

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

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DATE: December 27, 1962  
10:00 a.m.

Approved in WH  
1/18/63

SUBJECT: Conversation with Israeli Foreign Minister Meir

PARTICIPANTS: The President  
Foreign Minister Golda Meir of Israel  
Ambassador Harman of Israel  
Myer Feldman, Deputy Special Counsel to the President  
Phillips Talbot, Assistant Secretary of State for NEA  
Robert Komer, White House Staff

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Initiating a 70 minute discussion, Foreign Minister Meir said she brought greetings to the President from the Prime Minister of Israel. All the people of Israel, she said, have been watching with joy what the President has been doing, especially the way in which he handled the Cuban crisis. Israel saw it not just as a Cuba-US issue but as a big problem affecting the world, and is delighted at the way it came out.

Israel, she continued, has never questioned whether it should be in the free world. Its path is clear. Thus it appreciates US actions and has gained much encouragement from American concern with its security and from American friendship and understanding. She was glad that this talk was taking place after the meeting of the General Assembly, and would like to convey to the President the Israeli feelings about their area and their neighbors.

She is not really surprised when people do not see Israel's security problems as the Israelis do, Mrs. Meir said, but she does ask that others try to understand Israeli views. Israel is not anti-Arab. From the beginning it has been Israel's desire to live at peace with the Arabs. There is an identity in the kind of developments the US and Israel would like to see in the Middle East, i. e. each wishes an area in which every country is independent, free of fear and free to concentrate on its own development. Israel is sometimes called the only democratic country in the Middle East. Israelis would like to see all the countries in the area both democratic and rapidly developing. Their

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region should be one of cooperation among the countries for the common good. The area is underdeveloped, but Israel believes that it has possibilities and that Arabs would not suffer from cooperating with Israel in the direction of development.

Israel is perfectly prepared to live within its present borders. It doesn't want more land; it doesn't need, for example, Jordanian sand. On Israel's borders are four Arab countries. Israel has never had real trouble with Lebanon. Cows occasionally wander over the border from Lebanon and are sent back. Girls in the Israeli army may get lost and wander across the Lebanese border, but they are very politely returned. None of these incidents are serious. The Jordanian border was for years the scene of fierce actions, but it has been quiet for several years now. There are, it is true, some incidents. For example, two Israeli policemen were shot last year. But when the Jordanian commanders in the area were transferred, Israel knew that Jordan did not want trouble. There was also trouble with the Jewish cemetery on the Jordanian side. Israel tried in every way not to give this too much publicity, and hopes to be successful in the settling of this matter too.

The Syrian border, however, is different. Israeli agricultural settlements lie in the valley, with the Syrian Army posted in the hills overlooking them. The Syrians sometimes open fire on these settlements. On a visit Mrs. Meir had made to one of the settlements two years ago, she found every house hit by shells. This kind of action forces the Israeli Government either to tell its people to evacuate the area or to declare its responsibility for their security. Finally, the Egyptian border has been somewhat different since 1956 than before, but Israel knows that the Fedayeen are being trained to attack Israel either directly from Egypt or round-about across the Jordan border. This, as anyone could see, is a dangerous situation.

With respect to Egypt, Mrs. Meir said that she believes, quite objectively, that Israel has been prepared for anything and everything that might make it possible to talk with Egyptian leaders about their common problems. She herself has tried repeatedly. In 1956 a woman in the Pakistan Delegation at the UN was willing to make an approach to the Arabs to get them to talk privately to Mrs. Meir, but it came to nothing. On another occasion, the head of the Burmese Delegation had a try. Regrettably, there has so far been no result. Then there is the question of arms preparations in the Arab countries, especially in Egypt. Israel knows that the Egyptians have been getting more arms from the Soviets lately, especially since the Yemen fighting began, but generally since last March. Israel has seen that Soviet-supplied TU 16s have been able to fly from Egypt to Yemen, drop bombs and fly back to Egypt. If they can do that, what could they do to Israel? Israel knows that Egypt

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has, with German help, been building ground-to-ground missiles since 1960. Now Israel has learned, as it didn't know one or two months ago, that the Egyptians are making preparations for radiological warfare. The warheads are to be filled with materials that would contaminate the land for years and years. It seems that if the refugees can't come back, the Egyptians think that at least the land should not be available to Israelis. Now Israel has information that Egypt has established a secret budget of \$220 - 250,000,000 for work of a out four years or so on this. There is, of course, nothing in the official Egyptian budget on this item nor on what the Egyptians get from Russia. Israel also has the problem of its sea frontier, considering the number of submarines that Egypt has. Egyptians say that Israel breathes through only one border - the sea border - since the land borders are taken care of. Maybe this is only Arab talk, but the talk could mean something.

This, Mrs. Meir continued, is how the people of Israel live. The Israelis are not a frightened or panicky people, but they are very conscious of their security problems. If Mr. Rowan says (in the General Assembly debate) that Arabs are not convinced of Israel's peaceful intentions, this sort of statement may be "objective", but Israel cannot be "objective" on this matter.

In the Middle Eastern area, she continued, things are not static. She held no brief for the old Imam of Yemen and does not know what the young one would do if he had power. The revolutionary change in Yemen could be a positive development - if it were allowed to happen only for the good of the people and not to throw off one yoke merely to take on another. Israel did not think it right that Nasser should have forced Syria into a union with Egypt, either. There is a constant shadow of Nasser's ambitions in the Middle East. Nor does he work alone. Since Yemen he has gotten more arms from Russia. Israel knows what he has done in Africa, e. g., in the Congo and Ghana. Israel is also represented in Africa, and Nasser is always saying that Israel is the forerunner there of American and British imperialism.

Then, Mrs. Meir went on, there is the refugee problem. She asked the President to understand that Israel wants to see this problem solved. In 1949 it had said it would take up to 100,000 refugees back. Even though there was no peace, close to 40,000 came back. There are 230,000 to 240,000 Arabs living in Israel, about 11% of the population. Not all of them are peaceful citizens. For example, as development programs go forward peoples' houses sometimes have to be moved for new roads or other facilities. Although no one likes his house to be destroyed, Jewish citizens accept it even if they don't like it. But a few months ago when a new road was to be cut through an Arab

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village, there was a quite different reaction. We were accused of taking something away from the Arabs. They said they would put their women and children right in front of any bulldozers brought in. This is the sort of line they always take.

The question is this: even if Israel is to accept a very small number of Arabs, for what purposes would they be coming in? In the United Nations the Arabs repeat frankly and openly for hours and hours the one refrain that Israel has no right to exist and must disappear. This is the situation. Israel knows about Arab plans to bring Arabs back to Israel and then to make an Algeria out of Israel. They would create difficulties within the country; then when the Israeli Government would do what any state would have to do under the circumstances, the Arab countries would come to the help of these returning Arab refugees.

The Government in Israel has two responsibilities, Mrs. Meir said. On the one hand it is responsible for the security and welfare of the people. But in this generation the leaders of Israel have another responsibility. Twice before in history there has been Jewish sovereignty, but both times the country was occupied and the people dispersed. This generation has tried for the third time to establish a sovereign state, and this could be the last time. The whole world remembers what happened in Europe. In World War II Eastern Europe held the reservoir of people to come and make a fresh start in Israel. Who knows what will happen to the three or three and a half million Jews in the USSR? They may never get out. If something happens again so that the Jews are dispersed from Israel, this could be the last time. That is not a happy idea.

These, Mrs. Meir concluded, are the problems of Israel. She, of course, recognizes that the President's position causes all sorts of people to put their problems on his shoulders. Israel does this too. The United States has taken on the responsibility for the free world. Israel is part of the free world, and it is American interest and concern that have made it possible for Israel to bring its problems to the President.

In response the President said that he appreciated Mrs. Meir's full statement. In considering the problems of the world we should think of the future and especially of the next year or two. Her last point was particularly important: the burden which the United States carries for the free world. No other country carries the same responsibility for distant countries, for Korea, South Vietnam, India and Pakistan, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and elsewhere. Our concern is in maintaining the balance of power in the interest of the free world. This is why we find ourselves involved in issues between the Somalis and Ethiopians, Indians and Pakistanis, Cambodians and Thais, and so many other disputes which are not part of what we see as the central struggle, i. e. the struggle of free peoples against the Communist Bloc.

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The United States, the President said, has a special relationship with Israel in the Middle East really comparable only to that which it has with Britain over a wide range of world affairs. But for us to play properly the role we are called upon to play, we cannot afford the luxury of identifying Israel - or Pakistan, or certain other countries - as our exclusive friends, hewing to the line of close and intimate allies (for we feel that about Israel though it is not a formal ally) and letting other countries go. If we pulled out of the Arab Middle East and maintained our ties only with Israel this would not be in Israel's interest.

To be effective in our own interest and to help Israel, the President continued, we have to maintain our position in the Middle East generally. Our interest is best served if there is a group of sovereign countries associated with the West. We are in a position then to make clear to the Arabs that we will maintain our friendship with Israel and our security guarantees.

Looking ahead 12 months, the President said, we see many problems. In the Yemen crisis, we went ahead in order to try to lessen the impact of the fighting on Saudi Arabia and the risk that a pro-UAR regime might take over in Saudi Arabia. We know that the Saudi Arabian Government is not the best in the world from your point of view, but this seemed an action in your interest.

The President continued that in the next two years or so he could see further problems arising which will put strain on United States' efforts to maintain good relations with Israel and with the Arabs. One of these is the Jordan waters issue. The United States has already given Israel some assurances on this, but the Arabs are going to be anxious. Another is the maintenance of order on Israel's frontiers with the various Arab states. The United States feels that greater use should be made of the United Nations to meet these problems, whereas Israel probably thinks that the UN actions are too slow. Last spring the US took a view which we knew was unpopular in Israel; we took it in order to maintain our position in the Middle East. The third area of likely strain is the question of the refugees; the fourth may arise when the Hawk missile starts coming in. All of these are going to be problems for us, costing us something.

We know that Israel faces enormous security problems but we do too. We came almost to a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union last spring and again recently in Cuba. Indeed, three or four times in the past year there has been a situation which could easily have been built up into a direct collision with either the Soviets or the Chinese. Because we have taken on wide security responsibilities we always have the potential of becoming involved in a major crisis not of our making, e. g. in the event of a coup

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in Iran or of the Sino-Indian affair. Our security problems are, therefore, just as great as Israel's. We have to concern ourselves with the whole Middle East. On these questions - of water, of the UN role and reprisals, of refugees and of missiles (though that is not exactly similar to the other matters) - we are asking the cooperation of Israel in the same way that we are cooperating with Israel to help meet its needs. Israel doubtless thinks of itself as deeply endangered - if the Arabs come up with skilled manpower and if they threaten Israel - and Israelis have a tremendously deep patriotic sense. Our position in these matters may seem to be asking Israel to neglect its interests. The reason we do it is not that we are unfriendly to Israel, but in order to help more effectively. I think it is quite clear that in case of an invasion the United States would come to the support of Israel. We have that capacity and it is growing. Also, the United States is helping Israel economically. We would like now to see if we can make some progress on refugees and maintain our friendship with Israel without constantly cutting across our other interests in the Middle East. When Israel takes actions in these matters, we hope it will understand our problems as well as its own.

Mrs. Moir said that Israel welcomes the growing US influence in the Middle East because it will help the Middle East in a way that is friendly to Israel. she might give an example of what happens with the UN and shooting incidents. When Syria resumed shooting early in December Prime Minister Ben Gurion called in General Von Horn two days later. Von Horn told the Prime Minister that his observers had not yet finished their report; then he took another four days to visit Damascus. If the matter had been handled properly, he should have himself informed the Israeli Government immediately that all necessary steps were being taken without delay and he should have gone to Damascus without Israeli prodding.

The President responded that he did not know the details of this particular case. His central point, however, was that the United States is interested in the security of the free world and is trying to assert its influence in this direction. There are gambles involved in all our programs. In the Middle East we have the twin problems of being historically and obviously associated with Israel and, especially in this Administration, building on that association through our actions with respect to the Jordan waters, Hawks, and aid, while at the same time we have other responsibilities in the Middle East. Israel, the United States and the free world all have difficult survival problems. We would like Israeli recognition that this partnership which we have with it produces strains for the United States in the Middle East.

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When Israel takes such actions as it did last spring, whether right or wrong, those actions involve not just Israel but also the United States. We are being asked to understand by Israel. By the same token we believe that Israel should consider the interests of the United States. Because of its ties with the United States, Israel does not have to depend wholly on its own efforts for security, but on the United States as well.

When we discuss these problems, the President added, he would hope Mrs. Meir and the Prime Minister would recognize that we on our part have tried to work out a good relationship and that Israel should do the same. We would hope Israel could proceed in such a way as to lessen collisions between us.

Mrs. Meir asked the President to believe that the overwhelming majority of Israeli people never have doubts about the position of the U. S. vis a vis Israel. Israel has a double security problem. It is part of the free world and it also is involved in a private war. When Syria shoots at Israeli villages there are mothers and children there. The Government must tell them that they will take care of their security.

As to the refugee problem, Mrs. Meir asked the President to recall that in his talk with the Prime Minister in the spring of 1961 the latter had not argued with the President's ideas. He had said he was not sure that the U. S. would succeed in these efforts, but they were worth a try. Israel still stands where the Prime Minister had at that time said it stood, and still supports what the President said at that time.

The President noted that obviously Israel cannot accept a flood of refugees. The Arabs have their troubles too. Maybe no compromises are possible. But he did not think we should give up on refugees. They are costing the United States money and they cause great damage to the prospects of peace. What we were trying to put together may have been impossible. Israel needed reassurances. The Arabs obviously could not make advance commitments. Our judgment, however, was that the great majority of refugees would resettle. We have not made any progress on the Johnson Plan and that is gone. But we should keep trying. He is not convinced that it is impossible. The fact is that if we don't get a settlement we face an almost impossible position. It is like the Kashmir dispute; a settlement might seem impossible to achieve, but it is equally impossible to let this dispute run on and blow up.

This country is really interested in Israel, the President said, as he is personally. We are interested that Israel should keep up its sensitive, tremendous, historic task. What we want from Israel arises because our relationship is a

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two-way street. Israel's security in the long run depends in part on what it does with the Arabs, but also on us. He would hope, for example, that Israel would give consideration to our problems on this atomic reactor. We are opposed to nuclear proliferation. Our interest here is not in prying into Israel's affairs but we have to be concerned because of the over-all situation in the Middle East.

Mrs. Meir reassured the President that there would not be any difficulty between us on the Israeli nuclear reactor. She also said she wanted to suggest that at least the first one or two talks in the new round of US-Israeli discussions about the refugees should be held in Israel. This would permit participation in the talks by the Prime Minister who could bring to them his full authority. How helpful it would be, she went on, if only the Arabs would agree to follow the President's proposals on refugees. Indeed, it might be helpful if there were a possibility of getting Israeli representatives together with Egyptian leaders for talks which could be held anywhere, just to have direct discussions about their common problems. We could be sure that the Israelis would not be the ones to reveal publicly any private talks.

The President thanked Mrs. Meir for coming to see him in Palm Beach. As she left she reiterated her hope that the beginning of the next round on refugees could be conducted in Jerusalem.

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