

PRESIDENT MEM  
CON

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: June 1, 1964

SUBJECT: Johnson/Eshkol Exchange of Views

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PARTICIPANTS: The President His Excellency, Levi Eshkol,  
Myer Feldman, Deputy Prime Minister of Israel  
Special Counsel His Excellency, Avraham Harman,  
Ambassador of Israel

Participants who entered mid-way in discussion.

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	Mr. Komer	Shimon Peres	
	Governor Harriman		
	Mr. Falbot		
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The President began by saying to the Prime Minister that the United States was and would continue to be interested in the security of Israel. The President said that he appreciated very much the way Mr. Feldman had been received by the Prime Minister. The President said that as long as he remained in the White House, Mr. Feldman would continue to serve as his "Prime Minister" on the question of Israel.

The President went on to say that he was foursquare behind Israel on all matters that affected their vital security interests. Just as the U.S. was in Southeast Asia, they would be wherever they were needed.

The President took up the specific problems on the agenda. With regard to tanks, he said he appreciated the readiness of Israel to agree to the manner in which tanks could be provided. He pointed out that they could not provide tanks directly but they would be glad to help Israel in every way possible to get a sufficient quantity of tanks elsewhere. "We believe the Centurion is a good tank" he said, "and it will certainly be available. However, we will also do everything we can to help in the M-48."

The President then referred to the fact that Senator Ribicoff had discussed this matter with him and also that he appreciated the fact that the tank matter had not been made a public issue but had been kept discreet.

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On the question of water, the President pointed out that all the Arab capitals have been informed that the United States supports the Johnston Plan. There can be no doubt in anyone's mind concerning U.S. commitment to this water project. The President said "We back Israel fully on the Jordan water. We want Israel to have more water. For that reason we are ready to undertake a study in connection with the desalting program which will also provide Israel with the water it needs. If the study proves that the desalting project is feasible, we will help in working it out. We will help Israel on this as much as possible. We have told the Arab Governments about this. Of course, we will get some backlash from the Arab countries as a result of your visit with me. However, I am not worried by that. It is important both to you and to the United States that everybody should know that we are friends. So that is no reason for us not to go forward with this desalting project."

The President asked Prime Minister Eshkol to make clear to his people that "if we turned our backs on the Arabs it would hurt Israel. We are deeply concerned with Israel's security. Our Joint Chiefs of Staff keep a close watch on this. And we are more confident of the Israeli deterrent edge than the Israelis seem to be. We don't blame them for running scared, but we hope they will listen to well meant advice.

"Of course, we know that the Israeli Government is worried over the U.A.R. missile threat. But that threat is likely to remain feeble through 1970. Israel should not hasten to counter it and accelerate in arms race. It can always count on the United States in an emergency." The President pointed out that the Arabs will inevitably tie Israeli missiles to Israel's nuclear potential. He said that he should like to remind the Prime Minister that the U.S. is violently against nuclear proliferation.

If Israel is not going to get into nuclear production, why not accept IAEA controls and let U.S. reassure Nasser about Dimona. It is U.S. firm policy to keep the U.A.R. from getting into nuclear production and it will do everything it can to restrain them.

"I want to assure you," the President said, "that we are not being naive about Nasser. What we want to do is to try and prevent him from leaning over too far towards the Russians."

The President summarized by listing the following six points:

1. On water, the U.S. will support the Johnston Plan.
2. On tanks, the U.S. will assist Israel in obtaining them.
3. On security, the U.S. will stand foursquare behind Israel.
4. On missiles, the U.S. Government feels that Israel is too worried about primitive U.A.R. weapons.

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5. With regard to nuclear weapons, the U.S. is against their proliferation.
6. On the desalting program, the U.S. is ready to help as much as possible.

The President expressed the view that the visit was good for both the United States and Israel, for both the Prime Minister and his nation. Following the visit, it will be possible for Prime Minister Eshkol to explain U.S. concerns and friendship to his people.

The President said that he was glad that the issues had been kept out of the pressures of the election year and that the whole matter has been kept quiet. Because of this they can go to the Germans and be of help. The President said that he saw a bright future for Israel. The Prime Minister could leave knowing that the U.S. will help Israel in the future, both morally and financially as much as she can.

Prime Minister Eshkol responded by first reciting the basis for the feeling of the Israelis that they needed additional strength. He said that after thousands of years of wandering, his people were now trying again to take their fate into their own hands and to do things for themselves. This was the meaning of going back home to Israel. In Turkish rule the area of Palestine had been 100,000 square k.m. but now Israel had been cut down to 20,000 sq. k.m. It was in this area that we tell our people that they must work out their destiny by depending on themselves and doing things for themselves. Of course, they always look for friends and they were immensely fortunate in having the U.S. as a friend. But what he told the people of Israel was to rely on their friends, but that the fundamental importance for Israel was "do it yourself". They had to build their own agriculture and their own industry, their own army and all the other essentials of the nation. They had to be able to create their own future. The problem of security went back a long way. Even before Hitler there had been pogroms in Czarist Russia. Therefore, security was the most important and the first consideration.

(At this point the President summoned into the room Governor Harriman, Mr. Talbot, <sup>and</sup> Mr. Komer who were accompanied by Mr. Shimon Peres, the Israeli Deputy Minister of Defense.) As they were sitting down, the President turned to the Prime Minister and said to him: "Harriman and Feldman are my Prime Ministers on Israeli questions." The President then said that the Prime Minister has just begun his statement and that he wanted them to hear it. The Prime Minister thereupon continued: "When the independence of Israel was proclaimed in 1948 we thought we could live in peace, but we found that we were encircled by enemies. The recent visit by Khrushchev served to give Nasser additional prestige, additional armor and money. This makes him a dangerous enemy. Israel knows that the U.S. is a real friend. We believe this. We are told that there is a United States commitment to Israel. But I cannot ask my people to rely on this alone. When I discuss this matter with my people, the question they ask me is 'do you have enough tanks?' It may be true that the Egyptian missiles are not yet accurate, but the Tel Aviv

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area with a million people is an easy target. The man in the street wants to hear from me that we are on guard. What if one day Nasser, even against the advice of Khrushchev (the Prime Minister interpolated that he thought Khrushchev's reference in his speeches in Egypt on Israel had been somewhat mild in language, and that he did not believe that Khrushchev wanted the destruction of Israel or war against Israel) and against the wishes of the U.S. were to attack Israel, he would do that if he felt that he could do it. Then, in one day or two or three days he could do a great deal of damage. What the man in the street in Israel wants to know is whether Israel would then be able to protect itself, whether it would be strong enough to protect itself. No one could forecast what other problems the U.S. would have at that time."

On tanks, the Prime Minister insisted that only the M-48 would meet Israel's needs. He said it would be bad if Israel were compelled to take the Centurion. Israel had some Centurions and knew them. Israel cannot buy new tanks every day and therefore it is very important for us that we should get today the tanks we need, said the Prime Minister.

Prime Minister Eshkol pointed out that the autonomy of the Centurion was four to five hours while that of the M-48 was 8 hours. This was very important to Israel. He said that if the Germans objected to doing it directly, it could be done through Italy.

With regard to missiles, he said that if Nasser was willing to give up his missiles Israel would acquire none; but Nasser already has about 200. The Prime Minister added: "I think that Nasser is planning to build these missiles in the hundreds. We have some indications of this. For example, we know that he bought quantities of steel. It is impossible for me to believe that Nasser is not improving his missiles." The Prime Minister went on to say that Israel would be prepared to wait a year or two; but Nasser is constantly improving his missiles, and in the next 2 to 3 years Nasser is likely to attack and to use them. Eshkol said he was always glad to hear complimentary things, for it implied that the Israeli armed forces could always overcome a 1 to 5 disadvantage. This might not always be true. At the present time, Nasser has 3 to 4 times as many planes and 3 to 4 times as much armor.

At the present time the disparity between Nasser and Israel in respect to numbers is one against 10 or 15 or 20--depending on whether we take only Egypt into account or also the Arab countries. The same goes for tanks where the Arabs have 3 times as much as Israel. Nasser's advantage is great.

The Prime Minister observed that he was sure it would be possible to make peace with Lebanon; and though difficult, it would probably be possible to make peace with Hussein. But if Nasser attacks, all the other Arab states will join him. Mr. Eshkol said he did not see any way in which he could explain to his country, or even his own political party, a failure to do something about the

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missile threat. The Prime Minister said that he did not see any way as a citizen of his country or as a leader to explain to his people that he would just sit back and do nothing in relation to the missile threat. In any case, for a year or two there would be no missiles in Israel. How could he go and explain to the country or to his own political party or to the Foreign Affairs and Security Committee of the Knesset, and when he is asked what he is doing to face the missile threat simply reply: "The Americans told me that the Egyptian missiles are no good." Nasser has always been the first in introducing new weapons. He was the first in jets; he was the first in Komars and the first in missiles. "I am told," he said, "that my boys in the army are very good. But it is too much for me to demand of my boys that they should face a situation like this without the proper materiel at their disposal." The Prime Minister went on to say: "We cannot afford to lose. This may be our last stand in history. The Jewish people have something to give to the world. I believe that if you look at our history and at all the difficulties we have survived, it means that history wants us to continue. We cannot survive if we experience again what happened to us under Hitler. You may view the situation otherwise and it may be difficult to grasp how we feel. I believe you should understand us. It is important that you should understand us."

The Prime Minister suggested that his visit would be successful if it had helped the President and the American people to understand the situation of Israel. What Israel wants is peace. Nothing less makes sense. War made no sense for Israel. Israel could not possibly conquer Egypt. But Nasser did not have an equivalent attitude. What Nasser was calling for was for driving the Israelis into the sea. The Prime Minister said: "We want your help but we feel that we must do everything that is within the power of a small nation to do to protect itself. If you can persuade Nasser to give up his tanks and missiles, we will do the same."

The Prime Minister offered to destroy all of his arms if Nasser would do likewise. Then the Prime Minister went on to suggest that he would appreciate it if the President would tell Erhard when he came to visit that the U.S. had an interest in helping Israel and in Germany helping Israel. Historically, he felt the Germans had an obligation to do so. The reparations they paid were merely monetary compensation. The Prime Minister added: "The reason I think it would be very important to tell this to Erhard is that sometimes we hear from the Germans that they are not so sure that you are interested in them helping us."

On the question of the U.S. relationship to the Arab nations, the Prime Minister said it was not in the interest of Israel that the U.S. break off its relationships with any other nation. But he asked whether it would not be possible for the United States to tell Nasser to work out a development plan and to have assistance rendered Nasser go into the development of Egypt rather than into other areas. He said that Egypt had much to do. He said: "What I am saying is that you should be pushing Egypt into development and building and out of the field of spending their resources on armaments."

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The Prime Minister suggested that in some instances it would be wise to help Israel publicly. Khrushchev had no reluctance in publicly promising Nasser everything he requested. But when it comes to assistance to Israel, their friends feel it must be done surreptitiously. It reminds the Prime Minister of the German expression: "Don't greet me in public." Perhaps a public greeting he said, would show that the friends of Israel mean to support that state and be conducive to world peace.

In summary the Prime Minister said:

1. Tanks--the tanks we need are the M-48. I am glad over your decision of the tanks and I leave our meeting feeling that I am entitled to tell my Government that we will have these tanks. It would be better if we could get them direct for it would not be good if the Arabs were left in any uncertainty that Israel would be helped in matters such as tanks. However, if you do it indirectly, that is all right, for after all, the important thing is that we should get the tanks that we need. But please do not push us into the Centurions.

2. Missiles--there would be no missiles for 1 to 2 years.

3. Water--the support of the United States is appreciated very much.

4. Desalination--the statement of the President is good news. Israel is prepared to pay rather more for water for irrigation than would be considered possible in other countries. Therefore the project should be feasible.

5. Dimona--I cannot agree that Nasser should be told the real situation in Dimona because Nasser is an enemy. After 16 years they withhold peace from Israel. I notice that in your joint communique with King Hussein there was included a point of "just peace." I don't understand the meaning of this term. I know what peace means. What should have happened is that the armistice should have been following immediately by peace. It would be a great thing if you could induce our neighbors to change the armistice into peace instead of pursuing escalation in tanks and missiles. In the meantime, while the U.A.R. remains an enemy and is committed to the destruction of Israel, it would seem inadvisable to communicate such matters to them. Besides, Nasser has worked for years to become a nuclear power. He will continue to do so. A message that Dimona is not manufacturing nuclear weapons would have no effect.

The Prime Minister then adverted to refugees by saying that Shukayri says there are refugees; but they really are not people within the classic meaning of refugees. They are used by the Arab nations to develop enemies against Israel. He stated that Israel was not engaged in nuclear weapons production, but posed the question: "Why tell Nasser?" He asked: "Why should we tell Nasser when we don't know from his what he is doing about missiles?"

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The Prime Minister concluded by saying that he thanked the President, for his decision was a grand thing and very imaginative.

The President asked Mr. Feldman to comment and he made a brief statement on the need for cooperation on the tank question and said that Peres would hold various meetings while he was in this country in an effort to establish a procedure whereby Israel would receive them. In the meantime, there was a great need for secrecy.

Under Secretary Harriman also made a brief statement dealing with the need to reassure the Israelis by having them inspect the 6th Fleet and other places where the military potential of the United States was evident.

Under Secretary Harriman said that he agreed that it was necessary to add meaning and credibility to the U.S. commitment. He added that tanks were the major issue and that he hoped that could be worked out.

The President said that it was important that there should be a feeling of security on Israel's part..

Under Secretary Harriman said that they were more hopeful about their strategy dealing with Nasser than the Prime Minister seemed to believe.

Mr. Feldman said that it was important that the tank question be kept quiet. It is understood, he said, that only three people in Italy would have to know about it.

The President then reviewed matters briefly, adding that there would be some mutual assistance in intelligence matters. We would help Israel with our knowledge of Arab intelligence and Israel would exchange information that they had with us.

Prime Minister Eshkol suggested that it would be helpful to have semi-annual meetings at the political and military level where there could be mutual exchange of all matters of concern between the two nations.

Under Secretary Harriman said this would be an excellent idea and that we would establish some method whereby this can be accomplished.

The President closed the meeting by saying: "Well, this has been a good beginning."

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