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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Craig Daigle**, City College of New York

Last fall marked the fortieth anniversary of the fourth Arab-Israeli war, when Egyptian and Syrian armies launched coordinated attacks on Israel beginning on October 6, 1973, the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur. Like the three previous Arab-Israeli wars, the October War was a military success for the Israelis as the Egyptian and Syrian armies were largely destroyed in a matter of weeks. Psychologically, however, it is difficult to exaggerate the traumatic impact the war had on the mentality of Israeli leaders. One member of the Labor Party described it in Hebrew as *r'idat ha'adamah*—the Earthquake—an apt description for the way it shook the foundations of Israel's defense policies. Israeli leaders could no longer automatically discount the possibility of an Arab attack based upon their conception of Arab weakness, especially in the air.

For many years, research on the October War focused heavily on the failure of Israeli and U.S. intelligence agencies to anticipate the joint Arab attack.¹ More recently, however, the focus has shifted to the politicians and in particular the motives Egyptian President Anwar Sadat had for taking his country into a war that he knew it would lose. A consensus has emerged that Sadat aimed not for a large-scale reconquest of Arab territory, but instead wanted to give the peace process a jolt by igniting a regional crisis to break the political stalemate. Much of the debate between scholars has centered on the question of who was to blame for the political stalemate. Was the failure the result of the Arabs' refusal to negotiate a peace agreement with Israel in the wake of their defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War? Did Israeli leaders miss an opportunity to avoid another war by ignoring genuine

¹ See, for example, Uri Bar-Joseph, *The Watchmen Fell Asleep: The Surprise of Yom Kippur and its Sources* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005).

peace overtures from Arab leaders and embarking on a policy of expansion?² Or was the political stalemate a consequence of U.S. and Soviet Cold-War policies?³

Yigal Kipnis, a former Israeli Air Force pilot who now teaches at the University of Haifa, joins the chorus of scholars who view the war as a political failure by Israeli leaders. In his fascinating and highly engaging study, *1973: The Road to War*, first published in Hebrew in 2012, Kipnis puts the blame for the war largely on the shoulders of Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir for refusing to enter a political process with Egyptian officials that could have prevented hostilities. “During the seven months preceding the war,” Kipnis concludes, Meir “distrustfully rejected Sadat’s initiative to open peace negotiations” and “reacted with scorn to the threat that accompanied the Egyptian proposal” (287). Primarily concerned with Israeli domestic politics, Meir was not ready to accept Sadat’s territorial requirement, namely Israeli recognition of the Sinai Peninsula. By the spring of 1973, Kipnis asserts, Meir had become so intransigent that she preferred a war with the Arabs over a political agreement mediated by the United States.

By itself, this would not necessarily make Kipnis’s argument unique. Meir has often come under criticism for her refusal to cooperate with the Arabs and many Israelis demanded her resignation following the October War. But what separates Kipnis from previous scholarship is that he argues that the Israeli Prime Minister was aided in her efforts to thwart a peace settlement with the Arabs by U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. Although Kipnis falls just short of calling these efforts a conspiracy, he insists that there was a “coordinated” (26) effort, or a “common strategy,” (29) between Kissinger and Israeli leaders to delay any agreement with Arab leaders, particularly Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. This “strategy of non-cooperation” (25) was monitored closely by Israeli officials in Washington, lest Kissinger “attempt to deviate from this policy” (26). “[Kissinger] was acting to assist the Israeli government in its policy of not promoting political progress,” writes Kipnis. “He was not the one who orchestrated Meir’s refusals, but he definitely served Israeli policy interests when they were presented to him as unchangeable realities” (25).

Drawing on extensive use of recently declassified documents from Israeli and U.S. archives, Kipnis roots this “coordinated” effort in December 1971, when Kissinger helped broker a secret “understanding” (78) between Meir and President Richard M. Nixon to prevent an imposed U.S.-Soviet agreement on the parties involved, abandon calls for Israel to accept the 1969 Rogers Plan, which called on Israel to withdraw to the international frontier with Egypt, and provide Israel with sophisticated military hardware. Put simply: Israel could refuse to reach an agreement with the Arabs while continuing to receive an open-ended

² See, most recently, Avi Raz, *The Bride and the Dowry: Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians in the Aftermath of the June 1967 War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

³ See Craig Daigle, *The Limits of Détente: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); David A. Korn, *Stalemate: The War of Attrition and Great Power Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1967-1970* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

commitment on planes and weapons from the United States. “The ‘Understandings of December 1971’ were to be valid for two years,” Kipnis argues, and “became the basis of Israeli–United States relations as well as US policy in the Middle East for the following fifteen months. They contradicted US State Department policy and thus constituted additional proof that the Jarring Mission and the Rogers and Sisco initiatives had had no chance of success” (79).

Kipnis is to be commended for his meticulous use of Israeli records, for challenging Israeli studies that have focused heavily on the pre-war intelligence failures, and for unearthing a wealth of new evidence that demonstrates the length Meir and her colleagues were willing to go to avoid a peace settlement with their Arab neighbors. He convincingly shows that this war could have been avoided had Israeli leaders been willing to engage the Arabs diplomatically, and he makes a strong case that the United States aided Israel in its politics of stalemate. By showing how Israeli leaders believed they had reached an understanding with Nixon and Kissinger, moreover, the book also helps explain why Israeli officials did not use Sadat’s termination of the Soviet military mission in Egypt, in July 1972, as an opening to move toward a peace settlement, and why they became frustrated with Kissinger in early 1973 for holding secret negotiations with Egyptian officials.

The major problem with Kipnis’s argument, however, is that the secret ‘understanding’ (if there was one) only existed in Israeli minds. Nowhere in the U.S. records is there any mention of a secret understanding with the Israelis, nor did Nixon’s actions indicate that he had reached a two-year agreement with the Israelis that gave them *carte blanche* refusal to participate in negotiations while receiving their pick of the litter of U.S. aircraft. Indeed, following his re-election in November 1972, Nixon made it clear to his staff that further delay of an Arab-Israeli settlement was not an option. “Henry, the time has now come that we’ve got to squeeze the old woman [Golda Meir],” he told Kissinger shortly after the election. “I am determined to bite this bullet and do it now because we just can’t let the thing ride and have a hundred million Arabs hating us and providing a fishing ground not only for radicals but, of course, for the Soviets.”⁴ In February 1973 he again stressed to Kissinger that he had delayed pressing for a Middle East settlement through two elections but “this year I am determined to move off dead center. . . . This thing is getting ready to blow.”⁵

Although he moved with far less urgency than Nixon in wanting to pursue an Arab-Israeli settlement, Kissinger, too, gave little indication that an ‘understanding’ existed with the Israelis that would prevent a settlement until 1974 (at the earliest). Beginning in April 1972, in fact, Kissinger began secret communications with Egyptian officials, through CIA channels, to set up a high-level meeting between senior representatives of the two

⁴ Nixon Diary Entry, Feb. 3, 1973, printed in Nixon, *Memoirs*, 786–787.

⁵ These remarks were written on a memo Kissinger sent to Nixon on February 23, 1973. See footnotes 2, 3, and 7, Document 25, in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1969-1973, volume XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973.

governments. Kissinger suggested that an emissary of President Sadat would be welcome in the United States, and indicated that the timing of such a meeting could take place as early as October 1972.⁶ True, the establishment of this secret channel did not necessarily mean that a peace agreement would emerge from the discussions. But Sadat made it clear to Kissinger that he wanted to use this channel to reach a political agreement with the Israelis, and his decision to terminate the Soviet military mission in Egypt in July 1972 created an opportunity for the United States government to develop a concrete plan for future action on how to progress towards a peaceful settlement of the Middle East problem.

When Kissinger met in Washington with Prime Minister Meir and Israeli Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin in February 1973, prior to a meeting with Nixon, he also gave no indication that such an understanding existed. To the contrary, he told the Israelis that they needed to be more flexible when it came to negotiations with the Arabs. “You will not get the President to accept a policy of do-nothing,” he explained.⁷ The following month, during a meeting with Israel’s ambassador to the United States, Simcha Dinitz, Kissinger made it clear that while he would “take no initiatives” and would react in “a slow-moving way” to Egyptian proposals, the Israelis needed to be “intellectually prepared...for a sudden, purposeful, and intelligent push” on a Middle East peace agreement.⁸

Let me be clear: my disagreement is not with Kipnis’s argument. I believe he has correctly interpreted the Israeli documents and has made a convincing case that Israeli officials clearly thought they had reached an “understanding” with Nixon and Kissinger that would free them from American political pressure at least through Israel’s October 1973 elections. This understanding formed the basis of many of Israel’s decisions in the two years leading up to the October War and left its leaders with the mistaken belief that they had firm U.S. support to reject any peace proposals, and did not have to participate in negotiations with the Arabs until after the 1973 Israeli elections. Combined with their conception that their Arab neighbors could not launch a successful attack, this understanding prevented Israeli leaders—especially Meir and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan—from taking into consideration the dangers of a potential war and made them more inclined to ignore intelligence warnings suggesting hostilities were imminent.

What accounts for this discrepancy between Israeli and U.S. officials as to the nature of the “understanding”? The answer, I believe, can be found in the records of Soviet-American diplomacy regarding the Arab-Israeli dispute in the fall of 1971. This evidence strongly suggests that during their meetings with Meir in December 1971, when the two sides allegedly reached this “understanding,” Nixon and Kissinger only agreed not to pressure

⁶ Kissinger eventually met with Hafez Ismail, Sadat’s National Security Advisor, in February 1973. See *FRUS*, 1969-1973, volume XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, Documents 28 and 29.

⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, February 28, 1973, Israel State Archive, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9352/2.

⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, March 30, 1973; *FRUS*, 1969-1973, volume XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, Documents 43.

the Israelis to accept a recent Soviet peace proposal that officials in Moscow wanted as the basis for negotiations at Nixon's May 1972 summit with General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev. The proposal, which was presented to Nixon at the White House by Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko on September 29, 1971, called on Israel to withdraw from all the occupied Arab territories in return for the withdrawal of all Soviet military units from the Middle East.⁹ Nixon saw this as a basis for discussion but Meir dismissed it as a Soviet ploy to impose an agreement on Israel.

Admittedly, the only U.S. record of Meir's conversation with Nixon and Kissinger in December 1971 is a spotty tape recording that hardly offers conclusive proof that an 'understanding' had not been reached. But the audible parts of the recording make clear that Nixon stressed that he did not want future delivery of arms to Israel "to be a block to the frank discussions which we should have on the political side." He asked Meir to at least give the "appearance" of participating in the negotiations and to give serious consideration to the Soviet peace proposal. "If you were to give us in this an interim [agreement]," Nixon promised Meir, "I can assure you there won't be any pressure. No pressure...We're not talking about the two of us getting together and pressuring you."¹⁰

Kipnis is certainly correct in suggesting that Nixon and Kissinger did not aggressively pursue an Arab-Israeli peace settlement and were therefore complicit in contributing to the stalemate in the region. But he sees this as a result of Israeli pressure rather than a coherent U.S. strategy. Indeed, the story that Kipnis describes is one where Meir had Kissinger wrapped around her fingers and would use whatever leverage she could to extract concessions from the White House, even leaning on her friends in Congress to ensure Kissinger's confirmation as Secretary of State in September 1973. (160) According to Kipnis, Meir "succeeded in recruiting Kissinger" (29) to become actively involved on Israel's behalf, and insists that Kissinger followed Meir's "demand" to "continue to procrastinate in dealing with Sadat" (124). He also argues that Kissinger's nomination as Secretary of State was seen as a positive development for Israel as Kissinger would now be able to delay State Department initiatives for an Arab-Israeli peace settlement.

Kissinger acknowledges in his memoirs that he had a unique and somewhat personal relationship with Meir. Their European Jewish background and shared experience of escaping anti-Semitism, provided a connection that Kissinger did not share with other world leaders. "To me," said Kissinger, "[Meir] acted as a benevolent aunt toward an especially favored nephew, so that even to admit the possibility of disagreement was a

⁹ Recording of a Conversation Between President Nixon and Foreign Minister Andrew Gromyko, September 29, 1971; National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, White House Tapes, Conversation 580-20.

¹⁰ 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.

challenge to family hierarchy producing emotional outrage.”¹¹ Kissinger also conceded that as a Jew who had lost thirteen members of his family during the Holocaust, he could hardly “do anything that would betray Israel.”¹² Still, the notion that he acted more as an Israeli agent than as an architect of his own policy is not the case. To suggest, as Kipnis does, that Kissinger had been led “astray” (131) by participating in secret talks with the Egyptians in February 1973 unfairly implies that Kissinger was working more for Israeli interests instead of U.S. goals.

A broader study that included a deeper analysis of U.S. policy in the region prior to 1973, and included additional discussion of the larger Cold War context shaping the decisions of U.S. officials, would have made clear that Kissinger’s strategy did not result from pressure Meir put on him, nor from any secret ‘understanding’ that he may have had with the Israelis. Rather, his strategy resulted from his own belief of favoring a policy of stability over peace in the region. In fact, from the first weeks of the Nixon administration, Kissinger advocated such a policy so he and Nixon could pursue their larger—and more important—foreign policy agendas, namely détente with the Soviet Union, rapprochement with the People’s Republic with China, and ending the Vietnam War. To bring stability in the Middle East, Kissinger wanted to strengthen Israel militarily, which he believed would prevent the Arab states from launching an attack to reclaim the territories captured by Israel in 1967.

As part of the President’s concept of ‘linkage,’ moreover, Kissinger argued that the United States should proceed slowly on the Middle East in order to pressure the Soviets on Vietnam. Since Moscow needed an agreement for its Arab clients far more than the U.S. needed a settlement for Israel, the Soviets would have to show some flexibility. It was this strategy—not a secret understanding or Israeli pressure—that led to a stalemate in the region and compelled Sadat to launch an attack on Israel in October 1973. By accepting an untenable status quo in the region rather than promote a lasting Arab-Israeli peace agreement, Kissinger effectively told Arab leaders that Israel would indefinitely retain possession of their land. In short, the war was largely a consequence of Nixon and Kissinger’s efforts to promote détente with the Soviets—which led to the stalemate in the region—rather than produce a peace agreement that would have avoided a war.

For Meir’s part, her refusal to engage diplomatically with the Arabs did not begin with the alleged understanding she had reached with Nixon and Kissinger in December 1971. She strongly opposed U.S. discussions with the Soviets of an Arab-Israeli settlement in the early months of the Nixon administration. She fiercely rejected the 1969 Rogers Plan. And she only grudgingly accepted a ceasefire in August 1970 to end the fighting along the Suez Canal after Nixon had sent her a letter that Israeli Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin later

¹¹ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979), 370.

¹² Quoted in Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 562.

described as a “a latter-day Balfour Declaration.”¹³ In the spring and summer of 1971, Meir also refused to participate in discussions with the Egyptians regarding the joint withdrawal of their forces along the Canal as part of an interim settlement, prompting Secretary of State William Rogers to conclude after a meeting with Meir in May 1971 that she “strongly prefers arguing the past, has difficulty talking specifics, and has to be pushed forward rather than lead her platoon of ministers.”¹⁴

Meir’s intransigence, and Israel’s conviction in its military superiority over the Arabs, certainly contributed to the repeated ignoring by Israeli leaders of warnings from their intelligence services about a pending Arab attack. And here, Kipnis makes a strong case that the Israelis knew well in advance of Sadat’s intentions to launch a war against Israel. Using interviews with Zvi Zamir, the former head of the Mossad, and an extensive analysis of the activities of Ashraf Marwan, an Egyptian intelligence operative who became Israel’s top source for information on Egypt’s rearmament and plans for war, Kipnis concludes that that Israeli leaders had several warnings that should have prevented them from being caught off guard on the morning of October 6, when most Israelis were in synagogue. Thus, in his estimate, the war resulted from “the collapse of Dayan’s and Meir’s ‘political conception,’ not an intelligence failure” (30).

Kipnis does not attempt to settle the debate as to whether Marwan was the best spy Israel ever had or whether he acted as a double agent for Egypt by passing incorrect information to the Mossad. But, as Kipnis suggests, this is a merely a “footnote” (292) to the larger story of Israel’s political failure. And we now know from Kipnis’s impressive study the depths of Israel’s political failure, the consequences of which still reverberate today.

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¹³ Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, expanded ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 179.

¹⁴ Telegram 2919 from the Embassy in Italy, May 8, 1971; National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 657, Country Files, Middle East, Nodis/Cedar/Plus, vol. 2.