

Who Killed Détente? The Superpowers and the Cold War in the Middle  
East, 1969-77

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Can great power rivals establish a stable détente relationship? Analysts have grappled with this question for years. In general, there is little agreement on the answer: one need only examine contemporary debates over how the United States should structure its relationships with countries like China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Some scholars, such as Charles Kupchan, argue that rivals can achieve détente by adopting accommodating policies, even if they have very different political systems.

“Accordingly,” he argues, “the United States should base its relations with other states primarily on the nature of their foreign policy behavior, not the nature of their domestic institutions.”<sup>2</sup>

Most analysts, however, doubt that strategic rivals can develop and maintain a stable détente relationship. For example, Robert Jervis claims that there were limits beyond which U.S.-Soviet relations could not improve during the Cold War. “The root of the conflict,” he writes, “at best was a clash of social systems. Mutual security in these circumstances was a goal

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<sup>1</sup> For differing perspectives on China, see, for example, Aaron L. Friedberg, “Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics,” *National Interest*, No. 114 (July/August 2011), pp. 18-27, <https://nationalinterest.org/article/hegemony-chinese-characteristics-5439>; Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), pp. 396-402. On Iran, see Michael R. Pompeo, “Confronting Iran: The Trump Administration’s Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 6 (November/December 2018), pp. 60-70, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-10-15/michael-pompeo-secretary-of-state-on-confronting-iran>; Robert D. Kaplan, “Warming to Iran,” *Atlantic*, January/February 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/01/warming-to-iran/383512>; and Ray Takeyh, “Time for Détente with Iran,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (March/April 2007), pp. 17-32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20032281>. On North Korea, see Andrew Yeo and David Kang, “Don’t Let Skepticism Kill a Chance for Real Détente with North Korea,” *National Interest*, October 3, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/dont-let-skepticism-kill-chance-real-detente-north-korea-32542>. On Russia, see John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (September/October 2014), pp. 77-89, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24483306>; Michael McFaul, “Moscow’s Choice,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 6 (November/December 2014), pp. 167-171, <https://jstor.org/stable/24483933>; Stephen Sestanovich, “How the West Has Won,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 6 (November/December 2014), pp. 171-175, <https://jstor.org/stable/24483933>; and Robert David English, “Russia, Trump, and a New Détente: Fixing U.S.-Russian Relations,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2017-03-10/russia-trump-and-new-d-tente>.

<sup>2</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 14. For a competing perspective, see Stephen R. Rock, *Why Peace Breaks Out: Great Power Rapprochement in Historical Perspective* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

that could not be attained.”<sup>3</sup> Arguing in a different vein, William Wohlforth writes that competition for status can undermine a budding détente between rivals.<sup>4</sup> Détentes, Sean Lynn-Jones argues, might even prove counterproductive. “The lessons drawn from cooperative experiences,” he writes, “may be fundamentally inapplicable to events in which the conflictual aspects of a relationship are paramount.”<sup>5</sup>

In this debate, the experience of the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1970s looms especially large. By almost all accounts, the détente policy the United States pursued toward the Soviet Union under Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, which they crafted in conjunction with their influential national security adviser and secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, was wholly unsuccessful. “Détente by 1980,” John Lewis Gaddis wrote in 1983, “was almost universally regarded as having failed.”<sup>6</sup>

Many analysts at the time argued that the Soviet Union, because of its ideological struggle with the United States, could not abandon its aggressive foreign policy. It was “obvious and beyond dispute,” Eugene Rostow wrote in 1978, that the Soviet Union was “engaged in a policy of imperial expansion all over the world, despite the supposedly benign influence of SALT I [Strategic Arms Limitation Talks] and its various commitments of cooperation to President Nixon in the name of ‘détente.’”<sup>7</sup> The United States, former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger agreed, had been willing “to reach a long-term accommodation during the

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Jervis, “Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 2001), p. 58, <https://doi.org/10.1162/15203970151032146>.

<sup>4</sup> William C. Wohlforth, “Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War,” *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2009), pp. 48-52, [doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000021](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000021).

<sup>5</sup> Sean M. Lynn-Jones, “Détente and Deterrence: Anglo-German Relations, 1911-1914,” *International Security*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall 1986), pp. 146-147, [doi.org/10.2307/2538960](https://doi.org/10.2307/2538960).

<sup>6</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, “The Rise, Fall, and Future of Détente,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Winter 1983), p. 362, [doi.org/10.2307/20041822](https://doi.org/10.2307/20041822).

<sup>7</sup> Eugene V. Rostow, “SALT II—A Soft Bargain, A Hard Sell: An Assessment of SALT in Historical Perspective,” *Policy Review*, No. 6 (October 1978), pp. 44-45. For a similar view, see Norman Podhoretz, “Kissinger Reconsidered,” *Commentary*, Vol. 73, No. 6 (June 1982), pp. 19-28, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/kissinger-reconsidered>.

1970s,” but abandoned that effort “as a consequence of the Soviets’ deep-seated impulses never to flag in the quest for marginal advantages.”<sup>8</sup> In short, as Gaddis pointed out, to many observers: “The decision to seek détente in the early 1970s was an unwise exercise in wishful thinking, the effect of which was only to shift the signals, in the eyes of Moscow’s watchful and ambitious ideologues, from red to yellow to green.”<sup>9</sup>

The widespread view in the United States that the Soviet Union had pursued an aggressive policy during the 1970s generated a severe backlash against détente. Indeed, President Ronald Reagan’s effective use of Americans’ disillusionment with the policy played an important role in both his surprisingly strong primary challenge to Ford in 1976 and his defeat of President Jimmy Carter in the 1980 general election.<sup>10</sup> “Détente,” he asked in 1978, “isn’t that what a farmer has with his turkey—until thanksgiving day?”<sup>11</sup> Reagan’s foreign policy platform, his adviser, Richard Allen, later wrote, was, “under cover of assailing Carter, a de facto indictment of the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger policy of détente with the Soviet Union.”<sup>12</sup> Kissinger,

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<sup>8</sup> James Schlesinger, “The Eagle and the Bear: Ruminations on Forty Years of Superpower Relations,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 5 (Summer 1985), pp. 939-940, doi.org/10.2307/20042363. Other U.S. officials who served during this period reached similar conclusions. For example, see Zbigniew Brzezinski, “The Cold War and Its Aftermath,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (Fall 1992), pp. 40, 45, doi.org/10.2307/20045308; Stephen Sestanovich, “Did the West Undo the East?” *National Interest*, No. 31 (Spring 1993), p. 31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42894854>; William G. Hyland, *Mortal Rivals: Superpower Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 143, 147, 232; Jeane Kirkpatrick, interview for CNN’s *Cold War* series, episode 19, February 28, 1999, National Security Archive (NSA), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/interviews/episode-19/kirkpatrick1.html>; and Richard Pipes, “Misinterpreting the Cold War: The Hard-Liners Had It Right,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (January/February 1995), pp. 156-157, doi.org/10.2307/20047026.

<sup>9</sup> Gaddis, “The Rise, Fall, and Future of Détente,” pp. 355-356. Gaddis, judging from his later writings, shared this assessment of Soviet behavior. See John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War: Implications, Reconsiderations, Provocations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 38-39, 100-101, 120.

<sup>10</sup> Other politicians, such as Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson, also benefitted from their criticism of détente.

<sup>11</sup> Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, eds., *Reagan, In His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan That Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America* (New York: Free Press, 2001), p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Richard V. Allen, “George Herbert Walker Bush: The Accidental Vice President,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 30, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/07/30/magazine/george-herbert-walker-bush-the-accidental-vice-president.html>.

one author thus concludes, had become conservatives' "bête noire."<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, Jeremi Suri writes, he had come to symbolize "an old and discredited Cold War *Realpolitik*."<sup>14</sup>

Many analysts still claim that détente failed because the Soviet Union refused to pursue an unideological, restrained foreign policy. Key Kremlin leaders, Jonathan Haslam writes, "explicitly identified themselves with Lenin and his priorities."<sup>15</sup> "However reactionary in preferences," he maintains, "Soviet leaders were driven by the nature of the system to pursue the expansion of the revolution," and, thus, "had no intention of ending the Cold War through compromise."<sup>16</sup> "So long as the Stalin-bred generation...remained in charge," Martin Malia claims, "the belief in the 'international class struggle' was a real guide to policy. And its concrete aim was to expell [*sic*] the United States from Eurasia."<sup>17</sup> Even scholars who hold a more nuanced perspective believe that détente "contained the seeds of its own eventual disintegration" because Marxist-Leninist ideology led Moscow to "exploit" certain "opportunities to expand Soviet power and influence in the Third World."<sup>18</sup>

In this article, I argue that the conventional wisdom about the reasons for détente's failure is deeply flawed. I do so with an examination of U.S.-Soviet diplomacy toward the Arab-Israeli

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<sup>13</sup> James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004), p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> Jeremi Suri, "Détente and Its Discontents," in Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 230. On the discrediting of realpolitik principles following Kissinger's time in office, see also Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 187-189, 266-270.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Haslam, *Russia's Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 397.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 295-296.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p. 378. For other examples of this argument, see Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 122; Matthew J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), p. 4; and Robert D. Kaplan, "In Defense of Henry Kissinger," *Atlantic*, May 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/05/the-statesman/309283>.

<sup>18</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and William Taubman, "Soviet Foreign Policy, 1962-1975," in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. 2: Crises and Détente* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 135. For similar perspectives on the role of Soviet ideology, see Mark Kramer, "Ideology and the Cold War," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 1999), pp. 539-576, [www.jstor.org/stable/20097622](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097622); and John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 187, 206-210.

conflict from 1969 to 1977. In the Middle East, at least, the Soviet Union was eager to cooperate with the United States to reach a stable agreement, and its ideas for how the dispute should be settled essentially mirrored those of the United States. But the United States, though tempted at points to respond favorably to the Kremlin's initiatives, instead tried to expel the Soviet Union from the region. This finding suggests that for *détentes* to be successful both sides must be prepared to structure their relationship on an essentially *realpolitik* basis by putting aside their ideological differences and cooperating in areas where their power political interests overlap. The root of the problem in the Middle East was the United States' refusal to act on that basis.

The article proceeds in four parts. First, I explain why U.S.-Soviet diplomacy toward the Arab-Israeli dispute in the 1970s is a useful case for investigating why *détentes* fail. In the next two sections, I examine, respectively, Soviet and U.S. policy in the Middle East. I show that it was Washington, not Moscow, that refused to cooperate for an Arab-Israeli agreement, a decision that contributed to the collapse of *détente*, and that the main obstacle was the United States' failure to pursue a *realpolitik* policy. I conclude by discussing the implications of my findings.

### *Incentives for U.S.-Soviet Cooperation on the Arab-Israeli Conflict*

Any U.S.-Soviet effort to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute would have faced significant barriers. The bipolar structure of the international system, however, favored great power cooperation. With less reason to worry about relative power, Kenneth Waltz writes, the two leading states under bipolarity can more easily "lead in, or lend themselves to, collective efforts." They will under such circumstances have incentives to manage the system jointly, especially in "areas whose instability may lead to their involvement and, through involvement, to war."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the

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<sup>19</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 195, 208.

United States and the Soviet Union had cooperated in 1963 to reach a stable settlement in Europe.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, they had collaborated in 1968 to try to limit the spread of nuclear weapons.<sup>21</sup> They were, Waltz wrote in 1979, behaving like “sensible duopolists.”<sup>22</sup>

In the Middle East, too, both the United States and the Soviet Union had reason to support an Arab-Israeli agreement. A political solution that would allow the Arabs to regain the territories they had lost in the June 1967 war in exchange for peace agreements with Israel was from the Soviet standpoint a very attractive outcome. To be sure, Moscow enjoyed expanded influence in the region following the war because the Arabs’ defeat had increased their dependence on the Kremlin. Yet, the postwar situation posed troubling dilemmas for the Soviets. The Arabs’ principal political objective was to regain the territories they had lost in 1967. If the Kremlin could not assist them in achieving that goal, then the Arabs might begin to question Moscow’s usefulness as a great power patron. As one Egyptian official put it, “The Soviets seemed to have reached a point of diminishing returns. When a friend can’t help his friend either by making peace or by the use of force, then he gradually loses his credibility.”<sup>23</sup>

The Kremlin leadership could try to maintain Soviet influence with the Arabs through the provision of arms. Giving Egypt and Syria weapons would, however, raise the likelihood of another major Arab-Israeli war. The Soviets, thus, had to decide whether to risk a “loss of control” or a “loss of influence.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Moscow’s support for the Arabs created a major financial burden, which, given how precarious its overall economic situation had become by this

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<sup>20</sup> Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Andrew J. Coe and Jane Vaynman, “Collusion and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (October 2015), pp. 983-997, doi.org/10.1086/682080.

<sup>22</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 203.

<sup>23</sup> Memorandum of Conversation (Memcon), April 10, 1969, Kissinger Transcripts Collection (KT), document 00023, Digital National Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington D.C. (henceforth DNSA), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Stanley Hoffman, “A New Policy for Israel,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (April 1975), p. 421, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20039519>.

time, was bound to shape its attitude on the Arab-Israeli issue.<sup>25</sup> As a top journalist at *Izvestia*, the official newspaper in the Soviet Union, made clear to a messenger for the U.S. government, the Kremlin “really wanted to get [the Middle East] done. Too much of a drain on them. Too many problems at home for a drain of a protracted period of time.”<sup>26</sup>

The United States also had a deep interest in an Arab-Israeli settlement. The Nixon administration, to the extent possible, wanted to maintain a balanced policy in the Middle East. The United States, Nixon wrote at one point, “should have a totally even-handed policy. As a matter of fact, the interest of the United States will be served in this case by tilting the policy, if it is to be tilted at all, on the side of 100 million Arabs rather than on the side of two million Israelis.”<sup>27</sup> During the June 1967 war, Nixon had stressed the need for the United States to demonstrate that its “attachment to peace is impartial,” because otherwise the Soviet Union would be given “an unparalleled opportunity to extend its influence in the Arab world to the detriment of vastly important United States and free world interests.”<sup>28</sup>

The emergence of the Persian Gulf as a vital center of global energy markets only reinforced this concern. Especially after the October 1973 war and the imposition of the Arab oil embargo against the United States, U.S. policymakers became increasingly sensitive to the linkage between the Middle East’s strategic energy resources and the Arab-Israeli issue. As

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<sup>25</sup> On the Soviet economic decline, see Marc Trachtenberg, “Assessing Soviet Economic Performance during the Cold War: A Failure of Intelligence?” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (February 2018), pp. 76-101, doi.org/10.15781/T2QV3CM4W.

<sup>26</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation (Telecon), December 31, 1970, Kissinger Telecons Collection (KA), document 04667, DNSA, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Memorandum (Memo) from Nixon to Secretary of State William Rogers, May 26, 1971, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969-1976: Vol. 23: Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1969-1972* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2015), p. 858.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Nixon to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, June 5, 1967, folder: Vol. 4, Tabs 111-127, box 18, National Security File (NSF), National Security Council (NSC) Histories, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas (henceforth LBJL).

Kissinger remarked, “The United States has an interest in the survival of Israel; but we, of course, have an interest in the 130 million Arabs that sit athwart the world’s oil supplies.”<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, the White House believed that a settlement would be in Israel’s interest as well. “In a historical perspective,” Kissinger said in September 1969, “[there is] no way 3 million people can survive in the midst of 60 million hostile people unless they can change that hostility.”<sup>30</sup> Consequently, Nixon and Kissinger believed that the Israelis, who they felt were taking a very tough negotiating position with the Arabs and thereby potentially obstructing a settlement, were pursuing a deeply misguided policy. Although Nixon admitted that Israel’s position was “unassailable” for the time being, he considered it “long range disastrous.”<sup>31</sup> The Israelis, Kissinger believed, were pursuing “a diplomacy which leads to suicide.”<sup>32</sup>

Above all, U.S. and Soviet policymakers understood that the situation in the Middle East was combustible. With the superpowers backing opposing sides of an explosive political conflict, the Arab-Israeli issue could potentially lead to a war in which both could become directly involved. After all, during the 1967 conflict Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin had warned the United States that the Soviet Union was contemplating taking military action.<sup>33</sup> The Middle East, Nixon felt, “was an international powder keg, that, when it exploded, might lead not only to another war between Israel and its neighbors, but also to a direct confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Memcon, “Subject: Meeting with Jewish Leaders (Philip Klutznik Group),” June 15, 1975, *FRUS, 1969-1976*: Vol. 26: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1974-1976* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2012), p. 712.

<sup>30</sup> Minutes of an NSC Meeting, “Middle East,” September 11, 1969, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 170.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Marc Trachtenberg, “The French Factor in U.S. Foreign Policy during the Nixon-Pompidou Period, 1969-1974,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Winter 2011), p. 46, doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\_a\_00073.

<sup>33</sup> Message from Kosygin to President Lyndon Johnson, June 10, 1967, 8:48 a.m., *FRUS, 1964-1968*: Vol. 19: *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2004), p. 409.

<sup>34</sup> Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), p. 343.

This situation was very alarming to the Soviets. The Kremlin leaders, one historian observes, feared that if another war broke out, there would be considerable pressure not “to stand on the sidelines” as they had done in 1967. If those pressures could not be resisted, the “nightmare scenario” of a confrontation with the United States might become unavoidable.<sup>35</sup> That Israel had by this time acquired nuclear weapons only heightened the level of risk.<sup>36</sup> The situation, Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev therefore emphasized, was “extremely dangerous,” involved a strong element of “explosiveness,” and could lead to “unpredictable consequences.” A political solution, he believed, was needed to “remove a source of dangerous tension.”<sup>37</sup>

Nixon administration officials shared Brezhnev’s concerns. Nixon, one historian writes, “seemed obsessed” with the possibility that the Arab-Israeli dispute could drag the superpowers into a war.<sup>38</sup> The possibility that the Soviets might intervene in the Middle East, Kissinger said, was a “real nightmare.” “In that event,” he observed, “we might have to intervene in Israel’s defense.”<sup>39</sup>

Both U.S. and Soviet officials, moreover, expressed anxiety about their lack of control.

When Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat chose to expel a large number of Soviet military

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<sup>35</sup> Craig Daigle, *The Limits of Détente: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> At least two scholars believe that Israel’s nuclearization probably induced Soviet caution in the Middle East. See Jeffrey Herf, “‘At War with Israel’: East Germany’s Key Role in Soviet Policy in the Middle East,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Summer 2014), p. 146, doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\_a\_00450; and Steven J. Rosen, “What the Next Arab-Israeli War Might Look Like,” *International Security*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Spring 1978), p. 169, doi.org/10.2307/2538462. A third scholar observes that Soviet leaders referred to Israel’s nuclear arsenal “as a serious danger.” See Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War II to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 97-98.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Brezhnev to Nixon, May 3, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976: Vol. 15: Soviet Union, June 1972—August 1974* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), p. 328; Letter from Brezhnev to Nixon, May 13, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976, Vol. 15*, p. 461; and Note from Brezhnev to Nixon, March 27, 1972, *FRUS, 1969-1976: Vol. 14: Soviet Union, October 1971—May 1972* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2006), pp. 232-233.

<sup>38</sup> George Lenczowski, *American Presidents and the Middle East* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 120.

<sup>39</sup> Memcon, “Conversation with Kissinger: Lunch,” January 22, 1975, folder 1, box 30, Paul Nitze Papers, Library of Congress Manuscript Division (henceforth LOC), Washington, D.C.

advisers from Egypt in July 1972, Moscow was not totally dismayed. Sadat's decision, Anatoly Chernyaev, a senior analyst in the International Department, wrote in his diary, might be "for the best—we will not be liable when he tries to wage war against Israel and gets smacked once again."<sup>40</sup> It was, he believed, "a good thing," for the situation hitherto had been "dangerous for us!"<sup>41</sup>

Likewise, Nixon and Kissinger believed that the situation in the Middle East bore similarities to the situation in Europe on the eve of World War I. Nixon, William Quandt observes, worried "about the explosive potential of the Arab-Israeli conflict—he repeatedly used the pre-World War I Balkans analogy."<sup>42</sup> Both superpowers, the president worried, had "constituents we may not be able to control, and this makes the situation very explosive."<sup>43</sup> There was, he estimated, "a 50 percent chance" that the United States would "be dragged in" if the Middle East erupted again, and there was no guarantee that the Soviets would "stay out, even if they should."<sup>44</sup> If the Israelis felt sufficiently threatened—as they had in 1967—Nixon noted, they might feel compelled to strike preemptively, which would leave the United States "looking down the barrels with the Soviet Union again."<sup>45</sup> Kissinger also compared the situation to "the nightmare" of World War I. The United States and the Soviet Union, he worried, might be dragged into a war that could prove "very difficult to arrest."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Anatoly S. Chernyaev Diary Entry, July 22, 1972, NSA EBB No. 379, p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> Chernyaev Diary, August 11, 1972, NSA EBB No. 379, p. 31.

<sup>42</sup> William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 60.

<sup>43</sup> Conversation among Nixon, Kissinger, and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, June 15, 1971, in Douglas Brinkley and Luke A. Nichter, eds., *The Nixon Tapes, 1971-1972* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), p. 173.

<sup>44</sup> Minutes of an NSC Meeting, February 4, 1969, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> Memcon, "Subject: President's Meeting with His Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board," June 5, 1970, *FRUS, 1969-1976*: Vol. 24: *Middle East Region and Arabian Peninsula, 1969-1972; Jordan, September 1970* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2008), p. 80.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 146-147.

The United States and the Soviet Union, then, had much to gain from cooperating on the Arab-Israeli issue. If they could agree to respect each other's core interests in the Middle East, a stable settlement seemed possible. Given the degree to which the interests of the United States and the Soviet Union overlapped in the region, their failure to work together is puzzling.

*"The Radical Arab Program"? Soviet Policy in the Middle East*

A major theme running through Kissinger's writings about his involvement in Middle East diplomacy is the Soviet Union's uncooperative stance on the Arab-Israeli issue. "Soviet diplomacy," he claims in his memoirs, "gave all-out support to the maximum program of most Arab states."<sup>47</sup> The Kremlin leadership, Kissinger writes, could not "step out of [its] philosophical skin and abandon the Leninist postulate that a country's influence is ultimately determined by the correlation of forces."<sup>48</sup> The Soviets, in short, had simply refused to abandon "the radical Arab program."<sup>49</sup>

Many scholars share Kissinger's assessment. It was perhaps the Kremlin's "most important consideration," Alvin Rubinstein wrote in 1977, to prevent Egypt from reaching a settlement with Israel, as a resolution of the conflict would "eliminate from the Middle East the festering problem that helped the Soviet Union intrude itself into the politics of the region."<sup>50</sup> More recently, one historian has claimed that Moscow's core objective in the area was "to delegitimize Israel's right to exist." The Soviets, he argues, sought "the destruction of the state of

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<sup>47</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p. 352.

<sup>48</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 300.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Crisis: The Anatomy of Two Major Foreign Policy Crises* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), p. 11.

<sup>50</sup> Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile: The Soviet-Egyptian Influence Relationship since the June War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. xvi.

Israel in the 1970s or 1980s and with it the expulsion of almost two million Jews from the region.”<sup>51</sup>

One way to assess these arguments is to examine Soviet policy in the Middle East prior to and during the June 1967 crisis. Many scholars argue that during that period Moscow took a “very great interest in high-risk superpower competition” and pursued a policy that “was almost reckless.”<sup>52</sup> Others assert that the Soviets sought war in the Middle East to undermine the U.S. position in the Arab world.<sup>53</sup>

Any balanced assessment of the 1967 crisis must conclude that the Soviet Union failed to do its utmost to prevent a conflict. Indeed, Moscow’s transmission of a false intelligence report to its Arab clients, which alleged that Israel was concentrating a sizable number of military forces in preparation for an attack against Syria, precipitated the chain of events that ultimately led to war. Even when the Israelis offered to prove to Soviet representatives that no such buildup had been ordered by escorting them to the border, Moscow refused. Discussing the issue with the Soviet ambassador, Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban reported, “was like talking to someone from another planet.”<sup>54</sup>

More importantly, Moscow did not press the Arabs hard enough to de-escalate the situation. Even after Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser decided to close the Straits of

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<sup>51</sup> Herf, “At War with Israel,” pp. 129-130.

<sup>52</sup> George W. Breslauer, “Soviet Policy in the Middle East, 1967-1972: Unalterable Antagonism or Collaborative Competition?” in Alexander L. George, ed., *Managing U.S.-Soviet Rivalry: Problems of Crisis Prevention* (Boulder, Colo: Westview, 1983), p. 67. For a similar perspective, see Ronen Bergman, “How the K.G.B. Started the War That Changed the Middle East,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/07/opinion/how-the-kgb-started-the-war-that-changed-the-middle-east.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Kenny Kolander, “The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Soviet Policy by Other Means?” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (May 2016), pp. 402-418, doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2015.1084294. Two other writers claim that the Kremlin instigated the war to give the Soviet Union a pretext to target Israel’s nuclear facilities. See Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *Foxbats over Dimona: The Soviets’ Nuclear Gamble in the Six-Day War* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2007). Other scholars have referred to that argument in generally favorable terms. For example, see Matthew Kroenig, *Exporting the Bomb: Technology Transfer and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 22, 28, 30, 90-91.

<sup>54</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, May 21, 1967, folder 3, box 17, NSF, NSC Histories, LBJL.

Tiran, making war inevitable, the Soviets did not demand that he reopen the waterway. As one Soviet official subsequently acknowledged, “We could have interfered and told Nasser in no uncertain terms to cancel his decision. But we didn’t care, because we were afraid of antagonising him.”<sup>55</sup>

The evidence, however, shows that ideological considerations played almost no role in shaping the Kremlin’s policy in the Middle East. By the 1960s, Yevgeny Primakov, then a Middle East correspondent for *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, recalls, the Soviet leadership had jettisoned an ideological approach in favor of a “more pragmatic” line. Soviet officials even came up with new theoretical precepts to justify support for their Arab clients and to “stop local communist parties from attacking them.” “Ideology,” he writes, “was once again shown to be applied as the ‘servant’ of politics.”<sup>56</sup>

The Soviets, moreover, seemed intent on preventing Arab-Israeli tensions from boiling over.<sup>57</sup> “Considering the experience of Vietnam and the Middle East,” Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko wrote in January 1967, “we should take timely measures to relax tension in the ganglions in the three continents where sharp conflicts are possible which, in turn, can combine to lead to an ‘acute situation.’” “In this connection,” Gromyko concluded, “we should, while supporting the Arab countries in their struggle against Israel’s expansionist policy, flexibly dampen the extremist trends in the policy of certain Arab states, [for example] Syria, orienting

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Alexei Vassiliev, *Russian Policy in the Middle East: From Messianism to Pragmatism* (Reading, U.K.: Ithaca, 1993), p. 72. Some Soviet officials privately encouraged the Egyptians to seek a compromise on the issue of the Straits of Tiran. Such urgings, however, clearly had not been sufficiently forceful.

<sup>56</sup> Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*, trans. Paul Gould (New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. 59.

<sup>57</sup> Guy Laron, “Playing with Fire: The Soviet-Syrian-Israeli Triangle, 1965-1967,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (May 2010), pp. 163-184, doi.org/10.1080/14682740902871869; and Guy Laron, “Stepping Back from the Third World: Soviet Policy toward the United Arab Republic, 1965-1967,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Fall 2010), pp. 99-118, doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\_a\_00049.

them toward the domestic consolidation.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, on the eve of the crisis the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) noted that the Soviets were “wary of Syria’s provocative actions along the Israeli border, and apparently have attempted quietly to discourage moves which could lead to actual hostilities in the area.” Moscow’s “idyll” with Damascus, the agency observed, “is apparently over.”<sup>59</sup> Viewed in this context, the argument that the Soviets set out to spark a war in 1967 seems far-fetched. As Galia Golan has written, “A war seemed to be a no-win proposition for the Soviet Union.”<sup>60</sup>

The Kremlin, in fact, appears to have had good reason to believe that Israel was contemplating an attack against Syria. To be sure, given how wide of the mark the Soviet intelligence estimate was, it is hard to accept the conclusion that Moscow believed the exact substance of the report it passed to Egypt and Syria. The situation along the border had, however, been extremely tense for months. In early May, Israeli leaders had also issued a string of public threats that significant military action was being contemplated. One newspaper report, although exaggerating the sort of strike that Israel was considering, stated that if the Syrians did not cease their support for cross-border raids into Israel, they would “inevitably provoke military action intended to topple the Damascus army regime.”<sup>61</sup> Given this context, Moscow might have misunderstood what the Israelis were planning and believed they had to goad Egypt into taking

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<sup>58</sup> Excerpts from Gromyko’s Foreign Policy Memo, January 13, 1967, Approved by the Politburo, in Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents, 1962-1986* (New York: Times, 1995), p. 642.

<sup>59</sup> CIA Directorate of Intelligence Weekly Review Special Report, “Syria: A Center of Instability,” March 24, 1967, folder 3, box 156, NSF, Country File, LBJL.

<sup>60</sup> Galia Golan, “The Soviet Union and the Outbreak of the June 1967 Six-Day War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Winter 2006), pp. 7-8, doi.org/10.1162/152039706775212003.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Richard B. Parker, ed., *The Six-Day War: A Retrospective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), p. 69. Various U.S. officials labeled Israel’s threats “exceptionally sharp” and “pretty militant,” which “lent credibility to the Syrian reports.” See Report RCI-2184 from George C. Denney, Jr., Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), to Rusk, “Subject: The Soviet Contribution to the Start of the Current Mid-East Crisis,” June 1, 1967, folder: Vol. 6, Appendices A-D, box 19, NSF, NSC Histories, LBJL; and Memo from National Security Adviser Walt Rostow to Johnson, “Subject: Urgent Message to Eshkol,” May 17, 1967, folder 2, box 17, NSF, NSC Histories, LBJL.

steps to deter Israel.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, U.S. officials later acknowledged that an attack “would have been quite in keeping with normal Israeli practice” and that “no one in Washington would have been surprised at a quick Israeli raid.”<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, the Soviets had not wanted the situation to escalate. Even as they passed the report to the Arabs about an Israeli military buildup, they advised the Egyptians to “stay calm, and not to be drawn into fighting with Israel,” while telling the Syrians “to remain calm and not give Israel the opportunity for military operations.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, in a speech made soon after the war, Brezhnev characterized Nasser’s decision to close the Straits of Tiran, about which the Kremlin had not been consulted in advance, as “ill-advised.” Moscow, he stressed, had warned the Arabs that their “belligerent statements...could become inflammatory material” that would give Israel and the United States a pretext “to kindle a fire in the Middle East.”<sup>65</sup> “Nasir’s policy of stirring up the area as he did,” Communist Party official Mikhail Suslov complained, “was nearsighted and incomprehensible.”<sup>66</sup>

In addition, the basic message given to the delegations headed by Egyptian Minister of War Shams Badran and Syrian President Nur al-Din al-Atassi when they visited Moscow in late May was to not further inflame the situation. As one scholar observes, “Throughout the

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<sup>62</sup> For a useful discussion of this point, see Shimon Shamir’s comments in Parker, *The Six-Day War*, pp. 24-35. It is also possible that the Soviets believed Israel was planning a major attack because they might have received false intelligence from Israel as part of a disinformation campaign that ultimately backfired. For the fullest explication of this argument, see Guy Laron, *The Six-Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 43-54.

<sup>63</sup> Memo by Harold Saunders of the NSC Staff, “The President in the Middle East Crisis,” May 12—June 19, 1967, December 19, 1968, folder 1, box 17, NSF, NSC Histories, LBJL.

<sup>64</sup> CIA Intelligence Report, “Soviet Policy and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War,” March 16, 1970, History of the National Security Agency, document 01665, DNSA, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> Report by Brezhnev to the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, “The Soviet Union’s Policy regarding Israel’s Aggression in the Middle East,” June 20, 1967, in Yaacov Ro’i and Boris Morozov, eds., *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 308, 310.

<sup>66</sup> CIA Intelligence Information Cable, “Subject: Comments by Brezhnev and Suslov to Visiting Finnish Communist Party Delegation on Near Eastern Crisis,” June 15, 1967, folder: USSR, Vol. 15, April 1967—June 1967, box 223, NSF, Country File, LBJL.

consultations, Soviet officials continuously urged Cairo to exercise restraint and voiced concerns over the escalation of regional tensions.<sup>67</sup> “The [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics],” one Iraqi representative was similarly informed, “was not supporting Egypt completely because the USSR would never support the destruction of Israel.”<sup>68</sup>

Likewise, when the war began, the Soviets exhibited marked caution. Brezhnev, the CIA learned, had emphasized during the conflict that the Soviet Union’s “principal aim” was to prevent the crisis from expanding into a world war. He had, indeed, been “taken” with the fact that Washington and Moscow had remained in close touch throughout the fighting and had stressed that each had “a high sense of responsibility” to avoid an escalation.<sup>69</sup>

Many analysts also claim that Moscow’s postwar policies, especially its decision to intervene in the Egyptian-Israeli War of Attrition in early 1970, show that the Soviets were supporting its clients’ extremism. “Soviet Middle East diplomacy,” Vladislav Zubok asserts, “became a hostage of Arab radicalism and demands.”<sup>70</sup> In moving their forces to the area, another scholar writes, the Soviets had challenged the United States in a way not seen since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.<sup>71</sup>

Again, some elements of Soviet policy deserve criticism. It was, after all, the Soviets’ client, Egypt, that chose to reinitiate fighting along the Suez Canal in early 1969. And although

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<sup>67</sup> Hassan Elbahtimy, “Allies at Arm’s Length: Redefining Egyptian-Soviet Relations in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (February 2019), p. 103, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2018.1438893>.

<sup>68</sup> Telegram from the White House Situation Room to Johnson, May 28, 1967, folder 10, box 17, NSF, NSC Histories, LBJL.

<sup>69</sup> CIA Intelligence Information Cable, June 15, 1967.

<sup>70</sup> Vladislav M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 200.

<sup>71</sup> Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, p. 113. See also Dean Acheson, “Russia’s Goals in the Mideast,” *New York Times*, October 14, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/10/14/archives/russias-goals-in-the-mideast.html>. Some writers take this argument even further. For example, see Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *The Soviet-Israeli War, 1967-1973: The USSR’s Military Intervention in the Egyptian-Israeli Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

the Kremlin tried to dissuade Nasser from taking this action, they refused to break with him.<sup>72</sup> It was, therefore, somewhat hypocritical for Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to say that U.S. complaints about Moscow's intervention were "like portraying burglars who systematically rob other people's homes as the injured parties when the homeowner decides to install a lock to keep the burglars out."<sup>73</sup> Moreover, Moscow was complicit in Egypt's violations of a cease-fire agreement that the United States helped broker in August 1970, which, in effect, eliminated any possibility that peace negotiations could resume at that time and ultimately made possible the Egyptian attack across the canal in October 1973.

Nevertheless, to say that the Soviet Union backed the radical Arab agenda would be simplistic. True, Moscow might have been planning to increase its military presence in the area even before the War of Attrition began to escalate in the summer of 1969, implying that its intervention in the Middle East cannot be explained entirely by that conflict's intensification.<sup>74</sup> The Soviet Union, however, only reluctantly agreed to accept the tremendous risks involved in deploying a significant number of its own military personnel—the first time it had ever carried out such an operation for the defense of a noncommunist country—for the purpose of saving Nasser's regime from collapse. Egypt, after all, was one of the Soviet Union's most important clients, and once the Israelis had completely destroyed that country's air defense system in late 1969, their aim was to overthrow Nasser by bombing deep in the Egyptian interior.<sup>75</sup> As a National Intelligence Estimate observed, the Soviets had likely accepted the Egyptian leader's

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<sup>72</sup> On Moscow's opposition to Nasser's decision to resort to military action, see Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *Sphinx and Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Arab World* (London: William Collins Sons, 1978), pp. 193-195; and David A. Korn, *Stalemate: The War of Attrition and Great Power Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1967-1970* (Boulder, Colo: Westview, 1992), p. 190.

<sup>73</sup> Memcon, March 20, 1970, in United States Department of State, *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2007), p. 140.

<sup>74</sup> Dima P. Adamsky, "The 'Seventh Day' of the Six Day War: The Soviet Intervention in the War of Attrition, 1969-1970," in Ro'i and Morozov, *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War*, pp. 198-250.

<sup>75</sup> Richard B. Parker, *The Politics of Miscalculation in the Middle East* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 137, 141, 143, 145.

point that the “situation was humiliating both to him and to the Russians and possibly that his position, and therefore theirs, would be jeopardized unless means were found to deny the Israelis freedom of the skies over the heart of Egypt.”<sup>76</sup>

Moscow, moreover, likely felt obligated to come to Egypt’s defense because the United States was backing, or at the very least acquiescing to, Israel’s tough policy. “A man would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to sense how much the [Nixon] administration favors our military operations,” Israel’s ambassador in Washington, Yitzhak Rabin, wrote, “and there is a growing likelihood that the United States would be interested in an escalation of our military activity with the aim of undermining Nasser’s standing.”<sup>77</sup> The White House, Kissinger admitted privately, “suffer[ed] no pain (but can’t say we don’t care) when the Israelis hit [Egypt] and Syria.”<sup>78</sup> Nixon, similarly, wanted the Israelis to “kick Nasser [and Egypt] harder.”<sup>79</sup>

In addition, the Soviet intervention should be understood in political terms. Egypt, the Kremlin believed, would not negotiate for a settlement from a completely prostrate position. “Frankly,” Dobrynin told U.S. officials in June 1970, “maybe the situation now is a little more equal in the military sense. Perhaps this provides a good opportunity to advance toward a settlement.”<sup>80</sup> When considered in this context, the August cease-fire violations were possibly also intended to improve Egypt’s bargaining position.

Likewise, the Soviet Union might have believed that it could use its intervention to pressure the United States to pursue a settlement. The danger posed by the intervention,

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<sup>76</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate 30-70, “The USSR and the Egyptian-Israeli Confrontation,” May 14, 1970, Soviet Estimate, document 00446, DNSA, p. 2. For additional details of the Soviet decision to intervene, see Igor Timofeyev, “War on the Day of Atonement,” *New Times* (Moscow), November 1988, p. 20; and Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan* (New York: Quadrangle, 1975), pp. 77-84.

<sup>77</sup> Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 151-152.

<sup>78</sup> Memcon, January 9, 1970, Kissinger Conversations Supplement, document 00034, DNSA, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 179.

<sup>80</sup> Memcon, “Subject: Middle East,” June 2, 1970, *FRUS, 1969-1976: Vol. 12: Soviet Union, January 1969—October 1970* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2006), p. 487.

Dobrynin recognized, “obviously troubled the White House,” because it “might force the Nixon administration to depart from its current very convenient position of not having to worry about Israel’s military situation while it can continue, at the same time, to exert diplomatic pressure on the Arab countries by using the military operations that Israel conducts with virtual impunity, especially the operations of its aircraft.” Using Soviet forces, then, “could perhaps turn out to be the most effective way to compel Nixon to look seriously at the Middle East situation.” Dobrynin was by no means proposing a “direct confrontation,” but rather “playing a new political card with a greater degree of pressure”—the kind of move that any great power might have made in these sorts of circumstances.<sup>81</sup>

Many analysts were especially critical of Soviet policy prior to and during the October 1973 Middle East war, which did severe—and perhaps even irreparable—damage to the U.S.-Soviet détente. Indeed, many Americans concluded that Soviet behavior during this period had revealed the Kremlin’s basic hostility toward Israel and the United States. Although he had written just days before the war that détente reflected a “basically hopeful situation,” the conflict altered Eugene Rostow’s view. The Kremlin leadership, he had come to believe, had been trying to “lull” the United States, while it “dangled before the eyes of [the] Arabs the irresistible temptation...to drive out the Israelis, as the Crusaders had been driven out before.”<sup>82</sup>

Rostow’s view was widely shared at the time, even though there was little evidence to support it.<sup>83</sup> Sadat’s decision in July 1972 to expel the Soviet military personnel stationed in

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<sup>81</sup> Memcon, February 10, 1970, in United States Department of State, *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 124-125.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in John Rosenberg, “The Quest against Détente: Eugene Rostow, the October War, and the Origins of the Anti-Détente Movement, 1969-1976,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (September 2015), pp. 720, 722, 723, doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhu042. See also “The Quest for Détente,” Statement by the Foreign Policy Task Force of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, July 31, 1974, [http://neoconservatism.vaisse.net/doku.php?id=the\\_quest\\_for\\_detente](http://neoconservatism.vaisse.net/doku.php?id=the_quest_for_detente). Rostow was the chair of this task force.

<sup>83</sup> For example, see Schlesinger, “The Eagle and the Bear,” p. 949; Albert Wohlstetter, “Threats and Promises of Peace: Europe and America in the New Era,” *Orbis*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Winter 1974), pp. 1111, 1117-1118; Abraham S. Becker, “The Superpowers in the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1970-1973,” in Abraham S. Becker, Bent Hansen, and

Egypt was a result of his frustration with the Kremlin's opposition to another Middle East war and its refusal to provide the Arabs with weapons for that purpose. Thus, it came as "a violent shock" to the Egyptian leader when the superpowers decided, in effect, to ignore the Arab-Israeli dispute at the Moscow summit in May and, subsequently, when the Soviets nevertheless continued to deny Cairo weapons for war.<sup>84</sup> As Kissinger boasted, "You know that the Russians showed restraint [in the Middle East]; that is why Sadat kicked them out."<sup>85</sup>

Although Moscow decided to provide Egypt and Syria some military assistance in early 1973, here again, context is crucial. Despite having pledged repeatedly throughout 1972 to begin working on the Arab-Israeli issue after Nixon's re-election, Nixon and Kissinger declined to launch a major peacemaking effort in 1973. During Kissinger's meetings with Sadat's national security adviser, Hafez Ismail, in February, the latter stated that Cairo was prepared to be more flexible on the question of how an Egyptian settlement with Israel would be connected to a comprehensive agreement that would include Jordan, the Palestinians, and Syria.<sup>86</sup>

In the wake of those talks, however, the United States made essentially no effort to advance Egypt's proposals. Years later, Ismail expressed bafflement about what had happened,

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Malcolm H. Kerr, eds., *The Economics and Politics of the Middle East* (New York: American Elsevier, 1975), p. 117; Rubinstein, *Red Star on the Nile*, p. 271; Dina Rome Spechler, "The U.S.S.R. and Third-World Conflicts: Domestic Debate and Soviet Policy in the Middle East, 1967-1973," *World Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (April 1986), pp. 435-461, doi.org/10.2307/2010201; Joseph Kraft, "New Realities in the Middle East," *Washington Post*, October 18, 1973; and Letter from Nitze to Winston Lord with Enclosed Copy of Nitze's May 2 Remarks at the School for Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, May 5, 1975, folder 9, box 32, Nitze Papers, LOC. Some analysts still criticize Soviet behavior during the October war. See, for example, Sergey Radchenko, "Stumbling toward Armageddon," *New York Times*, October 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/09/opinion/stumbling-toward-armageddon.html>.

<sup>84</sup> Anwar el-Sadat, *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 229.

<sup>85</sup> Memcon, October 4, 1972, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 207.

<sup>86</sup> As Kissinger informed Nixon, "the most important thing" that had emerged from the talks was Egypt's "willing[ness] to make a separate Egyptian-Israeli deal, because they know afterwards the Jordanians and Syrians are going to follow the same procedure." "[T]he problem," Kissinger concluded, "is with the Israelis." See Editorial Note, *FRUS, 1969-1976*: Vol. 25: *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), p. 85. Ismail was also willing to consider Kissinger's suggestion that Israel be permitted to maintain a temporary military presence in Sinai. For the minutes of the Kissinger-Ismail talks, see Memcon, February 25, 1973, KT00681, DNSA; and Memcon, February 26, 1973, KT00682, DNSA.

saying he “would love to know what [the Nixon administration was] really up to in 1973.”<sup>87</sup>

Thus, Sadat complained bitterly in April that “every door” he had opened had been “slammed in my face by Israel—with American blessings.”<sup>88</sup>

Given the White House’s promises to the Kremlin, the Nixon administration’s refusal to undertake a serious effort at Arab-Israeli peacemaking bordered on deceitful. It was therefore unsurprising that the Soviets chose to take a harder line in the spring of 1973 by providing the Arabs additional arms. As early as May 1971, even Nixon had recognized that the United States was essentially leaving the Soviet Union no alternatives. Without diplomatic movement, Nixon noted, the Soviets would “have had no other choice but to build up the armed strength of Israel’s neighbors to the point that another Mideast war will be inevitable.”<sup>89</sup> As it was, the Kremlin ultimately gave the Arabs arms that enabled them to pursue only limited military objectives.<sup>90</sup>

Moreover, the argument, which many analysts made at the time, that the Soviets had urged the Arabs to go to war is unfounded. Upon learning on October 4—only two days prior to the start of the fighting—that the Arabs would attack Israel, the Kremlin became deeply concerned. Moscow, one former Soviet official writes, “had done everything it could to talk Sadat and [Syrian President Hafez al-Assad] out of launching a military attack.”<sup>91</sup> Soviet policy, KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov noted, had been “directed at the prevention of the unleashing of a military conflict.”<sup>92</sup> Moscow, Golan notes, wanted to avoid war because it thought that the

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<sup>87</sup> Memo from Rodman to Kissinger, “Subject: Hafez Ismail,” February 25, 1981, folder 4, box 45, Peter Rodman Papers, LOC.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Arnaud de Borchgrave, “The Battle is Now Inevitable,” *Newsweek*, April 9, 1973.

<sup>89</sup> Memo from Nixon to Secretary of State William Rogers, May 26, 1971, p. 859.

<sup>90</sup> Saad El-Shazly, *The Crossing of the Suez* (San Francisco, Calif: American Mideast Research, 1980).

<sup>91</sup> Victory Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from Andropov to Brezhnev, October 29, 1973, Cold War International History Project (henceforth CWIHP), Wilson Center Digital Archive, Washington, D.C. (henceforth WCDA), p. 2.

Arabs would lose, believed a war would damage détente, and feared it would risk a superpower confrontation. Thus, “[The Soviets] pushed for a cease-fire from the very first day of the war.”<sup>93</sup>

In addition, Soviet officials had repeatedly tried to warn the Nixon administration that without diplomatic progress, there would be a war. Brezhnev had even insisted that Nixon be awakened to discuss the matter at the end of his visit to the United States in June.<sup>94</sup> The Soviets, in fact, had assumed that the administration must have known that war was imminent and had therefore evacuated their dependents from the Middle East, a move that should have alerted U.S. and Israeli officials that an Arab attack was coming.<sup>95</sup> Thus, Nixon admitted in the midst of the war that the Soviets had “a pretty good beef” when it came to the Middle East, given that the United States had been “stringing them along.”<sup>96</sup> “I think it is a total mistake,” Kissinger agreed, “to say the Russians instigated this war.”<sup>97</sup>

During the war, the Soviets once again pursued a moderate policy. Many observers at the time pointed to the Soviet Union’s decision to resupply the Arabs with arms as evidence of its intention to exploit détente and improve its strategic position in the Middle East at the expense of the United States. Moscow, however, was probably using arms to gain influence with its clients so that it could convince them to accept a cease-fire.<sup>98</sup> As one U.S. official later pointed out, this was “precisely the way in which the United States used the supply of arms to the Israelis.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Richard B. Parker, ed., *The October War: A Retrospective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), p. 182.

<sup>94</sup> Memo for the President’s File by Kissinger, “Subject: President’s Meeting with General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev on Saturday, June 23, 1973 at 10:30 p.m. at the Western White House, San Clemente, California,” June 23, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, pp. 538-542.

<sup>95</sup> Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War*, pp. 3, 5. As Kissinger later acknowledged, it had been “inexplicable” that U.S. intelligence had failed to comprehend the significance of the Soviet evacuation. See Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 465.

<sup>96</sup> Telecon, October 14, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 496.

<sup>97</sup> Memcon, March 1, 1974, KT01045, DNSA, p. 4.

<sup>98</sup> Galia Golan, “The Soviet Union and the October War,” in Asaf Siniver, ed., *The Yom Kippur War: Politics, Legacy, Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 107-108.

<sup>99</sup> William B. Quandt, “Soviet Policy in the October Middle East War—II,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (October 1977), p. 590, doi.org/10.2307/2616230.

Nor had Brezhnev's letter of October 24 to Nixon, which triggered a U.S. nuclear alert, represented the sort of threat that U.S. decision makers have claimed it did. The missive, Soviet diplomat Vasily Kuznetsov recalled, had been crafted so as "not to frighten the Americans too much."<sup>100</sup> Brezhnev's objective had been to get the United States to prevent Israel from continuing its violation of the October 22 cease-fire agreement—an agreement that both superpowers had sponsored but which Kissinger had nevertheless told the Israelis they could delay putting into effect—with the goal of destroying Sadat's trapped Third Army. Thus, as late as October 23 Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Sisco expressed satisfaction with the policy Moscow had pursued during the crisis: "I knew that the Soviets attached importance to détente, but...the strength of that view even surprised me. It just comes out in every possible way."<sup>101</sup>

Soviet behavior during these crises, then, does not support the notion that Moscow was endorsing the "radical Arab program." It should therefore not be surprising that the Kremlin took a reasonable position on the substance of a political settlement. Importantly, there can be no question, contrary to what some scholars have claimed, that Moscow recognized Israel's right to exist. Even before the 1967 war, U.S. officials understood that the Soviets did "not even give lip service to Arab aspirations to destroy Israel."<sup>102</sup> According to Jordanian representatives, Moscow had made clear to Nasser in the aftermath of that conflict that it was willing to press for an Israeli withdrawal to the prewar lines, "but no further. The Soviets have emphasized they accept Israel's right to existence and are not in the least interested in Israel's destruction."<sup>103</sup> To the extent that it played any role at all in this area, Soviet ideology appeared to dictate such a policy. The

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<sup>100</sup> Quoted in Israelyan, *Inside the Kremlin during the Yom Kippur War*, p. 169.

<sup>101</sup> Minutes of the Secretary of State's Staff Meeting, October 23, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 699.

<sup>102</sup> Report, "Politico-Military Contingency Planning for the Arab-Israeli Dispute," May 1966, folder 1, box 105, NSF, Country File, LBJL.

<sup>103</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Jordan to the Department of State, "Subject: Conversations with Jordanian Officials," July 19, 1967, folder 7, box 110, NSF, Country File, LBJL.

Kremlin, Nasser was told, wanted the Egyptian president to “dissociate himself from the concept of obliterating Israel as a state.” Moscow simply “cannot support this kind of position, which contradicts Marxist-Leninist ideology.”<sup>104</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the 1967 war, the Soviets had been willing to support a proposal that was acceptable to the United States. Moscow, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Arthur Goldberg, reported in July, considered Israel’s right “to exist as [a] national independent state free from war” as “legitimately...on a par with [the] troop withdrawal question.”<sup>105</sup> The Arabs, Brezhnev emphasized, needed to “grasp the situation realistically.” They had no military option, he observed, “and a political solution will not be possible without the participation of [the] Arabs themselves.” “Why,” he asked, “should we stand up to Israel with war? After all, we do not say that we do not recognize Israel as a state.”<sup>106</sup> In July 1967, consequently, Gromyko and Goldberg reached a compromise formula for a Security Council resolution whereby Israel would withdraw from all the territories it had captured in the war in exchange for a promise of non-belligerency.<sup>107</sup>

The Soviets withdrew their support when Nasser refused to accept the agreement in the face of opposition from Syria and Algeria. Still, they had expressed deep frustration with their clients’ intransigence. The Arabs, Brezhnev complained, had “not show[n] appropriate realism” and had “overlooked an important political chance prepared by all of us.”<sup>108</sup> The head of the

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<sup>104</sup> Telegram from Kuznetsov to Various Posts, July 1, 1967, in Ro’i and Morozov, *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War*, p. 346.

<sup>105</sup> Excerpt from a Telegram from the Mission to the United Nations to the Department of State, July 22, 1967, folder 3, box 48, Arthur Goldberg Papers, LOC.

<sup>106</sup> Polish Record of Meeting of Soviet-bloc Leaders (and Tito) in Budapest (excerpts), July 11, 1967, CWIHP, WCDA, pp. 4, 6, 10.

<sup>107</sup> Telegram from the Mission to the United Nations to the Department of State, July 21, 1967, *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Vol. 19, p. 699.

<sup>108</sup> Polish Record of Meeting of Soviet-bloc Leaders (and Tito) in Moscow, November 9, 1967, CWIHP, WCDA, p. 3.

International Department, Boris Ponomarev, similarly “criticized the Arabs ferociously, calling them fanatical and irrational.”<sup>109</sup>

One could rightly blame the Soviets for, in effect, granting the Arabs a veto over their policy at this critical juncture, but they had not abandoned the effort for a Middle East settlement. The Kremlin had been pulled in two directions, not wanting to break with its clients but hoping that it could nevertheless move matters in its preferred direction. Moscow, in a sense, was making an investment by continuing to support the Arabs, with the hope that, in the future, it would be better positioned to bring them along. Consequently, the Soviet Union joined the United States in voting for United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which called for an Arab-Israeli agreement on the basis of a “land for peace” formula, in November 1967.

One might argue that the Soviet rejection of a December 1969 U.S. peace proposal, known as the Rogers Plan, which called for a full Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 border with Egypt, showed that Moscow was uninterested in a reasonable settlement. When Nasser refused the offer, ostensibly because it included no provisions relating to Syria, the Soviets followed suit. Given that Damascus was unwilling even to participate in the peace process at the time, such an objection was ludicrous. Nasser himself had referred to the Syrians as “uncontrollable juveniles.”<sup>110</sup> Moreover, Secretary of State William Rogers implied when he unveiled the plan that the United States would be willing to help resolve the Syrian aspect of the dispute if Damascus would “accept the Security Council Resolution of November 1967.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> CIA Intelligence Report, “Soviet Policy and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War,” p. 31.

<sup>110</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Jordan to the Department of State, July 19, 1967.

<sup>111</sup> Rogers’s Address to the Galaxy Conference on Adult Education, December 9, 1969, Jewish Virtual Library, Chevy Chase, Maryland, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-rogers-plan-december-1969>. Specifically, Rogers stated that the United States was not seeking a settlement that involved only Egypt and Jordan, but also “other States” that accepted Resolution 242.

The context in which the Rogers Plan was announced, however, makes the Kremlin's rebuff somewhat understandable. Given their earlier support for a "land for peace" deal, the Soviets in all likelihood wanted the Arabs to accept it. Egypt's precarious military position in the War of Attrition, however, probably impeded the ability of the Soviets to persuade Nasser to accept the proposal. More importantly, Nixon never had any intention of pressing the Israelis to accept the plan, a fact that Soviet and Egyptian negotiators recognized. "It was an open book," one Egyptian official later recalled, "that the White House was not on board."<sup>112</sup> One can rightly criticize the Kremlin leaders for not breaking with Nasser over what was an eminently reasonable proposal, but they might have reasoned that straining their relationship with him over a plan they knew lacked Nixon's backing made no sense, even if they agreed with it substantively.

Further evidence that Soviet policy was moving in a moderate direction is the Kremlin's offer to remove its military forces from Egypt once an agreement was reached. During his September 1971 visit to Washington, Gromyko, under orders from Brezhnev, notified Nixon of the Soviet Union's willingness to withdraw its military personnel from that country as part of a settlement that would closely resemble what the United States had outlined in the Rogers Plan.<sup>113</sup> The offer, Nixon admitted, represented "a hell of a concession."<sup>114</sup>

By 1973, a comprehensive settlement had become Moscow's top Middle East priority. The Soviet Union, Brezhnev said during the October War, would help guarantee a settlement and restore diplomatic relations with Israel. If that upset the Arabs, then they could "go to hell!"

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<sup>112</sup> Remarks by Ambassador Ashraf Ghorbal, quoted in Parker, *The October War*, p. 35. See also Salim Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2016), pp. 31-32.

<sup>113</sup> Conversation between Nixon and Gromyko, September 29, 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976: Vol. 13: Soviet Union, October 1970—October 1971* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2011), pp. 1051-1055. The comparison to the Rogers Plan is taken from Korn, *Stalemate*, p. 274.

<sup>114</sup> Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, September 30, 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976, Vol. 13*, p. 1065.

Moscow had offered them “a sensible way for so many years,” but they had nevertheless chosen war. “We are not going to fight for them,” Brezhnev declared. “And especially we will not start a world war because of them. So that’s that.”<sup>115</sup> At the Geneva conference in December 1973, Gromyko told Eban that the Soviet Union “recognizes that Israel has an undoubted right to exist like any other independent state in the world. If anybody violates this principle, we will oppose that with great force since that would be against our basic policy.”<sup>116</sup>

Thus, even though the Soviets were well positioned after the 1973 war to obstruct progress in the Middle East, they chose instead to encourage direct negotiations between the parties and endorse the disengagement agreements between Israel, Egypt, and Syria. As Kissinger admitted, Moscow had been “not unhelpful.”<sup>117</sup> The Soviets, he observed, had “tried to be fairly reasonable all across the board. . . . Even in the Middle East where our political strategy put them in an awful bind, they haven’t really tried to screw us.”<sup>118</sup>

In sum, the Soviet Union appeared interested in cooperating with the United States to reach a stable Arab-Israeli agreement. But was the Nixon administration equally interested?

*“Taken to the Cleaners”: Kissinger’s Middle East Strategy*

The evidence suggests that under not-too-different circumstances the United States might have agreed to cooperate with the Soviet Union in the Middle East. Nixon, in particular, was attracted to the idea of working with the Soviets to pressure the Arabs and the Israelis to reach an agreement. From the beginning of his presidency, Nixon maintained that the superpowers would

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<sup>115</sup> Chernyaev Diary Entry, November 4, 1973, NSA EBB No. 430, p. 69. Brezhnev’s language might have been even more forceful. See Gordon Barass, *The Great Cold War: A Journey through the Hall of Mirrors* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 185.

<sup>116</sup> Quoted in Abba Eban, *Personal Witness: Israel through My Eyes* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1992), p. 551.

<sup>117</sup> Letter from Kissinger to Eugene Rostow, August 19, 1974, folder: Miscellaneous Correspondence (Current), box 52, Peter Rosenblatt Papers, LBJL.

<sup>118</sup> Memcon, “Subject: The Secretary’s Visit to the Soviet Union,” March 18, 1974, in William Burr, ed., *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top-Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow* (New York: Free Press, 1998), p. 225.

have to wield their combined influence to achieve peace in the Middle East. “Any settlement,” he said, “will have to be imposed—without calling it that. Overhanging this is US-USSR relations.”<sup>119</sup> “The only solution,” he believed, “would be one imposed by both the United States and the Soviet Union.”<sup>120</sup>

The president appeared willing to launch a major peacemaking effort in 1973. The Arab-Israeli dispute, he wrote, was “getting ready to blow.”<sup>121</sup> The Middle East, he stressed, was his “highest priority in the year of 1973.” The United States, he said, was “not Israel’s lawyer,” nor was it willing to “fight a world war for Israel.” That country, Nixon insisted, needed to “make its deal now...before the Arabs engulfed it.” The Israelis, he said, “were totally wrong in their strategy.”<sup>122</sup> “Right now,” he told Kissinger, “this is going to be settled...We’re going to move.”<sup>123</sup>

The 1973 war reinforced Nixon’s inclination to work with the Soviets in the Middle East. The United States, the president told Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, had not wavered in its support of Israel during the conflict, but a settlement was now needed because the United States could not do “a repeat performance.”<sup>124</sup> “These US-Soviet confrontations,” he said, “are not pleasant.”<sup>125</sup> “Only the U.S. and the Soviet Union,” he wrote Brezhnev, “have the power and influence to create the permanent conditions necessary to avoid another war.” The United States and the Soviet Union, therefore, had to “step in, determine the proper course of action to a just

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<sup>119</sup> Minutes of an NSC Meeting, April 25, 1969, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 94.

<sup>120</sup> Memcon, June 5, 1970, p. 80.

<sup>121</sup> Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: Background for Your Meeting with Egyptian Emissary Hafiz Ismail,” February 23, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 70 n. 3.

<sup>122</sup> Memo for the President’s File by Kissinger, “Subject: Meeting with Chancellor Willy Brandt of the Federal Republic of Germany on Tuesday, May 1, 1973 at 10:45 a.m. to 12:25 p.m.,” May 1, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976*: Vol. E-15, Part 2: *Documents on Western Europe, 1973-1976* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2014), p. 826.

<sup>123</sup> Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, February 23, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 68.

<sup>124</sup> Remarks by Meir’s Aide, Mordechai Gazit, as quoted in Parker, *The October War*, p. 214.

<sup>125</sup> Memcon, November 1, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 833.

settlement, and then bring the necessary pressure on our respective friends for a settlement which will at last bring peace to this troubled area.”<sup>126</sup>

Ultimately, however, the Nixon administration chose not to pursue U.S.-Soviet cooperation in the Middle East. To be sure, Nixon agreed partially with Kissinger’s view that the region represented a key area of Cold War competition, which dampened, at times considerably, his desire to cooperate with the Soviets.<sup>127</sup> In addition, Nixon initially was reluctant to press Israel to withdraw to the 1967 lines, especially on the Syrian front, a position the Soviets could not accept.

Fundamentally, however, Nixon disagreed with Kissinger’s view that reducing Soviet influence in the Middle East should be the top U.S. priority in the region. Kissinger, he remarked, was “wrong on the Mideast.”<sup>128</sup> The president’s views in this area were “very different from Henry’s. It’s the one thing he’s blind on.”<sup>129</sup> In part, Nixon’s remarks reflected his belief that Kissinger’s Jewish background rendered him unable to pursue an unbiased Arab-Israeli policy.<sup>130</sup> “I never found a Jew that was rational about Israel—never one,” he said.<sup>131</sup>

But more importantly, Nixon, especially after the 1973 war, wanted to cooperate with Moscow to reach a settlement. The Soviets, the president recognized, seemed to “like the

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<sup>126</sup> Telegram from Deputy National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft to Kissinger, October 20, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 629.

<sup>127</sup> For example, see Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 563.

<sup>128</sup> Conversation among Nixon, Presidential Assistant John Ehrlichman, and Presidential Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman, May 10, 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 852.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 853-854.

<sup>130</sup> Nixon, as one scholar writes, was “a cultural anti-Semite.” See Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 170. The president’s personal biases likely contributed to his perception of Kissinger’s thinking about the Middle East.

<sup>131</sup> Conversation among Nixon, Ehrlichman, and Haldeman, May 10, 1971, p. 855. For additional evidence of Nixon’s perspective in this area, see Conversation among Nixon, Ehrlichman, and Haldeman, March 9, 1971, in Brinkley and Nichter, *The Nixon Tapes*, p. 38.

condominium business,” an approach he supported. The way to a deal, he said, was for “Brezhnev and Nixon [to] settle this damn thing.”<sup>132</sup>

As a matter of principle, Nixon was not committed to extending Israel’s territory beyond the 1967 lines. Kissinger wrote in March 1969 that the United States had “no interest in supporting Israeli expansionism” and “no stake in where the lines are drawn.” The U.S. position, he added, did “not differ greatly from British, Soviet, and French views.” The United States and the Soviet Union were “closer than we might have expected on the substance of a settlement.”<sup>133</sup> And although Nixon was willing to explore the possibility of obtaining the best deal for Israel, he did not abandon the Rogers Plan as official U.S. policy.<sup>134</sup>

More significantly, by the end of his presidency, Nixon appeared to favor a full Israeli withdrawal on all fronts. As Kissinger noted, during a June 1974 meeting with President Assad, Nixon had “promised the 1967 borders.”<sup>135</sup> The president, a Syrian official later claimed, made a “stark commitment” to that effect. “The United States of America,” Nixon reportedly said, “will never agree to allowing Israel to annex any of the occupied territories. Israel should withdraw from all the occupied territories.”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Telecon, October 14, 1973, p. 499.

<sup>133</sup> Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, “Subject: The Mid-East Talks with the USSR So Far,” March 30, 1969, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 12, pp. 112-113, 116.

<sup>134</sup> On this point, see, for example, Memcon, February 16, 1972, KT00429, DNSA, pp. 3-4.

<sup>135</sup> Memcon, August 23, 1974, National Security Adviser (NSA) Memcons, 1973-1977, box 5, Gerald R. Ford Digital Library, Ann Arbor Michigan (henceforth, FDL), p. 2.

<sup>136</sup> Quoted in Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 164. On Nixon’s comments to Assad, see also Lars Hasvoll Bakke and Hilde Henriksen Waage, “Facing Assad: American Diplomacy toward Syria, 1973-1977,” *International History Review*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2018), p. 557, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07075332.2017.1334687>.

Some analysts claim, however, that domestic political considerations would have prevented Nixon from pursuing a comprehensive settlement, given the pressure it would have required the administration to put on Israel.<sup>137</sup>

Accounts that claim that Nixon—because he had not depended on Jewish votes to win the presidency—was basically immune to domestic pressure regarding Middle East policy overlook the ways in which politics at home influenced his decisions.<sup>138</sup> It was the president’s view, after all, that the “Jewish lobby,” through its campaign contributions to members of Congress and its media presence, wielded “enormous influence.”<sup>139</sup> Partly as a consequence of that belief, early in his presidency Nixon proved very reluctant to press Israel, fearing that its American supporters would, in response, mobilize opposition to his Vietnam policy. “Unless it is absolutely necessary,” he explained to Dobrynin, “I don’t want to anger the Jews, who hold important positions in the press, radio, and television, from which they can exert a powerful influence on other groups of American voters.” Supporters of Israel, he added, were “the main critics of our Vietnam policy and will undoubtedly step up this criticism if it seems to them I am ‘selling out’ Israel, although I have no intention of doing so.”<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> For the most forceful articulation of this view, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007). For accounts that specifically emphasize Nixon’s domestic political concerns as they related to the Arab-Israeli conflict, see for example Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers*, pp. 21, 27-28, 30-31, 50; George W. Ball and Douglas B. Ball, *The Passionate Attachment: America’s Involvement with Israel, 1947 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), p. 327 n. 4; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, pp. 114, 220-221; Patrick Tyler, *A World of Trouble: The White House and the Middle East—from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), pp. 124, 173; and remarks by Ambassador Samuel Lewis, in Parker, *The October War*, pp. 236-237, 301-302, 328. Congressional support for Israel also increased noticeably during this period. See Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America’s Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 169, 459 n. 156; and Kenny Kolander, “Phantom Peace: Henry ‘Scoop’ Jackson, J. William Fulbright, and Military Sales to Israel,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (June 2017), pp. 567-593, doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhw061.

<sup>138</sup> For an example of this argument, see A.F.K. Organski, *The \$36 Billion Bargain: Strategy and Politics in U.S. Assistance to Israel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 24-27.

<sup>139</sup> Memo from Nixon to Secretary of State William Rogers, May 26, 1971, p. 856.

<sup>140</sup> Memcon, June 10, 1970, in United States Department of State, *Soviet-American Relations*, pp. 150-151. Nixon’s anti-Semitic tendencies, of course, contributed to his perception that American Jews dominated the news media and federal bureaucracy. For Nixon’s views on these issues, see for example Conversation among Nixon, Billy Graham,

Consequently, domestic considerations shaped the White House's approach to Arab-Israeli peacemaking at the tactical level, with important implications for U.S. policy. Although Nixon had wanted to cooperate with the Soviet Union on the Middle East issue, he waited until after he had secured his re-election and concluded the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam. The White House, he told Brezhnev during the May 1972 Moscow summit, had a problem with "timing, which is now difficult for us, if we are to affect the Israelis." Only after the election could the United States and the Soviet Union "try to get to the nutcutting part of the problem." "Candidly," he said, "we can't settle it before the election, but after that we can make progress, in a fair way."<sup>141</sup>

Likewise, Kissinger felt in the aftermath of the 1973 war that the administration needed time to build a domestic base of support. For Kissinger, this meant pursuing an incremental, rather than comprehensive, approach. Israel, he recognized, would "scream" as soon as the United States applied pressure. The White House, therefore, would need to "have unity in this country to stand up for it... We have to start working on the Jewish lobby."<sup>142</sup> Moreover, the shadow of the 1976 presidential election proved to be a critical factor in President Ford's decision to avoid a showdown with Israel over the nature of a comprehensive settlement during the spring and summer of 1975.<sup>143</sup>

Ultimately, though, domestic politics did not determine Nixon's Middle East policy. He had, after all, carried forty-nine states in 1972 and did not have to worry about re-election.

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and Haldeman, February 1, 1972, in Brinkley and Nichter, *The Nixon Tapes*, pp. 359-360; and Evan Thomas, *Being Nixon: A Man Divided* (New York: Random House, 2015), pp. 334-336.

<sup>141</sup> Memcon, May 26, 1972, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, pp. 1133, 1137.

<sup>142</sup> Memcon, November 3, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 875.

<sup>143</sup> Galen Jackson, "The Showdown That Wasn't: U.S.-Israeli Relations and American Domestic Politics, 1973-75," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Spring 2015), pp. 130-169, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00201.

Furthermore, the 1973 war seemed to provide a golden opportunity for the president to seize the initiative in conjunction with Moscow.

In principle, Nixon was willing to pressure Israel. The Israelis, he had emphasized soon after taking office in 1969, needed to understand his “determination to go ahead and do what we can for a settlement. Israel cannot count on us to be with it no matter what it does.”<sup>144</sup> The United States, he and Kissinger agreed, would, after Nixon’s re-election, have “to put it to Israel” and “brutalize [the Israelis]” in 1973.<sup>145</sup> Immediately after winning re-election, Nixon remarked, “The time has now come that we’ve got to squeeze the old woman [Meir].”<sup>146</sup> In the midst of the 1973 war, he emphasized that the White House would have to “squeeze the Israelis when this is over and the Russians have got to know it. We’ve got to squeeze them goddamn hard.”<sup>147</sup> The administration, he said, had “to get the Israelis to act reasonable...I hate to use the word blackmail, but we’ve got to do some things to get them to behave.”<sup>148</sup> “I will deliver the Israelis,” he pledged to Dobrynin.<sup>149</sup> In one of his final acts in office, Nixon ordered a complete cutoff of U.S. assistance to Israel.<sup>150</sup>

Nixon’s problem, however, was that the Watergate scandal ultimately consumed his presidency. The White House, one NSC staffer noted in June 1973, was going to have an “especial difficulty in taking steps which might provoke a confrontation with the Jewish lobby and their congressional supporters when they have been weakened domestically by the

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<sup>144</sup> Minutes of an NSC Meeting, April 25, 1969, p. 93.

<sup>145</sup> Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, December 9, 1971, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 23, p. 959; and Telecon, March 27, 1972, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 14, p. 230.

<sup>146</sup> Conversation between Nixon and Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Alexander Haig, January 23, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 8.

<sup>147</sup> Telecon, October 14, 1973, p. 496.

<sup>148</sup> Quoted in Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), p. 132.

<sup>149</sup> Memo for the President’s File by Kissinger, “Subject: Meeting with Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy [sic] F. Dobrynin, in the Oval Office, Wednesday, December 26, 1973, 10:35-11:29 a.m.,” December 26, 1973, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 25, p. 1197.

<sup>150</sup> Memo from Nixon to Kissinger and Schlesinger, undated, folder 13, box 8, Alexander Haig Papers, LOC; and Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 1205.

Watergate Affair.”<sup>151</sup> Were it not for the scandal, Kissinger told the Israeli ambassador, “there would be great pressures building up now.”<sup>152</sup> The Israelis, Kissinger recognized, no longer felt they had to take the president seriously. Their “assessment of Presidential paralysis,” as he put it, had allowed Meir to brush “off with disdain” Nixon’s attempts to pressure her.<sup>153</sup> Given “the present climate in the United States,” Kissinger wrote in May 1974, “we could not force a public confrontation with the Israelis at this time.”<sup>154</sup>

With Nixon in no position to formulate U.S. policy, Kissinger assumed control, a development, which, in turn, would have profound implications because of their divergent beliefs about the Arab-Israeli dispute.

Kissinger was almost certainly more persuaded than Nixon by the argument that Israel should be allowed to retain some of the territories it had captured in 1967. One historian, who has studied Kissinger’s Middle East diplomacy in great detail, goes so far as to claim that “Kissinger *deliberately* designed the [incremental peace] process to enable Israel’s indefinite occupation of Arab land.”<sup>155</sup> As late as August 1974, the secretary of state informed Israeli officials that he believed a return to the 1967 lines, at least with respect to the Syrian and Jordanian fronts, was “impossible.”<sup>156</sup>

Like Nixon, however, Kissinger was not wedded to the notion of changing the 1967 lines in Israel’s favor if a stable agreement could be reached on the basis of those boundaries. His incremental approach, rather than indicating that Kissinger was attempting to help Israel retain

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<sup>151</sup> Quoted in Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers*, p. 125.

<sup>152</sup> Memcon, August 17, 1973, folder: Rabin/Dinitz Sensitive Memcons (3 of 3), box 135, NSC Files, Kissinger Office Files, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, California.

<sup>153</sup> Telegram from Kissinger to Scowcroft, May 14, 1974, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 277.

<sup>154</sup> Telegram from Kissinger to the Embassy in Egypt, May 16, 1974, folder: Egypt (2), box 12, NSA Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, 1969-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan (henceforth GRFL).

<sup>155</sup> Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers*, p. 13.

<sup>156</sup> Memcon, “Subject: The Future Map of Israel,” August 1, 1974, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 396.

territory, must be understood, in large measure, as a tactic for dealing with domestic constraints. Although, he told Assad at one point, he had actually been “in sympathy with [the Rogers Plan],” it was clear to him “that a comprehensive approach cannot work in America.” Given Watergate, he said, he was “doing the utmost that can be done.”<sup>157</sup>

More importantly, once he concluded that an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines was probably necessary to secure a final settlement, Kissinger seemed willing to negotiate such an outcome. Any comprehensive U.S. peace plan, he wrote in a key memorandum to Ford in April 1975, would have to be based on the premise “that Israel should return essentially to 1967 borders, keeping open the possibility that changes of a minor nature might be negotiated.” In practice, that meant that the United States could only support altering the 1967 Jordanian-Israeli boundary “by a kilometer or two.” The idea of substantial border changes, he wrote, was “based on an unfeasible premise.” Peace, then, would be “possible only on the basis of the 1967 boundaries for Syria and Egypt plus some form of Palestinian entity on part of the West Bank.” As Kissinger pointed out, any adjustments to the 1967 lines would “be an inconsequential addition to Israel’s security, particularly in an era of modern weapons.”<sup>158</sup>

In addition, Kissinger appeared to be laying the groundwork for an effort to resolve the Palestinian question, widely regarded as the main weakness in U.S. policy during this period. In November 1975, he approved a statement stating that the Palestinian dimension represented “the heart of the conflict.”<sup>159</sup> Kissinger was, in principle, even prepared to involve the Palestine

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<sup>157</sup> Memcon, March 9, 1975, folder: Middle East Memcons and Reports, box 3, Vol. 1 (2), FDL, p. 29.

<sup>158</sup> Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Subject: Discussion of Middle East Strategy,” April 21, 1975, folder: Middle East—General (8), box 1, Presidential Country Files for the Middle East and South Asia, GRFL, pp. 13-16.

<sup>159</sup> Quoted in Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers*, p. 173.

Liberation Organization (PLO) in the peace negotiations. “Our optimum course,” he said in January 1976, “is to go to the PLO.” Were it not an election year, he implied, “I would do it.”<sup>160</sup>

Kissinger’s views on the substance of an Arab-Israeli settlement, then, were very similar to the Soviet Union’s. He was not, however, interested in cooperating with the Soviets for an agreement. To the contrary, his main goal was to drive them out of the region. From the beginning of the 1973 war, Kissinger declared that his strategy was “to demonstrate that whoever gets help from the Soviet Union cannot achieve his objective, whatever it is.”<sup>161</sup> His “principal objective,” he stressed, was “to keep the Soviet military presence out of the Middle East and to reduce the Soviet political influence as much as possible.”<sup>162</sup>

Kissinger thus sought to exclude the Soviet Union from the postwar diplomacy. At the formal level, the secretary of state said, the United States would cooperate in the Middle East. “But,” he added, “since the Soviet Union can deliver nothing, we will have our bilateral discussions with the Arabs as well. You must distinguish appearance from reality. There may be some face-saving things, but we will determine for ourselves what will be done.”<sup>163</sup> The United States, Kissinger told Chinese leaders, would “move matters toward a settlement in the Middle East, but we also want to demonstrate that it was not done by Soviet pressures.” Even “apart from the merits of the dispute,” the U.S. strategy was to resist whenever Moscow pressed for progress. Only after the Soviet Union had been “defeated” would Kissinger alter his approach. “We are not,” he emphasized, “against Arab aspirations; we are against their being achieved with Soviet pressure... And that is our strategy right now.”<sup>164</sup> The plan, he said, was “to squeeze the

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<sup>160</sup> Memcon, January 29, 1976, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 913.

<sup>161</sup> Memcon, October 6, 1973, NLC-26-9-1-4-8, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

<sup>162</sup> Memcon, October 25, 1973, in Burr, *The Kissinger Transcripts*, p. 155.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>164</sup> Memcon, November 12, 1973, in Burr, *The Kissinger Transcripts*, p. 188.

Soviets to the sideline, not to settle it with them.”<sup>165</sup> The administration’s “whole policy,” he said, was designed to “[avoid] settling it cooperatively with the Soviet Union.”<sup>166</sup> Kissinger, one scholar points out, was “jubilant” when that strategy appeared to be working. “We are,” he exulted, “moving the Soviet Union out of the Middle East.”<sup>167</sup>

There is perhaps no better indication of the premium Kissinger placed on undermining the Soviet Union in the Middle East than when his step-by-step approach broke down in 1974-75 and, consequently, U.S. strategists considered moving in the direction of a comprehensive plan. Ford and Kissinger had grown furious with the Israelis for jeopardizing the diplomacy through their inflexibility—their attitude, Kissinger said at one point, made him “almost blind with rage”—and they now had compelling reasons to pursue an overall approach.<sup>168</sup>

Yet, Ford and Kissinger remained unalterably opposed to cooperating with Moscow on a settlement. To be sure, the administration chose to back away from a confrontation with Israel at this time primarily because of domestic political considerations. This did not mean, however, that the White House had abandoned its core objective of undermining the Soviet position in the Arab world. Another Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement, Ford stressed, would allow the United States to “forestall the Soviets getting back in.”<sup>169</sup> A partial agreement, Kissinger agreed, remained an important option because it represented “the best way to reduce the influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East.”<sup>170</sup> In short, Kissinger had all along been “wholeheartedly in

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<sup>165</sup> Memcon, “Subject: Secretary Kissinger’s Meeting with Jewish Intellectuals,” December 6, 1973, in Zaki Shalom, “Kissinger and the American Jewish Leadership after the 1973 War,” *Israel Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring 2002), p. 211.

<sup>166</sup> Memcon, “Subject: China,” July 6, 1975, in Burr, *The Kissinger Transcripts*, p. 382.

<sup>167</sup> Quoted in Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed*, p. 160.

<sup>168</sup> Telecon, June 11, 1975, document 4-A, NSA EBB No. 526, p. 1.

<sup>169</sup> Memcon, November 27, 1974, *FRUS, 1969-1976: Vol. 16: Soviet Union, August 1974—December 1976* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2012), p. 377.

<sup>170</sup> Memo from Scowcroft to Ford, August 28, 1975, *FRUS, 1969-1976, Vol. 26*, p. 822.

agreement” about “the undesirability of an imposed Mideast settlement and of doing anything ‘in tandem’ with the Soviets.”<sup>171</sup>

It had been the United States, then, rather than the Soviet Union, that had not wanted to cooperate for Arab-Israeli peace. U.S.-Soviet conflict, Kissinger admitted in August 1974, had “mostly been our fault. What have they done that’s so bad?”<sup>172</sup> In the Middle East, Kissinger’s assistant, William Hyland, agreed, the United States had been “screwing them.”<sup>173</sup> The United States, Kissinger emphasized, had “squeezed [the Soviets] in the Middle East in an unbelievable way.”<sup>174</sup> Moscow, he said, had “got nothing” out of détente. Instead, the United States had “pushed [the Soviets] out of the Middle East.” “Brezhnev’s colleagues,” Kissinger concluded, “can say he was taken to the cleaners.”<sup>175</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Scholars frequently argue that détente failed in the 1970s because the Soviet Union, driven by its communist ideology, continued to pursue an aggressive foreign policy. The Soviet leaders, President Reagan declared in his first news conference, “reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat” in order to achieve their goal of a global communist revolution.<sup>176</sup> That sort of argument is especially common with respect to Soviet policy in the Middle East.

These claims are difficult to support. Particularly after the 1973 war, Golan writes, Moscow exuded “optimism, with Soviet-American cooperation portrayed as a major factor in the

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<sup>171</sup> Letter from Kissinger to John P. Roche, November 28, 1977, folder 6, box 44, Rodman Papers, LOC.

<sup>172</sup> Memcon, “Subject: Draft Statement for Senate Foreign Relations Committee Appearance,” August 1, 1974, KT01268, DNSA, p. 4.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>174</sup> Memcon, “Joint Leadership Meeting on the Summit Trip to Moscow,” July 10, 1974, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 15, p. 1020.

<sup>175</sup> Memcon, February 8, 1974, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 117.

<sup>176</sup> Quoted in Lou Cannon, “Reagan, Gorbachev Two Paths to Détente,” *Washington Post*, May 29, 1988.

new favorable conditions for reaching a settlement.”<sup>177</sup> Indeed, it was in large part because Moscow refused to align itself with the radical Arab agenda that its position in the Middle East eventually declined.

It is true that American domestic politics affected U.S. policy on the Arab-Israeli dispute. “Israel’s lobby is so strong,” Nixon complained at one point, “that Congress is not reasonable.”<sup>178</sup> Domestic politics, however, mainly influenced U.S. tactics and timing, more than substance. Had it not been for Watergate, Nixon almost certainly would have moved to pressure the Israelis. Although Ford preferred to wait until 1977 to pursue a comprehensive approach, he still felt he could prevail in a confrontation. Accepting a showdown with Israel over the terms of a settlement, Kissinger believed, might actually “be an asset to [Ford].” There was a possibility, he said, that it would make the president “a national hero.”<sup>179</sup> “[The Israelis],” Ford agreed, “can’t win the confrontation between the Congress and the President.”<sup>180</sup>

Basic U.S. strategic calculations, however, made it impossible for the superpowers to cooperate on the Arab-Israeli issue. “[Eugene] Rostow’s argument that the Soviets started the Middle East war to destroy US influence in the area,” Kissinger complained at one point, “is absolutely preposterous.”<sup>181</sup> People such as Rostow, he grumbled, had gotten the story backward. It was the United States that had been exploiting the Soviets, not the other way around.

“Brezhnev,” Kissinger believed, “is a political idiot and has given us all sorts of gains.”<sup>182</sup>

U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union had been extremely tough, though it was masked by a rhetorical strategy that emphasized détente. As Kissinger put it, his goal had been to conduct

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<sup>177</sup> Galia Golan, *Yom Kippur and After: The Soviet Union and the Middle East Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 159.

<sup>178</sup> Memcon, “Subject: Cabinet Meeting,” May 18, 1973, NSA Memcons, 1973-1977, box 1, FDL, p. 5.

<sup>179</sup> Memcon, “Subject: Soviet Grain Deal; Economic Summit; Middle East; PFIAB,” August 8, 1975, NSA Memcons, 1973-1977, box 14, FDL, p. 2.

<sup>180</sup> Telecon, June 15, 1975, document 4-B, NSA EBB No. 526, p. 3.

<sup>181</sup> Memcon, August 1, 1974, p. 5.

<sup>182</sup> Memcon, April 23, 1974, NSA Memcons, 1973-1977, box 3, FDL, p. 6.

“the most anti-Soviet [policy] that can be sustained.” That strategy, however, had to be “complex.” “We have,” he said, “the best potential for being tough by seeming to be soft. Where have the Soviets gained anything?”<sup>183</sup> “Our policy to reduce and where possible to eliminate Soviet influence in the Middle East,” Kissinger boasts in his memoirs, “was in fact making progress under the cover of détente.”<sup>184</sup>

These conclusions are at odds with the conventional wisdom about this period of U.S. foreign policy. Kissinger, as one historian writes, is widely regarded as the “most prominent torch-bearer in the modern era” of a realpolitik approach to international politics.<sup>185</sup> Indeed, the standard view is that Kissinger’s whole policy was rooted in the notion that ideological considerations can be ignored and that great powers can cooperate when they have overlapping power political interests.<sup>186</sup>

That interpretation, however, does not stand up in the light of the historical evidence. It hardly made sense from a realpolitik standpoint for the United States to press the Soviet Union so hard that the pro-détente forces in the Kremlin would be weakened. By humiliating the Soviets, he had helped undermine the very “structure of peace” he had promised to erect. Nor can Kissinger’s determination to sideline the Soviet Union from the Arab-Israeli peace process, despite its desire to cooperate with the United States, be reconciled with a realpolitik approach. Rather than constituting, as many writers believe, a spectacular success for U.S. diplomacy, Kissinger’s efforts to undermine the Soviet position in the Middle East might have cost the

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<sup>183</sup> Memcon, “Subjects: Immediate Defense Needs; U.S.-Soviet Détente; Negotiating Strategy; Long-Term Arms Supply; PLO Vote in the UNGA,” October 13, 1974, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 154, 156.

<sup>184</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 594.

<sup>185</sup> John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>186</sup> See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 277, 281, 287; and Jacob Heilbrunn, “Kissinger’s Counsel,” *National Interest*, No. 133 (September/October 2014), pp. 68-69.

superpowers a chance for a comprehensive settlement.<sup>187</sup> Kissinger's rhetoric about erecting a stable foundation for U.S.-Soviet relations, in short, should not be accepted at face value.

The case of U.S.-Soviet diplomacy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 1970s, therefore, suggests that stable détente relationships between great power rivals are possible, but only if both sides are willing to proceed on a realpolitik basis. Had U.S. officials been prepared to take such an approach, the Cold War might have run its course in a very different way.

What does this article imply for how the United States should conduct its relations with rivals like China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia? In the simplest terms, it suggests that if Washington wants to reach an accommodation with these states, it must be willing to set aside concerns about ideology and their internal characteristics, and instead proceed on a more businesslike basis. Moreover, any chance to develop stable relationships with its rivals will almost certainly be lost if U.S. officials fail to respect what these states regard as their core power political interests.<sup>188</sup> Pursuing such an approach would by no means guarantee a more peaceful world or that the United States would improve its relations with these countries. Washington cannot, of course, control how they would respond if it were to adopt a policy more in line with realpolitik principles. But if an opportunity does exist for the United States to develop détente relationships with its rivals, it is likely to be lost if it chooses to pursue the same type of approach that it took during the 1970s.

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<sup>187</sup> For accounts that praise Kissinger's efforts to reduce Soviet influence in the Middle East, see, for example, Niall Ferguson, "He Provided Strategic Vision in Dangerous Times," *New York Times*, February 13, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/02/13/henry-kissinger-sage-or-pariah/henry-kissinger-provided-strategic-vision-in-dangerous-times>; Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 255; Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 314; Abraham Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War: The Epic Encounter That Transformed the Middle East* (New York: Schocken, 2004), p. 508.

<sup>188</sup> Many realist scholars have been critical of post—Cold War U.S. policy toward Russia for precisely this reason. See, for example, Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault"; and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 2016), pp. 7-44, [doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00236](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00236).