



DOCUMENT

# Transcript Shows That Kissinger Dreaded All-Out Israeli Victory in Yom Kippur War

Then-U.S. secretary of state feared too much winning would make Israel harder to influence.

BY COLUM LYNCH | AUGUST 9, 2019, 11:17 AM

For Henry Kissinger, the prospect of an Israeli defeat during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War was always unthinkable. A victory by a Soviet-armed Arab coalition against a U.S.-armed Israel would shatter Washington's strategic advantage in the Middle East and send the message to other Cold War clients that they "need to rely on the Soviet Union," the then-U.S. secretary of state told his staff.

But Kissinger also harbored doubts about the virtues of an all-out Israeli victory that resulted in a decisive Arab surrender. As he participated in cease-fire talks to end the war, in a phone conversation with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, he confessed that, "My nightmare is a victory for either side." It was a sentiment that Dobrynin shared, [according to a declassified transcript of the Oct. 13, 1973, conversation made public Friday by the National Security Archive](#). [The superpower phone chat is \*Foreign Policy's\* Document of The Week.](#)

It possible that Kissinger's remark was made to lift Dobrynin's spirits as he was seeking the Soviet diplomat's support for a cease-fire that would leave the Soviet Union's Arab clients with less land than they started with and a bloody nose they would not long forget.

An Arab coalition, led by Egypt and Syria, had launched a surprise attack on Israel on Yom Kippur, in an effort to reclaim land it lost in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The offensive initially caught Israel and the United States—whose intelligence agencies saw little prospect of an Arab strike—entirely off guard, and it rattled Israel's sense of military invincibility.

At the time of the conversation, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was still holding out hope that his forces could reclaim lands captured by Israel. But just over a week later, Israel had largely surrounded Egypt's Third Army, forcing the Arab coalition to accept the terms of a U.S.- and Soviet-brokered cease-fire.

But there may very well have been more to Kissinger's preference for a negotiated peace. He believed that Israel's reliance on a massive airlift of U.S. tanks, artillery, and ammunition—dubbed Operation Nickel Grass—to repel a series of Arab military forays would make Israel realize it was not powerful enough to go it alone.

“The Israelis have learned that their original idea—that they could use the stockpiled equipment that they had from us to score a big victory over the Arabs if we pressed them too hard is no longer possible,” he said in a previously [declassified briefing](#) to his staff. “If they get into another war, they must do it with our enthusiastic backing or they are lost.”

“As far as Israel is concerned, we have to be taken even more seriously than we have been in the past,” he added. “And our insistence on a more politically oriented policy cannot go unheeded.”

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TELECON  
Dobrynin/Kissinger  
October 13, 1973  
7:14 p. m.

D. Hello.

K. Anatolyi.

D. Hello, Henry.

K. You don't keep in touch with your old friends.

D. On the contrary. I was afraid to bother you. You have been winning too many awards. I am just reading your correspondence with the Egyptians. Your last message about you going to Egypt later on.

K. It was consistent with what we told you.

D. I am not complaining. It is marked on the 16th. Is anything new?

K. No. I am just assuming that Kosygin will be returning soon.

D. Yes, his home is still Moscow, not Cairo.

K. The only thing I have a slight worry about is maybe he failed in his mission. Or supposing he didn't fail and suggests something. You will understand we will need some time to consider it. Don't ask us for an answer in two hours. We have not discussed this with the Israelis. We have been more frank with the Arabs on this than with the Israelis. It is my judgment that Israel will refuse any linkage on a peace settlement. We didn't want any liberals yelling that Kosygin is probably in Cairo selling. You know what I mean.

D. Yes.

K. We are in a difficult position.

D. You make it clear that you need 24 hours.

K. Please keep in mind if you have any contacts with the Israelis that we have not discussed this formula with them. I was so upset with what they did with the ceasefire and that... would be screaming that Soviet as would be sailing through the Canal. I want to confine

it to Jackson. First of all it depends of course on the verdict, something on the line of 242. It is my judgment they will go along with it. For all I know they may say thank you. It depends on the military situation. What is your impression?

D. It is very quiet. We are waiting for the results from Kosygin. He should get a very straight talk with Sadat.

K. I have told my associates the Arabs are lying as Arabs and the Israelis are lying as the Arabs and it is hard to tell what is going on.

D. Don't say that to an American correspondent. . . . You know how the things go in these cases.

K. The Israelis said they knocked out on Sunday 250 tanks. Now that is a big order.

D. We have to. . . someone.

K. I quite frankly don't know. Our impression is that it is fairly stable.

D. It is my impression it is a stalemate on both fronts.

K. My nightmare is a victory for either side.

D. It is not only your nightmare. Are you speaking from the point of view. . . . if you are not here who will handle this?

K. I was going on the 22nd. I may put it off for a few days. I will almost certainly be here until the 23rd and maybe the 24th.

D. Who will handle it?

K. Scowcroft.

D. Scowcroft, and not Rush? For the time being until the 23rd you will still be here and we will be in contact with you.

K. I expect if Kosygin comes back tomorrow. By Saturday we should hear something. The only thing was I wanted to call you at a quiet moment to remind you that in all honesty we have not discussed this with the Israelis.

D. . . . they presumed that the Americans would consult us, at least the hope that is so when it comes to something important. He would like to show that he is not worried about it. I will be in touch with you.

TELECON

Ans. Dobrynin - Secretary Kissinger  
October 13, 1973

K: ....Here is what we will do. the message which you have sent us...we will not go to the Security Council tonight even though the original idea was to go at 6:00. We will wait and make a decision on how to proceed until 9:00.

D: Morning?

K: 9:00 tomorrow morning, which will be a whole day in the Middle East conflict. If you would have, if you could get me an answer from Moscow which is a little bit more specific.

D: On what...put me in a very difficult position to do it publicly

K: But if you can give indications privately, you and I have handled crises before. We are interested in a result...cease-fire and status quo ante...estimate by Tuesday you will be asking us. It isn't a question, we are not asking for a favor. We are trying to prevent...exacerbation of our relationship...  
The situation in this country with public opinion and Congress...very serious consequences. If you tell us by Monday morning this thing will be over there will be no debate.

D: What?

K: If you tell us you believe by Monday, there is an effective cease-fire and status quo ante, don't worry, we don't want to do this by public affair. If you tell us something else, that of course, would be kept confidential as everything.

D: I understand.

K: In effect you to agree by tomorrow morning for public action, concerned practical action that will...

D: Really...tell Gromyko and Breshnev by Tuesday the situation will be..

K: Right now our reading on the situation that Arab attacked has been totally contained. They are now going to be pushed back, possibly will be associated as Israeli mobilization is completed, after that we will see what we have, see we have the as before. We think if the matter could be sewed up tomorrow...Arabs proved their point, attacks across the Canal and return to the status quo ante. Both

D: avoid...

D: Don not understand... What do you think might you really suggest from our point of view. You know our position which was really principle, the 67 war.

K: I know your position.

D: It is not a public debate. I am telling you, for us to tell the Arabs very difficult. Don't hear from Moscow another difficulty, new facing question. Arabs doing what they feel necessary, lands accompanied by Israel. They definitely using this argument with us. Very difficult for us to tell them, look here you shouldn't do that.

K: I understand your difficulty. It isn't at all easy we also have difficult situation. Haven't been... kept Israel, lands of Damascas, Cairo. Don't ... proposal for political to imagine.

D: Our course of action you would public.. Security Council.

K: Defacto return to status quo ante, de factor return to cease-fire. I have already told Egypt that I would make effort after Israeli election. I have already told Gromyko I would make an effort. None of this I would do in... framework. We could compromise in.. and going to looks. It isn't

D: I understand, military point, of view you know situation better than. It's not politically .. is a question.

K: These ...

D: Question to near asking them to let similar, if they have nothing..

K: We have, perhaps we can't let this war continue until the ... when the Israelis have pushed the Arabs out of every territory, but havon't started clobbering the Arabs. If we are losing, want the exact moment possibly Arabs can hold on for 24 hours.. little to capture and we wait for a settlement. Anatoly, with all respect... we will face this problem in the next 48 hours one way or another, if we do nothing by Tuesday, Wednesday at the latest. Arabas will have been defeated.

D: I understand.

K: At that point what are we going to do?

D: Would you approach on the more Egypt?

K: That I understand.

D: ... will be very helpful. I will

H: I will approach them tonight. You can count on... I will approach them.

D: Much better to personally tell them, from us it will look as don't seen trying to sell them out.

K: We will not go to Security Council tonight, give... a chance to think you... and we think try to get any message from Moscow at 9:00 tomorrow morning.

D: 9 or 10:00?

K: After noon there now.

D: 4:00 - they are setting in Savidabo .. what kind of discussion on weekend going on.

K: I can imagine what kind of discussion going on at this hour. .. at 1:00 in the morning.

D: It will not be..

K: I understand.. around Savidabo people are very happy

D: Also trust Gromyko's ingenuity. If you have any ideas during course of night.. I will call you.

K: Not at night. I sleep quietly. What you have to understand is we have no to us if it turns into propaganda battle.. we will have the non-aligned and you and everyone else on Monday in the GA .. will only .. protection we have is to be extremely tough and, the facts of life..

D: I understand, for us to go.. opening. Look, I don't know. You like us to give back territory which belongs to us.

K: Can't wait you understand. Effort going to be made for negotiation. Certainly now public point of original to start. We don't know what you are going to tell them. By Monday evening going to be thrown out of there anyway.

D: New strategy of using threat of..

K: Wuestion really is practical.

D: Practical; for of view. Give back territory that belongs to them.. always belonged to them. I understand your dilemma.

H: China for... agreement, Russians were really in collusion with the US and... Retreat from territory wa...



D: Enacting amount to this one.

K: One other thing. Not speaking officially. If you and we could find a way of stopping this, now then it would be overwhelming. Argument..as to what practical consequences have been of our relationship overwhelming on these things..we have been waiting while..if it goes to other way, if you and we are going to be...

D: Calling of names..on this we could give assurances ..not sure about Israel ...nothing against the US.

K: Hope I could us on this particular.. American line.

D: Will..well it would still not change specific condition ..

K: Coming back to the practical thing, I understand practically important for us to say..

D: Things directed against both of us.

K: I agree. We don'tknow what would result from what to do. Right now to tell Sadat... Anatoly, going to be a brutal mess in the General Assembly. You -- blood bath. Allies going to get up and you will have to do as well as they.

D: Allies, pipeline,

K; No No, Asian allies.

D: Asian allies criticize both of us.

K: You will have to say something, General Assembly going to be a mess, This should give time demands to the proposal report to Gromyko and Brezhnev. I will report on conversation immediately to..

D: Can't ask Arabs to give up lands.. OK, maybe you can find another solution.

K: Let's not let time slip by. I believe military situation will rapidly turn sour..

END

