israel would have to "await a comprehensive settlement with *all* the other parties, including Syria and the Palestinians"; with regard to the Palestinians, at least, he had simply agreed that the Egyptians needed to think more about the issue, and a lot of what he said had in fact suggested that if the other issues were resolved, the Palestinian question would not be a stumbling block to "full peace" with Egypt. So again Kissinger's later account did not give a good sense for what had happened in his meetings with Ismail.

What general conclusions, then, are to be drawn from the whole analysis in this section? The first and most obvious point is that the accounts Kissinger later gave of what had happened during his time in office have to be taken with a grain of salt. This is not to say, of course, that his three enormous volumes of memoirs, along with his other writings and utterances dealing with these matters, are devoid of historical value. Those three volumes are, in fact, perhaps the most extraordinary political memoir ever written, and no historian interested in the period would ever dream of ignoring them. The point is simply that what he says there should not just be accepted on faith and that it is important to assess his claims in the light of the other evidence we now have access to.

A second point is perhaps a bit less obvious, and this is that the distortions were by no means random. In all three Middle East cases, the effect was to minimize America's responsibility (and especially Kissinger's personal responsibility) for what happened. The message in his passage dealing with the Gromyko offer was that the Soviets were still impossible—that they continued to "back the maximum Arab position"—so there was no point to trying to cooperate with them in working out a settlement. The message in the passage dealing with the meetings with Ismail was that the Egyptians were still impossible—that all Ismail had done was to "put forward a polite ultimatum for terms beyond our capacity to fulfill." And his account of the preemption issue on the eve of the 1973 war also suggested that America's ability to influence what happened was severely limited. Israel, the argument ran, had made the decision not to preempt

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way to proceed" (link). Kissinger to Ismail (the recipient's name was sanitized out, but it is obvious from the content of the letter and from the withdrawal sheet at the top of the file that he was the addressee), n.d. (but almost certainly from late June 1973), in HAKOF, box 130, folder "Saunders Memoranda—Sensitive, Egypt/Hafez Ismail," NPL. The fact that this was sent through CIA channels is also clear from the withdrawal sheet. But by the time this letter was sent it was clear to everyone that the plan could not be put into effect. The U.S. government would have had to put a certain degree of pressure on Israel, and with the Watergate affair coming to a head, Nixon was no longer able to take action of that sort.

[68] This is also the conclusion to be drawn from Yigal Kipnis's discussion of this episode in *1973*, pp. 64-72.

entirely on her own; the subtext was that the U.S. government had little control over what Israel did. There is a clear pattern here, and that pattern tells us something about Kissinger's purposes in presenting things the way he did. He wanted to give the impression that America's room for maneuver was quite limited and that he personally should therefore not be blamed for the way events unfolded. But having identified the bias, we are in a position to control for it when we analyze Kissinger's account of the main issue we are concerned with here, U.S. policy at the end of the October 1973 war.

A Green Light for Israel?

The tide of battle in October 1973 eventually turned against the Arabs. The Soviets then pressed hard for a ceasefire and Kissinger agreed to go to Moscow to see what could be worked out. But, contrary to what is often claimed, he was no longer particularly interested in holding the Israelis back.[69] As he himself later pointed out, "what we wanted was the most massive Arab defeat possible so that it would be clear to the Arabs that they would get nowhere with dependence on the Soviets."[70] It was for that reason that he now sought to give the Israelis more time to complete their military operations, and in fact one of the main reasons he had agreed to go to Moscow was that the trip would give Israel another couple of days.[71] But on October 21 he did negotiate a ceasefire agreement with Brezhnev and Gromyko. That led to a U.N. Security Council resolution, adopted just before 1 a.m. on the 22nd. The resolution was supposed to go into effect twelve hours later—that is, just before 1 p.m. New York time that day, equivalent to just before 7 p.m. Israeli time.[72] According to Kissinger's later account, the Israelis were not informed of the decision as promptly as the Americans had intended because of a communications problem in Moscow; he therefore indicated to the Israelis when he met with them on the 22nd that he "would understand if there was a few hours' 'slippage' in the cease-fire deadline" while he was flying

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[69] For the argument that Kissinger still sought to limit the Israeli victory, see, for example, Sheehan, *Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, p. 36. It is important to realize, however, that Kissinger's attitude on this issue had shifted dramatically in the course of the war, and in its first phase his position had been very different, much more in line with what Sheehan and many others (including Kissinger himself at points) have claimed.

[70] Kissinger meeting with Jewish leaders, June 15, 1975, FRUS 1969-76, 26:712 (link).

[71] Kissinger-Schlesinger-Colby-Moorer meeting, October 19, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:622 (link); and Kissinger meeting with Jewish leaders, June 15, 1975, FRUS 1969-76, 26:712 (link). See also Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 542. He was also very irritated by the fact that Nixon had told Brezhnev, just before Kissinger arrived in Moscow, that Kissinger had "full authority" to reach a ceasefire agreement with the Soviets; Nixon's letter, Kissinger later wrote, deprived him of "any capacity to stall." See, for example, Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 546-47. Note also his discussion of this episode in his 2003 book talk with James Hoge (link), 19:30 to 20:20. "I wanted to drag out this negotiation" over the ceasefire, he told Hoge, "in order to strengthen our bargaining position" (19:07). He took much the same line in the PBS documentary, "The 50 Years War: Israel and the Arabs" (1999), part 2, 22:45 to 23:30 (link).

[72] See FRUS 1969-74, 25:652 n.3 (link).

home, "to compensate for the four hours lost through the communications breakdown in Moscow."[73] But when the ceasefire began to unravel the next day, Kissinger wrote, he had the "sinking feeling" that those remarks of his might have "emboldened" the Israelis.[74]

What are we to make of Kissinger's claims in this area? Given what was shown in the previous section, neither Kissinger's own accounts nor the historical works based on his testimony should be accepted uncritically. They all have to be evaluated in the light of the massive and quite extraordinary body of evidence now available, and when one examines the sources it becomes clear that there are real problems with the way this episode is commonly interpreted. Kissinger, first of all, did *not* tell the Israelis in his meetings with them on the 22nd that they had to stop their offensive, allowing only a four-hour delay. Everything he said, in fact, pointed in the opposite direction. "You won't get violent protests from Washington," he told Meir, "if something happens during the night, while I'm flying. Nothing can happen in Washington until noon tomorrow."[75] And "noon tomorrow" implied at least a 16-hour delay beyond the ceasefire deadline (if the reference was to Israeli time), or perhaps a 22-hour delay (if, as is more likely, he meant Washington time), not the mere four-hour delay that Kissinger had admitted he had been willing to give the Israelis to compensate for the communications breakdown.[76] In another conversation, moreover, this time with Israeli military leaders, he might have gone even further; according to Matti Golan (relying on Israeli sources), Kissinger spoke in terms not of hours but of days. When he was asked during that meeting how long it would take "to complete the encirclement of the two Egyptian armies on the east bank of the Suez Canal," the Air Force chief, according to Golan, answered that they could be destroyed "in two or three days." "Two or three days?" Kissinger supposedly replied. "That's all? Well, in Vietnam the cease-fire didn't go into effect at the exact time that was agreed on." To the Israelis, Golan writes, it sounded like Kissinger was giving them a

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[73] Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 556-58, 569. Note also Kissinger to Scowcroft, October 21, 1973, summarized in FRUS 1969-76, 25:647 n.2, and Kissinger-Meir meeting, October 22, 1973, ibid., 25:657 (link).

[74] Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 569.

[75] Kissinger-Meir meeting, October 22, 1973, 1:35 p.m., FRUS 1969-76, 25:658 (link). See also the Israeli account (in English) of a later meeting with Meir et others, October 22. 1973, 3 p.m., https://www.archives.gov.il/product-page/2410453.

[76] We should also note that he did not, as is sometimes suggested, impulsively give the Israelis these assurances during his stopover in Israel in order to soothe their ruffled feathers (about being presented with the ceasefire resolution as a great power fait accompli). The message about how the Israelis could have a little extra time to comply with the ceasefire (because of the communications breakdown) had, in fact, already been given to them the previous evening. See Kissinger to Scowcroft, October 21, 1973 (4:05 p.m. Washington time) (link), and Scowcroft to Kissinger, October 21 (8:42 p.m. Washington time) (link), both in HAKOF, box 39, folder "HAK Trip: HAKTO, etc." [3 of 4], NPL. An extract from the Kissinger cable is in FRUS 1969-76, 25:647 n.2.

green light to continue operations for two or three days more.[77] But Golan's book is not a totally reliable historical source, and this particular story should not carry much evidentiary weight.[78]

One does not need, however, to rely on sources of that kind to reach the conclusion that the green-lighting of Israel was part of a deliberate strategy. Kissinger's basic idea, as a number of documents show, was that the Israelis could take advantage of the fact that no one would really know how far they had actually advanced at the time the ceasefire was supposed to go into effect. That meant that no matter where they were at the time the shooting actually stopped they would not have to withdraw to any particular line. As he told Dinitz in a telephone conversation at noon on the 23rd, since "nobody will be able to tell where" the forces were, the ceasefire resolution could not "be given practical effect"; the exact standstill line was "indeterminable."[79] In line with that idea, he had encouraged the Israeli leaders the

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[77] Matti Golan, *The Secret Conversations of Henry Kissinger: Step-by-Step Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Quadrangle, 1976), pp. 86-87 (link). The Kissinger comment was not quoted in the U.S. record of the meeting. Military Briefing, October 22, 1973, 4:15 p.m., in NSAEBB98 (link). It is possible, of course, that the remark Golan quoted had been an "off the record" comment. And one U.S. source does provide a certain degree of support for Golan's account. Helmut Sonnenfeldt, who was part of the small group Kissinger took with him on the trip, said flatly that Kissinger told Meir that "you have another 48 hours, and then you've got to stop beating up on the Egyptians, because it'll get us into serious problems with the Soviets if you encircle the Egyptian Third Army and destroy it." But Sonnenfeldt had been less categorical earlier in the interview. "I think Henry," he said, "might also have winked a little bit at [Meir] and indicated that she had just a couple of days, maybe, for Israeli forces to continue, but then they'd have to stop," and he went on to note that he had not been at the Kissinger-Meir meeting. What this suggests is that Sonnenfeldt was just speculating about what Kissinger had told the Israeli prime minister and that his testimony on this point is therefore of only limited historical value. Oral history interview with Helmut Sonnenfeldt, July 24, 2000, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project (link), pp. 127, 198-99. It is also worth noting that the recently released Israeli account of this meeting refers to the 2-3 day period, but does not have Kissinger making the sort of comment Golan had attributed to him. Kissinger meeting with Israeli military leaders (with Meir and others present), October 22, 1973, 4:15 p.m, https://www.archives.gov.il/product-page/2410427.

[78] Golan had claimed, for example, that Kissinger, prior to his trip to Moscow, had assured the Israelis (who very much wanted to continue their military offensive) that they had "had nothing to fear": "he didn't believe that any agreement would be achieved in Moscow," and that "no big news would come from the meeting in the Kremlin." Golan, *Secret Conversations*, pp. 75-76 (link). But it had in fact been clear to the Israelis from the outset that the purpose of Kissinger's Moscow trip was to arrange a ceasefire, and Kissinger had by no means promised the Israelis that no ceasefire agreement would be negotiated in Moscow. See Kissinger-Dinitz phone conversations, October 19, 1973, 7:09 and 7:40 p.m., FRUS 1969-76, 25:619-20 (link) and DOSKTC (link). See also Shalev to Gazit, October 18 and 19, 1973, in *Telegrams sent from the Israeli Embassy in Washington to the Prime Minister's Office during the Yom Kippur War, 5-31 October 1973,* frames 202 and 222. This collection was posted on the Israel State Archives webpage on the Yom Kippur War, and will henceforth cited as "*Israeli Telegrams*"; the URLs are given in the appendix (link). Kissinger, one should note, dismissed the Golan book as worthless when it came out. When asked for comment, a State Department spokesman said that Kissinger had neither read, nor intended to read, the book in its entirety, but on the basis of the excerpts he had seen, he considered it "by and large a collection of lies, distortions, and material so taken out of context as to amount to lies." Bernard Gwertzman, "Israeli Book Gives a Critical View of Kissinger," *New York Times*, March 21, 1976 (link). William Quandt's assessment was more judicious: while Golan was "often quite accurate" and provided "new information of real value," the book was full of minor errors; one also had to wonder about how solid Golan's account was, since the material it was based on had been confiscated by the Israeli censors before this version of the book was written. Quandt review of Golan and Sheehan books, *Middle East Journal* 31, no. 2 (Spring 1977), pp. 218-219 (link).

[79] Kissinger-Dinitz phone conversation, October 23, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:683-84 (link). For the Israeli account of the conversation, see *Dinitz to Gazit, October 23, 1973, 1:10 p.m. (reporting on 12:05 p.m. conversation with Kissinger), in

previous day to "just say" they would stop where they were at the time the ceasefire was supposed to take effect provided the other side also did so, taking care to note that whether offensive operations actually continued lay within their "domestic jurisdiction" and that "reality" (meaning, presumably, "and not U.N. resolutions") would determine where the ceasefire lines actually were.[80]

He was more explicit when he met with Dinitz in person on the afternoon of the 23rd. He told the ambassador that he wanted Israel to improve her position in the field as much as possible; indeed, he said, he had made that clear to Meir when he saw her in Israel. But for diplomatic reasons it would be helpful if the Israelis accepted a U.N. resolution calling for a return to the original ceasefire line. That resolution, he thought, would have no substantive effect; the Israelis would not be expected "to return to the positions from which" they had started. He asked only that they find "200-300 unimportant and insignificant yards from which" to withdraw, so that they could claim they were complying with the U.N. resolution. There were no threats, no demands, no criticism even of the Israeli offensive—an attitude very much at odds with the much harder line Nixon was taking with the Israelis at the time.[81]

He reiterated the point, and indeed went a bit further, in two phone conversations with Dinitz that evening. "When the pressure starts," he told the ambassador, the Israelis could withdraw a bit—just a "few hundred yards" from where they would be at that point, which was of course well beyond the original ceasefire line—but "not right now." "The time to make moves," he said, "is just a little bit before you are forced to." Israel, he thought, should continue military operations for another day: the fighting should only stop "tomorrow," that is, two days after the ceasefire was supposed to go into effect. Then someone should announce that Israel was returning to the original ceasefire line; the assumption was that since no one knew where that line was, there would be no way to prove that the Israelis, in withdrawing a few hundred yards, were not pulling back to the original line. In terms of tactics, the idea was that the Israelis should say one thing and do another, but the Israeli government was unwilling to go along with what it viewed as an unnecessarily dishonest policy and refused to accept what Kissinger called his "strong tactical advice." In its view, the fact that some Egyptian commanders had continued to fight past the deadline (and were supposedly the first ones to

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Israeli Telegrams (link) [frames 276-77]. According to that account, when Dinitz said that there was no way of knowing where the ceasefire line was, Kissinger replied, "If so, and there's no way of knowing, what do you care if a resolution is passed calling for a return to the lines that existed when the ceasefire went into effect?"

[80] Kissinger meeting with Israeli leaders, October 22, 1973, 2:30 p.m., FRUS 1969-76, 25:663 (link).

[81] *Dinitz to Gazit, October 23, 1973, 6 p.m. (reporting 3 p.m. meeting), *Israeli Telegrams* (link) [frames 281-82]. See also *Shalev to Gazit, October 23, 1973, 6:30 p.m., ibid. [frames 283-286]. For Nixon's insistence that the offensive cease, see *Dinitz to Gazit, October 23, 1973, 1:15 p.m. (reporting Dinitz's 12:40 p.m. conversation with Scowcroft), *Israeli Telegrams* (link) [frames 277-78].

violate the ceasefire) gave it all the justification it needed to do what it wanted to do anyway—namely, to cut off the Egyptian Third Army in the Sinai. Kissinger was irritated by the Israeli response—not by the Israelis' refusal to stop fighting, but by their unwillingness to defend their actions by making false claims about where their forces were at the time the October 22 ceasefire was supposed to take effect. "The trouble with your people," he told Dinitz on the evening of the 23rd, "is they have too much integrity." He had clearly not given up on his plan. "In my personal opinion," he said (according to the Israeli account of these conversations), "if you could buy some time by discussing the 200-300 yards, why not give up some of your integrity? After all, within a short while it will become clear that 25,000 Egyptians do not have water or supplies and then you have the upper hand anyway." And the next day he complained to the ambassador that because of Israeli boasting—he was particularly annoyed with some remarks Israeli defense minister Moshe Dayan had just made—"the strategy which I had proposed is no longer possible." "The Israelis are not only obnoxious," he complained to other U.S. officials a little later that morning, "they're also boastful. If they had kept their mouths shut, no one would have known where the ceasefire line was."[82]

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[82] Kissinger-Dinitz telephone conversations, October 23, 1973 (7:20 p.m. and 8:30 p.m.), DOSKTC (link to first telcon and link to second telcon), and, for the Israeli account, see *Dinitz to Meir, October 23, 1973 (no time given), *Israeli Telegrams* (link) [frames 291-92]. See also Kissinger, *Crisis*, pp. 322-23 (which did not include the latter part of the transcript of the first of those calls, where Kissinger complained about the Israelis having too much integrity). Another Israeli account of Dinitz's report of his 3:15 p.m. (Washington time) meeting with Kissinger also shows Kissinger pressing the Israelis to accept the new ceasefire and then just pull back 200-300 yards. *Shalev to Gazit, October 23, 1973, 6:30 p.m., *Israeli Telegrams* (link) [frames 283-86]. Note also Kissinger-Meir meeting, November 1, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:816 (link), for another Kissinger complaint about Israel being too honest. For the point about how his strategy was no longer viable, see Kissinger-Dinitz phone conversation, October 24, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:705 (link). For the point about how the Israelis should have kept their mouths shut, see WSAG meeting, October 24, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:711 (link). But even a week later he had not totally given up on this strategy; he now recognized, however, that it might be harder to implement than he had hoped: "unfortunately the Russians photographed something." See Kissinger-Meir meeting, November 1, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:815-16 (link). Finally, with regard to the point that the Egyptian violations, which were real enough, were essentially being used by the Israelis as an excuse for continuing with their own offensive, it should be noted that U.S. intelligence at the time seemed to think this was the case. According to the October 23 President's Daily Brief, for example, while "some Egyptian units" had been ordered "to continue combat operations despite the cease-fire," it was not clear "that Egypt 'incessantly and continuously' violated the agreement, as Israel claims." The Israelis, the authors speculated, "may have required little in the way of Egyptian provocation before deciding to press their military advantage." President's Daily Brief, October 23, 1973, CIA Electronic Reading Room (link) (link to document). It was, in fact, quite clear to CIA analysts on the 24th that the Israelis had not been particularly interested in ending the fighting. "The concerted Israeli effort to capture Suez and cut off the Egyptian 3rd Army in the two days since the original cease-fire deadline," they thought, "casts considerable doubt on Tel Aviv's claims that Egypt bears full responsibility for the cease-fire violations." Even on the morning of the 23rd, it had been clear to the Americans that on the southern part of the Egyptian front Israeli forces had "been ordered to continue fighting"—and not just to fend off Egyptian attacks; their goal, as the Israelis themselves had made clear, "was to cut off Egyptian forces on the east bank" of the Suez Canal. CIA, Middle East Situation Reports Numbers 71 and 77, October 23 (11:30 a.m.) and 24 (10:30 p.m.), 1973, in CIA Electronic Reading Room (link to first document; link to second document). Both documents are in the CIA collection "President Nixon and the Role of Intelligence in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War" (link), released in 2013. Note also Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger's comments in a high-level meeting held the morning after the Brezhnev threat was received. "There are indications," he said, "that the Israelis may have been diddling us yesterday as to who was doing what." They had claimed "that there were flights of Egyptian aircraft designed to coincide with an attempted Egyptian breakout to the

The real problem, however, was not that the Israelis were too honest. The real problem had to do instead with the Arabs and their Soviet friends. The Egyptians especially were becoming increasingly desperate as the Israelis threatened to cut off their Third Army in the Sinai. And the Soviets were enraged by the Israelis' refusal to comply with the ceasefire—and by what they viewed as America's unwillingness to make them do so. The Soviet leadership had by no means been eager to intervene in the conflict. Kissinger himself understood how reluctant the Soviets were to confront the United States in this crisis. Brezhnev, he pointed out, had told him in Moscow that "détente was the most important thing and he wouldn't give it up for the Middle East," and he apparently took that statement at face value.[83] But what that meant was that America could go rather far before triggering Soviet military action of any sort. The question was how far, and by the 23rd Soviet patience was clearly wearing thin. There were even certain indications that the Soviets were preparing to send troops to Egypt.[84] So on the morning of the 24th, nearly two full days after the ceasefire was supposed to take effect, the Americans slammed on the brakes. The Israelis were told in no uncertain terms to stop military operations: "we cannot," Kissinger said, "make Brezhnev look like a Goddamn fool in front of his own colleagues."[85]

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east." But it now looked "like the Israelis might have been the ones who were moving, with their aircraft providing cover, and the Egyptians came out to meet them." This, he said, "would support what the Russians were saying to us yesterday about Israel's activities." Washington Special Actions Group meeting, October 25, 1973, 10:16 a.m., p. 2, CIA Electronic Reading Room (link). The JCS Chairman, Admiral Thomas Moorer, also felt that the Soviets were justified in blaming the Israelis for violating the ceasefire. NSC/JCS meeting, October 24/25, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:739.

[83] Kissinger-Schlesinger-Moorer-Colby meeting, October 24, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:722-23.

[84] See especially the record of the meeting at which the decision to order the U.S. military alert was made: NSC/JCS meeting, October 24/25, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:738-39 (link). The indicators are discussed in most of the scholarly works dealing with the crisis. See, for example, William Quandt, "Soviet Policy in the October Middle East War-II," *International Affairs* 53, no.4 (October 1977), pp. 596-97 (link), and Barry Blechman and Douglas Hart, "The Political Utility of Nuclear Weapons: The 1973 Middle East Crisis," *International Security* 7, no. 1 (Summer, 1982), pp. 136-38 (link). On Soviet naval activities at this point, see Lyle Goldstein and Yuri Zhukov, "A Tale of Two Fleets—A Russian Perspective on the 1973 Naval Standoff in the Mediterranean," *Naval War College Review* 57, no. 2 (Spring 2004) (link), pp. 51-52. We now know, incidentally, that the Soviets never intended to push things to the point of a full-scale confrontation with the United States and that the military steps they had taken were essentially for political effect. See Golan, "The Soviet Union and the October War" (link), esp. pp. 112-13; Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 296; Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin*, pp. 97, 148, 168, 173, 180-81, 190, 193; and Jackson, "Lost Peace" (link), pp. 207-213.

[85] Kissinger-Dinitz phone conversations, October 24, 1973, 9:22 and 9:32 a.m., FRUS 1969-76, 25:705, 706 (link). Nixon also had his chief of staff call Dinitz and threaten "drastic action, disassociating self from Israelis" if the Israelis did not stop. And the Israeli ambassador did report that as of 10:38 a.m. Washington time "firing has ceased." The president, Dinitz was told, was "thankful and relieved," although he was probably not sure that this information was to be believed, because the "strong warning [was] reiterated." But Dinitz again assured the Americans that the Israelis had instructed their forces to "do nothing but block and contain Egyptian forces." See handwritten note for Kissinger's deputy Brent Scowcroft (link), and "Ambassador Dinitz Situation Report (as dictated by Larry Eagleburger)," October 24, 1973 (link), both in HAKOF, box 136, folder "Dinitz: June 4-October 31, 1973," NPL. It is, however, not clear whether this U.S. pressure played a decisive part in getting the Israelis to halt military operations, since they certainly had their own reasons for doing so. See Talia Winokur, "'The Soviets Were Just an Excuse': Why Israel Did Not Destroy the Egyptian Third Army," *Cold War History* 9, no. 1 (2009) (link). But the fact that Americans put great pressure on Israel at this time (and

The U.S. government had thus shifted course about twelve hours before the famous Brezhnev letter threatening unilateral Soviet intervention was received in Washington—just a bit too late to prevent that threat from being issued.[86]

But the key point to note here is that the Brezhnev threat, and the Soviet moves that had preceded it, were directly provoked by what was viewed as Israel's flouting of the ceasefire. Kissinger himself had no problem recognizing, at the late night meeting where the decision on how to respond to the Brezhnev threat was made, that it was "the Israeli violation" of the ceasefire agreement that "broke the camel's back"; it was only then, he pointed out, that "the Soviets decided to move."[87] Indeed, he later admitted to the Israelis that Brezhnev's claim that he had been tricked was "not unreasonable."[88] And he certainly recognized that he had pushed the envelope a bit too far—that he himself was in large measure responsible for creating the situation that had led to the Brezhnev threat. "If the Soviets have decided to go in," Kissinger remarked to Dinitz when he phoned him on the evening of the 24th to tell him about the Brezhnev threat, "I just think we turned the wheel yesterday one screw too much."[89] The "we" is very much worth noting. That single two-letter word is a kind of "smoking gun" here. It shows that the Israelis had not acted on their own, and that Kissinger had given the green light for the Israeli offensive.

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not before) is clear from other sources. Note, for example, Kissinger's remarks in WSAG meeting, October 24, 1973, 10:21 a.m., p. 5, FRUS 1969-76, 25:714: "We were very tough with the Israelis this morning. We told them this had to stop." For the Israeli account of Nixon's strong warning, see *Dinitz to Gazit, October 24, 1973, 2:00 p.m. (reporting 10:35 a.m. meeting), *Israeli Telegrams* (link) [frames 292-93] (in English). As for the timing, Kissinger later suggested that the Americans all along had wanted to uphold the ceasefire and were spurred into action the previous morning, when he was told that a Brezhnev note had arrived complaining about the Israeli offensive and proposing a new Security Council meeting to deal with the problem. "The urgency of Brezhnev's appeal," Kissinger wrote, "suggested that the plight of the Egyptian Third Army was far more serious than our own intelligence had yet discovered or the Israelis had told us." The destruction of that army, after the great powers had arranged a ceasefire, was intolerable; he then "urgently contacted" Ambassador Dinitz, presumably to make that U.S. position clear. Kissinger, *Crisis*, pp. 307-308. But the phone conversation with Dinitz, which Kissinger alludes to in this context, was all about how to handle the proposed Security Council resolution; there was not the slightest hint that the Israelis needed to halt their offensive. Kissinger-Dinitz phone conversation, October 23, 1973, 11:04 a.m., DOSKTC (link).

[86] Brezhnev to Nixon, October 24, 1973 (received 10 p.m.), FRUS 1969-76, 25:734-35.

[87] NSC/JCS meeting, October 24-25, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:741 (link).

[88] Kissinger-Meir meeting, November 2, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:860-61 (link). On the Soviet belief that they had been deceived, see the sources cited in Jackson, "Lost Peace" (link), p. 216 n. 144. Note also Kissinger's comment in a phone conversation with Haig on the evening of the 24th that the Soviets "realize they were taken." The fact that he said "realize," rather than "believe" or "suspect," shows that in Kissinger's view the Soviets were justified in feeling they had not been dealt with honestly. Kissinger-Haig phone conversation, October 24, 1973, 7:50 p.m., DOSKTC (link), and also in Kissinger, *Crisis*, p. 340.

[89] Kissinger-Dinitz phone conversation, October 24, 1973 (10 p.m.), DOSKTC (link). He made much the same point in a more indirect way in a meeting the next morning with other top U.S. officials. "The great lesson to be learned from this," he said, "is that when you have a victory, don't turn the screw one time too many." Washington Special Actions Group meeting, October 25, 1973, 10:16 a.m., p. 3, CIA Electronic Reading Room (link).

It is also important to note that in reacting to the Brezhnev threat the way he did, Kissinger was deliberately engaging in a bit of overkill.[90] "Although at the time all the Russians were going to do was to put a division at the Cairo airport," he later remarked, in ordering the alert he wanted "to teach them that they could not operate far from home."[91] He had learned, he said at the time, "that when you decide to use force you must use plenty of it."[92] The decision to order the alert was in line with the basic philosophy he had outlined a week earlier. "If we get into a confrontation," he had said, "we have to show that we are a giant! We have to win!"[93] To be sure, the whole "crisis" of October 24-25 was somewhat artificial, since the Americans did not intend to resist the basic Soviet demand that Israel stop her advance; they had actually taken the necessary actions to force Israel into line about twelve hours before the Brezhnev letter was received. But the purpose of the alert was not to confront the Soviets on that issue. It was instead essentially an exercise in image-making. Kissinger wanted—or, more precisely, had come to want—"the most massive Arab defeat possible so that it would be clear to the Arabs that they would get nowhere with dependence on the Soviets"—and the green-lighting of the Israeli offensive has to be understood in that context.[94] The whole world needed to be shown that America was the top dog, that the Soviets had been faced down, and that it was the U.S. government that would determine how things ran their course in the Middle East. Egypt was now at Israel's mercy, and Israel was utterly dependent on the United States; America, Kissinger said, was thus "in the catbird's seat."[95] And the Soviets would be playing a purely secondary role. On the 24th, for example, he explained what had been agreed to in Moscow and then outlined how the U.S. government intended to proceed: "The only thing agreed is that the Arabs sit down with Israel, initially with the United States and Soviet Union to get them talking. We privately will tell the Arabs to screw the Russians and come to us for any deals."[96] He of course realized that he should not overdo it. It was important, he thought, to not "humiliate the Soviet Union too

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[90] Kissinger, in fact, later referred to the alert as a "deliberate overreaction." See Sheehan, *Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, p. 38, and Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, pp. 94-95 (quoting from an interview Stein did with Kissinger's assistant Peter Rodman in 1992).

[91] Kissinger meeting with Jewish intellectuals, March 31, 1975, FRUS 1969-76, 26:604 (link).

[92] NSC/JCS meeting, October 24/25, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:741 (link).

[93] WSAG meeting, October 15, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:531 (link).

[94] Kissinger meeting with Jewish leaders, June 15, 1975, FRUS 1969-76, 26:712 (link).

[95] For the point about Israel's dependence on the United States, see Secretary of State's Staff Meeting, October 23, 1973, and Kissinger-Schlesinger-Moorer-Colby meeting, October 24, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:697, 724 (link). For the point about America being in the key position, see Secretary of State's Staff Meeting, October 23, 1973, ibid., p. 697; and WSAG meetings, October 24 and November 2, 1973, ibid., pp. 714, 841.

[96] Kissinger meeting with Clements, Moorer, and Scowcroft, October 24, 1963, CIA Electronic Reading Room (link) (link to document).

much."[97] And he was prepared to throw the Soviets a bone or two to help them save face and keep them from making trouble. But he did want to humiliate the Soviets just the right amount—and above all he wanted to make sure that on the real issues America would be calling the shots.

A Self-Inflicted Wound?

In his Walgreen lectures in 1951, George Kennan suggested that democracies were like those "prehistoric monsters with a body as long as this room and a brain the size of a pin." Their foreign policies had a certain mindless quality. They tended to think too much in terms of abstract moral principles and too little in terms of what would make for a stable international system. They would be much better off, he thought, if they lowered their sights and dealt with other countries in a less ideological and more businesslike way. They should avoid "moralistic slogans" and refrain from picturing their "effort as a crusade"; they should keep their "lines of negotiation to the enemy" open and settle for a reasonable accommodation rather than insist on total victory. But he understood that the United States, because of its own internal political culture, found it hard to pursue that sort of policy—and he was worried that unless it found a way around that problem it might be headed for real trouble down the road.[98]

Kennan was by no means the only observer to see things that way, and the failure of détente in the 1970s is often interpreted in those terms. Kissinger, the argument runs, had sought to pursue the kind of policy Kennan had in mind, a policy based on realist principles. But his approach was too subtle, too European, for the unsophisticated Americans, who insisted that the country's foreign policy reflect its moral sensibilities and ideological beliefs. And of course Kissinger himself often took that view. Reading his memoirs, the subtext is clear: it was not his fault if the policy was not successful. To be sure, a large part of the problem had to do with the external situation, especially in the Middle East. The Soviets were impossible; he had not seen "one shred of evidence" that they "were willing to separate themselves from the hardline Arab program."[99] The Arabs were also impossible; even in February 1973, he claimed, Ismail had merely presented "a polite ultimatum for terms beyond our capacity to fulfill." As for the Israelis, they made their own decisions, and America's ability to influence their behavior was quite limited. But the internal problems, in the

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[97] Kissinger-Schlesinger-Moorer-Colby meeting, October 19, 1973, and Kissinger-Meir meeting, November 2, 1973, FRUS 1969-76, 25:622, 863 (link). See also Jackson, "Lost Peace" (link), p. 268.

[98] George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), esp. pp. 66, 72-73.

[99] Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 551. That claim was repeated many times in that book, but in reality Soviet policy was much more reasonable than Kissinger made out. This is one of the basic themes in Jackson, "Lost Peace."

final analysis, turned out to be even more daunting. Given the kind of political culture America had, it was impossible even for a statesman of his undoubted ability to pursue the sort of realist policy he felt was in America's interest. Indeed, as was pointed out earlier, he went so far as to say as he was about to leave office that the problem had "been almost entirely domestic" in nature.

Our basic claim here is that that whole interpretation of the failure of détente is deeply misleading. It was not because the country would never support a realist policy that things ran their course the way they did in the 1970s. The policy of reaching an accommodation with the USSR was generally welcomed in 1972. If the very idea of improving relations with a major Communist power was simply unacceptable for ideological reasons, the reaction to the détente policy at that point would have been very different. The shift in attitudes at home after 1972 was real enough and obviously played a very important role in the story, but it did not just happen on its own; that shift had a good deal to do with Soviet behavior from 1973 on, or at least with the way it was commonly interpreted. And when you look at how, and especially at when, that shift took place, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the shift was triggered in large part by the particular interpretation that was placed on Soviet policy during the October War. The view that the USSR had played a major role in instigating that conflict was very important in that regard, but the events that took place at the end of the war also mattered a great deal. For if the United States had been forced to take the extraordinary step of ordering a worldwide military alert—a step that seemed to suggest that there was a real risk of general nuclear war—then the provocation must have been enormous. The Soviets had actually threatened to send troops to the Middle East; that suggested that they were as aggressive as ever; détente, therefore, had been a fraud. And it was not just American opinion that was affected by the events of October 1973. The Soviets assumed that Kissinger had not dealt honestly with them and that the Americans had somehow given the green light for the Israeli violations of the ceasefire; what happened at the end of the war thus also tended to discredit détente in Soviet eyes—something which helps explain Soviet policy in the Third World in the mid- and late 1970s.[100]

None of this had to happen. If Kissinger had played it straight with the Soviets in October 1973 and had not encouraged Israel to violate the ceasefire he had just negotiated in Moscow, then there would have been no Brezhnev threat and no U.S. alert. More generally, if U.S. policy had been different—if the Americans had been more willing to work with the Soviets in dealing with the Arab-Israel conflict, a policy more in keeping with what was supposed to be the

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[100] For a good summary of the evidence on the Soviet reaction, see Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 243-44. See also Dobrynin, *In Confidence,* pp. 295, 297, 299-301.

spirit of détente—events might well have run their course in the post-1973 period in a very different way, mainly because feelings within America would have been different, but also because Soviet policy would probably have been different. And what that suggests is that the détente policy as such was not the problem. It was not that a country like the United States was simply incapable, for domestic political reasons, of pursuing a policy based on realist principles. The real problem had to do with the fact that the actual policy the U.S. government chose to pursue at the time was cut from a very different cloth. The goal in theory might have been to build a world where the United States and the Soviet Union could put ideology aside and deal with each other on a relatively cooperative, businesslike basis. But if Kissinger had taken that goal seriously, would he really have pursued the policy he did in late October 1973? By green-lighting the Israeli ceasefire violations, he was undermining the basic policy his government was supposed to be pursuing. That effect, however, was entirely foreseeable, and that in turn makes you wonder about how serious he was in pursuing that policy in the first place—about whether all the talk about building a "lasting structure of peace" was just so much wool to be pulled over people's eyes for much less noble political purposes.