

## **The October 1973 War: Super-Power Engagement and Estrangement**

**Taken from ZMANIM, 84 (2003) pp. 59-69**

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### Introduction

In the 1970s, nuclear parity required some degree of bilateral cooperation between Washington and Moscow. Detente emerged. It aimed at avoiding direct East-West confrontations. It meant keeping regional conflicts from heating up to a point where an unanticipated flash point might drag both countries into a protracted war, or worse, one with nuclear weapons. Detente necessitated a close watch on the behavior of clients, proxies, and allies, lest an unwanted circumstance stumble into catastrophic results. Yet, neither super-power was willing to halt regional competition, particularly if gain and/or disadvantage could be had at the other side's expense. Detente may have contributed to avoiding a nuclear confrontation between Moscow and Washington, but it did little to restrain the one-upmanship each still sought during the cold war. In the Middle East, US President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser and in September 1973, Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger saw detente as a means to draw Arab states closer to the US but only if it meant a diminution of Soviet influence.

Prior to the October 1973 war and well into its diplomatic aftermath, a simple philosophy guided Kissinger: maintain detente, but try to weaken the Soviet Union economically and politically. In the Middle East this also meant assuring Israel of American support, enticing a more than willing Sadat away from Moscow and maintaining oil flow at a reasonable price. For their part the Soviets sought to use detente to prevent a super-power confrontation while gaining a measure of equality with the United States. Nuclear parity in their view meant deriving symmetrical status with the US in the Middle East and elsewhere: if an Arab-Israeli settlement were to unfold, Moscow should have an equal role with Washington as co-choreographer. In the meantime, Moscow's influential role in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere in the region should not diminish but be sustained. As for Egypt and Israel, the cold-war had aligned each with Moscow and Washington. Detente influenced and controlled their political choices. Both Cairo and Jerusalem seriously considered how either of the respective super-power patron acted or would act to a policy option, whether and how to probe the other side about diplomatic solutions, when to prepare for war and when to go to war. Sadat did not let detente curb his political options entirely. He remained in alliance with Moscow because it provided him

with minimum military supplies and important public political support that enabled him to go to war and break the unbearable status quo of Israeli occupation of Sinai since the June 1967 war; he cultivated an alliance with Washington to achieve diplomatic traction in order to push and pressure Israel out of Sinai. For her part, Israel was primarily interested in doing nothing that would jeopardize Washington's economic, political, and military support for Israel. A common strategic goal unified common policy objectives of all three capitals: limiting and reducing Moscow's presence and influence in the Middle East. While Israel welcomed Egypt's turn away from Moscow and deepening flirtation with the United States, the US-Israeli special relationship was altered during and after the October 1973 War. Though American presidents and congresses remained close to Israel for years afterwards by providing qualitatively superior military supplies and large sums of foreign aid to Israel, differences of opinion flourished between Israeli Prime Ministers and American Presidents about the conditions and circumstances pertaining to Israeli management and return of territories it won in the June 1967 war. Washington was no longer merely Israel's best friend, incipient American diplomatic engagement in Egyptian-Israeli diplomacy and gradually in other Arab-Israeli talks, enshrined the US as the central role as mediator, umpire. That meant a degree of even-handedness with Arabs and Israelis had to be maintained alongside the deep American emotional, military, and financial attachment to Israel. While each of the super-power's bi-lateral relations with Israel and Egypt respectively transited the war, the substance and objectives of each significantly changed. Moscow and Washington parried before, during and after the war, and though the USSR deepened its relationship with Syria and lost significant but not complete influence over Egypt's options, Moscow emerged from the October War with its prestige in the region diminished, its role in Arab-Israeli diplomacy limited to that as perennial junior partner.

Sadat's options: harnessing Washington

After succeeding Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's primary political objectives included solidification of his rule, the liberation of Sinai by preferably diplomatic means, and an improvement in the Egyptian economy. For Sadat, it was the shame, humiliation, and indignity from the June 1967 war which needed to be redressed. And if successfully undertaken with United States help, Sadat could obtain from Washington financial assistance for his ailing economy and burgeoning population. This latter objective necessitated some lessening of ties with Moscow. Though he solidified his domestic rule, his forays into liberating Sinai through diplomacy were initially frustrated. Sadat's secret diplomatic overtures to the Israelis in the early 1970s posted through the US and the UN for initial stages of Israeli withdrawal

from Sinai were rebuked. At best, Sadat's concept of peace with Israel, expressed by Dr. Usamah al-Baz, then a young Egyptian foreign ministry official, "was something like non-belligerency, opening the Suez Canal, and ending the Arab boycott in exchange for all of Sinai with security arrangements," [1] providing that Israel go back to the international border. For her part, Golda Meir, like all previous Israeli prime ministers, possessed little trust for Arab leaders in general especially a president of Egypt. That mistrust was profound and virtually unalterable. Then, Meir weighed almost every security decision in terms of what it would mean to Israel's relationship with Washington. According to Moshe Dayan, Israel's Defense Minister during the June 1967 and October 1973 wars, Meir "checked everything first about what the Americans would say." [2] Gideon Rafael, the Director General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry at the time, said that "Meir was more interested in receiving Phantom jets from Washington than in listening to what Sadat was offering." [3] Meir was simply not opposing Sadat's overtures because of how it might play in Washington, in this case she remained sure that if she permitted a limited number of Egyptian soldiers or policemen in Sinai, Sadat would only provide Israel a non-belligerency agreement. In the early 1970s, all Arab states and the PLO were not psychologically or politically prepared to recognize Israel and end the conflict with her. Moreover, Meir and the Israeli government were not ready, as Sadat wanted to agree to withdraw from other territories (Golan Heights, Jerusalem, the West Bank or Gaza Strip) Israel won in the June 1967 War. Meir wanted no linkage of a withdrawal from Sinai to arrangement a commitment for withdrawal from those areas. Israelis and their leadership were not psychologically prepared to reach an accommodation with Arab neighbors that required a full exchange of land for peace treaties.

In the 1971-1973 period Sadat faltered in enticing super-power imposition of a forced Israeli withdrawal from Sinai. Increasingly disillusioned by Moscow's unwillingness to provide Egypt with the quantity and sophistication of arms necessary to liberate all of Sinai, and disenchanted with the Soviet Union's capacity to assist Egypt economically, he tossed out some 12,000 plus Soviet advisers and technicians in July 1972. While he did not want Soviet military officials snooping about as he secretly prepared military options to liberate Sinai, he knew that the Soviets "would not have allowed the Egyptians to go to war" against Israel. [4] Moreover, the "no peace-no war" stalemate continued to stifle Egypt's ability to entice western capital investment. And confirmation that an imposed solution was not in the cards emerged when the May 1972 Nixon-Brezhnev summit ended without a super-power commitment to engage in Arab-Israeli negotiations.

Sadat misfired in seeking unilateral American pressure on Israel to return Sinai to Egyptian sovereignty. After his national security adviser, Hafez

Ismail was asked to confer with Kissinger in early 1973, Sadat learned, according to Ismail's reporting, of a US proposal for Egypt and Israel to share Sinai's security and sovereignty. Sadat found that notion totally unacceptable.<sup>[5]</sup> Kissinger told Ismail, that "you [the Arabs] have been defeated, and that Israel has been victorious. You talk as though you were the victors and Israel were the loser. The situation will not change unless you change it militarily. Despite this I wish to convey some advice to Sadat and tell him. Beware of attempting to change the situation militarily because you will be defeated as you were defeated in 1967. There would be no hope of finding a settlement on the basis of a just peace or anything else. Nobody would be able to speak to Israel."<sup>[6]</sup>

Sadat's objective was to restore Sinai to Egyptian sovereignty, regain honor lost by the disastrous defeat in the June 1967 war, use the war and its aftermath, to promote Egypt and his rule as synonymous leaders of the Arab world. His methods included combining diplomacy with a limited military undertaking. Moving on a variety of tracks simultaneously to achieve the same objective while camouflaging his true intentions was typical of the unconventional mix of policy options he chose.<sup>[7]</sup> His lack of convention intrigued Kissinger; Sadat's unexpected twists and turns, caused Israelis to mistrust him. Sadat sent up clear signals to the Israelis through the UN and the US in 1972-73 that he wanted diplomatic progress via negotiations while at the same time he acquired basic military supplies from the Moscow. Neither naive about his own military capabilities nor unrealistic about Washington's willingness to preserve Israeli security, Sadat recognized that through military means, the Egyptian Army could not dislodge Israel from all of Sinai. Moreover, he believed that U.S. intervention, on Israel's side, at some point during a war in Sinai was a likely possibility. Washington would act to prevent either an Israeli military defeat or major loss of territory. Armed with the knowledge that Kissinger and the US were seriously interested in seeing the Soviets expelled from Egypt, the evidence is persuasive that Sadat planned the October 1973 War in order to create an international crisis, aimed at lighting a fire under the United States, <sup>[8]</sup> designed for Washington, Nixon and Kissinger to become involved, so that they might choreograph Israel's departure from Sinai.

From a nationalistic perspective, Sadat undertook the war to distinguish Egypt from the other Arab states Sadat told General al-Gamasy, his Army Chief of Staff, that the October war "was not a war for the Palestinians or for the other Arabs; it was for Egypt."<sup>[9]</sup> Sadat evolved a negotiating process from the war that was not exclusively for Egypt, but for Egypt first.<sup>[10]</sup> It was aimed at coupling the United States to a diplomatic process. When Sadat negotiated the first Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement in January 1974, he reminded al-Gamasy,

that he was “making peace with the United States , not with Israel .” [11] Before the war, Sadat told Zaid Rifa'i, King Hussein's political adviser and later Jordan 's Prime Minister, that in order to have the Soviets and Americans pay attention to the Middle East, he had to initiate a war, a war for movement not a war for liberation. “For me, I [Sadat] shall cross the canal and stop.” [12] Confirming this view, Nabil al-Arabi, then an Egyptian foreign ministry official, Sadat entered the war, “not to attain military objectives, but to influence the political process.” [13] From a later assessment by Joseph Sisco, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs in the US State Department, and his deputy, Roy Atherton, Sadat’s “decision to go to war was precisely to get what he wanted, namely, a negotiation started.” [14]

To do this Sadat used Syria . Fighting a one front war against Israel would have likely brought about Egypt ’s quick military defeat. Sadat made it appear to Syrian President Assad that he was prepared for a full military attack into Sinai, yet he planned for a limited war only; in March-April 1972, he instructed his Chief of Staff, General al-Gamasy to prepare military options that would liberate some of Sinai, 10-12 kilometers on the east bank of the Canal, or all of Sinai up to the strategic Mitla and Gidi Passes. [15] Syrian forces planned to liberate all of the Golan Height as they expected the Egyptians to do so in Sinai. However, the Egyptian forces, however, just passed the canal and stopped. [16] Once embedded in Sinai, the halt of the Egyptian advance came as a total surprise to the Syrians. Said Syria 's Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam, years later “For Syria, it was a war of liberation, not a war of movement.” [17]

Israel ’s priorities- avoid alienating Washington

Israel ’s military and political leaders, including Dayan accepted the concept that the chance of war in October 1973 was low. [18] Whereas, Israeli military intelligence had accurately assessed Egypt 's capabilities, they did not accurately estimate Egypt 's intentions. Recalling those last days of September and early October, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the American Embassy in Tel Aviv, Nicholas A. Veliotis remarked that, “for weeks before the outbreak of the October War our military guys were going into their intelligence people and asking 'what about this, what about that, aren't you worried about this' and they said 'no, forget about it, we are not worried about it'.” [19] Ten days to a week before the war, Jordan 's King Hussein had a secret meeting with the Israeli Prime Minister. [20] What details King Hussein knew and how much he told Meir about the dates, timing, plans, and coordination for the War remains open to interpretation. What is reasonably certain is that King Hussein did not know the exact details about the war which differentiated Egyptian and Syrian military objectives. One of Meir's questions to the

King was whether Egypt and Syria would act together in war. A week before the war commenced, according to General Peled, "Golda knew exactly from Hussein that Syria and Egypt would attack."<sup>[21]</sup> What she could not have assumed was that Egypt would cross the canal and essentially stop, except for an attempt or two to break for the Sinai passes.

On October 1, 1973, when Meir inquired about the meaning of Egypt's increase in troop deployment along the west side of the canal, she was told that Egypt had the capability to go to war and to cross the canal, but that Israeli intelligence discounted the probability of war.<sup>[22]</sup> On October 4, Israeli intelligence sources noted that the Soviet Union had decided to evacuate families of Soviet personnel still in Syria and Egypt. For the Politburo, it was simple: the lives of the Soviet people were dearer than caring whether they were tipping off either the Israelis or Americans that a war was imminent.<sup>[23]</sup> The next day, when the Americans had still not inquired from Moscow about why Soviet personnel were evacuated, Vasilli V. Kuznetsov, the first Deputy Minister of Soviet Foreign Affairs, reasoned that Israel's military and political leaders, including Dayan "accepted the concept that the chance of war in October 1973 was low."<sup>[24]</sup>

On the evening of October 5, Meir's government understood definitively that the Egyptians and Syrians were prepared to attack, but "the probability of war breaking out was regarded as the lowest of the low."<sup>[25]</sup> When informed early the next morning that an attack would take place at 6 p.m. that day, Meir at an 8 a.m. Tel Aviv cabinet meeting with her military advisers and close Cabinet Ministers, decided not to launch a preemptive strike against either Arab Army. She told those in attendance, "Look, this war is only beginning now. We do not know how long it will take, we don't know if we will be in dire need of ammunition, and so on. And if I know the world, if we begin, no one will give us a pin; they will say, 'How did you know that they [the Arabs] would have attacked?'"<sup>[26]</sup> Dayan, like Meir wanted to be sure that the Americans understood that the Israelis did not initiate the war.<sup>[27]</sup> Washington learned of the pending attack during an early morning meeting which Meir had with the US Ambassador Israel, Kenneth Keating. On the eve of the war, Keating was told by Israeli Defense officials that "the situation was not dangerous,"<sup>[28]</sup> which translated to a low estimate of war breaking out. American intelligence estimates confirmed the Israeli view that without a prospect of aerial advantage, Egypt would not risk storming the Suez Canal and the Bar-Lev fortifications.<sup>[29]</sup>

#### The War and the Resupply 'Issue'

The war began at 2 p.m. on October 6, 1973. It was Yom Kippur,



much of Israel was at home or at worship, fasting, with Israeli radio and television off the air. The war took the political leadership in Moscow and Washington by surprise; however their respective embassies in Cairo and Tel Aviv (Moscow had not restored its diplomatic relations with Israel severed after the June 1967 War) each had a keen sense that war was in the wind. However, when Kissinger reached Anatoly Dobrynin early in the morning on October 6 (the war had already started in the Middle East), the Soviet Ambassador to Washington was completely unaware of the level of tension in the Arab-Israeli theater. Though Moscow knew that the war was imminent, Soviet President Brezhnev and members of the politburo believed it was a “gross miscalculation...major political error” with “certain and speedy defeat for the Arabs.” This conclusion was based on the mistaken belief held by Soviet experts and advisers that “the Arab soldier not only was insufficiently trained technically but also lacked courage under battle conditions.”<sup>[30]</sup> As for Kissinger, he claimed for the record that he was stunned when he learned about the Syrian and Egyptian surprise attack. Kissinger’s first reaction was “what do the Arabs think they can gain?” Everyone had the illusion that this would be a short war, another Arab humiliation, and there was no way they could obtain significant territories.<sup>[31]</sup>

By October 8, Sadat reportedly communicated with Washington and told Kissinger that he wanted American intervention to diplomatically resolve the conflict with Israel .<sup>[32]</sup> Sadat said, “I want you to understand I’m not out to defeat Israel or to conquer Israeli territory. I’m out to get back my territory, and to go on that basis to negotiations.”<sup>[33]</sup> The Syrians possessed no knowledge of Sadat’s CIA contacts nor did Damascus know that it was Sadat’s intention to essentially stop once his armies established a bridgehead in Sinai. Sadat’s actions intrigued Kissinger because the Egyptian president wanted to use military force to chart a course for a clear political outcome.

During the first days of the war, Egypt and Syria registered significant military gains. By contrast for Israel , the first week of the war was traumatic. There was initial disbelief, extensive loss of life, and major setbacks militarily. By the end of the first week of the war, the Bar-Lev line was overtaken while Egyptian efforts to break out of their 10-12 kilometer wide swath, it had established on the east bank of the Suez Canal was repulsed by the Israeli army. On the Golan Heights, the Syrian army overwhelmed the lesser Israeli forces during the first days of the war, but again by the end of the first week of the war, Syria ’s early territorial gains were reversed, with Israel recapturing all the territory it had lost since the beginning of the war, and then some.

In collective emotional agony, Israel required physical assistance. Simultaneously in Tel Aviv and Washington, Israel sought resupply of

ammunition and material from the United States . Israel provided the American embassy in Tel Aviv with a lengthy list of needed military equipment while Israel 's Ambassador to the US , Simcha Dinitz requested the resupply of both ammunition and equipment. Israelis leaders were not sure that a resupply operation could be mustered, but they asked anyway. What the Israelis wanted were the supplies and material "already in the pipeline." According to Mordechai Gazit, the Director General of the Israeli Prime Minister's Office at the time, in the early days of the war "Kissinger told us -- hit them, don't spare your ammunition. You'll get everything back. Don't wait for us, you can not get the tanks overnight. You will get everything back." [34] The question was not if Israel would be resupplied by Washington, but how fast and in what manner. Kissinger did not want to use American planes to ferry supplies to Israel , lest it upset Washington's relationship with Moscow, humiliate the Arabs, or stimulate an Arab oil embargo. By the second week of the war, when the full military resupply airlift to Israel was underway, neither Cairo or Moscow perceived it as an American provocation, but rather as a response to the Soviet Union's own resupply of Syria.[35] Early in the war, Moscow supplied Syria with material by sea. Several explanations have been offered for why resupply to Israel was delayed. Kissinger intentionally "withheld major deliveries to Israel so long as the Russians exercised restraint and so long as he hoped that Sadat would accept a cease-fire in place. Kissinger wanted to insure an opening to Sadat, prevent the feared oil embargo, and not generated violent anti-American protests from the Arab world." [36] But no delay in resupply to Israel , according to the Secretary of State's thinking was not going to make a difference to Israel , because "no senior official of any [ US ] Department believed that any significant resupply could reach Israel before the war ended, with limited quantities of specialized equipment excepted." [37] Second, military estimates suggested that while Israelis needed military resupply, their critical condition was prematurely overstated. [38] Third, the United States did not have in its stocks the quantities of weapons Israel needed. For example, Washington could provide Israel with only six TOW missile launchers from NATO stocks. When the huge C5A aircraft landed in Israel for the first time, it only had one M-60 battle tank in its belly. Fourth, it remains unclear how eager Nixon and his Defense Secretary James Schlesinger or their advisers and deputies were prepared to resupply Israel . What is clear according is that for the first three or four days of the war, Schlesinger refused to meet Dinitz, and as Dinitz tells it, Schlesinger put a deputy, William Clements in charge of the resupply of [39] munitions and equipment to Israel , who "was not exactly a member of the World Zionist Organization." In 1978, when Meir was asked whether she believed that Kissinger intentionally held back the needed military resupply, she responded, "I honestly still do not know." [40] However according to Wat Cluverius, a junior level State Department desk officer who worked in the



Operations Center then, “There were points when the Israelis just didn’t have another days worth of tank ammunition until the big airplanes landed. But I don’t think that any of us, had any doubts at all that Israel couldn’t turn it around. Nobody believed that Israel was in any kind of mortal danger whatever. Hurt yes, frightened yes. It was pretty quickly clear that what we had to have out of the war was no unchallenged victor and no humiliated victor... and we all agreed. I don’t think anyone in that operations [Center] could ever believe that we had anything but a situation that had to be manipulated. [41] In any event, the American resupply mission to Israel had military, strategic, and psychological implications. Washington’s initial hesitancy to start the resupply effort to Israel had a psychological impact on Israel because though it infuriated Israeli leaders, it confirmed their need and even heed American diplomatic suggestions. Later Washington’s intervention with the Israelis saved one of Sadat’s doomed armies from destruction, and therefore prevented Egypt 's full defeat, while insuring only modest Israeli victory in the October War.[42] Once the airlift of military equipment began, Israel wanted it to go faster. For Israeli morale the resupply was terribly important. Sitting at the U.S. embassy, Veliotos recalled that “resupply was more for show than for blow.” In the middle of the War, Israel wanted to demonstrate to the Arabs Washington’s friendship to Israel . Israel 's request and the massive United States military resupply was confirmation for Sadat that Washington indeed possessed strong physical and moral support for the Jewish state. But Sadat reasoned that with Israel beholden to the United States for vital support, Israeli leaders would therefore be obliged to listen to Washington's entreaties about withdrawal from Arab lands. Ultimately the unwillingness of America 's NATO allies to allow use of their air-space and air-fields to affect the American resupply mission created for Moscow welcome and frosty gaps in the North Atlantic alliance. The massive resupply to Israel justified the subsequent action by Arab oil producers, lined up in advance of the war, to embargo oil sales to the United States and other western countries considered sympathetic to Israel .

Washington and Moscow face off: genuine or bluff

At the end of the first week of the war, after repelling the Syrians on the Golan, Israel redirected her attention toward the Egyptian front, moving from the defensive to the offensive, transferring additional men and equipment. During the second week of the war, Israel tried to break through Egypt ’s new line of defense along the Canal established on the ashes of the destroyed Bar-Lev line. Due to the high casualty loss of Israeli personnel in the frontal armored tank assaults in Sinai, Israeli military planners opted for the more delicate effort of establishing a bridgehead across the canal as a way to neutralize the Egyptian success and to minimize casualties.[43] Time was also required to traverse the

distance from where reserves and their material were located in central Israeli locations to the Canal itself. By October 9, General Ariel Sharon found a seam between the Egyptian Second Army in the North and the Third Army to its South, but was denied permission to punch through it. Israeli political leaders were still pessimistic because of the level of their losses and their slow ability to regain any military initiative. Israel had no reason to believe that Sadat wanted to use diplomacy after the war. The wrangling for arms supply from the US continued. By October 13, with Israel fully besieged and Egypt with limited, but noticeable, military success, leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States, though believing that the “war ran the risk of endangering their mutually advantageous policy of detente and embroiling them in war, neither was yet ready to press firmly for a cease-fire.” [44] Privately, Moscow began to confront the prospect of an Arab defeat in Sinai and on the Golan; [45] it wanted to insure an equal role with the US in bringing the war to a conclusion. According to Israeli General Peled, Syrian “interest in a cease-fire increased” after Israeli artillery shells fell on Damascus. The Syrian Army was in retreat and it wanted the Soviet Union to press for a cease fire; Assad was unable to convince Sadat to sustain a counter-attack against Israel in Sinai in order to divert Israeli men and material away from the Golan. Throughout the war Syrian President Assad reproached Moscow for not having responded to his cease-fire appeal; he portrayed Moscow’s unwillingness to seek a cease-fire as “treasonous.” The Politburo was willing to endorse a cease-fire, through the United Nations but only if Sadat agreed; in Moscow’s view, Syrian preferences for when and how the war might end were not as valid as Egypt’s. [46] With early battlefield successes across the Suez Canal, Sadat was incredulous at the Soviet suggestion for a cease-fire. Sadat disdained the idea.[47] And the Soviets spurned Assad’s request. Moscow like Washington remained transfixed by Egypt’s importance, discounting Assad and Syria .

By the time Sadat finished addressing the Egyptian parliament on October 16 where Israeli withdrawal from all the territories would be discussed at a proposed international Middle East Conference sponsored by the United Nations, Israeli troops under General Sharon’s guidance crossed the canal from east to west. Israel set up an expeditionary force that in the next week saw the 15,000 man Egyptian Third Army in Sinai virtually cut off from supplies from the west. For several reasons, the precarious disposition of Egypt’s Third Army dominated the unfolding military and diplomatic drama.

It engendered Kissinger’s visit to Moscow on October 21-22. Kissinger used the visit to lessen Moscow’s role in a post-war Middle East by negotiating a cease-fire, not a post-war political settlement. Though the Israeli leadership believed otherwise, he did not go to

Moscow to end the war prematurely or impose a super-power settlement on Israel . In fact, argued Kissinger, he went to 'procrastinate' and give Israel additional time to improve its military position; it was Nixon who wanted Moscow and Washington to impose not only an end to the war, but "a comprehensive peace in the Middle East," a position held by Brezhnev too. [48] Moscow's invitation to Kissinger to visit Moscow had different objectives: to avoid a Soviet-American military encounter in the Middle East, consolidate Moscow's reputation in the Middle East and reinforce detente. [49]

Kissinger's visit to Moscow came on the heels of Alexei Kosygin's secret visit to Sadat in Cairo from October 16-19. In their desire to achieve diplomatic parity with Washington, the Soviets wanted a cease-fire. When Kosygin raised the serious nature of Israel's presence on the West Bank of the Canal, Sadat dismissed the Soviet Premier's assertion, claiming that the Israeli counter attack across the canal "would have no impact on the course of the war in general" and "no threat posed to Cairo." [50] A totally different assessment was provided by the Soviet military attaché in Moscow who told Kosygin while he was there that "from a military point of view it would not be very difficult for Israel to seize the Egyptian capital." [51] While Sadat expressed his firm unwillingness to accept a cease-fire arranged by a Soviet initiative, the Israelis continued to expand their bridgehead on the east bank which induced Moscow to invite Kissinger to Moscow. Then, almost immediately after Kosygin left Cairo, Sadat requested the cease-fire and Kissinger was almost immediately invited to Moscow to discuss a cease-fire. Did Sadat decline Kosygin's offer because he wanted Kissinger's dominance in the unfolding diplomacy? Or did he stage-manage the war and gambled that it would reach crisis proportions with his Third Army in danger of annihilation so both a cease-fire and a political settlement would be imposed on Israel?

When Kissinger and his advisers arrived in Moscow, the US was in a very strong negotiating position. While Israel seemed poised to achieve a decisive victory, Kissinger understood that his goals were to control that success, but not deny it; to exclude the Soviets as much as possible from key decisions; and, to enhance his budding relationship with Sadat. Concurring said Sisco, "a cease-fire was much more important to the Soviets at that point, because the situation militarily on the ground favored us -- meaning the Israelis." [52] According to Mahmoud Riad, a senior Egyptian diplomat and Secretary General of the Arab League, at the time, encirclement of the Third Army, "was the trump card that Israel was using to pressure Egypt" and "as a consequence of the deterioration of the military situation along the Egyptian front, Brezhnev was unable to enforce the Arab demands [for Israeli withdrawal]; the best he could achieve was an agreement for a

cease-fire...” [53] From October 20-22, Kissinger had three meetings with Soviet officials, led by Brezhnev. Though Israeli leaders were fearful that Kissinger and Brezhnev would impose a super-power solution upon Israel, the American compiled minutes that Kissinger had with Brezhnev and other Soviet officials unequivocally show that he accurately and repeatedly represented Israeli interests to Moscow. Kissinger knew that the longer he delayed in calling for a cease-fire, the more reliant Sadat would be upon American intervention to save the Third Army. Before Kissinger left Moscow, he fashioned UN cease-fire resolution, UNSC 338, which called for a “cease fire, negotiations [to] start between the parties concerned under appropriate auspices aimed at establishing a just and durable peace,” the terminology exactly desired by Meir. Kissinger made it clear to Brezhnev that convening a Middle East conference on international and equal auspices with Moscow, did not mean that Moscow would be steering the diplomacy as an equal with Washington at the war’s conclusion. [54] Intentionally or not, no mechanism for enforcing a cease-fire was included in UNSC 338. Upon wrapping up his conversation at the Kremlin on October 22, Kissinger offered a toast to Foreign Minister Gromyko in which he lauded his counterpart for negotiating many agreements with the US, “but even more that, the agreements we’ve negotiated a relationship between our countries which is fundamental to peace in the world. What we’ve done in the last two days is important not only to the Middle East but to U.S-Soviet relations and our whole foreign policy.” [55] Kissinger told Moscow’s leaders what they wanted hear that detente meant a joint in action, but Kissinger understood that if a partnership existed the US was always senior to its USSR junior partner. After Kissinger left Moscow, the leaders of the USSR, out of fear for the Egyptian Army’s immediate demise, perhaps Sadat’s possible fall from power (a blow to Soviet prestige in the Middle East and reputation elsewhere that could not be tolerated), , the Soviets sent several messages to the White House each one more ominous than its predecessor. Dobrynin finally told Kissinger that if Moscow and Washington would not act together to prevent the Third armies demise, then Moscow would act unilaterally because it “cannot allow arbitrariness on the part of Israel .” [56] Was Moscow’s threat of military intervention to stop Israeli destruction of the Third Army real or only a threat? Was it made only to show Washington, Moscow’s seriousness? Was it aimed not only at Israel to halt squeezing the Third Army but aimed at Washington as a warning, “do not discount Moscow’s desire and capacity for exercising influence to protect its interests.” Hafez Ismail recalled that he believed that the Soviets were indeed “preparing to send a division of airborne troops to Egypt .” [57] Yet, Dobrynin commented that it “would have been reckless both politically and militarily,” and Kosygin himself is quoted to have said on October 25. “It is not reasonable to become engaged in a war with the United States

because of Egypt and Syria .”[\[58\]](#)

Nixon and Kissinger nonetheless ‘reacted’ to the possible Soviet intervention by going on a worldwide ‘nuclear alert.’ What happened in public was clear: Kissinger sent a message to the Israelis to desist from destroying the Third Army; it had to be saved to guarantee an Washington’s trump card with Sadat in the unfolding diplomatic web that Kissinger was spinning relentlessly; the alert warned the Soviets not to intervene in Egypt, and Nixon showed that with all his ‘Watergate’ problems, the American government was not stalemated. Kissinger even said to Dobrynin that the reason for the nuclear alert was determined by domestic considerations. From at least one source close to Kissinger, Peter Rodman, it was acknowledged that “it was our strategy to deliberately overreact...facing down the Russians....you had to scare them off.”[\[59\]](#) The result of this diplomatic poker game: Kissinger reminded the Soviets and the Israelis who had clout. While the Israelis did not allow Washington to dictate or define her security needs, Meir’s government listened to America ’s requests for cautious action with the Third Army’s fate.

As the stand-down from the nuclear alert occurred, Meir and Sadat quickly agreed through military channels to negotiate directly the separation of their forces. The negotiations themselves guaranteed preservation of the Third Army. These military negotiations took place about 60 miles from Cairo, at the Kilometer 101 marker. [\[60\]](#) Having just reminded Moscow that Washington was not giving up its central role in the unfolding diplomacy, Kissinger had another problem emerging. Cairo and Jerusalem were negotiating through their generals not only a separation of forces agreement, disengagement and political agreements as well.

For three weeks, from October 30 forwards, Egyptian General al-Gamasy and Israeli General Aharon Yariv held direct negotiations at Kilometer 101, often times without UN representatives present. No Americans were present. Yariv and al-Gamasy respected each other professionally and negotiated a disentanglement of their armies, the provision of blood, supplies, and material to the Third Army, and outlined a schedule for return of Israeli POWs held by Egypt . Both generals reported regularly and directly to Meir and Sadat. According to the Israeli Ambassador to Washington, Simcha Dinitz, “Kissinger did not value direct discussions at [Kilometer] 101 because he believed that they would be making [political] concessions there to each other without actually eliciting the full price” which he could have obtained had he been choreographing the negotiations.[\[61\]](#) Kissinger told Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban, “For God's sake, stop the Yariv/al-Gamasy thing -- put it on the Geneva (peace conference) level. Otherwise, we don't have



an agenda in Geneva.”[\[62\]](#) Kissinger at one point told Meir, “You don't seem to understand that they are making mistakes [at Kilometer 101]. Let me do it.”[\[63\]](#) According to Eilts, political discussions had to be avoided because they “would potentially incapacitate [Kissinger's] direct and incipient intervention...he wanted all the reigns in his own hands, and was uneasy about all this progress being made and the military working group where he wasn't present.”[\[64\]](#) The Israelis and the United States agreed to pull the rug out of Kilometer 101. The cease-fire remained in effect, but all of the details -- withdrawal, how far, and who did what to whom -- was to be the subject of the Geneva Conference. “We knew,” said Veliotis, “Geneva would be window dressing for what had already been achieved in the Kilometer 101 negotiations.”[\[65\]](#) Yariv remembered it this way: Kissinger said, “What is he [Yariv] doing there at Kilometer 101? He is proposing disengagement. I need a disengagement agreement at Geneva.” Kissinger told the whole Israeli government, “I do not want a disengagement agreement now.” And Yariv received instructions to say good-bye to al-Gamasy. Kissinger pressured us to be sure that we arrived at an impasse.[\[66\]](#)

## Conclusions

Details of the first Israeli-Egyptian disengagement agreement and the maps delineating withdrawals and limited force zones were negotiated at Kilometer 101; they were not discussed at the two day ceremonial December 21-23, 1973 Geneva Middle East conference, but emerged in Kissinger's discussions with Meir and Sadat after the war. The Soviets knew nothing of these negotiating details until American envoys shared the contents with them. To be sure, Kissinger choreographed the diplomacy, but the Israelis and the Egyptians negotiated the detail directly between them at Kilometer 101. In a broader context, the October War introduced Kissinger to active Egyptian-Israeli conflict management and helped define his dominant control over the diplomacy that ensued. From the first communications with Sadat, through the Israeli resupply controversy, his Moscow visit, the nuclear alert, the suspension of the Kilometer 101 talks, the convocation of the December 1973 Geneva conference, and the signing of the January 1974 Egyptian-Israeli Disengagement agreement, Kissinger devised, defined, monitored, and interposed virtually exclusive American diplomacy at the expense of Moscow. Kissinger pursued Washington's definition of detente: avoid confrontation with Moscow, reduce their influence where possible, and side-line them and keep information from them in the emerging diplomacy. He did not allow Israel to determine the diplomatic process without his engagement, and yet he and Nixon preserved the American commitment to Israel's security. Kissinger shaped an outcome that provided for US regional advantage over the USSR in the Middle East by tethering and deepening an already willing



Sadat to the American connection. To his good fortune, Kissinger had Sadat who wanted an American-led outcome to end Israel's occupation of Sinai; he encountered an Israeli leadership, though persistently mistrustful of the Egyptian president, willing to take incremental steps toward a phased change of its relationship with Egypt; and though they did not always agree on tactics, he had considerable leash from President Nixon to choreograph the unfolding diplomacy. Certainly, the absence of any Israeli-USSR ties before the war greatly disadvantaged Moscow's credibility in the emerging post war diplomacy. Finally, though American-Israeli relations hit pot-holes during the war, by its conclusion, Washington and Jerusalem remained steadfast allies, notwithstanding Israel's insistence that Washington refrain from limiting Israel's political and military decisions. From the 1973 War and the subsequent 'peace process' diplomacy which enfolded from it, the American-Israeli relationship was altered to balance Washington's historic ties to Israel , with its growing connections to Sadat's Egypt . A bifurcated Washington policy toward Israel evolved: security and foreign aid assistance remained 'holy cows,' virtually untouchable in terms of American commitments, while American presidents increasingly supported Sadat, and his criticism of Israel's management of the West Bank, Jerusalem Golan Heights, and Gaza Strip. In a sense, Sadat used the cold war and Washington's craving to limit Soviet influence in the region to expose American public opinion to the Arab view favoring full Israeli withdrawal from the territories taken in the June War. From the evidence available, Sadat took a monumental risk in going to war, in gambling on Kissinger's craftiness, and in assessing the ultimate willingness of a series of mistrusting Israeli leaders to exercise political courage in testing Sadat's intentions to end the state of war in return for Sinai.

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