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OPERATION NICKEL GRASS:  
RICHARD NIXON AND THE YOM KIPPUR WAR

A Thesis Presented

by

LUKE GEORGE BERGQUIST

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,  
University of Massachusetts Boston,  
in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2020

History Program

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OPERATION NICKEL GRASS:  
RICHARD NIXON AND THE YOM KIPPUR WAR

A Dissertation Presented  
by  
LUKE GEORGE BERGQUIST

Approved as to style and content by:

---

Vincent Cannato, Associate Professor of History  
Chairperson of Committee

---

Timothy Hacsí, Associate Professor of History  
Member

---

Nicholas Juravich, Assistant Professor of History  
Member

---

Elizabeth McCahill, Program Director  
Graduate History Program

---

Timothy Hacsí, Chairperson  
History Department

ABSTRACT

OPERATION NICKEL GRASS:  
RICHARD NIXON AND THE YOM KIPPUR WAR

August 2020

Luke George Bergquist,  
B.A., University of Massachusetts Amherst  
M.A., University of Massachusetts Boston

Directed by Professor Vincent Cannato

*Operation Nickel Grass: Richard Nixon and the Yom Kippur War* is a critical examination of the American military intervention in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. At the request of the Israeli government, President Nixon ordered the United States Air Force to ship military equipment, weapons, tanks and jets to aid Israel in this conflict. Nixon had multiple goals by helping the Israelis in the Yom Kippur War. He wanted Israel to win the war believing that an Israeli victory would lead to formal peace talks. Since 1948, the Israelis and Arabs had never signed an official peace treaty ending all hostilities. President Nixon wanted the United States to open formal negotiations between Israel and the Arab States after the Yom Kippur War had ended.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. RICHARD NIXON’S PRAGMATISM AND THE YOM KIPPUR WAR...	16
3. OPERATION NICKEL GRASS.....	30
4. THE AFTERMATH OF THE YOM KIPPUR WAR.....	50
5. CONCLUSION.....	62
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	70

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

At 2:00 pm on October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a coordinated surprise attack against Israel along the Golan Heights and the Suez Canal. The timing and date of the major Arab offensives against Israel were well-planned and intentional. It was Yom Kippur, the holiest holiday of the Jewish year. For religious Jews, it was the Day of Atonement a time of fasting, prayer, and repentance. According to ancient Jewish tradition, God judges the fates of men on this day. Israeli Jews who celebrate this holiday spend most of the day attending religious services at synagogue. Yom Kippur is also a national holiday for the nation of Israel. In the 1970s all major Israeli businesses were required by law to close for twenty-four hours and the majority of Israeli citizens were given the day off from work.<sup>1</sup> The Egyptians and Syrians believed that since Israeli Jews were celebrating this holiday then it would be perfect time to launch a surprise attack against Israel. The 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict would be remembered as the Yom Kippur War by Israeli and American historians.<sup>2</sup>

Before 1973, the state of Israel had fought four wars against Egypt and other neighboring Arab states. To solidify its military power in the region, the Israeli government had established a strong political alliance with the United States. These miraculous victories were achieved in large part due to the Israel Defense Forces' modern

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<sup>1</sup> Harold H. Hart, *Yom Kippur Plus 100 days: the Human Side of the War and its Aftermath, As Shown through the Columns of the Jerusalem Post* (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1974), 13-23.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 2nd edition (New York: Schocken Books, 2017), 95-114.



air force, which was more technologically advanced compared to the Arab states. To counter-act American support for Israel, Egypt and Syria allied themselves with the United States' Cold War archenemy the Soviet Union. In the months leading up to the Yom Kippur War, the Egyptians and Syrians had modernized their militaries by purchasing Scud Battlefield Support Surface-to-Surface Missiles from the Russians to counteract Israel's air superiority.<sup>3</sup> These advanced weapons destroyed dozens of Israeli jets and tanks within the first few days of the Yom Kippur War and turned this conflict into a bloody stalemate. Within twenty-four hours, the entire Israeli Defense Forces were mobilized to face off against the Arab armies along the Egyptian and Syrian borders. Even after calling up the national reserves, the Israeli military was still outnumbered two to one by the larger Egyptian/Syrian coalition forces. For the first time since the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, the Israeli Jewish state was at risk of losing a war against its hostile Arab neighbors.<sup>4</sup>

President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had multiple political goals by having the United States military airlift weapons shipments to Israel in October 1973. One, they wanted Israel to ultimately win the Yom Kippur War believing that it would help undermine the Soviet Union's interests in the Middle East. Egypt and Syria were Russia's strongest allies in the region and were dependent on Soviet military aid to resupply their armies. Operation Nickel Grass was meant to guarantee that the Israelis would win the war. If Israel had been defeated in the Yom Kippur War it would

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<sup>3</sup> Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement October 1973* (Little Brown and Company, New York, 1975), 23-31; Freedman, Robert O. "Soviet Policy toward the Middle East from the Exodus of 1972 to the Yom Kippur War." *Naval War College Review* 27, no. 4 (1975): 32-53.  
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.umb.edu/stable/44641560>.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2016), 309-324.

have been the second time within a year an American ally had lost a major conflict against a Soviet-backed third-world dictatorship. The United States just several months before had been forced to withdraw its armed forces from South Vietnam and the Nixon Administration wanted to avoid another geopolitical disaster. Cold War international politics was the primary motivation behind Richard Nixon's support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War.<sup>5</sup>

Second, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger believed that an Israeli victory would establish formal peace talks between Israel and the Arab States. The Nixon Administration had, on multiple occasions attempted to open peace negotiations in the Middle East. Since the founding of the nation of Israel in 1948, there never been an official peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. All of the peace proposals had failed because both sides wanted full control of the Sinai Peninsula. The Egyptian government would only agree to peace talks if Israel immediately withdrew to its pre-1967 borders. The Israeli government refused to give up the occupied Arab territories believing it would compromise their country's national security. This failure to negotiate led directly to the Arab States' decision to go to war against Israel in 1973. President Nixon believed that if Israel achieved a decisive victory in the Yom Kippur War then Egypt and Syria would be forced to open formal peace talks. The United States Military Airlift was successful in achieving the Nixon Administration's two goals of helping Israel win the Yom Kippur War and opening formal peace talks in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, *Nixon in the World American Foreign Relations 1969-1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 126-141; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1985), 230-239.

<sup>6</sup> Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World American Foreign Relations 1969-1977*, 126-141. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, 230-239.

The United States and the Soviet Union had not anticipated a major war in the Middle East. The CIA, on May 5, 1973, had reported to National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger that it was unlikely that Israel and Egypt would go to war within the next several months. After achieving so many decisive victories over a twenty-year period, the Israeli government had convinced itself that Egypt and its allies did not have the military strength to challenge them ever again. The Israelis, blinded by their success, had sent reports to the American intelligence community that the Arab States were incapable of winning a conventional war against the Israel Defense Forces. This CIA analysis, however, ignored the fact that the Egyptians had been threatening to go to war with Israel for years and had established a military alliance with Syria. The Egyptian government was also secretly building up its military through aid from the Communist bloc countries.<sup>7</sup>

Even before the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, President Richard Nixon believed that Israeli military strength would be necessary to provide the political stability for the Americans to achieve lasting peace in the Middle East. Nixon, relatively early in his presidency, wanted his administration to take a more active role in American-Israeli affairs. Since the end of the Six-Day War in June 1967, the United States government had been trying unsuccessfully to negotiate an official treaty between Israel, Egypt, and Syria. Between 1969 and 1970, despite no official declaration of war, there were occasional skirmishes along the Israeli-Egyptian border. On December 9, 1969, U.S. Secretary of State William Rogers proposed the “Rogers Plan” to establish a foreign

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<sup>7</sup> Robert H. McKenzie-Smith, "Crisis Decisionmaking In Israel: The Case of the October 1973 Middle East War." *Naval War College Review* 29, no. 1 (1976): 39-52.  
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.umb.edu/stable/44641386>.

policy framework for a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt that would be negotiated by the United States and the Soviet Union. This proposal was a failure from the start. Neither the Egyptians nor the Israelis would agree to any treaties that threatened their national security and political interests. The Israelis refused to give up any territories they had conquered in the Six-Day War and the Egyptians would only recognize Israel's sovereignty if they were given back full control of the Suez Canal. To make matters worse for the peace talks, the nation of Egypt was suffering from a financial recession in the early 1970s that was the direct result of their losing the Sinai Peninsula to Israel. In September 1973, Secretary of State Rogers would be replaced by Richard Nixon's longtime political ally and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger who was more supportive of the Israelis than his predecessor.<sup>8</sup>

Following the death of Egyptian dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970, the newly appointed President Anwar el-Sadat started making preparations for war against Israel. He hoped that a victory against the Israelis would increase his political popularity in the face of economic hardships at home. More importantly, President Sadat wanted to regain control of the Sinai Peninsula. He strategized that if the Arab armies could force the Israelis to retreat from the Suez Canal and the Golan Heights then the United Nations would call for a cease-fire agreement. Egypt and Syria would then negotiate a peace treaty that would require the Israelis to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders. Sadat's entire military strategy was based on the assumption that the U.S. and the Soviet Union did not want a major war in the Middle East, and the two superpowers would call for peace talks

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed, the U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2015), 103-124.

at the first sign of hostilities. Sadat, however, did not anticipate that the Americans would provide military aid to the Israelis in the war.<sup>9</sup>

On October 9, 1973, the Israeli government secretly asked Secretary of State Henry Kissinger for American military aid. The Israelis feared that they could potentially lose the ongoing war against the Arab coalition forces, having received intelligence that the Soviets were starting to increase their regular weapons shipments to Egypt and Syria. The United States government almost immediately granted the Israelis their request for new jet fighters and tanks. Richard Nixon wanted Israel to win the Yom Kippur War believing that a decisive Israeli victory would allow the United States to conduct successful peace talks between Israel and Arab states. Nixon viewed the U.S.-Israel alliance as necessary to prevent Soviet intervention in the region. In Nixon's memoir, *Seize the Moment: America's Challenge in One-Superpower World* (1992), the former President looks back on the legacy of his decision to support Israel in the Yom Kippur War. Nixon argues that he was personally responsible for the executive decision to airlift weapons and military equipment to the Israelis. He claims that without the top-secret weapons shipments Israel could have lost the Yom Kippur War.<sup>10</sup>

This memoir reveals that Richard Nixon believed that U.S. military aid was necessary to prevent the Israelis from losing the war. United States military aid to Israel in the Yom Kippur War was dangerous since Egypt and Syria were allied with the Soviet Union. Any major escalation of the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict could have potentially led to a global confrontation between the U.S. and the Communist Bloc countries. President

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<sup>9</sup> Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism To Our Time* 2nd edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 746-752.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Nixon, *Seize the Moment: America's Challenge in One-Superpower World*, (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press for the Nixon Foundation, 1992), 217-231.

Nixon, however, was more than willing to risk a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union, believing that Israeli military dominance would be necessary to protect American interests in the Middle East. On October 14, 1973, he authorized the U.S. military to secretly give weapons to the Israelis. As part of "Operation Nickel Grass," the United States airlifted and shipped by sea over 50,000 tons of military equipment to Israel, including tanks and jet fighters. This sudden influx of American military aid gave the Israelis the time to rally their forces against Egypt and Syria. On October 15, 1973, Israeli major general Ariel Sharon's 143rd Infantry Division launched a successful counter-attack against Egyptian forces establishing a beachhead on the opposite side of the Suez Canal. This single decisive battle turned the tide of the Yom Kippur War in the Israelis' favor.<sup>11</sup> Ten days later on October 25, the Yom Kippur War officially ended when the United States and the Soviet Union negotiated a cease-fire agreement. Following President Jimmy Carter's Camp David Accords, Egypt and Israel would sign a peace treaty in 1979 officially ending all hostilities between their countries. Syria never signed a formal peace treaty after the Yom Kippur War and has maintained a cease-fire agreement with Israel that has lasted to the present day.<sup>12</sup>

American support for the Israelis in the Yom Kippur War was a direct result of Cold War international politics. Richard Nixon's foreign policy strategy was based on the idea of political realism. Henry Kissinger was Richard Nixon's top national security advisor and played an instrumental role in many of the foreign policy decisions of this administration. As a Harvard academic, Henry Kissinger has been credited with using

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<sup>11</sup> Nir Hefez and Gadi Bloom, *Ariel Sharon* (New York City: Random House Publishing, 2006), 155-177.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 520-533.

methods from a 1960s school of international relations in Political Science known as “Realpolitik.” Political realism advocates that government leaders be flexible in their approaches to foreign policy. Nixon and Kissinger were pragmatic and developed a new Cold War strategy “Détente” that was designed to deescalated tensions with the Communist Bloc Countries and made the United States a peacemaker in international politics.<sup>13</sup> This Cold War foreign policy strategy was the middle road between war hawkish anti-communism of the Right and the anti-war pacifism of the Left. Nixon throughout his Presidency had to deal with a Democratic majority in Congress and would often take moderate stances on political issues that appealed to both liberals and conservatives.<sup>14</sup>

President Nixon wanted to increase the United States’ standing as the dominant global super power, but negative public opinion at home over the Vietnam War prevented him from taking a traditional anti-communist foreign policy strategy. Instead, Nixon and Kissinger were pragmatic and decided to use diplomacy, instead of military firepower to expand American influence worldwide. By reducing tensions with the Russians and the Chinese, he was establishing the groundwork for a new era of American-Soviet international relations. From now on the United States would attempt to avoid direct military confrontations with the Communist Bloc countries. At the same time, however, the Nixon Administration continued to provide military aid to American allies abroad, including Israel.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, *Nixon in the World American Foreign Relations 1969-1977*, 126-141.

<sup>14</sup> Romain Huret, “Richard Nixon, The Great Society, and Social Reforms: A Lost Opportunity?,” in *A Companion to Richard Nixon* ed. Melvin Small (West Sussex, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 205-209.

<sup>15</sup> Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, *Nixon in the World American Foreign Relations 1969-1977*, 107-122.

The United States government's decision to support Israel in the Yom Kippur War was a direct result of Richard Nixon's pragmatic style of foreign policy and his willingness to do anything to protect American allies abroad. The American Airlift to Israel would have major global political and economic consequences. While the military aid initially helped Israel win the war, it also caused the United States to alienate many of its oil-producing allies in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>16</sup> As a direct reaction to "Operation Nickel Grass," the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries decided to embargo the United States and Western European countries that were allied with the state of Israel. This was an attempt by the Arab States to force Israel to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders and to allow for Palestinian statehood. This economic embargo lasted from October 1973 till March 1974 and caused the price of oil to skyrocket sparking a major global recession in the 1970s. More importantly, the arms shipments solidified the American-Israeli alliance and led to widespread bipartisan support for Israel in United States politics that has lasted to the present day.<sup>17</sup>

The events of the Yom Kippur War have been heavily debated by historical scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds. American historians are largely divided over Richard Nixon's political intentions in this conflict. The majority of these scholars agree that the Cold War directly influenced President Nixon's decision to provide arms to Israel in the Yom Kippur War. Egypt and Syria were allied with the Soviet Union, and an Israeli victory would have helped American political interests in the Middle East. What these historians largely disagree on is Richard Nixon's personal motivations for helping

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<sup>16</sup> Daniel Gordis, *Israel A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2016), 301-324.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs a History* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 363-373.



the Israelis. In general, there are two schools of thought among American historians when analyzing Nixon's political motivations and intentions in the Yom Kippur War.

The first group of American scholars argues that the President's decision to give weapons to Israel based on Cold War politics. According to this interpretation, Richard Nixon years before the Yom Kippur War had wanted to increase American military aid to Israel. For example, military historian Stephen Ambrose argues that President Nixon's support for Israel was a part of his larger Cold War strategy to keep the Soviets out of the Middle East. Since Egypt and Syria were allied with the Soviet Union an Israeli victory in the war would have helped American interests in the region. Ambrose states that the Yom Kippur War was essentially a Cold War proxy conflict since the Americans and Soviets were funding their respective allies. He also claims that Nixon and Kissinger believed that Soviets were directly responsible for the Arab states' surprise attack against Israel and that they wanted a quick end to the conflict to prevent a major confrontation between the two global superpowers. President Nixon had multiple goals by intervening in the Yom Kippur War all of which depended on the U.S. having a stronger alliance with Israel.<sup>18</sup>

Many other American scholars have come to similar conclusions on Richard Nixon's reasons for supporting Israel. Georgetown Professor and former State Department Official Dennis Ross argues that the Nixon Administration fundamentally changed the nature of the U.S.-Israeli alliance. He states that U.S. Presidents in the 1960s had tried to give equal support to both sides in the Arab-Israeli conflicts. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson feared that appearing too pro-Israel would isolate many

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery 1973–1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 230.

of the U.S.'s key Arab allies in the oil-rich Persian Gulf. President Nixon on the other hand was a risk-taker and believed that increased U.S. support for Israel was necessary to prevent Soviet intervention in the region. Dennis Ross agrees with the first school of thought that Richard Nixon's support for Israelis was based on his Cold War foreign policy strategy in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

One of the more unique books on the Yom Kippur War is *The Two O' Clock War: The 1973 Yom Kippur War and the Airlift that saved Israel* (2002) by Walter J. Boyne. He is a retired U.S. Air Force colonel and the former Director of the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. In this book, Boyne discusses how the Israelis, since the 1950s, had secretly been developing nuclear weapons but had not deployed them in the field by the time of the Yom Kippur War. He argues that Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir had ordered the assembling of thirteen "Jericho" ballistic missiles as a last resort weapon if the IDF lost the war against Egypt. Boyne argues that the United States airlift of weapons was meant to guarantee that Israel would win the war and prevent them from using nuclear weapons against the Arabs. Boyne's argument for why Richard Nixon had chosen to provide weapons to the Israelis is controversial and conflicts with other American historians who argue that the Nixon Administration's support was the result of his Cold War strategy to counter-act Soviet support for the Arab states.<sup>20</sup> Prior to the early 2000s, the majority of American historians did not discuss the role of Israel's nuclear weapons program in the Yom Kippur War, since the Israeli government archives had classified that information during the Cold War. Even today there is still little

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<sup>19</sup> Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed, the U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2015), 103-144.

<sup>20</sup> Walter J. Boyne, *The Two O' Clock War: the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the Airlift that saved Israel* (New York: St. Martin Press, 2002), 128-147.

information on Israel's nuclear weapons program that has been made available to historians to confirm or deny this theory.

The second school of American historical thought on the Yom Kippur War argues that Richard Nixon was not a strong supporter of Israel and only reluctantly gave them military aid in 1973. This alternative interpretation states that the Nixon Administration was pressured by Prime Minister Golda Meir to give into weapons to the Israelis when it became clear that they were going to lose the war without American aid. In *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*, William B. Quandt argues that the Yom Kippur War changed the nature of U.S.-Israeli relations on a fundamental level. He states that before the Yom Kippur War, Nixon believed that the Israeli military would guarantee political stability in the Middle East. Nixon had no prior intentions of increasing U.S. military aid to Israel and only authorized the airlift when it was clear that Israelis might potentially lose the war. Quandt argues that Richard Nixon was so focused on the fallout of the Watergate scandal that Henry Kissinger was responsible for most of the U.S. government's decisions in the Yom Kippur War. This text also cautions American foreign policymakers from viewing Arab-Israeli conflict as a black and white issue. Quandt states that the Nixon Administration was trying to balance its support for Israel and the Arab states in 1973, out of the fear of backlash from the neutral Persian Gulf oil states. This historical interpretation, however, ignores the fact that Richard Nixon's support for Israel was intended to directly counter-act the Soviet Union's military aid to Egypt and Syria.<sup>21</sup> Therefore Cold War politics were the primary reason for the American military aid to Israel. If the Soviet Union had not been

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<sup>21</sup> William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Washington, D.C.: Berkeley: Brookings Institution Press; University of California Press, 1993), 148-182.

supporting Egypt and Syria then the United States would not have given military aid to the Israelis in the Yom Kippur War.

Many Israeli historians would disagree with the first school of American historical thought that United States support for Israel was the result of President Nixon's Cold War politics. In *Nixon and Israel: Forging a Conservative Partnership*, Hebrew University Professor Noam Kochavi argues that Richard Nixon only reluctantly supported the Israelis in the Yom Kippur War out of political necessity. For most of his Presidency, Nixon pursued a Cold War policy of "détente" that was designed to de-escalate tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. He was also known to have privately made anti-Semitic comments about liberal American Jews and had paranoid delusions that they were undermining his Presidency. Kochavi argues that Richard Nixon did not want his administration to appear too pro-Israel out of the fear of isolating Arab allies. Instead, the President was pressured by Golda Meir and Henry Kissinger to provide weapons to Israel, because the Soviet Union was already funding the Egyptian military. Essentially before the Yom Kippur War, President Nixon had no intention of helping the Israelis and wanted to maintain the status quo. He only gave weapons to the Israelis, because of the fear that another U.S. ally would suffer a major defeat at the hands of a Soviet ally.<sup>22</sup> This text differs from the main argument of my thesis since it claims that Richard Nixon was not a supporter of Israel and only reluctantly helped them out of political necessity.

Another Israeli academic historian who is critical of Richard Nixon's actions in the Yom Kippur War is Daniel Gordis, the Senior Vice President of Shalem College in

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<sup>22</sup> Noam Kochavi, *Nixon and Israel: Forging a Conservative Partnership* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009), 70-75.

Jerusalem. In *Israel A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* (2016), Gordis criticizes Nixon and Kissinger for not being more supportive of the Israelis in the Yom Kippur War. Gordis argues that President Nixon reluctantly gave weapons to Israel and only supported them when it was clear that they could have lost the war against the Arab states. He also states that it was not until after the Yom Kippur War that the United States had a stronger alliance with the state of Israel. President Nixon did not want to be viewed as too pro-Israel out of fear of isolating United States' Arab allies, like Saudi Arabia.<sup>23</sup> Gordis agrees with the second school of interpretation that President Nixon supported the Israelis out of political necessity rather than being the Cold War foreign policy.

Unlike American and Israeli historians, European academic scholarship on the Yom Kippur War is more critical of Israel and United States interventions in the Middle East. These historians often interpret American support for Israel in the Yom Kippur War as a form of neo-imperialism. For example, Eugene Rogan argues that interventions by the United States and the Soviet Union in the Middle East were meant to gain more control of the region's oil supply. He uses neutral terms like "Arab-Israeli conflict" and the "1973 War" to describe the Yom Kippur War. This text reveals how many European scholars are sympathetic to the suffering of the Arab peoples in Palestine.<sup>24</sup> According to Rogan's interpretation, protecting the Western powers' access to oil resources was the main reason for President Nixon's support for the Israelis in the conflict rather than Cold War international politics. The problem with Rogan's argument though is that Israel was not a major producer of oil. Richard Nixon's support for the Israelis in the Yom Kippur War was the direct result of Cold War alliances. The United States ended up alienating

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<sup>23</sup> Gordis, *Israel A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*, 301-324.

<sup>24</sup> Rogan, *The Arabs A History*, 363-373.

many of the Arab petroleum states for helping the Israelis in this conflict. Therefore, President Nixon's support for Israel was based on Cold War foreign policy rather than a neo-imperialist desire for oil.

The first school of American historical interpretation is correct in arguing that Richard Nixon was a strong supporter of Israel and viewed the Yom Kippur War as a Cold War proxy conflict. He was a political pragmatist who was willing to do everything in his power to give the United States an advantage over the Soviet Union in Cold War. Political pragmatism is not the absence of political goals or principles rather it is the willingness to compromise and adapt foreign policy strategies in order to achieve one's objectives. Richard Nixon never blindly followed his political ideals instead he was willing to do everything in his power in give the U.S. an advantage over the Soviet Union in the Cold War. By helping Israel win the Yom Kippur War, Nixon believed that the United States would be in the best position to open formal peace talks between Israel and the Arab States.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World American Foreign Relations 1969-1977*, 126-141; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, 230-239.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### RICHARD NIXON'S PRAGMATISM AND THE YOM KIPPUR WAR

The American support for Israel in the Yom Kippur War reveals how Richard Nixon was a political pragmatist and had multiple goals in this conflict. Throughout his presidency, Nixon tried to de-escalate tensions with the Soviet Union and other Communist bloc countries. Coming to office in 1968 during the height of the unpopular Vietnam War, Nixon promised the American public that his administration would scale back United States involvement in military interventions abroad. Henry Kissinger was Richard Nixon's top national security advisor and played an instrumental role in many of the foreign policy decisions of this administration. Henry Kissinger was heavily influenced by political school of thought known as "Realpolitik."<sup>26</sup> This method of foreign policy is a form of political pragmatism or realism. Similar to the Italian Renaissance political theorist Niccolo Machiavelli, Kissinger believed that governments should be flexible with their moral principles when making important decisions in foreign policy. This political pragmatism practiced by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger allowed them to be adaptable while protecting American interests abroad.<sup>27</sup>

Nixon and Kissinger developed a new Cold War strategy "Détente" that used diplomacy, instead of military firepower to expand American influence worldwide. By reducing tensions with the Russians and the Chinese, he was establishing the groundwork

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<sup>26</sup> Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, *Nixon in the World American Foreign Relations 1969-1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 126-141; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1985), 360-368.

<sup>27</sup> Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World American Foreign Relations 1969-1977*, 126-141.

for a new era of American-Soviet international relations. From now on the United States would attempt to avoid direct military confrontations with the Communist Bloc countries. At the same time, however, the Nixon Administration continued to provide military aid to nations abroad that were at war with Russia's allies. Israel and its Arab neighbors were one of these Cold War hot spots. Richard Nixon wanted the Israelis to win the Yom Kippur War believing it would lead to formal peace talks between Israel and the Arab States.<sup>28</sup>

Since the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, the United States had always maintained friendly relations with the state of Israel. This alliance was largely the result of Cold War international politics. Israel's hostile neighboring Arab States Egypt and Syria were allied with the Soviet Union. In addition to these entangling Cold War alliances, Israel was one of the few liberal democratic governments in the Middle East making the nation a natural ally of the United States. Between 1948 and 1967, the Israelis and the Arabs had fought three major wars against each other with every conflict resulting in a decisive victory for Israel. The Arab-Israeli conflicts had always ended with cease-fire agreements with no official peace treaty. In the 1970s the Nixon Administration had made multiple attempts to open negotiations between Israel and Egypt. Neither side, however, was willing to agree to formal peace talks. The Soviet Union's alliance with the Arab States did not help with the negotiations since the Americans did not want to risk compromising their friendly relations with Israel by joining the Russians in a neutral peace agreement.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World American Foreign Relations 1969-1977*, 107-122.

<sup>29</sup> Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed, the U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2015), 103-124; Scherer, John L. "Soviet and American Behavior During the



For years the United States had been trying to reach a diplomatic solution to the ongoing hostilities between Israel and its Arab neighbors. On December 9, 1969, Secretary of State William Rogers proposed the “Rogers Plan” that would establish a foreign policy framework for a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt that would be negotiated by the United States and the Soviet Union. This proposal was a failure from the start. Neither the Egyptians nor the Israelis would agree to any treaties that threaten their national security and political interests. The Egyptian government would only agree to a peace treaty if Israel permanently withdrew to its pre-1967 borders. The Israeli government refused to give up the West Bank, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights since these territories were economically valuable and formed a military buffer zone between Israel and its hostile Arab neighbors. Neither side was willing to compromise its national security by agreeing to William Rogers’ 1969 peace proposal.<sup>30</sup>

The United States government would continue to attempt to reach a peace settlement between Israel and Egypt in the months leading up to the Yom Kippur War. U.S. State Department memos from May 1973 detail a top-secret meeting between National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and Egyptian diplomat Mohammed Hafez Ismail looking for a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and issue of Palestinian refugees. The Henry Kissinger office Memo dated May 20, 1973, describes Ismail's terms and conditions for a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

First Day: He said there are two main aspects of a settlement:--First is the question of restoring Egyptian sovereignty over Egyptian territory. This requires Israeli withdrawal to pre-war borders.—Second is the issue of Palestinian rights. This problem should be reduced to the size of Arab and Jewish communities

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Yom Kippur War." *World Affairs* 141, no. 1 (1978): 3-23.  
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.umb.edu/stable/20671755>.

<sup>30</sup> Ross, *Doomed to Succeed, the U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama*, 103-124.

within the area of mandated Palestine deciding how to divide that territory and live together. He said: Egypt would pose no objection if Hussein negotiated with Israel to get the West back and then gave the West Bank Palestinians a chance to determine their own future. This would then become an internal Jordanian problem. He was reluctant at first to commit himself that Egypt would regard Jordan's solution as a solution of the Palestine problem for all Arabs.

These United States state department documents reveal that the Egyptian government would only agree to a formal peace treaty if Israel was willing to return the majority of its conquered territories back to Egypt and Jordan. The Israelis would never agree to these terms since their government was unwilling to return the West Bank, which they considered vital for Israel's national security.<sup>31</sup>

The U.S. government quietly rejected Ismail's secret proposal believing it would weaken Israel militarily. Henry Kissinger believed that it would be better for American interests in the Middle East to maintain the status quo between Israel and the Arab states. His office memos on the top-secret meeting argue that the best course of action for the United States was to continue to maintain its support for Israel and wait for the Egyptian government to change its conditions for a peace settlement.

We can sit tight. Continuation of the status quo, even if it is marred by violation of the ceasefire and further acts of terrorism, probably would bring no serious threat to basic U.S. interests in the area in the near term and might well be manageable for several years to come[sic]...This is presently Israel's preferred strategy. Israel holds that, faced with a firm sit-tight policy by it and the United States, Sadat will have no choice but to come to negotiating table.

This memo is solid evidence that the Nixon Administration was convinced that Egypt and the other Arab states were not a military threat to Israel. The Israelis' lightning victories in the Six-Day War had convinced the international community that the Arabs states were

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<sup>31</sup> State Department Memo, May 20, 1973, Henry A. Kissinger Office Country Files-Egypt/Ismail Volume V (Memcon), [1 of 4] Box 132, National Security Council Files, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

unlikely to go to war against Israel. Kissinger decided that the United States should continue to maintain its positive relationship with Israel and not attempt to isolate them by publically supporting the Egyptian peace proposal.<sup>32</sup>

Henry Kissinger's office memos from the Ismail meeting also reveal how the Nixon Administration viewed the Soviet Union's alliance with the Arab states in the Middle East.

[sic] U.S. and Soviet aims in the Middle East, while they overlap in common desire to avoid renewed hostilities there, have never really coincided. All our experience to date indicates that the Soviets have been unwilling to deviate in any significant way from the Arab position on an overall settlement, as we were willing to do from Israel's in 1969. A renewal of U.S-Soviet peace efforts would give the Israelis the most serious problems, raising their suspicion that we were prepared to make and impose a deal at their expense. Furthermore, to engage the Soviets in joint peacemaking efforts would facilitate their attempts to recover lost ground in Egypt and improve their position elsewhere in the Arab world. We would be making the Soviets Sadat's negotiator and advocate.

While the United States and the Soviet Union wanted an official peace treaty between the Israelis and Arabs neither side was willing to risk isolating their Middle Eastern allies by imposing a new U.N. peace resolution on them. Kissinger believed that Soviet support was essential for any compromise agreement to be successful between Israel and Egypt. The Russian government, however, was unwilling to deviate from the Egyptian leadership's terms and conditions for peace out of the fear of losing Arab allies. The Nixon Administration in 1973 decided that it would be better for American interests to maintain the status quo with Israel and Arab states in the face of a political stalemate.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> State Department Memo, May 20, 1973, Henry A. Kissinger Office Country Files-Egypt/Ismail Volume V (Memcon), [1 of 4] Box 132, National Security Council Files, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>33</sup> State Department Memo, May 20, 1973, Henry A. Kissinger Office Country Files-Egypt/Ismail Volume V (Memcon), [1 of 4] Box 132, National Security Council Files, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

Egypt and Syria were determined to go to war against Israel and they would need Soviet military aid for the conflict. The Russians willingly gave the Arabs weapon shipments believing it necessary to maintain the Soviet Union's political influence in the Middle East. The United States government similarly believed that a militarily strong Israel was needed to protect American interests abroad. These entangling alliances in the Middle East prevented the United States and the Soviet Union from proposing a compromise peace deal between Israelis and Egyptians in the months before the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>34</sup>

In the early morning hours of October 6, 1973, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was awoken by Assistant Secretary of State Joseph J. Sisco with the sudden news of a major war breaking out in the Middle East. The American ambassador to Israel, Kenneth Keating, had forwarded a message from Prime Minister Golda Meir stating that the Mossad (Israeli intelligence) had discovered that Egypt and Syria were preparing to launch a surprise attack against Israel that afternoon.<sup>35</sup> At exactly two o'clock that day, the Arab Coalition forces would launch two simultaneous offensives against Israel in an attempt to recapture the Golan Heights and the Suez Canal. These regions had been conquered five years before during Israel's lightning victories of the Six-Day War of 1967.<sup>36</sup>

The Israeli government was not surprised by the sudden outbreak of hostilities with Egypt and Syria. In 2002, it was leaked to the press that Mossad Chief Zvi Zamir

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<sup>34</sup> State Department Memo, May 20, 1973, Henry A. Kissinger Office Country Files-Egypt/Ismael Volume V (Memcon), [1 of 4] Box 132, National Security Council Files, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>35</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1982), 450-459.

<sup>36</sup> Walter J. Boyne, *The Two' Clock War the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the Airlift that saved Israel* (New York: St. Martin Press, 2002), 1-15.

had a double agent, code-named “The Angel,” inside the Egyptian military hierarchy who had warned the Israelis of the impending Yom Kippur offensive. The night before hostilities began “The Angel” informed his London Mossad contacts that Egypt and Syria were going to war with Israel sometime tomorrow afternoon on October 6. According to Zamir, the Israeli spy was Arab billionaire Ashraf Marwan, the son-in-law of the deceased Egyptian Dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser. He was also the personal aide and a trusted political advisor to the Egyptian President Anwar El-Sadat. Marwan would later die under mysterious circumstances by falling from the balcony of his luxurious London apartment on June 27, 2007. The cause of his death was never discovered though the British police suspected it was murder.<sup>37</sup> Marwan’s last-minute warning allowed the Israelis the precious few hours necessary to call up the nation’s military reserves for the war and inform the United States government of its desire for peace and a quick end to the war.

According to Henry Kissinger’s memoir, Prime Minister Meir’s message told him that Israel had no intentions of launching a preemptive strike against the Arab states and requested that the U.S. Secretary of State inform the Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin of the Israeli government’s desire for peace. Egypt and Syria had previously cut all official ties with the United States and Israel so the majority of diplomatic correspondence with the Arab-coalition states was conducted through third-party Russian channels of communication. At 6:40 Eastern time, Henry Kissinger telephoned Dobrynin to reassure the Soviets that Israel was not responsible for the sudden hostilities and that they did not want to go to war against Russia’s Arab allies. In his memoir, Kissinger

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<sup>37</sup> Abraham Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Schocken Books, 2017), 562-563.

claims that during the phone call Dobrynin accused the Israelis of manufacturing the crisis to justify a preemptive strike against military targets in Egypt and Syria. Despite the Secretary of State's insistence that Israel wanted peace, Dobrynin intentionally ignored his warnings. Henry Kissinger theorized that the Soviet Union was aware of the Arab states desired for war and was pretending to have no prior knowledge of plans for the surprise offensive to avoid being accused of collusion with Egypt.<sup>38</sup>

Kissinger's analysis of the Soviet Union's prior knowledge of the war and support for the Arab States was accurate. For several months President Sadat had kept the Arab coalition's war plans top secret to everyone, except the highest-ranking leaders of the Egyptian and Syrian governments. On October 3, just a few days before the Yom Kippur offensive, Soviet Ambassador Vladimir Vinogradov was secretly summoned to President Sadat's headquarters in Cairo, Egypt. He informed the Soviet Ambassador that Egypt and Syria were planning to go to war against Israel soon to break the political deadlock in the Middle East and claim land for the Palestinians. By telling the Soviet Union of their war plans, the Arab governments hoped that the Russians would agree to continue to their regular shipments military aid knowing that it was the only way they could to quickly resupply themselves once hostilities resumed with Israel.<sup>39</sup>

Ambassador Vinogradov was shocked by the news and asked President Sadat when the war would begin. The Egyptian leader lied and said that the official date had not been decided yet. After passing on the message of the Arab states' war plans to the Moscow Politburo, General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev ordered the immediate evacuation of all Soviet citizens and military advisors from Egypt. In addition to regular

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<sup>38</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 450-451.

<sup>39</sup> Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 78-79.

weapons shipments, the Russians had been sending thousands of Spetsnaz Special Forces soldiers to Egypt and Syria to train the Arab armies. The purpose of these military advisors in the Middle East was to maintain Russia's ongoing political alliances with the Arab secular nationalist governments. The Soviet leadership had not anticipated that Egypt and Syria would actually try to go to war with Israel. Now that the Yom Kippur War had begun the Russians did nothing to stop Sadat and Assad from invading Israel. Egypt and Syria were determined to wage war against Israel and Secretary of State Kissinger's last-minute attempts had diplomatic mediation were futile.<sup>40</sup>

In a private message to President Nixon, Henry Kissinger describes the developing Arab-Israeli conflict and his failed attempt to convince the Soviets to negotiate an end to the hostilities.

At 6:00 am this morning, I was notified that the Israelis have what they consider to be hard information that [sic] Egyptians and Syrians were planning to launch a coordinated attack within six hours. I immediately called Dobrynin and told him of the Israeli demarche. I emphasized to him that: --The U.S. and the USSR have a special responsibility to restrain their respective friends. -- We are urgently communicating with the Israelis, warning them against any preemptive --That it was important for our own relationship that this crisis not degenerate into armed conflict. [sic] I asked Dobrynin to call Moscow immediately to report this information and to ask his government to restrain Syria and Egypt.<sup>41</sup>

This personal correspondence telegram to President Nixon reveals that the United States government did not want the Israelis and Arabs to go to war. Henry Kissinger had attempted to mediate hostilities on the first day of the Yom Kippur War, but it was a total failure. The Russians were initially unwilling to convince Egypt and Syria to call off the fighting out of the fear of isolating their most important allies in the Middle East. The

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Henry Kissinger correspondence to Richard Nixon, Country Files – Middle East, Middle East War Memos + Misc. October 6, 1973 – October 17, 1973 [Oct 73- Feb 74] [2 to 2] Folder 1A Box 664, National Security Council Files, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

Soviet Union's reluctance to restrain their allies convinced the Nixon Administration that they were supporting the Arab states in this war and that it would take an Israeli victory on the battlefield to get them to call for a cease-fire agreement.

It is important to note that neither Egypt nor Syria were Communist regimes. In the 1970s, Egypt was ruled by an "Arab Socialist" military government that supported the creation of a Pan-Arab Nation that would unite all Arab ethnic peoples in the Middle East. Syria was ruled by the Ba'athist party headed by General Hafiz al-Assad who had overthrown in the previous Arab republic in 1970 and established himself as the country's new "progressive" revolutionary leader. Despite Egyptian and Syrian leaders' claims of being "Arab Socialist" states, in practice, these regimes were secular nationalist dictatorships, where political power was centralized within the military hierarchies. These Arab authoritarian regimes were secular governments because they did not have an official state religion despite being overwhelming Muslim majority countries.<sup>42</sup>

Egypt and Syria had allied themselves with the Soviet Union to counter-act Western imperialism and gain advanced weaponry for their militaries. Unlike the Eastern European Communist Bloc countries, the Soviet Union did not have direct control over its Arab allies. Egypt and Syria had friendlier political relations with each other than with the Russians. Some of the Soviet military advisors in Egypt reportedly hated working with the Arab troops, because many of these soldiers were devout Muslims who did not follow the ideals of atheistic Communism. These cultural, religious, and political differences between the Russians and the Egyptians made them unlikely allies against the Israelis and Americans in the Middle East. The Soviet Union did not want a major war in

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<sup>42</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs A History*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 332-343.



the Middle East, but once the Yom Kippur War started it increased its military aid to the Arab states to maintain its fragile alliances with these nations.<sup>43</sup>

President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger had not anticipated another conflict with Israel, Egypt, and Syria in October 1973. Earlier in the year, the American intelligence community on several occasions had reassured the Nixon Administration that it was highly unlikely that a major war would break out in the Middle East. This analysis was based on the events of the Six-Day War in June 1967, where the Israelis had defeated Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq in a brief conflict that lasted less than a week. Israel had won this war by launching a preemptive airstrike against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan that had wiped out the Arab Air Forces before the ground fighting had even started. This decisive victory created the illusion of Israeli military superiority in the Middle East. The United States government was convinced that Israeli Defense Forces were vastly superior to the Egyptian and Syrian armies and that it would be foolish for the Arab States to challenge Israel in a conventional war again. This assumption, however, did not match the political realities on the ground.<sup>44</sup>

American and Israeli governments had been given plenty of evidence and warning signs of Egypt's plans to go to war that year. In April 1973, President Sadat had publically stated his intentions to go to war with Israel. At the American-Soviet Washington D.C. summit in June 1973, General Secretary Brezhnev privately confided his fears to Richard Nixon that the Arabs were plotting to go to war against Israel and asked for the United States to restrain the Israelis in case of renewed hostilities. Over

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<sup>43</sup> Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement October 1973* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1975), 23-31.

<sup>44</sup> Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, 360-368.

several months, Egyptian military traffic along the borders increased significantly and the Soviet Union's arms shipments to the Arab states were at an all-time high. In the summer of 1973, Henry Kissinger, as last-minute precaution, quietly asked the State Department to write up a new contingency plan in case of another Arab-Israeli conflict. The task of writing the plan went to a junior State Department official who thought the entire exercise was a waste of time and money. The first draft of the contingency plan lay half-finished in his file drawer on October 6, 1973.<sup>45</sup>

Now that the Yom Kippur War had started Henry Kissinger theorized that the Israelis would easily defeat the Arab states in a defensive ground conflict. This quick and decisive Israeli victory would allow the United States the opportunity to open formal peace talks between the Israelis and Arabs. The negotiations for a ceasefire agreement would be conducted through the United Nations and would be called as soon as the Israelis had defeated both Egypt and Syria's armies on the battlefield.<sup>46</sup> The Nixon Administration needed Israel to win the Yom Kippur War to create a lasting peace that favored American interests in the Middle East.

On October 6 at 9:25 am on the first day of the war, Kissinger during a private phone conversation with President Nixon expressed his thoughts on the origins of the war and devised a strategy for getting both sides to the negotiating table.

The Russians claim to be surprised and my impression is that they were supposed to be surprised because apparently there has been an airlift of dependents out of the area going on for the last 2 or 3 days....Fighting has broken out on the Golan Heights and along the Sinai. The Egyptians claim that the Israelis had launched a naval attack in the Gulf of Suez which triggered the whole thing. That I just can't believe. Why a naval attack? The Israelis claim that so far the fighting is still

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<sup>45</sup> William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1993), 148-150.

<sup>46</sup> Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, 360-368.

mostly in Israeli territory and that they have confined themselves to defensive action. My own impression is that this one almost certainly was started by the Arabs. It is almost inconceivable that the Israelis would start on the holiest holiday for the Jews when there is no need to and there is no evidence that the Israelis launched air attacks, and they gave us an assurance which we passed on this morning that they would not launch a preemptive attack and we told the Arabs that if the Israelis launch a preemptive attack that we would oppose them and they should exercise restraint. My view is that the primary problem is to get the fighting stopped and then use the opportunity to see whether a settlement could be enforced.<sup>47</sup>

President Nixon agreed with his Secretary of State's initial conclusions that the Arabs were responsible for this war and that the Soviet Union was given previous warnings of the surprise offensive. These men believed that the best strategy for the United States was to wait for Israel to achieve a decisive victory on the battlefield, and then called for a U.N. cease-fire agreement. Since Richard Nixon was largely preoccupied with the events of the Watergate Scandal, he gave Secretary of State Kissinger the primary responsibility for dealing with the developing Middle East crisis on the behalf of the Presidential Administration.<sup>48</sup> Once again the United States government was basing its diplomatic strategy for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict on the events of the previous wars. Kissinger was still blinded by the assumption that the Israelis were going to easily win the war and that the United States could quick negotiate an end to all hostilities.

When the Yom Kippur War began in October 1973, Richard Nixon believed Israel would ultimately win the conflict and that the United States government should maneuver to open peace talks as soon as the Israelis gained the upper hand on the battlefield. He and Kissinger theorized that if the United States continued to maintain it's

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<sup>47</sup> Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger, Washington, October 6, 1973, 9:25 a.m., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973*, Editors: Nina Howland and Craig Daigle, General Editor: Edward C. Keefer, (United States Government Printing Office Washington, 2011) Document 104.

<sup>48</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*, 148-150.

for support Israel then they could achieve a lasting peace agreement between the Israelis and Arabs. Richard Nixon also blamed the Russians for starting the war, arguing that their years of military aid encouraged Egypt and Syria to renew hostilities with Israel. The United States government viewed the Yom Kippur War as a developing Cold War international crisis and believed an Israeli victory was necessary to counteract Soviet Union interests in the region.<sup>49</sup>

All of this American political maneuvering in the Middle East reveals how Richard Nixon was a political pragmatist. In some ways, the Yom Kippur War was a Cold War proxy-conflict, since the Nixon Administration wanted Israel to win the war and create a peace deal that favored American interests in the region. On the first day of fighting the United States government was overconfident that Israel would win the war and that the Arab states' inevitable defeat would force both sides to the negotiating table. What Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger did not anticipate was that the Yom Kippur War would not be the same as the Six-Day War. This time Israelis did not have the element of surprise that allowed them to win a decisive offensive campaign in June 1967. For the next few weeks, Israel would have the fight of its life against Egypt and Syria, in a defensive ground war that would stretch its military resources to the limit.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, 360-368. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery 1973–1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 230.

<sup>50</sup> Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, 360-368; Ross, *Doomed to Succeed, the U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama*, 103-124; Ambrose, *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery 1973–1990*, 230.

**CHAPTER THREE:**  
**OPERATION NICKEL GRASS**

From the beginning of the Yom Kippur War, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger wanted Israel to win this conflict. If Israel achieved a decisive victory then it would pave the way for formal peace talks between the Israelis and Arabs. It would also undermine the Soviet Union's interests in the Middle East. Initially, President Nixon theorized that the Israeli Defense Forces were militarily stronger than the Egyptian and Syrian armies, and would easily defeat them on the battlefield. The United States would then be in a favorable position to negotiate a diplomatic solution to this war.<sup>51</sup>

On October 8, 1973, the third day of the Yom Kippur War, during a private late-night phone conversation with Kissinger, President Nixon stated his thoughts on the conflict and the possibility of opening peace talks between the Israelis and Arabs.

Richard Nixon: Right. The one thing we have to be concerned about, which you and I know looking down the road, is that the Israelis when they finish clobbering the Egyptians and the Syrians, which they will do, will be even more impossible to deal with than before and you and I have got to determine in our own minds, we must have a diplomatic settlement there.

Henry Kissinger: I agree with you.

Richard Nixon: We must have. We must not tell them that now but we have got to do it. You see, they could feel so strong as a result of this, they'd say: Well, why do we have to settle? Understand? We must not, we must not under any circumstances allow them because of the victory that they're going to win—and they'll win it, thank God, they should—but we must not get away with just having this thing hang over for another four years and have us at odds with the Arab world. We're not going to do it anymore.

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<sup>51</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery 1973–1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 230-240.

Henry Kissinger: I agree with that completely, Mr. President. But what we are doing this week is putting us in a position to do—

Richard Nixon: To do something, that's right.<sup>52</sup>

In this discussion, Richard Nixon argues that when Israel ultimately wins the war the United States government needs to be prepared to take a lead role in the cease-fire negotiations. He wanted the outcome of this war to lead to formal peace talks between Israel and the Arab States. All previous Arab-Israeli conflicts had ended in cease-fire agreements with no formal treaties officially ending all hostilities. Richard Nixon believed that when the Israelis win the war then this would be a golden opportunity for the United States to open formal peace talks between Israel and Egypt. Even if some factions in the Israeli government might not want a peace treaty with the Arab States, the United States was still going to push for it in future negotiations. President Nixon and Henry Kissinger were wrong in assuming that Israel was would easily win this conflict against Egypt and Syria. Within a week the United States would be airlifting tens of thousands of tons of weapons to Tel Aviv, Israel in an effort to help the Israelis win the Yom Kippur War.<sup>53</sup>

Israel's lightning victories of the Six-Day War had created an illusion that Egypt and Syria could not defeat Israelis in a full-scale conventional war. This was not the case for years the Arab States had been receiving military aid from the Soviet Union, particularly Surface to Air Missile Launchers (SAMs). These SAMs were designed to neutralize Israeli jets and bombers, which were directly based on French and American

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<sup>52</sup> Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger, Washington, October 8, 1973, 7:08 p.m., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973*, Editors: Nina Howland and Craig Daigle, General Editor: Edward C. Keefer, (United States Government Printing Office Washington, 2011) Document 132.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2016), 311-324.

warplane designs. This technological advantage prevented Israel from dominating the skies near the Suez Canal and the Golan Heights. Within a few days, the Yom Kippur War had quickly turned into a bloody stalemate with both sides calling on their Cold War superpower allies for help. Without the sudden influx of American military aid, the Israelis could have lost a prolonged war against Egypt and Syria. Richard Nixon's decision to give military aid to Israel helped the country win in this war and lead to peace talks between the Israelis and Arabs.<sup>54</sup>

The Israeli Defense Forces were caught almost completely unprepared for the October 1973 Arab offensive. Mossad had only received its tip from "The Angel" of Egypt's plans for war just hours before the Yom Kippur War had started. Since the end of the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel had maintained heavily fortified trenches, along the eastern bank of the Suez Canal and the Golan Heights. On the eve of battle, Israeli troop levels along the Suez Canal numbered only 450 soldiers and 91 tanks scattered across miles of Bar-Lev forts. An additional 200 tanks were stationed in reserve three hours away from the front lines. On the Golan Heights, the Israelis had only one tank battalion stationed in case of Syrian aggression. Nine months before the Yom Kippur War, Israeli commandos had infiltrated Egypt and set up listening devices on the opposite side of the Suez Canal. Israeli high command was convinced that these bugs would alarm them of any attempts by Egypt to mobilize its forces for an attack and give them plenty of time to send reinforcements to the Suez Canal. The problem was that the listening devices had to remain dormant 90 percent of the time or they risked being detected by the Egyptians. During the summer, the Arabs had discovered a few of the bugs. The Israelis could only activate this early warning system by pressing a button in Tel Aviv military HQ and the

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<sup>54</sup> Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*, 311-324.

bugs were not active on October 6, because they were convinced that the Arab states would not attempt an attack on the holiest Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. This overconfidence prevented the IDF from realizing that 100,000 Egyptian troops and 1350 tanks were being mobilized on the border for a surprise attack.<sup>55</sup>

Fully mobilized, the Israeli Defense Forces could field an army of 375,000 troops, 2,100 tanks, and 359 warplanes. The Egyptian-Syrian coalition had an estimated 900,000+ troops, over 4,000 tanks, and 680 warplanes. 100,000 of these soldiers were volunteer militias from Iraq and Jordan who had joined the war to fight against the Israelis. Despite American and Soviet preconceptions of Israel's military superiority in the Middle East, the reality was on the ground that the Israelis were outnumbered two to one on the first day of the Yom Kippur War. Within a day, the Israelis lost dozens of jets and tanks to the Arabs' new Surface to Air Missile Launchers and Rocket Propelled Grenades gifted to them by the Russians. The Israeli military was not invincible and unless they could replace these battlefield losses the Yom Kippur War would be a disastrous defeat for Israel.<sup>56</sup>

Prime Minister Golda Meir realized that American military aid would be necessary for Israel to win this conflict against Egypt and Syria. On October 8, 1973, the Mossad had discovered that the Soviet Union was increasing its weapons shipments to the Arab States. The Israeli military did not have the resources to fight a prolonged conflict given the heavy losses their tanks and airplanes had suffered within the first two days of the war. Prime Minister Meir believed the United States government could be persuaded to intervene in this conflict to help Israel win it. After a long late-night debate

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<sup>55</sup> Abraham Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Schocken Books, 2017), 60-71.

<sup>56</sup> Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 60-62.



with her political cabinet, the decision was made for the Israeli ambassador to the United States Simcha Dinitz to secretly ask Secretary of State Henry Kissinger for American military aid.<sup>57</sup>

Prime Minister Meir had been on friendly terms with the United States government for years before the Yom Kippur War. She was one of the first foreign leaders to visit President Nixon in the White House in 1969 just months after taking the Oath of Office. This diplomatic meeting reveals that Nixon wanted the United States to strengthen its strong political alliance with the state of Israel. Not only were Nixon and Meir political allies they also were close-friends and wrote secret letters to each other often. Between 1969 and 1974, hundreds of private messages were sent between Richard Nixon and Golda Meir. The subjects of these correspondences ranged from birthday notifications to secret political messages. In one of the letters dated May 14, 1969, Meir tells Nixon her fears that the Soviet Union's interests in the Middle East were hostile to the state of Israel and prejudice against the Jewish people.<sup>58</sup>

When Foreign Minister Eban was in Washington in mid-March, he explained why Israel opposed the intention of seeking a common formula with the Soviet Union for a settlement in the Middle East. We felt strongly that such a course would be interrupted by the Arab Governments as releasing their responsibility to join with us in direct agreement for the establishment of permanent peace. It is essential for them to understand that the only development which can bring a change in the present situation is the conclusion of peace treaties settling all outstanding issues between and secure boundaries. Moreover, it is evident that Soviet aims and policies are so hostile to Israel's vital interests that any formulation designed to secure Soviet consent is bound to prejudice Israel's rights. This does not in any way reflect on the United States Government, whose good will and constructive purpose are fully acknowledged by us.

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<sup>57</sup> Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 357-364.

<sup>58</sup> Letter from Golda Meir to Richard Nixon, May 14, 1969, Israel-Prime Minister Golda Meir 1969. [1 of 1] Box 756, National Security Council Presidential Correspondence Files, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

This letter reveals that Prime Minister Meir did not want the Soviet Union to be a part of the peace negotiations attempted in 1969 since she believed the Russian interventions in the Middle East were directly hostile to Israeli interests. The Arab States had been receiving Soviet military aid for years and were Russia's closest allies in the region. Golda Meir wanted to establish stronger relations with the United States as an ally in the Cold War. Richard Nixon wanted his Presidential Administration to take a more active role in Middle Eastern politics than his predecessors. He hoped that the United States could find a diplomatic solution to the Arab-Israeli conflicts that favored American interests in the region. Four years later, the Israeli leadership turned to the Nixon Administration for help in the Yom Kippur War realizing that they needed American military aid to win the conflict.<sup>59</sup>

According to Henry Kissinger's memoir *Years of Upheaval*, at 1:45 am on Tuesday, October 9, he was awakened by a late-night phone call from the Israeli ambassador in Washington, Simcha Dinitz asking what the United States could do about militarily resupplying Israel. Kissinger was puzzled by the nature of this question. The previous day he had privately spoken with the Israeli ambassador and was told that the Israelis were winning the war. Kissinger was initially annoyed by the phone call and told Dinitz that they would talk first thing tomorrow. An hour later the Israeli ambassador called him again with the same urgent message. Kissinger then realized that something must be seriously wrong and told Dinitz that they would secretly meet at the White House at 8:20 am.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Letter from Golda Meir to Richard Nixon, May 14, 1969, Israel-Prime Minister Golda Meir 1969. [1 of 1] Box 756, National Security Council Presidential Correspondence Files, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>60</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1982) 490-491.

Kissinger and Dinitz met with their aides in the Map Room on the ground floor of the White House. This quiet room had decades earlier been used by Franklin Roosevelt as his military command post during World War II. Henry Kissinger would often hold secret meetings with foreign diplomats and politicians in this place. Dinitz revealed to him that despite the Israeli government's official claims of winning the war, the situation on the battlefield was getting worse daily. Over the past three days, the IDF had lost forty-nine warplanes, including fourteen advanced phantom jets in the fighting. These traumatic Israeli losses were due to the Egyptians and Syrians use of Soviet-designed surface-air-missile defense systems that were strategically located around the Suez Canal and the Golan Heights. More shocking casualties was the fact Israel had lost 500 tanks, 400 of which were serving in the Sinai desert. The Egyptian troops along the Suez Canal were armed with Russian-made rocket-propelled grenades. These Soviet anti-tank weapons allowed the Arabs to easily destroy the Israelis French and American-designed tanks. To make matters worse, the harsh conditions of the Sinai Desert had disabled dozens of Israeli tanks due to mechanical malfunctions. The IDF forces were holding the line against the Arab forces, but their military resources were being stretched thin by fighting a war on two fronts.<sup>61</sup>

A State Department memo from the time of the Yom Kippur War records the details of this secret meeting between Kissinger, Dinitz, and their aides.

Dinitz: We got a message which sums up our losses until 9 a.m. Israeli time. In planes, 14 Phantoms, 28 Skyhawks, 3 Mirages, 4 Supermysteres—a total of 49 planes. Tanks—we lost something like 500 tanks. Some were lost on the way.

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<sup>61</sup> Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 120-125; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 491-493; Tal, David. "A Tested Alliance: The American Airlift to Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War." *Israel Studies* 19, no. 3 (2014): 29-54. doi:10.2979/israelstudies.19.3.29.

Secretary Kissinger: 500 tanks! How many do you have? [to Scowcroft:] We should get Haig here. Well, we can give him the figures.

Ambassador Dinitz: This includes those that were put out of commission for a week or more.

Secretary Kissinger: How many do you have?

Gur: 1800.

Dinitz: We lost 100 in the north and 400 in the south.

Kissinger: How did it happen? I understand your problem. I don't understand how it could happen. Our strategy was to give you until Wednesday evening, by which time I thought the whole Egyptian army would be wrecked.

Dinitz: It will become clear from the military situation.

Kissinger: So that's why the Egyptians are so cocky. Can I use these figures?

Dinitz: With the President.

Kissinger: Anyone else?

Dinitz: They were given to me for you.

Kissinger: How many have the Egyptians lost?

Gur: 4–500 in the Sinai, and the Syrians 400.

Kissinger: It is still about one-to-one with the Egyptians.<sup>62</sup>

This U.S. State Department document reveals how Kissinger was shocked that Israel had taken heavy tank losses against Egypt. Nixon and Kissinger had assumed that the Arab armies be quickly defeated by the Israelis allowing for the United States to call for a cease-fire agreement. Dinitz told Kissinger that the Israelis would soon be facing a bloody war of attrition unless they were resupplied by the United States. He proposed

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<sup>62</sup> Memorandum of Conversation Washington, October 9, 1973, 8:20–8:40 a.m., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973*, Editors: Nina Howland and Craig Daigle, General Editor: Edward C. Keefer, (United States Government Printing Office Washington, 2011) Document 134.

that the Americans secretly give Israel military aid in the form of new ammunition, weapons, tanks, and most importantly phantom jets. Kissinger supported Dinitz's proposal for giving military aid to Israel. After the meeting, Dinitz, in a private conversation told Kissinger to only inform Nixon about the Israeli battlefield equipment losses. The Israeli government feared that if the word was leaked to the press of Israel's heavy casualties then more Arab states might join the war against Israel.<sup>63</sup>

In his memoir, Kissinger writes that Dinitz's proposal changed the Nixon Administration's entire strategy in this Middle East crisis. Just a few days before the American intelligence had been convinced that Israel was militarily superior to the Arab states, and would achieve a quick and decisive victory in the war. Kissinger immediately agreed to Dinitz's proposal of secretly sending arms shipments to Israel. He promised Dinitz that the Americans would give the Israelis their intelligence on the conflict and that they would start shipping new planes and tanks as soon as possible. Kissinger believed that all of this would have to be done in complete secrecy since it would destroy the United States' reputation with the Arab world. Dinitz appreciated Kissinger's support for Israel and stated that with American military aid they would be free to go on the offensive and win this war. After working out the details of logistics of arms shipments to Israel with his State Department subordinates, Kissinger met at 4:45 pm that day with President Nixon to confirm this military deal.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 120-125. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 491-493; Tal, David. "A Tested Alliance: The American Airlift to Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War." *Israel Studies* 19, no. 3 (2014): 29-54. doi:10.2979/israelstudies.19.3.29.

<sup>64</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 493-496; Pierri, Bruno. "A Chess Game in the Middle East: Dr. Kissinger's Diplomacy against the USSR during the Yom Kippur War." *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali*, Nuova Serie, 76, no. 3 (303) (2009): 351-80.  
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.umb.edu/stable/42740829>.

Another memo records the details of this discussion between Nixon and Kissinger.

Kissinger: If the Arabs sense that the Israelis have lost more than they have admitted, they might rush in.

The President: Why do we have such lousy tanks?

Let's give them some M-60 tanks. It would give them great assurance if we could eventually give them laser bombs.

Let's go ahead on the consumables. But the quid pro quo is to tell Golda to call off the Jewish Community in this country. If it gets hairy, we may need to do more.

Kissinger: But not today.

The President: The Israelis must not be allowed to lose. How about sneaking in planes and tanks?

Kissinger: We can wait until Thursday. If the Israelis for the first time were pushed back by Arabs . . .

The President: Let's identify the tanks and planes on a contingency basis—in Europe.

Kissinger: We want to stick by Israel now so they won't turn on you during the diplomatic phase.<sup>65</sup>

This conversation reveals that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger wanted Israel to win the Yom Kippur War, believing that it would lead to formal peace negotiations after the conflict ended. They believed that helping Israel achieve a victory in this war would convince the Israeli government to support the Nixon Administration in the future peace talks. After less an hour of discussion, President Nixon approved Kissinger's plan to

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<sup>65</sup> Memorandum of Conversation Washington, October 9, 1973, 4:45 p.m., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973*, Editors: Nina Howland and Craig Daigle, General Editor: Edward C. Keefer, (United States Government Printing Office Washington, 2011) Document 140.

immediately start shipping weapons to Israel. The White House then sent a message to Dinitz promising the Israeli government that the United States would grant its request for arms shipments, and replace all of their aircraft and tanks losses.<sup>66</sup>

Despite claims by some academic historians, like William B. Quandt and Noam Kachovi, that Richard Nixon was reluctant to help Israel in the Yom Kippur War, the president immediately granted the Israeli government's request for military aid. Both Nixon and Kissinger believed that an Israeli victory in the Yom Kippur War would lead to formal peace talks in the Middle East that favored American interests. If the Soviet Union's Arab allies were defeated then the United States would have the advantage in the post-war negotiations. Richard Nixon was a Cold War pragmatist who was willing to do everything in his power to give the United States an advantage over the Soviet Union.<sup>67</sup>

On Wednesday, October 10, the morning after President Nixon approved the plan to give military aid to Israel, word reached American intelligence that the Soviet Union had started to airlift weapon shipments to Egypt and Syria. During a phone conversation, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Thomas Moorer informed Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger that the Russians were increasing their military aid to the Arab States.

I know that you are aware of part of this but I just wanted to tell you that we have a Spot Report coming out which states that it's beginning to appear that the Soviets are about to commence a massive airlift to the Middle East with 15 flights of AN-12s and they can carry about 22 tons each, into Syria and it appears that

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<sup>66</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 493-496; Pierri, Bruno. "A Chess Game in the Middle East: Dr. Kissinger's Diplomacy against the USSR during the Yom Kippur War." *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali*, Nuova Serie, 76, no. 3 (303) (2009): 351-80.  
<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.umb.edu/stable/42740829>.

<sup>67</sup> William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Washington, D.C.: Berkeley: Brookings Institution Press; University of California Press, 1993), 148-182; Noam Kochavi, *Nixon and Israel: Forging a Conservative Partnership* (State University of New York Press, 2009), 70-75; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 493-496.

they have another 20 which are AN-22s which can carry up to around 40 tons or so into Cairo and they'll be overflying Libya which means they are trying to avoid the combat area to get in there. [sic] I think they have already sent in enough planes before the present hostilities to lift out all the civilians, so I am trying to get De Poix to find out for sure. I would think they are carrying supplies.

The report stated an estimated twenty Russian planes had shipped supplies to Damascus and Cairo from Hungary and Yugoslavia. This sudden influx of Soviet military aid to the Arab states increased the United States government's urgency to resupply the Israelis.<sup>68</sup>

That same morning Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev sent a message to Kissinger for President Nixon informing him that the Soviet Union would be willing to accept a cease-fire agreement in the United Nations and a negotiated settlement to the war if the United States would agree to the liberation of all Arab lands occupied by Israel.

We would like to draw the attention of the President to one more thing. It is necessary, of course, to limit the task at this moment to adoption of a cease-fire decision. If one begins to broaden this task, to attach to it all kinds of conditions—like withdrawal of the troops to the initial lines, creation of some fact-finding commission and so on,—then it will in advance doom to failure the good thing for the sake of which we have agreed to act jointly. [sic] We mention this because the hints of such an approach were contained in the speech of the US representative in the Security Council. If such proposals were put forward, this would place us in a position where our representative will be forced to object and to vote against. We hope that this will not be the case and that coordinated actions of the USSR and the US will facilitate the cease-fire in the Middle East and [sic] the immediate renewal of active efforts towards getting a political settlement there on the basis of liberation of all Arab lands occupied by Israel.<sup>69</sup>

Kissinger believed that Israel would never accept these terms since it would require them to give up too much territory. He realized that Israel would need to win this war fast if the

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<sup>68</sup> Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between Secretary of Defense Schlesinger and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Moorer), Washington, October 10, 1973, 10:02 a.m., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973*, Editors: Nina Howland and Craig Daigle, General Editor: Edward C. Keefer, (United States Government Printing Office Washington, 2011) Document 144.

<sup>69</sup> Message From Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev to President Nixon, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973*, Editors: Nina Howland and Craig Daigle, General Editor: Edward C. Keefer, (United States Government Printing Office Washington, 2011) Document 149.



United States was to have an advantage in the cease-fire negotiations with the Soviet Union. Kissinger then called Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin and told him that President Nixon would need time to consider the Soviet Union's cease-fire proposal. After speaking with the Soviet Ambassador, he called Dinitz informing him that the American resupply to Israel was guaranteed and that Israelis should not feel the need to hold back their military reserves. By stalling the peace talks and encouraging the Israeli government to go on the offensive, Kissinger hoped that Israel would achieve a decisive victory on the battlefield that would allow the United States to gain the upper hand in the peace talks with the Soviet Union.<sup>70</sup>

This phone conversation reveals that Kissinger was a strong supporter of the state of Israel and truly wanted them to win the Yom Kippur War. By intentionally delaying the United States' call for a cease-fire agreement he was giving the Israeli military the time to rally their forces for a counter-attack against Syria and Egypt. Kissinger believed that a decisive Israeli victory in this conflict would weaken the Soviet Union's position in the Middle East. Cold War international politics directly influenced President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger's decision to give military aid to Israel. If Egypt and Syria were not close allies of the Russians, then it is unlikely that the United States would have helped Israel win the Yom Kippur War. These Cold War alliances were what caused the Americans and the Soviets to intervene in this Middle Eastern conflict.<sup>71</sup>

Two days later on October 12, 1973, the United States Air Force started airlifting military supplies and weapons to Israel. Initially, the plan was to use Israeli commercial jets to secretly deliver the American military aid to Israel. President Nixon, however,

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<sup>70</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 497-499.

<sup>71</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 497-499.

wanted no further delays and ordered the U.S. Air Force to directly intervene and start airlifting weapons shipments. Codenamed “Operation Nickel Grass” over the course of the next seventeen days the United States airlifted an estimated over 22,000 tons of military equipment, including Phantom Jet Fighters to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, Israel. The majority of the Western European states wanted to remain neutral in the war, and refused to allow American aircraft to land and refuel in their territories. Only Portugal allowed the American planes to land at Lajes Air Force Base in the Azores Islands on their way to Israel. The Portuguese government only let the United States Air Force land in the Azores, after Henry Kissinger sent a letter to Prime Minister Marcelo Caetano threatening to cut all diplomat ties with the country unless they helped the Americans. At the same time, the United States Navy shipped by over 33,000 of military supplies, including new tanks to Israel. These 55,000 tons of American military aid help the Israelis win the Yom Kippur War by increasing their military stockpiles and giving the IDF the time to launch a counter-attack against Egypt and Syria.<sup>72</sup>

On October 11, the Israeli Defense Forces had started to launch a major counter-attack against the Syrian army in the Golan Heights. Within 24 hours, the Israelis had captured all previously lost territories since the beginning of the conflict and pushed the frontline eleven kilometers deep into southern Syria. The Israeli army positions were now only thirty-five kilometers from the Syrian capital of Damascus.<sup>73</sup> Shortly afterward the Israeli Air Force had successfully bombed the Syrian Defense Ministry building in Damascus. This rapid Israeli advance into Syria had surprised the Soviet Union who had

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<sup>72</sup> Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 357-364; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 507-515; Walter J. Boyne, *The Two' Clock War, the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the Airlift that saved Israel* (New York: St. Martin Press, 2002), 105-125.

<sup>73</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 504-505; Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 343-56.

not anticipated the Arab offensive in the Golan Heights being defeated so quickly. That same day Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin warned Kissinger that the Russian Airborne Forces were on alert and the Soviet warships were headed to Syria to protect Damascus. For the first time in the Yom Kippur War, the Syrians were on the defensive against the IDF. The fighting in southern Syria would continue until October 25 as the Syrian Armed Forces quickly counter-attacked in an attempt to claim the lost territories from the Israeli Defense Forces.<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile, along the Suez Canal, the Egyptian offensive was starting to lose its advantage of surprise. As the Arab troops pushed deeper into the Sinai Peninsula they had stretched their frontline beyond Egypt's Surface to Air Missile Umbrella making their forces vulnerable to Israeli Jets. On October 14, the IDF in hard-fought battle had defeated an Egyptian attack destroying 250 enemy tanks, while losing just twenty of their armored vehicles. The next day General Ariel Sharon's tank division had crossed the Suez Canal and established a beachhead on the Egyptian side of the Canal. Within a week the Israeli Defense Forces had captured most of the western bank of the Suez Canal and forcing the Arab Forces into a full retreat. These decisive battlefield victories against Egypt were the direct result of the American military aid, which allowed the Israeli Defense Forces to go on the offensive against the Arab forces with the ability to replenish its equipment losses quickly and efficiently.<sup>75</sup>

With these decisive victories in the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula, the tide of the Yom Kippur War had turned in favor of Israel. The Soviet Union realized that the Arabs were slowly losing the war and it was time to convince the Americans to agree

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<sup>74</sup> Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*, 315-317.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid; Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 447-465.

to a cease-fire agreement. On October 19, Dobrynin sent an urgent message to President Nixon from Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev. The correspondence stated that the ongoing Middle East war threatened to harm the fragile state of American and Soviet relations. Immediate and effective negotiations would be needed to achieve a cease-fire agreement as soon as possible between the Israelis and Arabs.<sup>76</sup> As Dobrynin wrote,

Since time is essential and now not only every day but every hour comes, my colleagues and I suggest that the U.S. Secretary of State and your closest associate Dr. Kissinger comes in an urgent manner to Moscow to conduct appropriate negotiations with him as with you authorized personal representative. [sic] It would be good if he could come tomorrow, October 20. I will appreciate your speedy reply.<sup>77</sup>

Kissinger accepted the Soviet Union's invitation to Moscow for negotiations believing that it allowed the United States to more easily shape the proposed Middle East peace deal before the Soviets presented it in the United Nations. The Soviet Union wanted the Israelis to withdraw from all occupied Arab territories, including the Palestinian West Bank, as part of the cease-fire agreement. Henry Kissinger realized that the Israeli government would never agree to give up the West Bank and the Americans would need to use careful diplomacy to get the Israelis and Arabs to agree to a cease-fire agreement. President Nixon agreed to the Moscow invitation and gave Kissinger the responsibility for representing the United States in the peace talks.<sup>78</sup>

One of the reasons, Richard Nixon had allowed his Secretary of State to take the lead role in the Moscow negotiations is because his administration was dealing with domestic political issues. The Watergate scandal was reaching its height in October 1973.

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<sup>76</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 542; Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 495-507.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid; Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 495-507; Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*, 310-316.

Nixon's first Vice President Spiro Agnew had resigned from office over corruption charges on October 10, 1973. Richard Nixon had spent most of the week searching for a new Vice President and had allowed Henry Kissinger to make most of the decisions regarding the Middle East Crisis. On October 20, the same day Secretary of State Kissinger was flying to Moscow to negotiate the terms for a cease-fire agreement with the Soviet Union to end the Yom Kippur War, the infamous "Saturday Night Massacre" occurred. Richard Nixon had ordered the Justice Department to fire Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox who was investigating the President's role in the Watergate break-in. Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Deputy Attorney General William French Smith refused to do so and resigned from office. Solicitor General Robert Bork reluctantly carried out Richard Nixon's orders.<sup>79</sup>

On October 20, 1973, Kissinger arrived in Moscow to negotiate the terms for the cease-fire agreement to end the Yom Kippur War. In his memoir, Kissinger writes that he wanted to conclude these negotiations as quickly as possible before the Soviet leadership tried to take advantage of the chaos of the Watergate Scandal.<sup>80</sup> The next day Secretary of State Kissinger met in person with Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev to discuss a new U.N. peace resolution. The biggest issue between the American and Soviet leadership was whether or not Israel should withdraw to its pre-1967 borders. Being loyal to his Egyptian and Syrian allies, Brezhnev proposed a cease-fire agreement that would force the Israelis to end the occupation of the Palestinian Territories. This negotiation term was based on the 1967 U.N. Resolution 242 which was a previous failed attempt to get Israel

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<sup>79</sup> Ron Elving, "A Brief History Of Nixon's 'Saturday Night Massacre'" NPR online article October 21, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/10/21/659279158/a-brief-history-of-nixons-saturday-night-massacre>, date accessed 4/11/2020; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 542-547.

<sup>80</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 552.

to return its conquered territory as part of peace talks with the Arab States. Henry Kissinger realized that Israel would never support this proposal since its military was already winning the Yom Kippur War and the previous U.N. resolution was a complete failure. Instead, Kissinger presented a counter-proposal that removed any references to an Israeli withdrawal. This new document called for an immediate end to all hostilities twelve hours after the adoption of this resolution and opened peace talks between all parties involved in the conflict. The vague language of Kissinger's cease-fire agreement proposal was intentional since it was the best way to get the Israelis and Arabs to agree to end an immediate end to the fighting. By allowing the terms of a formal treaty to be determined at a later date it opened the possibility of peace in the Middle East and solved the immediate need for the United States to end the war. To Henry Kissinger's surprise, Brezhnev agreed to Americans cease-fire agreement proposal with only a few minor editorial changes.<sup>81</sup>

After only four hours of negotiations, the United States and the Soviet Union had agreed to a joint cease-agreement that would be immediately presented to the U.N. Security Council. On October 22, 1973, the United Nations formally adopted Security Council Resolution 338, which was based almost entirely on Henry Kissinger's proposal. The same day the Soviet leadership contacted the Egyptian and Syrian governments to pressure them to accept the U.N. resolution. Meanwhile, Kissinger traveled to Tel Aviv, Israel to convince the Israeli government to agree to the implementation of the cease-fire agreement.<sup>82</sup> During the private meeting, Prime Minister Golda Meir was at first concerned that United Nations Resolution 338 was a U.S.-Soviet conspiracy to force

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<sup>81</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 552-558; Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 495-507.

<sup>82</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 558-560.

Israel to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders. Kissinger repeatedly insisted that the joint U.S.-Soviet cease-fire resolution was not meant to harm Israel. He told Meir that the United States had stood by Israel throughout the course of the war and that opening direct peace talks with the Arab governments would be in the Israelis best interest. During the luncheon with the Israeli leadership, the Americans had received word that the Soviets had convinced Egypt had agreed to the terms of the cease-fire resolution.<sup>83</sup>

Despite Israel and the Arab States' formal adoption of U.N. Resolution 338, the Yom Kippur War did not technically end until October 25, 1973. For the next three days, there would still be sporadic fighting along the Suez Canal and in southern Syria as Israeli and Arab troops repeatedly violated the cease-fire agreement. Within the next few days, the U.N. Security Council would pass two more cease-fire resolutions finalizing peace between Israel, Egypt, and Syria. After two weeks and five days of fighting, the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict had ended with a costly Israeli victory. The Yom Kippur War was Egypt's and Syria's last attempt to defeat Israel in a conventional war and paved the way for formal peace talks in the Middle East.<sup>84</sup>

The Yom Kippur War reveals that President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger wanted Israel to win this war believing that an Egyptian and Syrian defeat would lead to peace in the Middle East. The Cold War was also an important factor in this conflict. Egypt and Syria were supported by the Russians, and the Nixon Administration did not want another American ally to be defeated in a war against a Soviet-backed country. When the Israeli government secretly asked Henry Kissinger for American military aid, he granted their request realizing that without U.S. support they

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<sup>83</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 564-565.

<sup>84</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 568-599.

could potentially lose the war. Richard Nixon approved of Kissinger's plan to give military aid Israel and ordered the Air Force to immediately start airlifting supplies to Tel Aviv. As the tide of the war turned in favor of the Israelis, President Nixon gave Secretary of State Kissinger the full authority to be the leading American diplomat in cease-fire agreement negotiations with the Soviet Union. During the Moscow talks with the Soviet leadership, Kissinger opposed any cease-fire terms that would have required Israel to give up the Palestinian territories. Instead, he proposed a cease-fire agreement that called for an immediate end to the fighting and open direct peace talks between the Arabs and Israelis. The Yom Kippur War was a decisive victory for the Israelis and led to formal peace talks in the Middle East. It would also have major consequences for United States relations with the Arab world.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*, 311-324; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 490-491; Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 343-357.



## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **THE AFTERMATH OF THE YOM KIPPUR WAR**

Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's decision to give military aid to Israel in the Yom Kippur War would have major consequences for United States political relations with the Arab world. Initially, the American airlift to Israel helped the Israelis win the war and lead to formal peace talks. It also, however, caused the U.S. to alienate many of its Arab allies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states, who were not directly involved in the Yom Kippur War, but still opposed the Israelis. From October 1973 to March 1974, the oil-producing Arab states embargoed the United States and other Western nations who had friendly political relations with Israel. This oil embargo caused a global recession in the 1970s. The 1973 Oil Crisis was a negative consequence of President Nixon's decision to airlift weapons to the Israelis.<sup>86</sup>

The Yom Kippur War was the first time the United States had directly intervened in the Arab-Israeli conflicts on the side of Israel. Previous presidential administrations had tried to give equal support to the Israelis and the Arab States. During the 1967 Six-Day War Lyndon Johnson feared that appearing to pro-Israel would weaken the United States' relationship with Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Jordan. When the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 242 which required Israel to withdraw its pre-1967 borders, President Johnson supported it despite the Israeli government's refusal to give up its captured territories. While the United States had always had friendly political relations with Israel, American Presidents had been reluctant

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<sup>86</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs A History* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 363-373.

to give the nation too much military aid out of the fear of political backlash from the Arab world. Richard Nixon, however, wanted his administration to have a more active role in the Middle East affairs and believed that U.S. support for Israel was necessary to protect American interests in the region. His administration was willing to propose peace terms between the Israelis and Arabs that did not require Israel to return to its pre-1967 borders. During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, President Nixon believed that an Israeli victory would pave the way for direct peace talks between Israel and its neighboring Arab States. It would also weaken the Soviet Union's Arab allies in the Middle East. When Prime Minister Golda Meir had Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz secretly ask Secretary of State Kissinger for American military aid, he almost immediately approved the request realizing the Israelis needed help to win the war. The American airlift gave Israel the military surplus of supplies necessary for the IDF to go on the offensive against Syria and Egypt. On the same day, the Israelis started received military aid from the United States, the Western powers would face major international political backlash from the Arab world in the form of the oil weapon.<sup>87</sup>

The Middle East was and is one of the largest fossil fuel producing regions in the world. In the 1970s, the global economy was becoming more and more dependent on oil from countries located on the Arabian Peninsula, particularly Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union competed for influence within the Arab world, because their economies needed these fossil fuel reserves to survive. By the 1970s, the Middle East was effectively a battleground between the Capitalist West and the Communist East for oil. One of the most powerful of

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<sup>87</sup> Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed, the U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2015), 103-136; Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1982) 490-496.

the oil-producing Arab states, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia was a longtime ally of the United States. While Saudi Arabia was officially an ally of the United States, they opposed Israel's occupation of the Palestinian Territories.<sup>88</sup>

On October 17, 1973, at 11:10 am, President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger held a meeting in the Oval Office with Arab foreign ministers from Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria, and Kuwait. Throughout this meeting, the American leaders were forced to defend the Presidential Administration's decision to give military aid to Israel in the Yom Kippur War. Kissinger insisted to foreign dignitaries that the United States government was committed to the peace talks, and wanted a quick and decisive end to the conflict. He argued that a prolonged war between Israel and Egypt/Syria would be bad for the region and that they did not want the airlift to Israel to change the United States' relationship with its Arab allies. President Nixon restated his commitment to the peace talks and how the U.S. government wanted to maintain positive relations with the Arab world. At the same time, he did not give the Arab leaders any promises on the terms and conditions of the cease-fire agreement between Israel, Egypt, and Syria.<sup>89</sup>

As the Oval Office meeting continued Omar Saqqaf, the Saudi Arabian foreign minister, argued that the Arab States wanted peace as well, but his government would only accept a peace treaty if the Israelis withdraw to their pre-1967 borders.

Israel is now being helped by the United States by force. Israel is not being threatened by the Arabs with annihilation. Your help to Israel is seen as hostile to the Arab world. We want no more than a return to the 1967 borders and respect for the rights of refugees to return to their lands or be compensated for what they have lost. This would be enough to guarantee the stability and integrity of Israel.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Rogan, *The Arabs A History*, 363-373.

<sup>89</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 534-536.

<sup>90</sup> Country Files – Middle East, Middle East War Memos + Misc. October 6, 1973 – October 17, 1973 [Oct 73- Feb 74] [2 to 2] Folder 1 Box 664, National Security Council Files, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

In response to the Arab foreign delegation's accusations, Richard Nixon reassured the Saudi Arabian diplomat that the United States has always been friends with the kingdom and that they only wanted a quick end to the war. President Nixon then told Minister Saqqaf that the Arabs could trust Kissinger as a negotiator and that his Jewish heritage would not affect his political judgment, nor was he being influenced by pro-Israel groups in the United States. Kissinger was privately horrified that Nixon would bring up his religious affiliation in front of the Saudis and worse suggest that it would compromise his role as Secretary of State. President Nixon was known to privately make anti-Semitic comments about American Jews and had paranoid delusions that they were trying to undermine his presidency. Despite being political allies, the president's anti-Semitic attitudes sometimes led to tensions with Kissinger. Saqqaf told President Nixon that Secretary of State Kissinger was doing a good job and they had full trust in his abilities as a diplomat. The American leaders left this meeting with the positive impression that United States support for Israel had not fully compromised their alliance with Saudi Arabia.<sup>91</sup>

This White House foreign diplomatic meeting reveals just how complex the United States' relationship with the Arab world was during the Yom Kippur War. President Nixon was a strong supporter of Israel and had given the country military aid to help them to win the conflict against Syria and Egypt. On the other hand, he had a serious fear that increasing American support for the Israelis could compromise the United

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<sup>91</sup> Country Files – Middle East, Middle East War Memos + Misc. October 6, 1973 – October 17, 1973 [Oct 73- Feb 74] [2 to 2] Folder 1 Box 664, National Security Council Files, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.  
Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 534-536.

States' ongoing alliances with Saudi Arabia and the other Persian Gulf States. While the Saudis had for decades been Cold War allies of the Americans, this did not change the fact that they opposed Israel for the occupation of the Palestinian West Bank. The United States had to maintain a fragile balance between supporting Israel and Saudi Arabia. Otherwise it risked losing two of its strongest military allies in the Middle East. Not all Arab nations had friendly relations with each other and Saudi Arabia needed U.S. military support as protection against its rivals. One political issue that often united the Arab countries against the Western powers was their opposition to Israel's occupation of the West Bank. The American Airlift to Israel in the Yom Kippur War had created a rift between the United States and Saudi Arabia that President Nixon was attempting to fix with this White House diplomatic meeting.<sup>92</sup>

Just a few hours after the Oval Office meeting with Arab foreign ministers, Henry Kissinger had received a top-secret message for Richard Nixon that the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries meeting in Kuwait City had decided to embargo the United States and other Western countries.<sup>93</sup>

Shaykh Adham stated that during the past twenty-four hours Egypt and Saudi Arabia had exchanged messages which resulted in an agreement to take the following joint position in Kuwait: a five per cent cutback of oil production every month until the Middle East crisis is "satisfactorily resolved." By satisfactory resolution they meant in effect the implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 but specific mention of that Resolution probably will not be made in Kuwait because Saudi Arabia does not subscribe to Resolution 242. [sic] The Egyptians agreed to a point insisted upon by the Saudi Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Wealth, Shaykh Zaki Yamani, that the public statement of this decision will include no specific reference to the United States. The Egyptians insisted that

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<sup>92</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 534-536;  
Rogan, *The Arabs A History*, 363-373.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

the five per cent reduction be made effective immediately rather than following a “warning phase” of one or two months as desired by the Saudis.<sup>94</sup>

The Persian Gulf States had voted to cut oil production by five percent every month in protest of Israel until its armies withdraw from all conquered Arab territories, including the Palestinian West Bank. OPEC only embargoed nations they believed were supporting Israel in the Yom Kippur War. This list included the United States, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and South Africa. Even though only the United States was shipping weapons to Israel, the Persian Gulf states wanted to punish any country that had friendly relations with the Israelis. OPEC believed that if the price of oil skyrocketed on the international market then the Western Powers would have no choice, but to force Israel to end the war and withdraw its armed forces from the Palestinian territories. This was the first time the Arab States would try to use oil as an economic weapon against the United States and Western European countries. Many Arab nations for decades had viewed the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel in Palestine as a form of Western imperialism in the Middle East. OPEC leadership wanted the Israelis to end the occupation of historically Arab lands. They theorized that the United States could persuade Israel to end the war through economic sanctions.<sup>95</sup>

Additionally, six of the Persian Gulf States had decided to independently increase the price of oil in their countries by seventy percent from \$3.01 a barrel to \$5.12 a barrel.<sup>96</sup> In his memoir, Kissinger writes that Nixon was initially surprised by the swift

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<sup>94</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Riyadh, October 17, 1973, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXXVI, Energy Crisis, 1969–1974*, Editors: Linda Qaimmaqami, General Editor: Edward C. Keefer, (United States Government Printing Office Washington, 2011) Document 218.

<sup>95</sup> Rogan, *The Arabs A History*, 363-373.

<sup>96</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 534-536.

retaliation of the Arab Oil Embargo. The United States government did not have any official contingency plans in place if Saudi Arabia and its allies suddenly decided to increase the prices of oil. On the first day of the Yom Kippur War, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Roy Atherton and Deputy Secretary Kenneth Rush had expressed their concerns about the possibility of an Arab oil embargo. Henry Kissinger quietly ordered the State Department to draw plans for such a scenario but did not think much of it. The Nixon Administration was so focused on helping Israel win the Yom Kippur War that they did not have the time to plan for the reaction of the Persian Gulf States.<sup>97</sup>

On October 19, 1973, President Nixon decided to formally ask Congress for a 2.2 billion dollar military and economic aid package to Israel to pay for rising costs of the United States Airlift. This foreign aid proposal was going to be part of the annual federal government budget. During a meeting with Congressional leaders, Richard Nixon told them that “No American President will ever let Israel down that tube.”<sup>98</sup> A State Department Memo from Henry Kissinger’s Middle East files details the terms of President Nixon’s proposal to Congress for military and economic aid to Israel.

Send a proposal to Congress requesting \$500 million in grant assistance for Israel and \$200 million in grant assistance for Cambodia to meet emergency needs arising from the conflicts. The remainder of Israel’s need could be handled by credits under the Jackson Amendment.<sup>99</sup>

This proposal to the congressional leaders reveals how Richard Nixon was willing to risk a political and economic backlash from the Arab world over the United States support for

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<sup>97</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 871-873.

<sup>98</sup> Richard Nixon, *Seize the Moment America’s Challenge in One-Superpower World* 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press for the Nixon Foundation, 1992) 217-231.

<sup>99</sup> State Department Memo, Country Files – Middle East Israel Vol. 12 (Mar 73-Oct 73) [1 of 4] Folder 4 Box 610, National Security Council Files, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

Israel. Congress granted funding for President Nixon's plan to give financial assistance to the Israeli government. The timing of the official announcement of Richard Nixon's support for Israel, however, was premature and angered OPEC. The Persian Gulf States soon expanded the oil embargo to include more Western European nations as punishment for President Nixon's refusal to stop supporting the Israelis in the war. They then implemented a complete trade embargo with the United States effectively cutting off the country from most of its oil imports.<sup>100</sup>

The Nixon Administration stood its ground and refused to let the Arab Oil Embargo influence the United States' decision to support Israel in the Yom Kippur War. Six days later, the conflict ended with a United Nations cease-fire agreement. On January 18, 1974, Egypt and Israel signed a "Separation of Forces Agreement" that required both sides to withdraw their forces from the Suez Canal and allowed U.N. peacekeeping forces to be placed in the Sinai Peninsula to prevent further conflict.<sup>101</sup> The 1973 Oil Crisis would continue until March 18, 1974, when the OPEC nations formally lifted the economic embargo with no conditions. Despite causing a global recession, the Arab Oil Embargo had failed to achieve its objective of forcing the Israeli military to end its occupation of Palestinian territories. The Persian Gulf States were forced to increase its oil production after losing billions of dollars in sales by stopping energy exports to the Western Nations.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 871-873.

<sup>101</sup> Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs online archive, "Israel-Egypt Separation of Forces Agreement-1974," (January 18, 1974) <https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/israel-egypt%20separation%20of%20forces%20agreement%20-%201974.aspx>.

<sup>102</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 926-933;  
Rogan, *The Arabs a History*, 386-398.



President Nixon and Henry Kissinger were successful at achieving their goals with the United States Airlift to Israel. American military aid helped the Israeli Defense Forces defeat both Egypt and Syria in the Yom Kippur War. This costly military defeat caused the Egyptian government to realize that their nation did not have the financial resources to continue challenging Israel in a conventional war. After the cease-fire agreement was implemented, Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat immediately opened formal peace talks with Israel. The decisive Israeli victory in the Yom Kippur War helped achieve the Nixon administration's ultimate goal of opening peace talks between the Israelis and the Egyptians.<sup>103</sup>

Over the next five years, peace talks would continue between Israel and Egypt. At the Camp David Accords of September 1978, President Jimmy Carter would negotiate the first official peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. On March 26, 1979, Egyptian President Sadat and Israeli Minister Menachem Begin would formally sign this peace treaty on the White House lawn. For the first time since the Israeli state's founding in 1948, Egypt had formally ended all hostilities with the nation of Israel. Syria would never sign an official peace treaty with Israel, instead, both parties agreed to a "Separation of Forces Agreement" which has lasted to the present day. The United States military airlift helped Israel win the Yom Kippur War and this victory led to peace talks after the end of the conflict.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*, 317-335.

<sup>104</sup> Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs online archive, "Israel-Syria Separation of Forces Agreement-1974," (May 31, 1974), <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Peace/Guide/Pages/Israel-Syria%20Separation%20of%20Forces%20Agreement%20-%201974.aspx>; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 926-933; Rogan, *The Arabs a History*, 386-398; Shmuel Tzabag. "Termination of the Yom Kippur War between Israel and Syria: Positions, Decisions and Constraints at Israel's Ministerial Level." *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 4 (2001): 182-205. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.umb.edu/stable/4284200>.

For Israel and the United States political relations, the military airlift in the Yom Kippur War led to the strengthening of the American-Israeli alliance. President Nixon's desire to support the Israelis was largely influenced by the American perception of Israel being a beacon of freedom and democracy in the Middle East. During the Cold War, the United States government believed it had a duty to promote liberal democratic values worldwide, and supporting Israel was an easy way of achieving this long-term political goal. The Middle East was dominated by dozens of Arab military dictatorships many of whom had hostile political relations with the western capitalist powers. Israel was one of the few countries in this region of the world that fit the American political establishment's definition of a democratic and capitalist government.<sup>105</sup>

In the years following the Yom Kippur War, American political lobbyists were becoming more vocal about strengthening the United States' alliance Israel. By the 1980s, pro-Israel political groups were becoming more organized and effective in gaining congressional support for the ongoing U.S.-Israel political alliance. Around the same time, the neoconservative wing of the Republican Party was gaining more power and influence in American politics, and supporting United States allies abroad was a part of their agenda. Since then American political leaders from both the Republican and Democratic Parties have been vocal supporters of Israel. This widespread support of the nation of Israel within American domestic politics was the direct result of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's decision to give military aid to the Israelis in the Yom Kippur War. For many American political leaders, Israel represented a liberal democratic nation surrounded by hostile dictatorships. This Cold War mentality that the United States should

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<sup>105</sup> Ross, *Doomed to Succeed, the U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama*, 140-144.

help democratic nations abroad is one of the reasons for the widespread support for Israel in American politics.<sup>106</sup>

The aftermath of the Yom Kippur War had dramatic consequences for Israeli domestic politics. One, it shattered the illusion created by the victories of the Six-Day War that the Israeli military was invincible and that the Arab States would not challenge the country in open conflict. The Israeli people realized that increasing national security was a major issue for the country. Two, it changed the fundamental makeup of the political parties in the Knesset (Israeli Parliament). Since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, the Mapai (Labor) Coalition for almost three decades had dominated Israeli electoral politics. In the December 1973 Knesset elections, just two months after the end of the Yom Kippur War, the Israeli Labor Party barely held onto its legislative majority and its popularity was slowly declining with Israeli voters. Four years later, the Likud (right-wing) Coalition won parliamentary elections for the first time in the country's history. The Likud Party with its commitment to a strong national defense and promotion of Israel's Jewish national identity was more appealing to voters who wanted an alternative to the left-wing Israeli political establishment. This shift to the political right in Israeli electoral politics helped strengthened the country's alliance with the United States. The Likud Party leadership was committed to maintaining the U.S.-Israel alliance and viewed American support for Israel was an essential part of country's national security.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ross, *Doomed to Succeed, the U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama*, 140-144; Shaul Mitelpunkt, *Israel in the American Mind, The Cultural Politics of US-Israeli Relations, 1958-1988* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 202-215.

<sup>107</sup> Gordis, *Israel A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*, 325-337.

The Yom Kippur War was the first time the United States had directly intervened in the Arab-Israeli conflicts on the side of Israel. Richard Nixon's military aid helped the Israelis win the war by giving the IDF the resources necessary to launch a successful counter-attack against the Arab States. This decisive Israeli victory paved the way for peace talks between Egypt and Israel. The United States military aid caused a widespread negative political backlash from the Arab world. During the conflict, Saudi Arabia and its oil-producing allies embargoed the United States and other western nations as revenge for supporting Israel. These economic sanctions caused a global recession in the 1970s.<sup>108</sup> President Nixon's support for Israel created tensions between the United States and various Arab countries who viewed American military intervention as a form of western imperialism. Despite the widespread anti-American political backlash from the Arab world, the United States Military Airlift was successful in helping Israel win the Yom Kippur War and in opening peace talks with Egypt. Since the end of this conflict, American leaders from across the political spectrum have been committed to maintaining a strong alliance with Israel.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Rogan, *The Arabs a History*, 363-373;  
Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 871-873.

<sup>109</sup> Ross, *Doomed to Succeed, the U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama*, 140-144;  
Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 871-873.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### CONCLUSION

President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had multiple political goals by having the United States military airlift weapons shipments to Israel in the Yom Kippur War. First, they wanted Israel to ultimately win the conflict believing that it would help undermine the Soviet Union's interests in the Middle East. Egypt and Syria were the Russians' strongest allies in the region and were dependent on Soviet military aid to resupply their armies. The United States military airlift to Tel Aviv was meant to guarantee that the Israelis won the war. If Israel had been defeated in the Yom Kippur War it would have been the second time within a year an American ally had lost a major conflict against a Soviet-backed third-world dictatorship. The United States just several months before had been forced to withdraw its armed forces from South Vietnam and the Nixon Administration wanted to avoid another geopolitical disaster. Cold War politics was the primary motivation behind Richard Nixon's support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War. He was a political pragmatist who believed that the United States should do everything in its power to gain an advantage over the Soviet Union.<sup>110</sup>

Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's second goal in the Yom Kippur War was to establish formal peace talks between Israel and the Arab States. For years the Nixon

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<sup>110</sup> Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, *Nixon in the World American Foreign Relations 1969-1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 126-141; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1985), 230-239; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery 1973-1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 230-240; Robert D. Schulzinger, "Nixon and Kissinger," in *A Companion to Richard Nixon* ed. Melvin Small (West Sussex, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 374-377.

Administration had on multiple occasions attempted to open peace negotiations in the Middle East. Since the founding of the nation of Israel in 1948, there had never been an official peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. All of the peace proposals had failed because both sides wanted full control of the Palestinian territories. The Egyptian government would only agree to peace talks if Israel immediately withdrew to its pre-1967 borders. The Israeli government refused to give up the occupied Arab territories believing it would compromise their country's national security. This failure to negotiate led directly to Egypt and Syria's decision to go to war against Israel in October 1973. President Nixon believed that if the Israeli Defense Forces achieved a decisive victory in the Yom Kippur War then Egypt and Syria would be forced to open formal peace talks with Israel.<sup>111</sup>

The Yom Kippur War was the first time the United States had directly intervened in the Arab-Israeli conflicts on the side of the nation Israel. Between 1948 and 1973, the Israelis had fought five wars against their neighboring Arab countries. In each of these wars, Israel had achieved decisive victories against Egypt and Syria. The most disastrous of these conflicts for the Arab States was the Six-Day War in June 1967. Within a week Israel had defeated Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq in an offensive ground war, and gained full control of Palestinian West Bank and the Sinai Peninsula. This miraculous victory created the perception in the minds of American and Soviet leaders that Israel was militarily superior to its neighboring Arab States. The United States government did not believe that Egypt and Syria would attempt to challenge Israel in

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<sup>111</sup> Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World American Foreign Relations 1969-1977*, 126-141; Garthoff, *Détente, and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, 230-239; Ambrose, *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery 1973-1990*, 230-240.

conventional war again. This American foreign policy assumption that the Israelis were militarily superior to the Arabs was wrong. Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat wanted to regain control of the Suez Canal and was willing to risk losing another war against Israel to achieve this political objective. President Sadat had allied himself with Syrian Dictator Hafez al-Assad and planned to launch a surprise offensive against Israel.<sup>112</sup>

With the sudden outbreak of the Yom Kippur War on October 6, 1973, President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger theorized that the Israeli Defense Forces would quickly recover from the surprise Arab offensive and ultimately win the war. The American political leaders believed that an Israeli victory in this conflict would hopefully force Egyptian and Syrian governments to accept formal peace talks with Israel. Initially, Henry Kissinger was planning for the United States to be the third party negotiator between the Israelis and Arabs following the resolution of the Yom Kippur War. This analysis of the ongoing Middle East crisis was based on Richard Nixon's overconfidence in the strength of Israel's armed forces based on their previous victories in the Six-Day War. The reality in 1973 was though that the Israelis were not prepared for a defense ground war against both Egypt and Syria. Within the first few days of fighting Israel had lost hundreds of tanks and dozens of jet fighters. These losses were due to the Egyptian and Syrian armies use of Surface to Air Missile Launchers and Rocket Propelled Grenades given to them by the Soviet Union in the years leading up to the Yom Kippur War. With Israel facing a prolonged war and in desperate need of resupplies, Prime Minister Golda Meir had Ambassador to the United States Simcha Dinitz secretly asked

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<sup>112</sup> Daniel Gordis, *Israel A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2016), 259-282; Garthoff, *Détente, and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, 230-239; Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World American Foreign Relations 1969-1977*, 126-141.

Henry Kissinger for American military aid. With this realization that the Israelis could potentially lose the war, Richard Nixon immediately approved Kissinger's proposal to airlift of weapons shipments to Tel Aviv, Israel. The President was determined to help Israel win this conflict believing that it would protect American interests in the Middle East.<sup>113</sup>

The political backlash from the Arab World in reaction to Richard Nixon's decision to support Israel in the Yom Kippur War was swift. On October 17, 1973, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries voted to embargo the United States and other western nations for being friends and allies with Israel. This oil embargo caused a global recession that would last until the 1980s. Saudi Arabia, one of the leading Arab nations in OPEC was a longtime ally of the United States in the Cold War. Despite officially being allies, the Saudi government was furious that President Nixon was giving military aid to the Israelis and demanded that the Western Powers forced Israel to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders. The Nixon Administration refused to give into OPEC's demands and continued to maintain its support for Israel in the Yom Kippur War. President Nixon was not going to let economic sanctions threaten the U.S.-Israel alliance. He believed that Israeli victory in this war would lead to official peace talks with the Arab States and protect American political interests in the Middle East.<sup>114</sup>

With the arrival of American military aid, the Israelis now had the resources necessary to launch a successful counter-attack against Egypt and Syria. Within a week the IDF had successfully driven the Syrian army off the Golan Heights and had captured

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<sup>113</sup> Abraham Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Schocken Books, 2017), 357-364.

<sup>114</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs a History* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 363-373; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 534-536.



the western bank of the Suez Canal. With these battlefield victories, the United States and the Soviet Union negotiated a United Nations cease-fire agreement that ended the Yom Kippur War on October 26, 1973. Over the next several years, Egypt and Israel would continue to conduct peace talks and ultimately signing a peace treaty ending all hostilities in 1979. Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger had achieved their goal of an Israeli victory in the Yom Kippur War and the opening of formal peace talks in the Middle East. Both the United States and the Soviet Union wanted peace between the Israelis and Arabs. The Cold War superpowers, however, wanted the peace negotiations to favor their political interests in the Middle East. President Nixon believed that the only way for the peace treaty to be favorable for the United States was to guarantee that Israel would win this conflict. The Russians had been giving regular weapons shipments to Egypt and Syria for years. The United States Airlift to Israel was meant to counteract the Soviet Union's ongoing military aid to the Arab States. This Cold War mentality of supporting democratic allies abroad influenced Nixon and Kissinger's decision to grant the Israeli government's request for military aid in the Yom Kippur War.<sup>115</sup>

Some Israeli historians, including Daniel Gordis and Noam Kachovi, have claimed that Richard Nixon was a reluctant supporter of Israel in the Yom Kippur War and that the United States military aid did not help the IDF win the conflict. Instead, they argue that the Israelis won the Yom Kippur War themselves through superior battlefield tactics and strategy.<sup>116</sup> This, however, was not the case. As soon as the Israeli government asked the United States for military aid President Nixon immediately granted the request

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<sup>115</sup> Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*, 315-317; Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War the Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, 447-465; Rogan, *The Arabs a History*, 363-373.

<sup>116</sup> Gordis, *Israel A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*, 301-324; Noam Kochavi, *Nixon and Israel: Forging a Conservative Partnership* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009), 70-75.

and ordered the U.S. Air Force to start sending weapons shipments to Tel Aviv. At the start of the Yom Kippur War, the Nixon Administration wanted Israel to win the conflict believing it would undermine the Soviet Union's interests in the Middle East and lead to formal peace talks. President Nixon was more than willing to accept political backlash for the Arab World for increasing American support for the Israelis. He was also a stronger supporter of Israel compared to the previous U.S. Presidential administrations.<sup>117</sup>

The second part of the Israeli scholars' argument is also problematic. If the Israeli military could have won the Yom Kippur War all by themselves, then why was Prime Minister Golda Meir secretly asking the United States for military aid in the first place? This claim by some Israeli historians that their country won the Yom Kippur War without the help of American military aid sounds more like political propaganda than a reflection of the events of the conflict. The fighting against Egypt and Syria continued for over a week after the first American weapons shipments started arriving in Israel. The sudden influx of United States military aid was necessary for the Israelis to win this war who need this surplus of resources to launch a counterattack against the Arab States. Even with the initial United Nations cease-fire agreement, the fighting continued along the Suez Canal and Golan Heights for three days. It took the additional U.N. resolutions to convince Israeli and Arab troops to stop skirmishing against each other.<sup>118</sup>

Since the end of the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict, American popular support for the nation of Israel has increased. In 2019, Gallup Poll reported that 59% percent of the American public was supportive of the Israelis. Over the past four decades, political leaders from both the Republican and Democratic parties have been vocal about their

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<sup>117</sup> Ambrose, *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery 1973–1990*, 230-255; Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed, the U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2015), 110-135.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

support for the Israeli government. Various American Lobbying groups, such as AIPAC, continue to play an influential role in Washington D.C. politics. These interest groups have been extremely effective at gaining congressional support for maintaining the U.S.-Israel alliance. This widespread support for Israel in American politics all goes back to Richard Nixon's decision to give airlift military aid to the Israelis.<sup>119</sup>

“Operation Nickel Grass” allowed the Israelis to win Yom Kippur War leading to formal peace talks in the Middle East. Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger wanted Israel to win this war believing that it would put the United States in a favorable position to negotiate a diplomatic solution to the Arab Israeli conflict. Without the support of American military aid, the Israelis could have lost the Yom Kippur War since they did not have the resources to fight a two-front conflict over a prolonged period of time. When the Israeli government secretly asked the United States for military aid, President Nixon granted their request stating Israel needed to win this war and ordered the Air Force to immediately start weapons shipments to Tel Aviv. During the cease-fire negotiations with the Soviet Union, Henry Kissinger would not agree with any terms that required Israel to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders realizing that the country's government would never agree to it. This shows that the Nixon Administration was doing everything its power to help Israel win the Yom Kippur War and reach a diplomatic solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite the backlash from OPEC, Richard Nixon continued his support for Israel in the Yom Kippur War. The United States military airlift was successful in helping the

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<sup>119</sup> Ross, *Doomed to Succeed, the U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama*, 140-144; Lydia Saad, “Americans, but Not Liberal Democrats, Mostly Pro-Israel” Gallup Poll online article March 6, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/247376/americans-not-liberal-democrats-mostly-pro-israel.aspx>, date accessed July 5, 2020.

Israelis win this war and paved the way for formal peace talks between Israel and Egypt.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World American Foreign Relations 1969-1977*, 126-141; Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, 230-239; Ambrose, *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery 1973-1990*, 230-240; Robert D. Schulzinger, "Nixon and Kissinger," in *A Companion to Richard Nixon* ed. Melvin Small, 374-377.

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