

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Review ESSAY- Reply to Author's Response

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Reply to Author's Response by **Craig Dagle**, City College of New York

In his recent response to my review of his book, Yigal Kipnis found several areas in which I apparently was "in error" in my conclusions and/or lack of knowledge of the documents. The largest point of difference centers on our interpretation as to whether there existed a secret "understanding" between Israel and the United States that would perpetuate the political stalemate between Arabs and Israelis from December 1971 until sometime in 1974. As I wrote in my review, I found Kipnis's book highly informative and am convinced from Kipnis's research that *Israeli leaders* firmly believed they had reached a formal understanding with President Richard M. Nixon and U.S. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. But there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that Nixon and Kissinger believed they had reached a two-year agreement with the Israelis, and nowhere in the U.S. records is there any direct mention of this alleged "understanding." As historians, it is our job to account for such obvious omissions and discrepancies in the records of the two governments.

I fully recognize that secret agreements between governments are often made<sup>1</sup> and not every word that officials say in meetings gets recorded in the documents. Even a cursory look through the Department of State's 2007 publication of the joint records of conversations between Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin will show that the substance of the records often differed, and that Dobrynin's records were generally far

<sup>1</sup> A prime example of this during the Nixon administration was the confidential "Agreed Minute" between President Nixon and Japan's Prime Minister Sato regarding the reintroduction of nuclear weapons into Okinawa in case of emergencies. See Kei Wakaizumi, *The Best Course Available: A Personal Account of the Secret US-Japan Okinawa Reversion Negotiations* (University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

more detailed than Kissinger's.<sup>2</sup> However, if this secret understanding remains the Holy Grail in determining Israeli policy, as Kipnis suggests throughout his book, certainly some explicit record revealing its substance would appear in the US record over a two-year period. It has not.

As part of my review of his book, I re-examined the documents in November/December 1971, including the December 2, 1971 tape recording of the meeting between Nixon and Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir when Kipnis claims the Israeli leader confirmed the "understanding" with President Nixon (80). There is no mention of an agreement that would continue the political deadlock in the region until 1974.<sup>3</sup> Kipnis does not cite the taped conversation of the meetings between Meir and Nixon for his book, nor any of the taped conversations between Nixon and Kissinger following the meeting, which may have confirmed the existence of this "understanding." This suggests that he did not consult them. Moreover, he contends that Kissinger remained committed to upholding the "understanding," and as proof shows evidence that Kissinger did not think an Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement could be concluded before the end of the 1973. This does not mean that Kissinger was committed to this so-called "understanding." It only means that Kissinger had his own timetable in mind for a settlement that he believed served broader U.S. strategic interests.

If the absence of mention to the secret "understanding" in the U.S. record alone is not enough to raise serious questions about its validity, there are also significant questions regarding the "understanding" that should compel readers to doubt the existence of this alleged agreement:

1) Why did the Israelis need an "understanding" from Nixon and Kissinger not to pursue the 1969 Rogers Plan? The plan was dead on arrival when presented by Secretary of State William Rogers in December 1969, and not one U.S. official—not even Secretary Rogers—was pushing this plan two years later, when Meir apparently received this "promise" (25) from Nixon and Kissinger not to advocate for its acceptance as part of this "understanding."

2) Why did Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir need an "understanding" with the United States to perpetuate the political deadlock in the region? Since succeeding Prime Minister Levi Eshkol in February 1969, Meir had all but refused to negotiate with the Arabs. She strongly opposed U.S. participation in the Two Power talks with the Soviets; she rejected the 1969 Rogers Plan; and she continually rejected Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's peace overtures in the spring and summer of 1971. Yet now, in December 1971, according to

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Selva and David C. Geyer, eds. *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972* (Washington, D.C: GPO, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Recording of a Conversation among President Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Prime Minister Meir, and Yitzhak Rabin, December 2, 1971; National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, White House Tapes, Conversation 628-16.

Kipnis, she apparently needed an “understanding” with the US government to continue the stalemate.

3) Why did Nixon want to ‘squeeze’ Meir into a settlement in early 1973 if he had agreed to an “understanding” with her to continue the political deadlock for another year? Indeed, Nixon made it clear to Kissinger after his re-election in November 1972 to “get going” on an Arab-Israeli settlement, for “unless we did it this year we wouldn’t get it done at all in the four year term.”<sup>4</sup> Did he simply forget about this “understanding”?

Beyond those factors, the only substantive part of the “understanding” that seems to make any sense was Nixon and Kissinger’s pledge not to compel Israelis leaders to accept an imposed U.S.-Soviet agreement. As I pointed out in my initial review, Meir came to Washington in December 1971 to dissuade Nixon and Kissinger from making a recent Soviet peace proposal, calling on Israel to withdraw from all occupied Arab territories in return for the Soviet withdrawal of all of its military units from the Middle East, a point of discussion during Nixon’s summit with Leonid Brezhnev in May 1972. Nixon agreed not to ‘pressure’ Meir to accept this, but that was the extent of his commitment. Unfortunately, the entire episode of the Soviet peace offer is absent from Kipnis’s account, which is odd considering that this episode was the bulk of the conversation between Nixon and Meir during their meeting in December 1971, not the alleged “understanding.”

Finally, let me address Kipnis’s assertion that I unfairly criticized him in my review for leaving the impression that Kissinger was working for Israeli interests instead of U.S. goals. I reached this conclusion based on the fact that Kipnis writes that Meir “succeeded in recruiting Kissinger” (29) to refuse the Egyptian peace feelers; that Kissinger was “acting to assist the Israeli government . . . in its policy of not promoting political progress” (25); that the “Israeli representatives in Washington kept watch over his moves, lest he attempt to deviate from [their] policy [of political deadlock] (26); and that Kissinger had been led “astray” (131) from their “coordinated” policy by meeting with Egyptian officials in February 1973. (I can go on)

From these comments, perhaps one can understand how I would draw such conclusions. But if I have incorrectly interpreted Kipnis’s words than what exactly did Meir succeed in “recruiting” Kissinger for? What was it that he was “acting to assist” the Israeli government in accomplishing? And what exactly was it that Kissinger had been led “astray” from by meeting with Egyptian officials? From carrying out his own policies?

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<sup>4</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Vol. XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, Document 11.*