



Limits of Influence

The Reassessment Crisis of 1975

Background

- From March 1975 until late autumn 1975, the US undertook a “reassessment” of its relationship with Israel, creating enormous tension between the executive branch and the Israeli government
 - Struggle of personalities
 - neoclassical realism



President: I think politically 1975 would be better.

Kissinger: The sooner the better for the PRC.

President: I am concerned about Vietnam and the other amendments on Turkey. I am willing to meet with the leaders and also Brademas. I think if I sat down with them and laid out the problem and said, "You can screw it up and end up with a mess."

Kissinger: Karamanlis knows we didn't do anything [to harm him]. But he can't have Papandreou push him to the right. He says he's getting out of NATO which means little. He has got to show that the Papandreou policy would get nothing. I think the time is ripe to meet with the Greeks, maybe by the end of next week.

President: Let's do it with the Greek Congressmen first. Let's keep in mind for the 12th, 13th, or 14th.

Kissinger: On the NSC meeting, I propose five minutes telling you what the proposals are, then a 15-minute CIA briefing, then I go through 15 minutes of political framework, then a general discussion. I suggest you make no decision at the meeting.

The Rabin visit will be the toughest you have had. I want to go over it tomorrow at our meeting.

At the meeting we should not go into too much detail because of the risk of leaks to Israel.

Do you want Rockefeller there? It is risky, but has merit in showing him his responsibilities.

President: I think he should be there. He is perceptive and we show confidence that he will be confirmed.

At the NSC the basic discussion will be the Israeli "Urgent List" and their 10-year plan. It's \$40 billion for 10 years. Just the O&M is \$4 billion a year for the whole thing, and that is over half their GNP. It will not be a contentious meeting; there is no bureaucratic defense or study. The issue will be to give Rabin something without taking away their incentive to cooperate in the negotiation.



Israeli Chief of Staff Mordechai Gur initialling the Sinai II Agreement. On his left, Defense Minister Peres; on his immediate right, Israel's Ambassador to the United States Simcha Dinitz; and on his right, General Abraham Tamir, Israeli general staff. Mr. Amos Eran of the Israeli



Friendships

- Personality
- Shared vision
- Values



President: Not exactly. We need some help.

I understand that you and Secretary Kissinger have discussed the [military aid] list I proposed. It is because I feel so strongly about your security that I have your higher items of priority here and the money wanted. It is a reflection of my attitude.

Rabin: We all appreciate the time you have taken. Without your decision we wouldn't have gotten this. There were certain other items

President: Henry is going to check it out. We will do what we can.

Rabin: We didn't stress the F-4's, the big difficult items. It is mostly ammunition and other general equipment. We face very sophisticated systems -- much more than in Vietnam. We think we need your advanced technology to offset the advanced technology of the Soviet Union, which is going to our neighbors.

President: There is the laser item which you consider high-priority. One item caught my eye -- 50 additional tanks. I will make that without further reference. We will check out the report.

Rabin: It is difficult to find the right words to express our need for the right weapons to defend ourselves.

Dinitz: We really appreciate it. We have been working for years on this.

President: We think it is essential that we affirm progress with respect both to Egypt and Jordan.

Rabin: We are ready to enter every effort to move toward a political

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510

Dear Mr. President:

You will recall that last December a substantial majority of the Senate wrote you urging a reiteration of our nation's long-standing commitment to Israel's security "by a policy of continued military supplies and diplomatic and economic support".

Since 1967, it has been American policy that the Arab-Israel conflict should be settled on the basis of secure and recognized boundaries that are defensible, and direct negotiations between the nations involved. We believe that this approach continues to offer the best hope for a just and lasting peace.

While the suspension of the second-stage negotiations is regrettable, the history of the Arab-Israel conflict demonstrates that any Israeli withdrawal must be accompanied by meaningful steps toward peace by its Arab neighbors.

Recent events underscore America's need for reliable allies and the desirability of greater participation by the Congress in the formulation of American foreign policy. Cooperation between the Congress and the President is essential for America's effectiveness in the world. During this time of uncertainty over the future direction of our policy, we support you in strengthening our ties with nations which share our democratic traditions and help to safeguard our national interests. We believe that the special relationship between our country and Israel does not prejudice improved relations with other nations in the region.

We believe that a strong Israel constitutes a most reliable barrier to domination of the area by outside parties. Given the recent heavy flow of Soviet weaponry to Arab states, it is imperative that we not permit the military balance to shift against Israel.

We believe that preserving the peace requires that Israel obtain a level of military and economic support adequate to deter a renewal of war by Israel's neighbors. Withholding military equipment from Israel would be dangerous, discouraging accommodation by Israel's neighbors and encouraging a resort to force.

Within the next several weeks, the Congress expects to receive your foreign aid requests for fiscal year 1976. We trust that your recommendations will be responsive to Israel's urgent military and economic needs. We urge you to make it clear, as we do, that the United States acting in its own national interests stands firmly with Israel in the search for peace in future negotiations, and that this premise is the basis of the current reassessment of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Respectfully yours,





Principle Actors

Neoclassical Realism

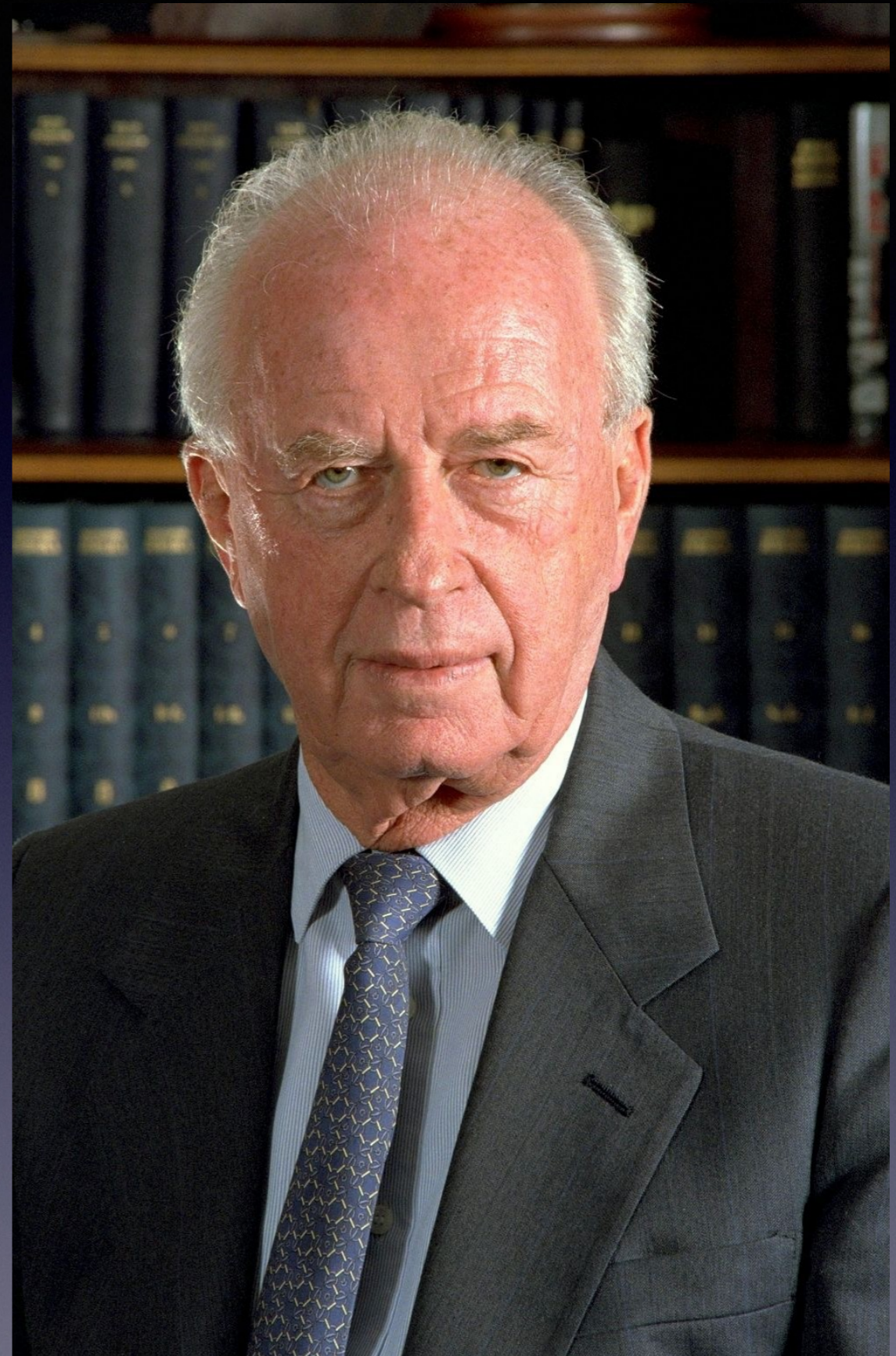
Y. Rabin

Fmr. Haganah and IDF officer

Fmr. U.S. Ambassador

Fmr. Israeli General (1967)

Israeli PM from 3 June 1974 –
22 April 1977



H. Kissinger

Prominent person in [United States foreign policy](#) between 1969 and 1977.

Strategist-Realist

Diplomat, respected statesman



G. Ford

38th President (1974-1977)

Fmr. Vice-President

Fmr. Majority Leader

Fmr. Michigan Congressman



Background

- Much of the 1975 reassessment period rests in the basic misunderstandings of personality and interpretation of national politics
- President Ford, his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Yitzhak Rabin each tried to mold the political culture and influence each other in the process.
- Besides the misunderstanding there is a sense that “reassessment” was an expression of frustration over Kissinger’s failure after his previous "diplomatic dialogues" were viewed as initial achievements in Arab-Israeli relations.

Background 1974

- By the beginning of 1974, after the October 1973 war, the Israelis and Egyptians had been engaged in negotiations over the Sinai where Israeli troops had remained.
- Egyptian President Sadat demanded that Israel withdraw from the critical Giddi and Mitla passes and the Um Hashiba alert station overlooking them in the Sinai.
- Rabin was willing to withdraw from significant portions of the Sinai won in 1967 and defended in 1973 in return for a non-belligerency agreement. But Sadat was willing to offer only “non-use of force,” not a peace treaty, and Rabin was unwilling to relinquish the strategic passes for such a tepid guarantee.
- Even so, he was ready to allow the Egyptians to advance to forward positions at the western entrances to the passes, and to give up the Abu Rodeis oil fields.

Background 1974

- The Americans, as records of discussions between Kissinger and Ford show, support Sadat's position.
- That fact was what made the agreement in January 1974 so promising. It had assurances between the Israelis and Egyptians that if built upon, would demonstrate a corner had been turned in the Middle East in defiance of obstacles and was moving towards a final peace.
- Thus, when the diplomatic efforts collapsed in October of 1974 it was so disappointing and served as an opening footnote to the reassessment period between the U.S. and Israel.

Background 1975

- During March, 1975 the attempt to create a Sinai II with Egypt by convincing Rabin to withdraw from the Sinai mountain passes of Gidi and Mitla, was rejected.
- The Middle East shuttle diplomacy that was so famed in producing the Egyptian-Israeli accord of 1974 and had potential for peace with other neighbors such as Jordan and Syria, hit a roadblock in the new Israeli government.
- Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, according to a condescending Kissinger “went shivering in fear” every time Jordan was mentioned during previous meetings. Now, according to Kissinger, “Israeli actions had imposed on us a risk to our entire Middle East strategy making reassessment unavoidable.” The term, according to Kissinger, was part of a leak after Rabin had shared a letter written from Ford, to his cabinet.

National Security

- To Prime Minister Rabin, and consequently to Israeli leaders since 1975, the dilemma is one not of absolutes, but rather balance “between security conceived as a military balance and security including a political and psychological component” (Kissinger)
- national security is based upon defensible borders (Walter)
 - buffer zones (Sinai, Golan) aka defensible borders
 - peace treaties (Egypt and Jordan) recognized Israeli borders and most important ‘right’ to exist

Reassessment

- Kissinger indicates Israeli's used term first
- Public records have President Ford using word first
- Kissinger's own biographers and autobiography indicates a mixed answer.

Opinion

- “Rabin had, in many ways, the most difficult role to play. Rabin had more at stake than Ford and was far less in control of his domestic situation than Sadat, and above all, that his country’s margin of survival was by far the narrowest of any of the participants in the peace process. Battered by his domestic opposition, assailed by competitors for leadership within his cabinet, press by his American allies to move faster, Rabin held to his determination to bring about some progress toward peace and not simply a new military arrangement”
- Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 458.

Opinion

- As to Rabin's sentiment toward Kissinger, Rabin said, "though personal feelings are not preferred tools for managing an international negotiation that is both rigid and demanding, I still had a special regard for this unusual man. He felt that he was working for the benefit of Israel, even when we had doubts about it."
- Rabin, *Memoirs*, pg. 258; Golan, *Secret Conversations of Henry Kissinger*, pg. 241.

Reassessment

- Therefore, *Reassessment* ushered in a tense phase in American-Israeli relations.
- On one level, it stated a truism: “whatever the label, the failure of the shuttle obliged us to take another look at our Middle East diplomacy”.
- At the same time, “the term could be read to imply that the basic relationship with Israel was up for review---which was not the American intention.” (Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 424).
- Regardless of intention the ensuing row began in earnest in March, immediately following the time that Kissinger had visited with Rabin. When Kissinger talked to President Ford laying the blame on the Israelis.

Reassessment

- Ford saw the negotiations as part of the final deal; meanwhile the approach by the Israeli Prime Minister was decidedly short term.
- The March negotiations were allowed to collapse, because of Rabin's "belief that these could and would be picked up again before long without any undue damage and possibly with important benefits," though the situation after March 22 showed the U.S. present a behavior that "castigated and penalized Israel and praised and supported" the Egyptian position causing the possibility of a further round of negotiations to be undercut, which meant that Rabin was give the position of seeking a limited agreement, "in favor another approach, or else of modifying what they wanted to achieve from a limited agreement in the light of what was possible." (Safran, *Israel: The Embattled Ally*, pg. 552)
- Unable to find a compromise, stalemate ensued

Timeline

- March
- April
- June
- July
- September

Conclusion

- Reassessment often took several forms, the most important of which was restriction of arms supply and suspension of consideration of economic assistance.
- “The United States had often used this kind of informal sanction in the past to induce Israel to take some specific action; this time, however, the sanction appeared to be almost purely vindictive since it came after the fact. Moreover, the action was particularly painful and potentially damaging to American-Israeli relations because it came only a short time after Kissinger had committed the United States to *increased* and more regular military assistance to Israel in connection with the conclusion of the first Egyptian agreement...”
- Safran, N. (1981). *Israel: The Embattled Ally*, pgs. 548-549.

Conclusion

- Since the review of concepts and policy was necessary, one may claim, normal, part of policy making (late 1974, early 1975) there then was little significance of declaring a *reassessment*.
- However, since Kissinger most likely needed time to reconsider available options and seek advice from President Ford, the unfolding “test of wills” as Ford mentions in his memoirs was meant to serve, “the purposes of gaining time and putting psychological pressure on Israel to soften it up for whatever next move might be made” Safran, N. (1981). *Israel: The Embattled Ally*, pgs. 548-549.

Conclusion

- It did not require the theatrics, leaked information, stories, the articles, and advice seeking of scholars.
- However, this episode offers a prologue to the kind of personal relationships Israeli and American leaders would experience in the decades since and nowadays the standard tactics utilized to influence each.
- In fact, involvement of partisan politicians, long-hours of negotiations often conducted to maximize personal strengths and egos at the detriment of other parties has become the standard operational procedures in the alliance between the United States and Israel.

Conclusion

- The Sinai II agreement was finally initialed on September 1, 1975.
- “Sadat promised not to join a war if Syria attacked Israel, while Israel assured Egypt that Israel would not attack Syria and the U.S. agreed to a commitment not to deal with the PLO until it recognized Israel’s right to exist and accepted Security Council Resolution 242 and 338.”
- Egypt turned towards a separate peace with Israel. When the historic Camp David Accords were signed between Egypt and Israel in 1979 the wars between Israel and an Arab neighbor since 1948 finally ended. The agreement also highlighted the importance of the Israeli-American relationship, in particular that between the chief executives.

Legacy

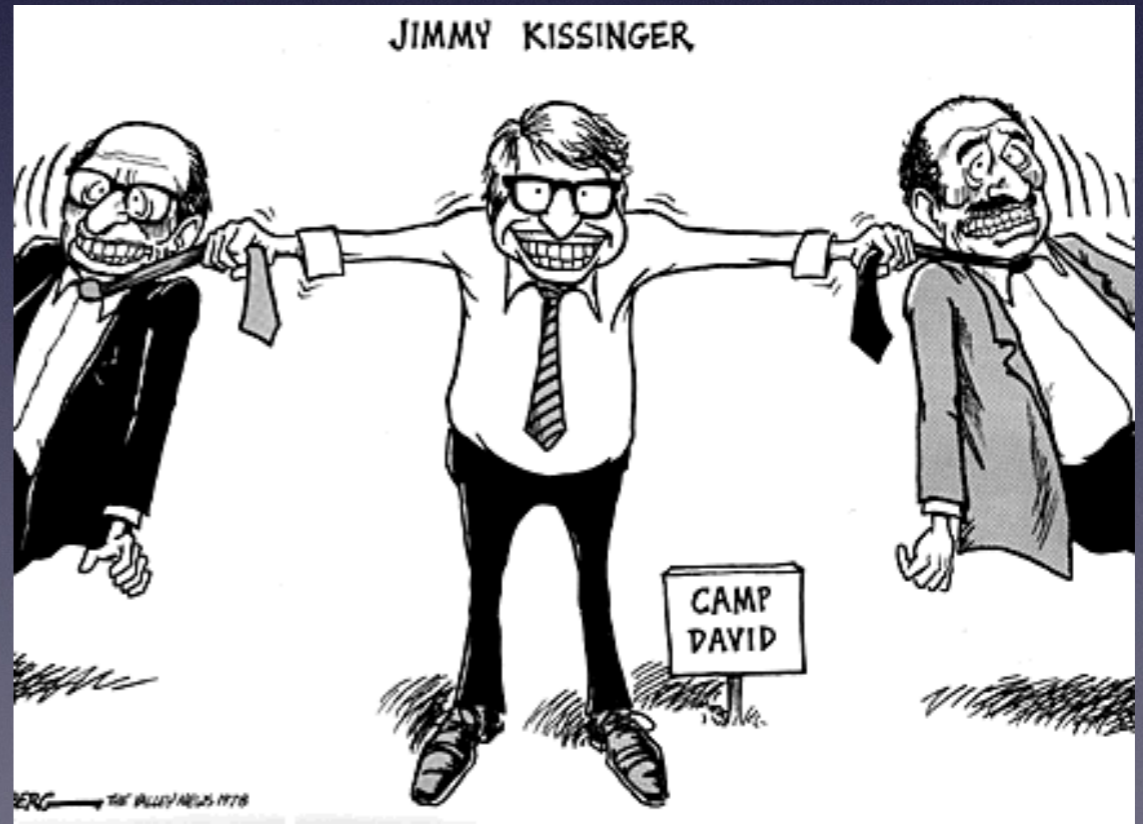
- Sinai II Agreement allowed several things to occur.
- Prime Minister Rabin closed “the hectic diplomatic movements triggered by the Yom Kipper War,” (Avner, *The Prime Ministers* pg. 286) and touched upon Israeli yearning for peace in his telephone call with Ford, “we really hope that it will be the beginning of something which we have not yet experienced in this area, and we hope that the other side, the Egyptian side, feels the same.”
- Sadat generously spoke along similar nonbelligerent lines: “Let us create a new atmosphere...and let us reach the state of non-belligerency officially and with guarantees” (Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 454).
- And in the highest praise possible from an aged diplomat on a former Israeli leader, Kissinger wrote, “Rabin was a significant strategist. His gradualist approach moved his fractious cabinet and wary public to the breakthrough that made the Camp David Accords of 1978 possible.” (Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*. pg. 458).

Legacy

- President Ford served as the moral guarantor of Egyptian and Israeli assurances to each other.
- Sadat took the decisive turn not only towards non-belligerency, but a turn away from the Soviet Union. Simply, he was tired of war and tired by Soviet promises.
- For Rabin, his role in the Sinai II agreement was possibly the most difficult. His abrasive style reflected the reality of his domestic situation. He had to “pace his own fragile political base” (Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*. pg. 458) while holding onto his determination to bring progress towards peace.
- As Kissinger writes, “had he moved too quickly, his cabinet would have fallen apart, and new elections would have had to be held; had he moved more slowly, he would have risked the American alliance” (Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*. pg. 458).
- Rabin was a strategist and was successful in moving, through his gradualist approach, his fractious cabinet and wary public to peace.

Legacy

- It was a security alliance in all but name, as Richard Valerian of NBC News quipped, “the best agreement money could buy” (Brinkley, *Gerald R. Ford*, pg. 117).
- The Knesset ratified the Sinai II agreement on September 3, 1975, paving the way for the eventual peace treaty with Egypt in 1979—and transforming the U.S.-Israel relationship for all time.
- However, just how it has been transformed is still very much open to discussion.
- As *Haaretz* reported then, Israel used American desire for peace to ‘squeeze’ further aid thereby achieving the strategic goals Rabin and his Cabinet had held before the reassessment period took place.
- The Americans used Israel and Egypt to block creeping influence of the Soviet Union in the region. And the reassessment period showed the cracks that have grown larger over the decades as American presidents and Israeli prime ministers have each tried to influence the other using public and private means.



Readings

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