

CHAPTER 12

CASTING A BLIND EYE: KISSINGER AND NIXON FINESSE ISRAEL'S BOMB¹

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It is now widely accepted that 1969 marked a turning point in U.S. policy regarding Israeli nuclear weapons. A “stopping point” may be a better description. The pivotal moment appears to have come in a private, unrecorded September 1969 meeting between Richard Nixon and Golda Meir: She is supposed to have admitted having the bomb, and Nixon is supposed to have promised that, as long as Israel kept its bomb under wraps, the United States would not ask questions about it. Up to that point, the United States had been urging Israel to join the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).² After the 1969 meeting, as General Yitzhak Rabin (the Israeli Ambassador at the time) put it, the subject “dropped off the agenda.” In fact, the entire subject of Israeli nuclear weapons dropped off the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

This history is still important today because the subject is still off the U.S. agenda. In fact, the U.S. Government is still committed to keeping Israel off the international nonproliferation agenda.³ But the pretense of ignorance about Israeli bombs does not wash anymore. President Barack Obama looked foolish, or worse, when he said he did not want to “speculate” whether any countries in the Middle East had nuclear weapons.⁴ The evident double standard undermines efforts to control the spread of nuclear weapons worldwide.⁵

It is useful, therefore, to try to understand the 1969 origins of the current approach toward Israeli nuclear weapons and to inquire about the continuing validity of U.S. promises at the time. We have more material to work with, since a few years ago the Nixon Library released many Nixon-era White House documents related to Israeli nuclear weapons, including recommendations to the President from his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger. The released documents—some of them formerly Top Secret—provide a fascinating glimpse into the White House policy reviews before the critical meeting with Meir.

The story has now been told in some detail, most recently by Avner Cohen, who used the 1969 Nixon-Meir meeting as the point of departure for his critique of Israel's policy of "opacity," or total secrecy about its bomb.⁶ What strikes me about this, and other accounts of the 1969 U.S. policy shift, is that, however interesting they are, these accounts are focused mainly on the Israeli side of the interaction. From my own brief look at the documents, there is rather more to the story of interest from the U.S. point of view.

Let me sketch some points that strike me about: (1) the Kissinger-directed White House policy analyses and recommendations; (2) Nixon's own handling of the Israeli nuclear issue; and, (3) the current weight of Nixon's promises to Meir, including any promise to shield Israel from the NPT.

NIXON SUBMITS THE NON-NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION TREATY FOR APPROVAL

It was President Nixon, by the way, who ratified U.S. membership in the NPT after President Lyndon Johnson had negotiated it and signed it. Nixon had no

particular attachment to the Treaty – it does not even rate a mention in his memoirs – and neither did Kissinger.⁷ Still, Nixon submitted the NPT to the Senate soon after he entered office and received its approval in March 1969. Apparently, Nixon was persuaded the United States did not thereby give up any freedom of action. In any case, he had no intention of pressing other countries to adhere to it.⁸ However little Nixon thought of the NPT, other senior officials did take it seriously, and the ratified Treaty formed part of the backdrop to dealing with Israel’s rapidly evolving nuclear weapons project. Since Israel was not one of the NPT-authorized five nuclear powers, the confrontation with Israel was to be the first test of the universality of the new Treaty.

DECISION ON *PHANTOM II* AIRCRAFT LEFT FROM THE JOHNSON ADMINISTRATION

The immediate nuclear-related Israeli question Kissinger had to address actually had to do with conventional arms – whether to permit delivery of 50 F-4 *Phantom* aircraft that Israel had bought in the last days of the Johnson administration. The F-4 was the top fighter-bomber in the world, and the Israelis wanted it badly. The outgoing administration had written into the F-4 contract the possibility of delivery cancellation if it appeared Israel was getting nuclear weapons.

The Defense and State Departments had wanted, as a condition of the F-4 sale, an explicit Israeli pledge not to build nuclear weapons.⁹ Israel offered instead its standard declaration that it would “not be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East.”¹⁰ The U.S. interpretation of this was that not “to introduce” nuclear weapons meant not to obtain them.

But Rabin would not agree, nor would he provide an alternative definition. When Defense Assistant Secretary Paul Warnke, who was handling the plane sale, asked, “What do you mean by ‘introduce’?” Rabin responded with, “What do you mean by ‘nuclear weapon’?”¹¹ The discussion went round and round until finally Rabin allowed—and this stuck as the Israeli interpretation—that an **unadvertised and untested** nuclear device would not be a nuclear weapon. This made explicit that Israel’s declaration did not exclude physical possession of nuclear weapons.

Warnke would not yield on the F-4 sale, so Rabin found ways to get around the Department of Defense (DoD).¹² Seventy senators signed a letter to the President supporting the sale. Arthur Goldberg and others spoke directly to President Johnson, who then ordered the DoD to approve the F-4 sale without conditions.¹³ Despite this order, Defense Secretary Clark Clifford permitted Warnke to say in his approval letter to Rabin that the United States retained the option to withhold delivery if Israel was not complying with its pledge not to introduce nuclear weapons—as the United States understood it.¹⁴ Since the planes were not yet built, the final decision on their delivery was left to the incoming Nixon administration.

KISSINGER LAUNCHES POLICY REVIEW ON ISRAELI NUCLEAR WEAPONS

To make the new administration’s decision more difficult, intelligence indicated the Israeli nuclear weapons project was advancing rapidly and possibly had already succeeded in producing bombs. (U.S. experts had been visiting Dimona more or less annually since the early-1960s, supposedly to ensure

the work there stayed “peaceful,” but the Israelis had easily hoodwinked them.)¹⁵ Israel was also producing Jericho missiles, which, because of their low accuracy, could only have been intended for carrying nuclear warheads. Additionally, as Kissinger later informed the President, there was “circumstantial evidence that some fissionable material available for Israel’s weapons development was illegally obtained from the United States by about 1965.”¹⁶

It was against this background that Kissinger ran a White House study (National Security Study Memorandum [NSSM] 40) in mid-1969, responding to the issue of Israeli nuclear weapons. The principal participants were the DoD, the Department of State, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). They all agreed that Israeli acquisition of nuclear weapons raised the prospect of a more dangerous Middle East and undermined efforts to control proliferation worldwide. They also agreed that a major U.S. effort to stop the Israelis was justified. But they did not agree on what that meant.

In truth, it was too late to stop the manufacture of Israel’s first bombs. Any possibility of keeping Israel from going any further depended entirely on the United States—on which Israel depended for advanced weapons—making this a firm condition of the weapons supply. But as the Johnson administration history showed, this condition would not be easy to make stick in the U.S. domestic political environment.

The DoD and the Joint Chiefs, as they did under the previous administration, advocated withholding delivery of the F-4 *Phantom* jets to gain an Israeli commitment not to build nuclear weapons or nuclear missiles, or at least not to deploy them. The State Department, on the other hand, wanted to avoid a con-

frontation with Israel, in part to preserve political capital for Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. It advocated keeping weapon sales and nuclear issues on separate tracks and proposed a series of well-meaning but ineffectual steps to deal with the nuclear issue.¹⁷ The State Department rationalized that there was still time for negotiations over the issue, that the Israelis had still not completed nuclear weapons, and that, in fact, they really only wanted a nuclear option and might stop on their own. If the Israelis did not stop, the State Department advised, we should at least “make a record for ourselves” of having tried to stop them.

In the hope of facilitating Israeli adherence to the NPT, the State Department offered the view that reasonable interpretation of the NPT’s Article III would draw the difference between **maintaining** and **exercising** the option to manufacture nuclear explosives. In other words, State was saying that so long as a country had not taken the last step in nuclear weapon manufacture, it could be judged to be in conformance with the Treaty.

In his recommendation to the President on possible Israeli adherence to the NPT, Kissinger went even further in watering down the meaning of the Treaty. He wrote:

The entire group agreed that, at a minimum, we want Israel to sign the NPT. This is not because signing will make any difference in Israel’s actual nuclear program because Israel could produce warheads clandestinely. Israel’s signature would, however, give us . . . a way of opening the discussion. It would also publicly commit Israel not to acquire nuclear weapons.

Kissinger apparently believed that the Israelis might actually sign the NPT—a course they pretend-

ed to be evaluating – with the thought of still keeping clandestine bombs. And he was willing to go along with that arrangement.

In the end, the touchstone of U.S. seriousness about stopping Israel's nuclear weapons program was still a willingness to tie delivery of the F-4 *Phantoms* to the nuclear issue. This Kissinger did not propose to do – it seems, on the basis of Nixon's guidance – although he kept the door open to doing so at a later stage. He concluded that holding the planes back would unleash a fierce political response against the administration from Israel's domestic supporters, and that this was too high a price for the administration to pay to uphold the principle of nonproliferation.¹⁸ Without the leverage of the fighter aircraft deal, however, there was no chance of gaining Israeli agreement on the nuclear issue. The only option left was to see what could be salvaged in terms of appearances.

In writing to the President about what the United States really wanted, Kissinger subtly shifted the ground away from trying to stop the Israelis from accepting their nuclear weapons but trying to: (1) avoid the appearance of U.S. complicity in Israel becoming a nuclear power; and, (2) keep Israel's bomb from leading to Arab pressure on the Soviets to match it.¹⁹ "While we might ideally like to halt Israeli possession," Kissinger wrote, "what we really want at a minimum may be just to keep Israeli possession from becoming an established international fact." In other words, if no one knew that Israel had bombs, that was almost as good as if the bombs did not exist – and it was a lot cheaper in political capital.

To make this work, both the United States and the Soviet Union had to pretend total ignorance of the situation. In the case of the U.S. Government, with

its difficulty in keeping secrets, it would be best if the government really was ignorant of the truth and so should stop asking questions. The Israelis had to go along with this by keeping their bomb under wraps, but of course, they were going to do so anyway. In short, after all the high-level White House analyses of what to do about Israeli nuclear weapons, the recommended option was for the U.S. Government to stick its head in the sand.

Kissinger and the top U.S. diplomats still pursued Israeli adherence to the NPT, just as had their predecessors in the Johnson administration, and continued fencing with Rabin over the meaning of “introduce” in the Israeli nuclear mantra—again, without resolution. The fact was that, by August 1969, the first of the F-4s were already getting delivered to the Israelis. They did not have to give in on anything.

NIXON DECIDES

Since we have Kissinger’s memoranda and his formal recommendations, it is tempting to see in them the intellectual lineage of the President’s decision. There is, however, a tendency to exaggerate the importance of the written bureaucratic record—and the work of advisors altogether. High-level decisions often move on other tracks. In the end, it appears that Nixon did in his private meeting with Meir on the nuclear issue—the meeting on that day covered other important topics—what he would have done anyway, quite apart from any advice he got. He gave the Israelis a pass on their nuclear weapons program primarily because he wanted them on his side in what he saw as his worldwide struggle with the Soviets. He did not care about the NPT and ignored Kissinger’s (seemingly genuine)

recommendation to pursue an Israeli signature.²⁰ Nixon seems to have decided the United States would not pursue the question of Israeli nuclear weapons, would not press Israel to join the NPT, and would end the by-then farcical U.S. “visits” to Dimona.²¹

It would also have been natural for Nixon to want to keep the entire arrangement secret, for one thing, to avoid charges of complicity in Israel’s nuclear program. Similarly, Meir agreed to keep, or acquiesced in keeping, the existence of her weapons secret, which she had every incentive to do, anyhow.²²

Nixon had already set his course in favor of providing Israel with advanced weapons during the 1968 presidential campaign. He said:

The United States has a firm and unwavering commitment to the national existence of Israel . . . as long as the threat of Arab attack remains direct and imminent . . . the balance must be tipped in Israel’s favor.²³

In speaking to a Jewish group, Nixon explicitly promised that, if elected, he would send the 50 *Phantoms*, and he told Rabin the same in a private meeting.²⁴

A March 1970 memorandum written by the President to Kissinger provides further insight into Nixon’s thinking underlying the 1969 Nixon-Meir deal.²⁵ Nixon wrote the memorandum after his decision in early-March 1970 to delay delivery of a later batch of F-4 *Phantoms* provoked a storm of protest from Israel’s U.S. supporters.²⁶ He had held up the planes because, with an eye on possible Soviet reaction, he did not want to tip the military balance in the Middle East too far in favor of Israel. His willingness to hold up delivery of the F-4s is interesting in itself. This is the same

act that Kissinger earlier judged as too risky politically for reasons related to nuclear proliferation or the NPT. But Nixon was prepared to make it for reasons he thought were important.²⁷

In the March 1970 memorandum, Nixon told Kissinger that, in further talks with Meir and Rabin, Kissinger needed to “lay it on the line.” Nixon said the key to his own pro-Israel stance was opposition to Soviet expansion. He was counting on Israel to stand with the United States. The Israelis had to understand that their “only reliable friends are the hawks in this country,” not the liberals. RN (as Nixon referred to himself) “does not want to see Israel go down the drain and makes an absolute commitment that he will see to it that Israel always has ‘an edge’.” Nixon pointed out that he did not get many Jewish votes in New York, Pennsylvania, California, or Illinois—the implication of which was pretty clear.²⁸ At the same time, he said, his “silent majority” voters would expect Israel to oppose Soviet expansion everywhere. He also stated they:

will not stand for a double standard . . . it is a question of all or none. This is cold turkey, and it is time that our friends in Israel understood this. . . . **Unless they understand it and act as if they understood it beginning now they are down the tubes.**²⁹

Nixon was irked that U.S. Jews were hawks when it came to Israel but doves on Vietnam, and he obviously wanted the Israelis to help straighten out his domestic political opponents. But what mattered to Nixon most was that Israel stand fast with him against Soviet expansion. That is primarily what the 1969 Nixon-Meir deal concerned.

WHAT U.S. OBLIGATIONS REMAIN FROM THE DEAL?

That 1969 deal still casts a shadow over U.S.-Israeli relations. There are reports that in 2009, President Obama provided Prime Minister Netanyahu with a letter that was said to “reaffirm” the 1969 agreement in writing.³⁰ In light of this, it is worthwhile to reconsider the assumptions of the original 1969 deal and to ask to what extent they are still valid today.³¹

In their dealings with both the Johnson and Nixon administrations, the Israelis accepted that not being “the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East” meant keeping their weapon’s existence secret and not performing nuclear tests. By Kissinger’s account, Nixon emphasized these conditions to Meir as the “primary concern.”³² Despite this, the Israelis conducted a nuclear test in 1979 in the oceans below South Africa.³³ More importantly, everyone now knows about the existence of Israel’s nuclear weapons. There is no longer even any ambiguity.

There were a number of reasons the United States worried in the past about public knowledge of Israel’s nuclear weapons: One was that the Soviets might then have had to help the Arab countries in some way that increased the risk of a U.S. confrontation with the Soviets. But now the Soviets are gone. Another reason was the fear that public knowledge of the Israeli nuclear weapons program would undermine the NPT, especially in the Middle East, by forcing Arab governments to respond with nuclear programs of their own. Now everyone outside Israel already knows and talks freely about Israeli nuclear weapons. Still another reason was the concern that knowledge about the Israeli weapons might expose the United States to charges

of complicity in the Israeli nuclear program. But it is precisely the current policy of pretended ignorance about Israel's weapons that makes the United States look foolish, hypocritical, and complicit to boot.

In the end, it is up to the Israelis to decide how they want to deal with **their** half of the 1969 deal – whether to stick with “opacity.” But it is up to the United States to decide how to deal with **our** half – whether to continue the U.S. Government's taboo on discussing Israel's nuclear weapons. Whatever reasons there may be to continue to do so, they do not include obligations flowing from the 1969 Nixon-Meir deal.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 12

1. This chapter was previously published in Henry Sokolski, ed., *The Next Arms Race*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012.

2. As early as 1960, President Dwight Eisenhower met with his top Cabinet officials and military leaders to discuss the problems raised by information that the Israelis, in Secretary of State Christian Herter's words, were “operating a plutonium production plant.” Defense Secretary Thomas Gates said, “Our information is that the plant is not for peaceful uses.” The President made clear that the issue went beyond the Middle East. He said, “We are now faced with the question of what to do as further countries become atomic producers.” He told the group the United States needed to tell the Israelis that we wanted the IAEA to inspect the plant “as a matter of course.” See General A. J. Goodpastor, Memorandum regarding a December 9, 1960, conference with the President, January 12, 1961.

3. Consider, for example, the Obama administration's hostile reaction to the proposal, coming out of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, for a 2012 meeting to discuss a nuclear-free Middle East, a goal the United States claims to support. Although the U.S. delegation had voted for the entire document – presumably to avoid an embarrassing conference failure – the Obama White

House immediately thereafter attacked the language of the meeting proposal.

4. Helen Thomas, at the President's first televised news conference, February 9, 2009.

5. Israel was not the only country whose nuclear weapons program was eased by ad hoc considerations that overwhelmed U.S. support for the NPT. This also happened in U.S. interactions with India and Pakistan over their nuclear programs, and, at one point, even with North Korea. In fact, U.S. policy toward India's nuclear program is surely a close second to that toward Israel's nuclear program in its glaring inconsistencies with stated nonproliferation policy. Israel was, however, the first country to face down U.S. nonproliferation policy—immediately after the signing of the Treaty—which created a precedent for U.S. acquiescence in NPT holdouts that was later exploited by other countries.

6. Avner Cohen, *The Worst Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. See also the article by William Burr and Avner Cohen in the May 2006 issue of *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*: "As long as Israel kept the bomb in the basement—which meant keeping the program under full secrecy, making no test, declaration, or any other visible act of displaying capability or otherwise transforming its status—the United States could live with Israel's 'non-introduction' pledge. . . ."

7. Nixon's memoirs contain no index entry for the NPT and apparently no reference to the Treaty in the book. See Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, New York, Grosset & Dunlop, 1978. Kissinger's memoirs make two glancing references, one to the 1968 signing by Johnson, and the second to German concerns about discriminatory treatment under the Treaty. See Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1979.

8. After deciding to back the Treaty, Nixon instructed U.S. diplomats not to push it too hard, and especially not to lean on the Germans. See also Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power*, New York: HarperCollins 2007, p. 136:

In [early] 1969, Nixon . . . urged the Senate to approve a nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT) signed by Johnson. Nixon's commitment to an NPT carried no political or economic costs. His internal directive supporting ratification emphasized that adherence to the treaty neither created new commitments abroad nor broadened existing ones. Nor would the treaty cause any international difficulties for the United States, since Nixon had no intention to pressure other countries to follow America's lead.

9. An indication of this comes through in a 1966 cable from Secretary of State Dean Rusk to the U.S. Ambassador in Israel. Rusk described his conversation with the Israeli Ambassador, who repeated what was by then the formulaic "[Israel] would not be first to introduce nuclear weapons in the Near East." Rusk told him, "Nothing would be more disastrous" for Israel than to get nuclear weapons, and he urged the Israelis to accept international inspection. Rusk noted, "If Israel is holding open the nuclear option, it should forget U.S. support. We would not be with you. . . ." Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, Washington, DC, July 28, 1966.

10. A formulation usually attributed to Shimon Peres, who improvised it in response to an unexpected question from President John Kennedy.

11. Memorandum of Conversation, "Negotiations with Israel—F-4 and Advanced Weapons, November 12, 1968," approved by Paul Warnke.

12. In his memoirs, Rabin comments on getting involved in U.S. campaign politics:

Sensitive souls may find the notion of setting a Democratic president against his Republican successor distasteful. If so, they will only be demonstrating their ignorance of the ways and means of American politics. It is not enough to say that in pursuing his country's welfare an ambassador to Washington is entitled to take advantage of the ongoing rivalry between the two parties. The fact is that for his efforts to bear fruit, he is obliged to do so; and any ambassador who is either unwilling or unable to maneuver through America's political landscape to advance his country's interests would do well to return home.

Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979, p. 142.

13. It is hard to know what Johnson really thought about Israel getting the bomb. He seemed to genuinely care about the NPT and getting Israel to sign it. But there seems to have been another side, too, as indicated by a story told by Arnold Kramish. In 1967, Kramish had somehow gotten an invitation to visit Dimona. Before leaving, he called U.S. Ambassador Walworth Barbour in Tel-Aviv. "Oh, no," Barbour shouted. "If you learn anything about Dimona, I'd have to tell the President, and then he would have to do something, and he doesn't want to." T. C. Reed and Danny Stillman, *The Nuclear Express: a Political Examination of the Bomb and its Proliferation*, Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2009, p. 119.

14. Letter, Paul Warnke to Yitzhak Rabin, November 27, 1968. This arguably still conformed to Johnson's instructions, in the sense that the Israelis were not asked to agree beforehand with the U.S. interpretation.

15. The arrangement was first worked out during the Kennedy administration, but it soon deteriorated. In an account provided by former Ambassador Barbour:

. . . We had considerable difficulty making arrangements for periodic visits which was a window-dressing exercise. The Israelis tried to be as forthcoming, or to appear as forthcoming as possible, at the same time without revealing anything to us. This wining them and dining them and taking them down there with, under great secrecy, sometimes even meeting them at the airport when they arrived, and taking them off the plane, and over around the back, and then clearing them through customs with Russian names and so forth [Laughs], it was all a very unrealistic exercise which went on for many, many years and then finally just petered out when even the United States realized it wasn't getting anywhere. And it became ridiculous.

See May 22, 1981, interview, Kennedy Library Oral History Project. One is left with the impression that the State Department, which coordinated the "visits" (specifically, not inspections), was not especially keen on having the experts learn anything. They apparently did not receive intelligence briefings.

16. This refers to the suspicion that Israel stole highly enriched uranium from the Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation (NUMEC) fuel plant in Apollo, PA, whose owners had close Israeli ties. A 1965 inventory found that a loss of about 100 kilograms (kg) could not be explained after accounting for all possible industrial loss pathways. By the time of Kissinger's memorandum, a further 150-kg remained missing. By then, the CIA had concluded that the material ended up in Israel's bomb program. In the early part of the Nixon administration, all the top national security officials, including Kissinger and the President himself, were involved in one way or another in the NUMEC case. See Victor Gilinsky and Roger Mattson, "Revisiting the NUMEC Affair," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March/April 2010, p. 61.

17. National Security Study Memorandum No. 40, "Israeli Nuclear Weapons Program — Issues and Courses of Action," Rodger P. Davies State/NEA to Dr. Kissinger, undated but evidently mid-1969, formerly Top Secret ("sanitized").

18. Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 176: "The White House considered tying arms shipments to Israeli promises not to go nuclear, but concerns about domestic political opposition deterred it from making the connection." Kissinger barely mentioned the concern about opposition from domestic Jewish groups, even though that was obviously a major factor. This omission is not surprising, since Nixon had earlier instructed his national security staff not to mention domestic political considerations, so as to maintain an illusory separation. See Richard Reeves, *President Nixon Alone in the White House*, New York: Simon & Shuster, 2001, p. 42, which describes a February 22, 1969, Nixon memo to Rogers and Kissinger regarding Middle East papers from State and the National Security Council: "In the future, I want no references to domestic political considerations to be included in any papers. . . ." It is a reminder to be cautious in relying on the written record. One is dealing with people who operate on several levels and who use their writings for multiple purposes.

19. Henry Kissinger, Memorandum for the President, "Israeli Nuclear Program." The copy in the Nixon Library is undated, but it refers to a Tab A dated July 19, 1969. Emphasis added.

(1) Israel's secret possession of nuclear weapons would increase the potential danger in the Middle East, and **we do not desire complicity** in it. (2) In this case, **public knowledge is almost as dangerous as possession itself**. This is what might spark a Soviet nuclear guarantee for the Arabs, tighten the Soviet hold on the Arabs, and increase the danger of our involvement. **Indeed, the Soviets might have an incentive not to know.**

20. Kissinger did not attend Nixon's private meeting with Meir and, hard as it is to believe, he seems not to have immediately taken in the change in policy. In an October 8, 1969, memorandum to the President, he reports on, among other things, Rabin's answer regarding the prospects for Israeli NPT adherence that the next Israeli government will decide after the upcoming elections. Kissinger commented: "This formulation strikes me as unacceptably weak. It seems to me that signature of the NPT with its loopholes and escape clause would not jeopardize Israel's potential nuclear capability or diminish Arab recognition of its conventional military superiority." He recommended that Nixon press Meir to make a "vigorous personal effort" to gain Cabinet support for an Israeli signature and ratification. This was 2 weeks after the Nixon-Meir private meeting. Perhaps the meeting left the NPT issue up in the air, with Nixon leaving it to Meir to decide.

21. The last "visit" took place in July 1969. The Israelis rushed the U.S. team, as usual. Meir refused a later U.S. request from U.S. Ambassador Barbour for an extra day-long visit. As much as the Israelis controlled the visits, they involved a lot of preparation, and there was always the chance of a slip-up that revealed too much. In reality, the Israelis did not have much to worry about—the Americans apparently never sent anyone who knew Hebrew, and they were used to getting the runaround.

22. Kissinger seems to allude to this in his memoirs: "It would be too much to claim that Mrs. Meir agreed; more accurate to say she acquiesced in a formulation whose meaning **only the future would reveal.**" Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 371, emphasis added. Nixon does not mention the September 1969 meeting in his memoirs. Meir was obviously the cleverest of the lot. Of course, it is possible that she may have been reluctant to agree not to test warheads.

23. Statement by Richard Nixon, *The New York Times*, September 9, 1968.

24. Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, pp. 131, 133.

25. Memorandum for Henry Kissinger from the President, March 17, 1970. In his memoirs, Nixon quotes at length from this memorandum, so it seems to reflect his considered views.

26. Nixon quotes at length from it in his memoirs and describes the background as follows:

At the beginning of March I decided to postpone our delivery of Phantom jets to Israel. I had heard that the Soviets had come under renewed pressures from their Arab clients to surpass the new American deliveries to Israel, and I hoped that since Israel was already in a strong military position, I could slow down the arms race without tipping the fragile military balance in the region. I also believed that American influence in the Middle East increasingly depended on our renewing diplomatic relationships with Egypt and Syria, and this decision would help promote that goal. . . . One of the main problems I faced in this regard was the unyielding and shortsighted pro-Israeli attitude in large and influential segments of the American Jewish community, Congress, the media, and in intellectual and cultural circles. . . . There was a wave of criticism in the media and in Congress when my decision to postpone the Phantom deliveries was announced. . . . I was annoyed that a number of the senators who were urging that we send more military aid to save Israel were opposing our efforts to save South Vietnam from Communist domination. I dictated a memorandum to Kissinger describing my feelings. . . .

27. Ultimately, of course, the Israelis got the planes. Another angle on the plane delivery decision is presented in a recent biography of John Mitchell, Nixon's Attorney General:

Max Fisher, the late Jewish industrialist, philanthropist, and pro-Israel lobbyist, remembered pleading with Kissinger in 1970 to speed up American delivery of a few dozen *Phantom* fighter jets for which Israel had paid, but, owing to pressure

from Arab states, never received. Completion of the deal would mark a decisive shift in American policy towards Israel: from neutrality to the guarantee of military supremacy Nixon had advocated as a candidate. . . . Who could convince the President? 'Go see John Mitchell,' Kissinger said . . . Fisher did as he was told – and got what he wanted.

See James Rosen, *The Strong Man: John Mitchell and the Secrets of Watergate*, New York: Doubleday, 2008, p. 127.

28. Although earlier in the memorandum, he says he is not motivated by the "Jewish vote."

29. *Ibid.*

30. See Eli Lake: "Exclusive: Obama Agrees to Keep Israel's Nukes Secret," *The Washington Times*, October 2, 2009: "President Obama has reaffirmed a 4-decade-old secret understanding that has allowed Israel to keep a nuclear arsenal without opening it to international inspections. . . ."

31. In any case, the United States is not obligated to observe an informal private agreement of which there is no written record.

32. Kissinger wrote to Nixon in an October 7, 1969, memorandum: "During your private conversation with Golda Meir, you emphasized that our primary concern was that the Israelis make no visible introduction of nuclear weapons or undertake a nuclear test program."

33. President Jimmy Carter's Science Advisor Frank Press commissioned a panel of academic scientists who devised an ingenious alternative scientific explanation about how the satellite might have been fooled. But every expert intelligence body in the government regarded the satellite signal as a valid indication of a test. Incidentally, such a test was also a violation of the Limited Test Ban Treaty, to which Israel is a party. Reed and Stillman, *The Nuclear Express*, p. 180.