

H-Diplo

H-Diplo FRUS Reviews

h-diplo.org/FRUS/

No. 9

Published on 17 February 2012

Reissued, 9 June 2014

H-Diplo FRUS Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Edward C. Keefer, Nina Howland, and Craig Daigle, eds. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Vol. XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973*. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2011. xxxiii + 1278 pp. Notes, maps, and index.
<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v25> .

Stable URL: <http://h-diplo.org/FRUS/PDF/FRUS9.pdf>

Review by William B. Quandt, University of Virginia

The *FRUS* volume on the Arab-Israeli October 1973 war weighs in at a hefty 1200 pages and contains some 425 documents. The searchable PDF version is available at: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v25> . Anyone already familiar with the extensive literature on this crisis – Henry Kissinger’s voluminous memoirs and his book entitled *Crisis* (Simon and Schuster, 2004), my own *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Crisis Since 1967* (Brookings, 2005, Third edition), and Alistair Horne’s recent *Kissinger* (Simon and Schuster, 2009), among many others – will know the main lines of the story and the current volume will primarily add nuance and texture. There are no bombshells here, nothing truly astonishing, although some of the documents are new and genuinely fascinating for what they show, especially about the relationship between President Richard Nixon and his colorful National Security Adviser-cum-Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger.

The archival material available for this crisis is much more extensive than for many comparable periods. First there are the official records of meetings, cables, and intelligence briefs. Kissinger was fully in charge of foreign policy during much of this period and he insisted on a very heavy flow of documents in official channels -- and in backchannels. Then, of course, there are the famous White House tapes, which picked up a fair amount of material when the president was discussing foreign policy. But most interesting to me are the recordings of Kissinger’s phone conversations – especially with Nixon, but also with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and Israeli ambassadors Yitzhak Rabin and Simcha Dinitz.

I was a junior member of the National Security Council staff working on the Middle East during this entire period and thus had access to most of the official documents, and a number of the items in this collection were authored by me or I was the notetaker at the

meetings. So what I found genuinely new were primarily the phone transcripts. But many readers will doubtless want to see the records of the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) meetings (an almost daily event chaired by Kissinger to set strategy), the backchannel messages with the Egyptians, and the occasional intelligence report that suggests how well or poorly government officials understood what was going on.

A small number of documents that the State Department historians had wanted to include were not declassified. We can only guess at their content. But since there is no mention in any of the documents of nuclear weapons or of Israel's activation of its Jericho missiles on the third day of the war, we might assume that is one topic that was off limits. We also get only the slightest of hints that the Israelis had a very high-level source on the Egyptian side. But nowhere is there a mention of Ashraf Marwan, the son-in-law of former Egyptian president Gamal Abd al-Nasser who may, or may not, have become an Israeli agent. While there has been a limited amount of discussion of his role in the Israeli press, and his bizarre death in 2007 was the occasion for a great deal of speculation, there is nothing in these documents that will resolve the enduring mystery surrounding his role. Did he provide invaluable intelligence to the Israelis, as they believe, or was he a double agent, feeding the Israelis disinformation, as some Egyptians maintain?

The documents present here can be seen as addressing a number of issues in considerable detail. First there is the pre-war period. Here one sees glimpses of Nixon expressing concern about the Middle East and Kissinger arguing that he will get to it by the end of the year, after the Israeli elections. He was in no rush, since he was confident that the balance of power in Israel's favor will insure that nothing much will happen. In document 6, Nixon is quoted as saying to Alexander Haig in January 1973 that "Henry has something of a blind spot here, because he doesn't want to do anything with the Israelis except reassure them and get them more arms."

In February 1973, an opening with Egypt took place. Sadat sent his national security adviser, Hafiz Ismail, to Washington, where he met with Nixon, William Rogers and Kissinger. The records of all these meetings are available, and show the Americans giving mixed signals. Yes the Arab-Israeli crisis was important, yes they intended to do something about it, but it could not all be settled in one fell swoop. Nixon talked about interim steps (document 26). Unbeknownst to the State Department, Kissinger then had a long separate meeting with Ismail during which he tried to persuade him to go along with a dual strategy of overt negotiations on interim steps, while secretly dealing with the White House to plan for something more ambitious later in the year. This is when Nixon and Kissinger began to cut Rogers out of the Middle East diplomacy, and a fairly active backchannel is opened with Egypt.

The documents vividly show a war scare in the spring. King Hussein was convinced that war was about to happen. He told the Israelis and the Americans. The Soviets were also alarmed (document 72, 72, and especially 74 on Brezhnev's visit to San Clemente, where he warns Nixon about the danger of war in the Middle East). There are some interesting intelligence assessments, with State's INR Bureau showing the greatest degree of concern (documents 93 and 94). The Israelis raised their alert level, there was no war, and it all

seems to have been a bluff. Kissinger met again with Ismail, this time in Paris, but there was no American record of this meeting, which is unfortunate, since it has been alleged by others – former CIA operative Jack O’Connell in *King’s Counsel* (Norton, 2011)-- that Ismail left the meeting convinced that the U.S. would do nothing. Others have claimed that Kissinger came close to telling Ismail that the U.S. would only deal with the issue if it were hot, a seeming invitation to the Egyptians to put a match to the tinder if they wanted the U.S. to get involved. I personally do not buy this interpretation, but since there is no document on this meeting we cannot rule out that something was said that led Ismail to conclude that war was the only way to get the attention of the Americans.

The day before the war broke out, October 5, there were lots of warning signals. A number of documents give a flavor of the time and how those signals were (mis)interpreted (documents 97 and especially 412, the Intelligence Community’s self assessment). The first days of the war are also on display here, with Nixon (in Florida listening to his tapes) learning the news and telling Kissinger “Don’t take sides” (document 104), and Kissinger talking frequently with Dobrynin and Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz. On the second day of the war, the backchannel to Hafiz Ismail and Sadat was activated and we have a good sampling of these exchanges (documents 118, 125, 138).

The documents make it possible to get a somewhat clearer view on the controversy surrounding the U.S. handling of Israeli arms requests. The line put forward by Kissinger in his memoirs acknowledges that there were divergent views over how urgent the Israeli need was. Most American officials felt that the Israelis would win quickly and that there would be little need to rush arms to them. The first panicky Israeli request for arms was accompanied by a dire prognosis of how the fighting was going (document 134). Note that when Kissinger met with Dinitz, as on this occasion, he was usually only accompanied by his trusted aide and notetaker, Peter Rodman. In a “principals only” WSAG meeting the next day, October 9, Kissinger expressed the view that “The best way would be for them [Israelis] to win without our help.... To meet them [Israeli requests] would immediately drive the Arabs wild.... The President’s first instruction is to give everything. I am leaning to give them as much of the consumables as possible that are of use in battle, and put the heavy equipment on a time schedule which would put it beyond the war.... We don’t want an Arab debacle.... [A] costly [Israeli] victory without a disaster is the best.” (Document 135).

The next day, however, the Soviets began an airlift of arms to Egypt and Syria. Shortly thereafter, the Soviets indicated to Kissinger that Egypt would be ready for a ceasefire in place if the UN were to call for it. The Soviets said that they would abstain on such a vote but would not veto. At the time, the Israelis had made gains on the Syrian front, but had been pushed back from the Suez Canal on the Egyptian front. Kissinger undertook to see if they might be ready for a ceasefire in place. Part of the evolving diplomacy was to get the British to put forward the resolution in the UN. They were urged not to ask Sadat if he would accept, since his public stance was then that the fighting should continue until Israel agreed to withdraw to the 1967 borders.

During the two days of sensitive diplomacy from October 11 to 13, Israeli urgent appeals for arms were met with a variety of excuses. Planes were supposed to be chartered, but the charters did not materialize; the Portuguese were reluctant to allow planes to land at Lajes base. In this dire situation, Golda Meir reluctantly accepted the idea of a ceasefire in place. I have written, (*Peace Process*, pp. 112-13), and still believe, that the U.S. was using the pressure of dragging its heels on arms supplies to get her to do so. Nothing in the documents has caused me to change my mind, although Kissinger to this day is adamant in denying this interpretation. He does, however, say in the documents that it would be a mistake to have American planes flying directly to Israel. In any event, they would make little difference if the fighting was about to end. Only late on October 13 did it become clear that the British would not introduce the resolution. They had spoken directly to Sadat and he was unwilling to publicly support the idea. Kissinger was furious, with both the British and the Soviets. In talking with Nixon that evening, they both agreed that a full-scale airlift to Israel was now needed, along with an offensive on the Egyptian front that would force Sadat to reconsider his position. It was Nixon, in particular, who said that the U.S. would be blamed no matter the size of the airlift, so it might as well be big. (Documents 140, 141, 165, 165, 167, 172, 173).

In another Nixon-Kissinger exchange, (document 180), the president noted that the Soviets had reason to feel that the United States had tricked them. If, he said, the U.S. just went for a ceasefire without any promise of a serious diplomatic effort, "they'll figure that we get the ceasefire and then the Israelis will dig in and we'll back them, as we always have.... We've got to squeeze the Israelis when this is over.... We've got to squeeze them goddamn hard." In his mind, it would take combined U.S.-Soviet pressure on the parties to get a settlement.

The end game of the crisis is well covered. Kissinger's talks in Moscow are here (documents 215-219), as well as his stop in Israel where he informed the Israelis that they had to stop moving forward, got strong pushback, and then famously told Golda Meir: "You won't get violent protests from Washington if something happens during the night while I'm flying. Nothing can happen in Washington until noon tomorrow." (Document 230). There are also fascinating exchanges, by this time almost on a daily basis, with the Egyptians. And of course there was the deterioration of the situation on the ground as the Israelis did advance, Sadat appealed for help, the Soviets threatened intervention, and the U.S. went on alert. The documents here are adequate, but there is not much new. On one occasion, Kissinger referred to Nixon as "The crazy bastard" in a talk with Haig (document 285), but there is nothing here to confirm the suspicion that Nixon was drunk when the NSC met to decide on the stage III alert. (Earlier, however, Kissinger did note on October 11 that the president "was loaded").

The last part of this volume deals with the first rounds of diplomacy after the war. There is, unfortunately, no record of Kissinger's first meeting with Sadat, which, according to his memoirs, had a big and favorable impact on his view of the Egyptian leader. By contrast, there is a full account of one of his lengthy meetings with Syria's leader, Hafiz al-Asad, in which the Syrian tells him after hours of cordial discussion that Syria does not intend to participate in the Geneva conference. Shuttle diplomacy soon got underway, but that will presumably be covered in another volume.

There are at least two noteworthy gaps in the narrative. I think that these gaps reflect reality – little time was spent on issues that, in retrospect, seem to have deserved more discussion. First, there was little concern with an Arab oil embargo until all of a sudden it was announced. In fact, Kissinger seemed to feel that there was little real threat. And then there was surprisingly little serious discussion of how to deal with it. Kissinger's main reaction was that he would tell the Arabs that the U.S. would not pursue an active diplomatic effort unless the embargo was lifted. But this turned out to be an empty threat. The embargo remained in place until after the Israel-Syrian disengagement was concluded in May 1974.

There was also little discussion of the decision to offer \$2.2 billion to Israel in aid to help pay for the weapons and to signal strong American support. This was a huge increase in the level of U.S. support for Israel. It came just before the Arab decision to embargo oil and to reduce production, and it may well have contributed to the latter decision. And yet it was never seriously discussed among the principals. Kissinger just announced that it was going to be done.

As I have tried to indicate, there is much here to interest serious historians, and evidently much more in the archives, but the basic story has been known for a long time, and much of this documentation just gives us added confidence in the prevailing accounts and a deeper sense of the fascinating interplay of strong personalities, especially Kissinger with Nixon, but also with Leonid Brezhnev, Golda Meir and Dobrynin. Nixon, for all his obvious Watergate-related problems, and his declining political fortunes, does not come off as a lightweight or fool. His broad strategic assessments are often quite shrewd. Kissinger, of course, is the star of this volume, and his strengths and weaknesses, his intelligence and his pettiness, and all on full display.

William B. Quandt holds the Edward R. Stettinius chair in the Department of Politics at the University of Virginia. He teaches courses on the Middle East and American Foreign Policy. Quandt served as a staff member on the National Security Council (1972-1974, 1977-1979). He was actively involved in the negotiations that led to the Camp David Accords and the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty. Quandt's books include: *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967* (Brookings, 2005, third edition); *Between Ballots and Bullets: Algeria's Transition from Authoritarianism*, (Brookings, 1998); *The United States and Egypt: An Essay on Policy for the 1990s* (Brookings, 1990); *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Brookings, 1986); *Saudi Arabia in the 1980s: Foreign Policy, Security, and Oil* (Brookings, 1981); *Decade of Decisions: American Foreign Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1976* (University of California Press, 1977); and *Revolution and Political Leadership: Algeria, 1954-1968* (MIT Press, 1969). He also edited *The Middle East: Ten Years After Camp David* (Brookings, 1988) and *Troubled Triangle: The United States, Turkey and Israel in the New Middle East* (Just World Books, 2011).

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.
