

A black and white close-up portrait of Walter Isaacson, wearing glasses and a suit, looking slightly to the right. The background is dark and textured.

KISSINGER

A BIOGRAPHY

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WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION

TWENTY-EIGHT

THE MAGIC IS GONE

Setbacks in the Sinai and Southeast Asia

The generation of Buchenwald and the Siberian labor camps cannot talk with the same optimism as its fathers.—KISSINGER, "THE MEANING OF HISTORY," Harvard undergraduate dissertation, 1949

SINAI II AND THE "REASSESSMENT," MARCH 1975

After the Egyptian-Israeli accord of January 1974 and the even more surprising success on the Syrian front in May, Kissinger made a mistake: he hesitated about seeking a Jordanian-Israeli negotiation. King Hussein, aware of the difficulties involved in recovering the Palestinian-populated West Bank region taken by Israel in 1967, had patiently waited for his turn on the shuttle schedule. But the new government in Israel, led by Golda Meir's successor Yitzhak Rabin, steadfastly resisted negotiations with Jordan, even though (or maybe because) the kingdom had not directly attacked Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Kissinger later conceded that everyone "took the path of least resistance and brought about the worst possible outcome." Israel was the greatest obstacle. Rabin had pledged that before signing a Jordanian disengagement he would call new national elections so that the public could have its say. Now that he was tenuously clinging to power, the prime minister recoiled at the prospect. Near the end of a

visit to Israel in October 1974, Kissinger returned to his King David Hotel room and exploded to Joseph Sisco: "We are racking our brains to find some formula, and there sits a prime minister shivering in fear every time I mention the word *Jordan*. It's a lost cause."

The option of a Jordanian shuttle was closed later that month when an Arab summit convened in Morocco and, to Kissinger's surprise, designated the PLO (rather than Jordan) to negotiate on behalf of the West Bank. Israel's reluctance to deal with moderate Jordan had paved the way for Yasir Arafat. "It was a bad miscalculation," lamented Ambassador Simcha Dinitz, "and it was our fault."¹

That left three options: do nothing (Jerusalem's preferred course), refer the Middle East mess back to the Geneva conference (Moscow's preferred course), or go back for a second Sinai accord pulling Israel farther back from its Egyptian front in return for additional guarantees from Cairo about improving relations. That, finally, became Kissinger's preferred course.

He scheduled a new mission for March 1975 based on what he thought was a tacit assurance from Rabin's government that it would agree to pull back another ten or fifteen miles in the Sinai. The plan was that Israel would vacate two key mountain gaps—the Gidi and Mitla passes—which would represent a withdrawal from about one-sixth of the desert peninsula.

"We felt we had Rabin's agreement to move through the passes," Kissinger recalled. He paid a courtesy call at the outset on Golda Meir to show the retired prime minister the plan. When she told him it would never be approved by the Israeli cabinet, Kissinger said to his deputy Joseph Sisco that it only went to show how quickly a person loses touch after leaving office.²

When Kissinger conferred with the cabinet, he found that Meir was right: instead of withdrawing completely from the passes, the Israelis insisted on manning at least a warning station in their midst.

The climax came on Friday afternoon, March 21, when Kissinger arrived in Jerusalem after two weeks of shuttling. The Israeli cabinet had just received a cable signed by Ford. "I am disappointed to learn that Israel has not moved as far as it might," it noted, adding that a breakdown would cause the U.S. to "reassess" its policy in the Middle East, "including our policy towards Israel." It was about as brutal as such diplomatic letters get, and the Israeli cabinet was shell-shocked.

Rabin had been Kissinger's friend back when he served as Israel's ambassador to Washington. He was no longer. Israel would not accept ultimatums, the new prime minister said. Kissinger replied that he did not give orders to the president, and he was not responsible for Ford's cable. (In fact, he was responsible for it.)

"I do not believe you," said Rabin, lighting a cigarette and staring directly at Kissinger.

The eruption back at the King David Hotel that Sabbath evening revised the Richter scale of Kissinger tantrums. Never had he been talked to in that fashion, he said as he stormed around the room.³

Kissinger decided to take a sight-seeing tour the next morning. He chose as his destination some ancient ruins on a cliff overlooking the Dead Sea—the famous fortress of Masada. There, on the eve of Passover in A.D. 73, more than seven hundred Jewish warriors and their families jumped to their deaths in a mass suicide rather than surrender to fifteen thousand troops of the Roman Legion. Although he was not known to have a passionate interest in archaeology, Kissinger was famous as an inveterate signal-sender.

Israel has often been accused of having a Masada complex, of being willing to commit mass suicide rather than make the concessions necessary to achieve peace. But Masada is also a symbol for glory and bravery in Israel. Recruits entering the army's armored brigades are brought there to take their oath of allegiance. "Masada shall not fall again," they pledge. The professor who gave him the tour was unsure whether Kissinger was sending a metaphorical warning to the Israelis about the dangers of indulging a Masada complex, or whether he was fortifying his own Jewish conscience and displaying his awareness of his people's historic plight.

At one point, worried about tiring Kissinger, the professor said it would be difficult to see one of the terraces because it required walking down a flight of one hundred fifty steps. But Kissinger forged ahead. "We don't have to do it in one leap," he said so that the press could hear. "We can do it step by step."⁴

After the Israeli cabinet rejected the withdrawal plan, Kissinger met with Rabin and his top advisers on Saturday night until well past midnight. Once again he gave a version of his doomsday speech, this time with such feeling that it betrayed a real sincerity. By the end, there were tears in the eyes of the Israeli stenographer.

Kissinger: "Step-by-step has been throttled, first for Jordan, then for Egypt. We're losing control. We'll now see the Arabs working on a united front. There will be more emphasis on the Palestinians. . . . The Soviets will step back onstage. The U.S. is losing control over events, and we'd all better adjust to that reality. The Europeans will have to accelerate their relations with the Arabs. . . . Let's not kid ourselves. We've failed."

Foreign Minister Yigal Allon: "Why not start it up again in a few weeks?"

Kissinger: "Things aren't going to be the same again. The Arabs

won't trust us as they have in the past. We look weak—in Vietnam, Turkey, Portugal, in a whole range of things. . . . One reason I and my colleagues are so exasperated is that we see a friend damaging himself for reasons that will seem trivial five years from now. . . . An agreement would have enabled the U.S. to remain in control of the diplomatic process. Compared to that, the location of the line eight kilometers one way or the other frankly does not seem very important. . . . I see pressure building up to force you back to the 1967 borders. . . . It's tragic to see people dooming themselves to a course of unbelievable peril."

Yitzhak Rabin: "This is the day you visited Masada."⁵

Kissinger promised that he would not publicly blame Israel for the collapse of the Sinai II shuttle. But his anger at what he bitterly called his "co-religionists" was hard to contain. On the flight home, speaking off the record, he called Rabin "a small man," claimed the entire cabinet was cowed by Defense Minister Shimon Peres, and lamented that there was no strong leader like Golda Meir to take charge.

March 1975 was, even without the Sinai II breakdown, a disastrous month for American foreign policy and for Kissinger. The final North Vietnamese offensive had begun, and the imperial city of Hue fell the day after Kissinger arrived home from Jerusalem. Likewise, the American-backed government in Cambodia was being assaulted by the Khmer Rouge. In Portugal, a coup against the left-leaning government had failed, increasing Kissinger's fears that the country would edge toward a pro-Soviet Marxist regime. In Angola, a civil war began, with the strongest rebel faction being backed by Cuban forces and Soviet aid. The Jackson-Vanik fiasco had jeopardized détente, and the SALT framework agreed to at Vladivostok had collapsed in disputes over its details.

Kissinger took his rejection by Israel personally, and for weeks he raged around Washington criticizing the "lunacy" of Rabin's cabinet. His actions ranged from the petty to the momentous. He ordered the removal of the direct private telephone line that ran from his office to that of Israeli ambassador Dinitz, a once and future friend. He also ordered, with Ford's approval, a very public "reassessment"—formalized in a National Security Study Memo—of America's Middle East policy and its relationship to Israel.

"With the end of the step-by-step approach, the U.S. faces a period of more complicated diplomacy," Kissinger said at a March 26 press conference. "Consequently, a reassessment of policy is necessary." In response to a question, he made one of those statements

designed to convey one thing by saying precisely the opposite: "The assessment of our policy is not directed against Israel."

Although the much-heralded reassessment was largely for show, Kissinger took the exercise rather seriously. Three options emerged:

- A revived Geneva conference. This would be accompanied by an American declaration of what it considered to be a fair overall settlement: a return by Israel to its 1967 border with minor modifications along with strong guarantees of the nation's security.
- A full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai and a separate peace with Egypt, as was finally wrought by President Carter at Camp David.
- A return to step-by-step disengagement shuttles.

Kissinger convened various groups to discuss these options. One gathering of the foreign policy establishment's wise men—including John McCloy, Averell Harriman, George Ball, Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, and David Rockefeller—not unexpectedly came down in favor of the first course. So did most of those in a group of academics including such fans from his Harvard days as Stanley Hoffmann and Zbigniew Brzezinski, both of whom had just written pieces attacking shuttle diplomacy.

The notion of retreating to Geneva, and thus letting the Soviets become involved in the process, held no appeal for Kissinger. Despite his doomsday speeches, it soon became clear he would be back to his shuttling, zealously guarding America's dominant role as well as his own.

Also helping to shorten the reassessment was the high-octane involvement of the Israeli lobby, led by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). No holds were barred. Kissinger was attacked with special vehemence. The campaign was capped by a public letter sent to the president and signed by seventy-six senators. It demanded massive military and economic aid for Israel, and it called on the president to make it clear that "the U.S. acting in its own national interest stands firmly with Israel."

Kissinger, enraged, summoned Dinitz (whom he now called "Mr. Ambassador" rather than "Simcha") and berated him. "You'll pay for this!" he shouted. "What do you think? That this is going to help you? You are crazy. This letter will kill you. It will increase anti-Semitism. It will cause people to charge that Jews control Congress."

Ford was also upset. He had been a stalwart supporter of Israel as a congressman, but the AIPAC letter, he recalled, "really bugged me." As he later wrote: "The Israeli lobby, made up of patriotic Americans, is strong, vocal, and wealthy, but many of its members have a single focus."

When Kissinger resumed his shuttle on August 21, 1975, he was hounded in Jerusalem by mobs of protesters outside his hotel shouting accusations of perfidy. "Jew boy! Jew boy! Jew boy go home!" they chanted, using a phrase Nixon had used on one of the Watergate tapes, which they knew would drive Kissinger mad. It did.

The breakthrough that would save the talks was visible before the new shuttle round began: American technicians would take charge of the warning stations in the middle of the disputed passes, and Israel would withdraw to the eastern end. It took twelve days, climaxing with an all-night session in Jerusalem, to tie up this agreement.

Key to the accord, and with more long-term significance, was the memorandum of understanding attached to it, which pledged that the U.S. would provide what turned out to be \$2.6 billion in military aid to Israel, including advanced equipment such as the F-16 fighter jet. This mammoth payoff to Israel in return for its Sinai II signature would turn out to be controversial.

As Kissinger was flying home in triumph, he was asked about a statement President Ford had just released calling the secretary's success "one of the greatest diplomatic achievements of this century." Kissinger responded: "Why 'this century'?" But Richard Valeriani of NBC was among those more cynical. On the "Nightly News" that evening, he proclaimed that "it was the best agreement money could buy."⁶

THE FALL OF CAMBODIA, APRIL 1975

As soon as the Vietnam peace accords were signed in January 1973, the violations began. Hanoi flagrantly infiltrated troops and matériel into the South, and Saigon blocked the establishment of the "National Council" that it saw as the first step toward a coalition government. In Cambodia there was not even a fictitious peace: the Khmer Rouge never accepted a cease-fire, and its war with Lon Nol's government in Phnom Penh continued unabated.

Throughout the spring of 1973, Kissinger argued that the U.S. should step up its bombing in Cambodia and make strikes against the Vietnamese infiltration routes as a signal that it meant to enforce the peace. This reflected his faith in the value of isolated B-52 bombing, a tactic that tends to appeal to civilians in the Situation Room more than military commanders.

The bombing war in Cambodia did little more than further tar-