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**KENNEDY, JOHNSON, AND NIXON:  
THE ADMINISTRATIONS THAT FORGED  
U.S.-ISRAELI RELATIONS WHILE FACING  
THE BOMB IN THE BASEMENT**

*Markéta Šonková*

**Abstract**

The subject of this paper<sup>1</sup> is U.S. foreign policy during the presidential administrations of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon. The main research objective was to analyse the U.S. relationship to Israel in the light of its nuclear weapons program and in relation to U.S. Cold War foreign policy. The aim of the paper is to compare and contrast three case studies – the individual presidential administrations – and to show how U.S. foreign policy and the relationship to Israel changed from lukewarm ties, through a “special” relationship, to a “strategic” relationship, regardless of the fact that Israel was not a signatory of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). This is especially important in the context of U.S. Cold War politics, as the Middle East was another area where the two superpowers competed for proxy spheres of influence. In the context of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War it is common to talk about the area of Southeast Asia or Europe, while the Middle East is usually discussed in connection to U.S. politics of the 1990s and onward. The aim of this paper, thus, is to show that the Middle East was equally important to U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War in terms of finding another proxy area and that the relationship that the U.S. has with Israel now was built during the administrations in question, especially since the U.S. pursued these ties regardless of the conflict of interest over the nuclear weapons program.

This paper is based on the author’s MA thesis defended in February, 2017 at the Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University.

**Keywords**

USA, Israel, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, nuclear weapons, Cold War, nuclear disarmament, American foreign policy.

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is a written version of a conference paper given at the 4<sup>th</sup> IDEAS English Students' Conference on May 12, 2017 in Brno.

## 1. Introduction

AFTER World War II (WWII), the United States (U.S.) firmly established itself as the new world power, and in the context of the bipolar division during the Cold War, it represented one of the two competing blocs. The U.S. was also the first nation to build a nuclear weapon and thus became the world's first nuclear power, which stood not only for an essential part of its foreign policy in the upcoming era, but also for a part of its national identity through perception of its power and strength in its updated world role. Thus, the nuclear discourse gained importance not only due to security and political reasons, but also due to national perception and public image creation.

As the Cold War progressed, the number of states with their own nuclear programs or nuclear testing at various stages grew, too. In this context, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – and other treaties on nuclear limitation and control – started being discussed as a means to regulate and observe this trend. It has been, since then, in the national interest of the U.S. to be part of these talks in order to contain nuclear proliferation efforts.

The U.S. and Israel have been enjoying a special relationship as well as a strategic one – although not completely flawless – for several decades now. This relationship grew stronger and started gaining more concrete shape in the 1960s, especially after the Six-Day War of 1967, when the U.S. became the primary supplier of foreign aid to Israel in place of France, as well as its chief arms supplier and a diplomatic ally. Until now, this relationship has concerned not only diplomatic, strategic, and political ties, but also military and intelligence ones, since Israel, being a Western-type democracy surrounded by the Arab world, has proved to be a valuable American ally in this sphere of influence. Moreover, Israel has represented, thanks to its location, a convenient strategic geographical asset<sup>2</sup> for the U.S. in the Middle East that proved important in the Cold War era.

From the mid-1960s, the world powers started actively discussing the NPT with the U.S. being one of its founding signatories. This was in concord with its newly gained position of the world's "watchdog of democracy." Although there have been disputes between the U.S. and Israel over Israeli nuclear testing from the early 1960s, the U.S. started advancing the idea of firmer engagement by the end of the decade nonetheless.

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<sup>2</sup> Term used by Mearsheimer and Walt in their 2006 publication *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*.

Due to local strategic, military, and security reasons, the official Israeli agenda on this matter has been a policy of ambiguity, and later, of opacity. However, based on the available sources, it is widely assumed that Israel has been working on its nuclear program almost since the foundation of the state. Since Israel has always seen itself as a Western-type of state, moreover, under a constant risk of annihilation by its hostile neighbors, its national security doctrine thus required the acquisition of nuclear technology – later also the weapons – as a deterrent against Arab-Soviet territorial expansion and ambitions. Therefore, both of the analyzed countries have their nuclear weapons arsenals, though the ways they perceive them culturally and from a societal standpoint differ.

Furthermore, as the Cold War advanced – and since the U.S. took upon itself the commitment to protect the Western and free world from Soviet influence – it also needed to take care of its internal dynamics, namely its national interests – also by means of nuclear arms control – as well as its strategic interests. The U.S. commitment to help Israel meant the U.S. could balance, through a proxy policy, the Soviet presence in the Middle East. Additionally, as the U.S. was militarily stretched due to the Vietnam War, creating a bond with Israel meant that it could outsource the resources to counter Arab-Soviet ambitions locally, with the nuclear ambiguity of Israel actually helping in these balancing policies.

With regards to the above-mentioned details, this paper concentrates on the formulation and the early stages of the relationship between the U.S. and Israel – that is, in the context of the 1960s and early 1970s – namely during the presidential administrations of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon. It focuses on the multi-layer dynamics in the light of the Israeli nuclear weapons program initiative and in the context of the initial U.S. talks on the NPT, with emphasis being put on the reflection of these and other talks in the relationship's formulation, as well as in U.S. policy approaches. One of the aims is to map how the initial American refusal of the Israeli nuclear program and little to no engagement in the area shifted to making a private commitment to Israel and calling the relationship “special” by President Kennedy, to the unrecorded negotiations between President Nixon and Prime Minister Meir, when the U.S. agreed to cast a blind eye on the nuclear issue in Israel in exchange for a “don't ask, don't tell” policy. Additionally, in the context of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, it is common to talk about the area of Southeast Asia or Europe, while the Middle East is usually discussed in relation to U.S. politics in the 1990s and onward. Thus, another aim of this work is to show that the Middle East was already equally important to U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War and that the issue of finding a satellite state in the Middle East was, in fact, also connected to the war being conducted in Vietnam. Finally, the paper strives to show that the relationship that the U.S. has with Israel now was

built during the administrations in question, especially since the U.S. pursued these ties regardless of the conflict of interest over Israel's nuclear weapons program.

## **2. Research Framework, Methodology, and Literature Overview**

Based on the above-mentioned concerns, the main research questions are:

1. What did the formulation and establishment of the relationship between the U.S. and Israel look like in connection to the American presidential administrations of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon between 1961 and 1974?
2. How was the relationship-formulation process reflected in American efforts to control nuclear weapons through the NPT talks, and how did it relate to Israeli nuclear initiatives at that time?
3. What did the situation look like after the partnership was established and what did this mean for the U.S.?

The hypothesis set forth in this text is that during the period in question, the U.S. moved from a lukewarm approach toward Israel, to a "special relationship"<sup>3</sup> that eventually transformed into a "strategic relationship,"<sup>4</sup> for reasons related to U.S. national and strategic interests, as well as to developments occurring as a result of world politics and the maintenance of a balance of power during the Cold War era.

This paper proceeds to answer the research questions through descriptive and comparative analyses of case studies, mapping U.S. foreign policy<sup>5</sup> decisions towards Israel, or major foreign policy events having direct or traceable consequences for Israel and the relationship, U.S. domestic policy decisions directly related to or having traceable consequences for Israel and the relationship,<sup>6</sup> governments' relationships, leaders' relationships, the public relationship, and private relationships, all in connection to or a reflection of the nuclear question.

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<sup>3</sup> Understood as a (mutually) beneficial relationship with especially strong ties between the nations in question.

<sup>4</sup> Understood as a semi-formal or formal relationship serving a specific strategic purpose.

<sup>5</sup> Foreign policy is understood as a set of approaches, rules, decisions, and the like that determine how the U.S. conducted its relations with other countries. In other words:

[Foreign policy is] designed to further certain goals. It seeks to assure [*sic*] America's security and defense. It seeks the power to protect and project America's national interests around the world. National interest shapes foreign policy and covers a wide range of political, economic, military, ideological, and humanitarian concerns. (Constitutional Rights Foundation n.d., n.pag.)

<sup>6</sup> The internal political dynamics are interwoven with the foreign policy-making processes and it is thus impossible to separate the two completely.

In certain theories, a state can be understood as being constituted as a whole in terms of being an actor as well as a decision maker.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, a case study in this work is understood as the individual presidential administration and all the mechanisms within it, together with its behavior and actions towards Israel, based on the above-mentioned principles. In other words, this paper considers actions of the U.S. during each administration as one case study, and the final analysis consists of three individual case studies that shall be compared and contrasted as outlined above.

Additionally, there is no vacuum in politics, neither within the individual states nor within the world system. Thus, although this work aims at concentrating on U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. administrations' behavior in relation to the nuclear question in Israel, some domestic issues as well as other issues in the world dynamics and power dynamics also needed to be taken into account, such as other internal players or the overall Cold War dynamics in the Middle East. However, due to the limited scope of this work, not all the variables could have been included in the discussion.

The topics presented in this paper are far from being new and have been studied many times before. However, some new and declassified information from the U.S. archives is now available compared to when earlier major studies on these topics were published. In the past two years, the U.S. has declassified numerous documents related to Nixon's final months in office, which are, together with other primary material, now available in the U.S. archives, and are often also accessible online. The U.S. Department of State publishes many of these documents in their series called *Foreign Relations of the United States*. As some new information has been revealed, part of which has been important for the presented research, it has been possible to work, in many cases, with primary materials, without merely relying on secondary sources. Nonetheless, there are still many documents that have been declassified only partially or are still classified completely.

On the other hand, in terms of Israeli information declassification, Israel follows stricter rules than the U.S., especially when related to state security. Together with ongoing delays to declassify many of the documents, the 2010 decision of Netanyahu's government to extend the classification period for some of the documents ensured that information related to several of the key moments of Israeli history, including the 1956 Sinai Campaign or the 1967 war, will not be available sooner than in 2018, when the Knesset will rule again on this issue. This decision also hides some documents from the first decade of Israeli existence that had already been made public (Ravid 2010, n.pag.).

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<sup>7</sup> Richard C. Snyder, H. W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin claim so in their 1961 chapter "The Decision-Making Approach to the Study of International Politics" (202).

Additionally, many of the seminal works on the U.S.-Israeli dynamic and nuclear issues are becoming dated. Avner Cohen's *Israel and the Bomb* was published in 1998, and although it is still considered the key work on the subject, there is a need for a new examination. In 2010, Cohen published *The Worst-kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb*, in which he maps the development of the opacity approach. Additionally, there is Michael Karpin's 2007 book *The Bomb in the Basement*. Importantly, Cohen, very often with William Burr, publishes updated articles, and there is also an extended version of the original book with many enclosed documents accessible through the National Security Archive of The George Washington University. In my research, I primarily drew on Cohen's seminal work, his new articles on the topic, and the GWU NSA archives.

There have been numerous books written, on the US-Israeli dynamics, such as David Shoenbaum's 1993 *The United States and the State of Israel*, Abraham Ben-Zvi's 1998 *Decade of Transition: Eisenhower, Kennedy and the Origins of the American-Israeli Alliance*, John J. Mearsheimer's and Stephen M. Walt's (in)famous 2008 publication *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, or Robert O. Freedman's 2012 book *Israel and the United States: Six Decades of US-Israeli Relations*. Dennis Ross has just recently published a book called *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama*.

In the light of the declassifications and new information being available, compared to the general datedness of the available canon, I believe it is important to re-examine the period between 1961 and 1974 since it created the basis upon which the U.S.-Israeli dynamics have been built into a form which allows for lasting cooperation. Moreover, the relationship between the U.S. and Israel is still special, strategic, and very topical in various areas of American foreign policy. Hence, it is important to understand how and why it was established, and also to understand that matters are not only black and white, especially in connection to other U.S. interests in the region, and with the nuclear question in general, the more so since the current political situation in the U.S. and the re-evaluation of its foreign policy course has contributed to Israel's re-examining its ties with Russia.

### **3. Early U.S.-Israeli Ties**

The relationship between the U.S. and Israel started soon after Israel's creation, since "the United States recognized Israel as an independent state on May 14, 1948, when President Harry Truman<sup>8</sup> issued a statement of recognition following Israel's

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<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the strong opposition of several senior U.S. officials, including Secretary of State George C. Marshall (Malka 2011, 3).

proclamation of independence on the same date” (“Israel – Countries – Office of the Historian” n.d., n.pag.). Diplomatic ties were created two weeks later (*ibid*). In fact, “the United States was the first country to recognize Israel as a state in 1948 [and] since then, Israel has become, and remains, America’s most reliable partner in the Middle East” (“U.S. Relations With Israel” 2014, n.pag.). Nonetheless, the final reversal, that eventually grew into today’s strong and strategic partnership, came only after the Six-Day War of 1967.

Israel and the United States share historic and cultural ties, but they are also bound by mutual interests. The Jewish tradition in the U.S. can be traced to the era of the Founding Fathers which can be seen in the letters by John Adams to Thomas Jefferson (“U.S.-Israel Relations: Roots of the U.S.-Israel Relationship” n.d., n.pag.) where the former claimed that “the Hebrews have done more to civilize man than any other nation” (Adams in *ibid*), while Woodrow Wilson went so far as to claim that “the ancient Jewish nation provided a model for the American colonists” (*ibid*). Other traces of Jewish influence in the U.S. are to be seen in Calvin Coolidge’s recognition of the Jewish role during the American War of Independence, in the original design of the official U.S. Seal submitted by Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams, as well as in early U.S. academia and its requirement for scholars to be familiar with Hebrew (*ibid*). The U.S. presidents were also sympathetic in terms of supporting the Balfour Declaration and the idea of a Jewish homeland since 1919 (“U.S.-Israel Relations: Roots of the U.S.-Israel Relationship” n.d., n.pag.). After WWII, the U.S. played an active role in the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine as well as endorsing the majority report on the partition of the land, with Israel declaring its independence less than six months later; the “recognition of shared values [has since been] a consistent theme in statements by American Presidents ever since Truman” (*ibid*).

Although the cooperation and ties were of a declaratory and diplomatic nature during the 1950s and early 1960s, since France was still the main aid supplier at that time, Israel was, nonetheless, a closely-watched region by the U.S. It was included either directly or indirectly in several U.S. policies, such as the Tripartite Declaration of 1950 which was an effort by the U.S., UK, and France to control the flow of arms to the Middle East in order to stabilize the situation in the region (“Harry Truman Administration: Tripartite Declaration” n.d., n.pag.) or The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 aimed at the Middle Eastern countries and on the basis of which “a country could request American economic assistance and/or aid from U.S. military forces if it was being threatened by armed aggression from another state” (“Milestones: 1953–1960 – The Eisenhower Doctrine, 1957” n.d., n.pag.).



Nonetheless, it is important to mention that the U.S. has also been critical of Israel and has acted against Israeli interests, too, especially prior to 1967. This includes maintaining the U.S. arms embargo when Israel was attacked after the proclamation of independence, which limited Israeli chances of self-defense, or Eisenhower's strong stand against the alliance of the UK, France, and Israel during the Suez Crisis of 1956 (Bard n.d., "U.S.-Israel Relation" n.pag.).

#### **4. Israel and the Middle East as an Area of Early Cold War Proxy Struggle**

The Soviet Union, whose involvement in the area dates back to the Tsarist period,<sup>9</sup> took political as well as strategic interest in the Arab states in the region as a means to both balance the Western efforts and to spread Communism (Wolfe 1969, 2). Similarly, the involvement of the U.S. in the Middle East started in the early days of the Republic (Mearsheimer and Walt 2008, 6). However, it was Eisenhower who openly "singled out the Soviet threat in his doctrine by authorizing the commitment of U.S. forces 'to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations, requesting such aid against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by international communism'" ("Milestones: 1953–1960 – The Eisenhower Doctrine, 1957" n.d., n.pag.). Therefore, the policy objectives regarding the importance of the area in the Cold War period date back to Truman.

Since the U.S. was aware of the Soviet interest in spreading Communism worldwide, as a means to both disseminate its ideology and to destabilize the U.S., this awareness can be seen reflected in its policies, including one of the key Cold War policy documents known as NSC 68, and then again in NSC 129/1 *United States Objectives And Policies With Respect To The Arab States\* And Israel Objectives*, where it is specifically stated that the Middle East is of great political and strategic importance:

Because of its geographic position, its natural defensive barriers, its sites for military bases, its position with respect to transportation routes, its petroleum resources and installations, the fact that it is a center for powerful worldwide religious groups, and the effects of its alignment on the prestige of the Western powers and on the policies of other countries in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. ("No. 71 Statement of Policy" 1952, n.pag.)

The objectives of the U.S. were to overcome, or to prevent any instability within the area that could threaten Western interests. Additionally, they sought to prevent

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<sup>9</sup> Back then, it was Russian, not Soviet involvement.

any extension of Soviet influence, while they aimed at strengthening Western influence, as well as ensuring the availability of regional resources for the United States and its allies “for use in strengthening the free world,” strengthening “the will and ability of these countries to resist possible future aggression by the Soviet Union,” and the establishment “within the community of nations a new relationship with the states of the area that recognizes their desire to achieve status and respect for their sovereign equality” (ibid).

Thus, as understood from the aforementioned details, the U.S. expressed a commitment to “take an increased share of responsibility toward the area, in concert with the U.K. to the greatest practicable extent, and where appropriate also in concert with France and Turkey” (ibid). Yet, it was still preferable that other nations were to provide the armed forces if needed. In short, the U.S. played an important and steadily increasing role in the Middle East and its security issues since WWII. The role was initially driven by oil, then by the threat of Communism, and then later by the growing relationship with Israel (Mearsheimer and Walt 2008, 7).

## 5. Israeli Nuclear Program and Strategy

Although a public secret, it is still difficult to write about the Israeli nuclear program and its strategy, as Israel has purposefully adopted a policy of nuclear ambiguity – neither confirming nor denying its nuclear status. Moreover, the Israeli nuclear program had not been revealed until September 30, 1986, when *The Sunday Times* published “information supplied by Israeli nuclear technician Mordechai Vanunu, which [led] experts to conclude that Israel may have up to 200 nuclear weapons” (“Nuclear Weapons Timeline” n.d., n.pag.). The Nuclear Threat Initiative states that Israel started with its nuclear program in the 1950s, and “had completed the R&D phase of its nuclear weapon programme in 1966, although it has not, to public knowledge, tested such a weapon” (“Nuclear Testing 1945 – Today” n.d., n.pag.). Allegations about “a secret Israeli nuclear weapons program were frequently heard in the 1960s and 70s [but] it was not until the mid-1980s . . . that the allegations were backed up with firm proof” (ibid). Therefore, the period that is being examined in this paper reflects the U.S. dealing with Israel without officially knowing if the nuclear capabilities of their ally-to-be were real.

A special unit of the IDF<sup>10</sup> Science Corps began searching the area of the Negev Desert for natural uranium reserves in 1949. The Israel Atomic Energy Commission

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<sup>10</sup> Israel Defense Forces

was then founded in 1952, the first chairman of which, Ernst David Bergmann, advocated an Israeli bomb “as the best way to ensure ‘that we shall never again be led as lambs to the slaughter’” (Bergman in “Nuclear Weapons” n.d., n.pag.). By 1953, the unit “had not only perfected a process for extracting the uranium found in the Negev, but had also developed a new method of producing heavy water, providing Israel with an indigenous capability to produce some of the most important nuclear materials” (“Nuclear Weapons” n.d., n.pag.). The whole process was slowed down by the 1956 Suez Crisis, nonetheless, the sources indicate that Israel began, thanks to French assistance, the construction of a large nuclear reactor at Dimona in the Negev desert in 1957 and that the reactor became operational in 1964.

Americans became aware of the site in 1958 when the “U-2 overflights . . . captured the facility’s construction, but it was not identified as a nuclear site until two years later,” as the complex was initially described “as a textile plant, an agricultural station, and a metallurgical research facility, until then Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, stated in December 1960 that the Dimona complex was a nuclear research center built for ‘peaceful purposes’” (ibid). Suspicion that such a reactor may not serve only for energy purposes gained more concrete shape with a secret telegram received by the U.S. Department of State in 1960,<sup>11</sup> where an unnamed source passed on a piece of information from another redacted source through a telegram to the U.S. Secretary of State about the Israeli nuclear power reactor. Although the source was not certain about the details, they indicated certainty about the existence of the facility, and that France was providing assistance as well as promising future uranium supplies (Undisclosed 1960, n.pag.). U.S. inspectors then visited Dimona seven times during the 1960s, “but they were unable to obtain an accurate picture of the activities carried out there, largely due to tight Israeli control over the timing and agenda of the visits” (“Nuclear Weapons” n.d., n.pag.).

During the first years, critical for “the bomb” development, the Americans did nothing to stop the program and Walworth Barbour, U.S. ambassador to Israel between 1961 and 1973, understood his assignment as not causing problems to POTUS.<sup>12</sup> After the 1967 war, he even stopped sending attachés to the site, even though he learned in 1966 that Israel had started fitting their missiles with nuclear warheads. The CIA subsequently confirmed production of nuclear weapons in 1968 (ibid). This is also the stage when Israel adopted “the bomb in the basement” posture and when the doctrine of ambiguity started shifting toward opacity, which was concluded by 1970.

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<sup>11</sup> This telegram is still redacted, although it was partially declassified in 1991.

<sup>12</sup> President of the United States

The philosophy behind the possession of “the bomb” was based on Israeli fear for self-preservation and its fight for survival, which is different from the U.S. philosophy. The bomb gave Israel a greater degree of autonomy during the Cold War bipolar division; it gave them another sense of security and pride in the hostile region, but most importantly, the “Israeli nuclear weapons program grew out of the conviction that the Holocaust justified any measures Israel took to ensure its survival” (ibid). Hence, it is not surprising that “it is widely reported that Israel had two bombs in 1967, and that Prime Minister Eshkol ordered them armed in Israel’s first nuclear alert during the Six-Day War. It is also reported that, fearing defeat in the October 1973 Yom Kippur War, the Israelis assembled 13 twenty-kiloton atomic bombs” (ibid) – that is they are said to have been armed with a nuclear arsenal during the two most decisive conflicts in Israel’s modern history. For the reasons mentioned above, Israel is not a party to the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (“Nuclear Testing 1945 - Today” n.d., n.pag.) which would subject their sites to inspections of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and to denuclearization.

## **6. The Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons**

It is the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons that is the cornerstone of the nonproliferation regime (“Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty” n.d., n.pag.), as it is “now the most widely accepted arms control agreement” (Njølstad 2003, n.pag.). The treaty was adopted on June 12, 1968 at the UN New York headquarters, and came into force on March 5, 1970 (“Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)” n.d., n.pag.). So far, 190 countries have signed the treaty.

At its core, “the NPT aims to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, to foster the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and to further the goal of disarmament”; additionally, “the Treaty establishes a safeguards system under the responsibility of the IAEA, which also plays a central role under the Treaty in areas of technology transfer for peaceful purposes” (“Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty” n.d., n.pag.). The NPT also divides the states into two categories: nuclear-weapon states which are the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom and the non-nuclear-weapon states (“The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) at a Glance” n.d., n.pag.).

The membership is, to date, almost universal and the only countries that have not signed the treaty are South Sudan, India, Israel, and Pakistan, out of which the last three mentioned are suspected of possessing or known to possess nuclear weapons (ibid); North Korea withdrew its membership in 2003. It is under this treaty that

the U.S. has been pursuing its non-proliferation policies towards other states, such as Libya or Iran, and it is also this treaty that Israel has refused to sign which becomes problematic in terms of its relationship with the U.S. Yet, as Green (2014, 97) mentions, “The Non-Proliferation Treaty has not been a sufficient impediment because it is based on a double standard, acknowledging the possession of nuclear weapons by the original five while prohibiting their acquisition by any others on the grounds that proliferation would threaten international security.”

## **7. Case Study I: John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1961 – 1963)**

John Fitzgerald Kennedy (D, MA) served as the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States between January 20, 1961 and November 22, 1963. He inherited his predecessors’ containment policy approach towards the world’s Communist threat and adopted the flexible response doctrine towards nuclear security. Also, the Limited Test Ban Treaty<sup>13</sup> was signed in 1963 during his time in office. It was also during JFK’s administration that the U.S. experienced one of the two highest crises in the near-use of its nuclear armaments – the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, it was during his presidency that the Israeli reactor entered its final stage of construction before going critical in 1964.

As such, JFK inherited a nascent relationship with Israel. Although before the Six-Day War of 1967, the relationship could be seen as one of a rather declaratory nature, those very declarations helped in establishing the special relationship status, as JFK was the first U.S. president who “extended the concept of a ‘special relationship’ beyond Britain to include Israel” (Kramer 2013, n.pag.). His friendship with Israeli Golda Meir, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, helped ease the communication and relationship-building between the two states. Jason Maoz further claims that “while it would be stretching it to describe [JFK] as a great friend of Israel, there is no denying that American-Israeli relations during his time in office were better than they’d been under Eisenhower” (“The Best Thing” 2010, n.pag.).

It is a belief commonly held by scholars and historians that the subtle changes in American pro-Israeli policy commenced with the 1962 decision to sell defensive Hawk anti-aircraft missiles to Israel (Lieber 1998, 13). This decision, after years of refusals to sell arms to Israel, is seen by many as a sign “signaling a shift in the

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<sup>13</sup> It bans nuclear testing in the atmosphere, in outer space, and underwater. It does not ban testing underground, however, with some adherence to contamination and environmental risks (“Treaty Banning” n.d., n.pag.).

<sup>14</sup> The other being the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

relationship between the two states” (Tal 2000, 304). This is especially evident since the administration did not “offer the missiles in exchange for concessions elsewhere” (ibid). It also meant the U.S. partially lifted its long-standing arms embargo. This decision can be described as a “reversal of U.S. policy” (Tal and Gazit in Tal 2000, 304) and that it followed from “decisions taken by the Eisenhower administration combined with Israeli lobbying and geopolitical changes in the Middle East” (Tal 2000, 304).

Yet, Ben-Zvi, too, claims that the changes had already started happening during the second Eisenhower administration. His realization of the geopolitical and strategic importance of Israel as an asset to American national interests in the Cold War context largely contributed to that (in Lieber 1998, 13). He perceives the “Eisenhower era as the incubation period in which the groundwork of the American-Israeli alliance was laid, with the Kennedy Administration consolidat(ing) and accelerating the processes the Eisenhower foreign policy elite (had) set in motion” (Ben-Zvi 1998, xi-xii). Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman further argue that for JFK, it was easier to support Israel than to live with – the potentially unacceptable – choices Israel might make in its pursuit of self-preservation, by which “Kennedy steered the U.S.-Israeli partnership to a new level of cooperation and changed the way the United States thought about regional stability, Israeli security, and U.S.-Israeli relations” (in Malka 2011, 8). In such a context, the Hawk sales during the JFK administration might have seemed to be the next logical step to counterbalance the Soviet-sponsored Arab states.

However, the sale of the Hawks was not only a culmination of JFK’s decisions with an impact on Israel, but it also represented his crossing the proverbial Rubicon as he “succumbed to the ‘powerful Jewish lobby’” (Ben-Zvi 1998, 2). Yet, David Tal claims that “despite the perceived massive support for Kennedy from American Jews, Israeli diplomats, in lobbying for the Hawks, did not try to activate the Jewish community or others of Israel’s supporters either in Congress or outside” (2000, 310). After all, JFK still refused to sell tanks and planes to Israel (“10. Israel and the United States” n.d., 124), so the only weaponry Israel could obtain from the U.S. was of a defensive nature. Nevertheless, Ben-Zvi claims that it is one of the big axioms of that era – that “Washington’s apparent tilt toward Israel during the early 1960s was the direct outcome of John F. Kennedy’s victory in the presidential elections of November 1960” – since the American Jewish community, an integral part of ethnic Democratic coalition dating back to the 1930s, shared many of JFK’s domestic concerns and priorities, as well as the fact that their leadership gained unprecedented access to the White House thanks to which they could exert pressure to pursue their foreign policy goals (1998, 2).

In terms of the nuclear question, during JFK's presidency America's own nuclear strategy slowly turned away from the philosophy of Massive Retaliation, as both the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, and JFK saw it as inflexible, too destructive, as well as "incapable of deterring aggression short of all-out war" (Green 2014, 37). Moreover, with growing technical and technological options and nuclear development, the doctrine needed to be adjusted. Thus, nuclear sharing<sup>15</sup> was employed<sup>16</sup> together with McNamara's Controlled Response. Controlled Response was, however, quickly superseded by the Assured Destruction doctrine triggered by the Cuban missile crisis in October, 1962. Additionally, JFK introduced his doctrine called Flexible Response that was later accepted also by NATO. The nuclear struggle was taking place still predominantly between the two superpowers. However, the satellites and allies were being taken into account, too. Therefore, the question of Israel and its potential to become nuclear was a serious matter for the U.S. as it could mean an introduction of nuclear weapons to the Middle East which would threaten U.S. interests and the balance of power there. Last but not least, the groundwork for the NPT began during JFK's administration:

A ban on the distribution of nuclear technology was first proposed by Ireland in a meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1961. Although the members approved the resolution, it took until 1965 for negotiations to begin in earnest at the Geneva disarmament conference. ("Milestones: 1961-1968" n.d., n.pag.)

Although the early proposal did not come from the U.S. and most of the work was done during LBJ's term, it is important to mention that the origins date back to Kennedy's era.

While the Eisenhower administration was aware of the Dimona construction thanks to aerial reconnaissance, it still accepted the cover story provided by the Israelis. JFK was, on the other hand, not so trusting. In truth, the question of the Dimona reactor was so important for him that only 10 days after he had assumed office, his Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, submitted to him a report regarding the atomic energy activities of Israel. Moreover, on January 31, JFK met "the departing American Ambassador to Israel, Ogden Reid, primarily to be briefed about the matter of Dimona" and he was told that "an inspection of the Dimona reactor could be arranged, 'if it is done on a secret basis'" ("The First American Visit to Dimona"

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<sup>15</sup> Some European allies were afraid they could be held hostage to the superpowers' struggle and could become a detached nuclear battleground. Thus, the U.S. stationed some of its nuclear forces among the allies.

<sup>16</sup> A concept already introduced in the 1950s.

n.d., n.pag.). However, JFK demanded that “an IAEA inspection team be given full access to Dimona, consistent with his commitment to halting the spread of nuclear weapons and as a way to reassure Egypt, which had reacted belligerently after the December 1960 revelations”<sup>17</sup> (Green 2014, 101). Such a request was refused by Ben-Gurion on the grounds of his December 1960 proclamation that Dimona served peaceful purposes only. Throughout February and April 1961, “a pattern emerged in which the United States would press for a date for the visit, while Israel would invoke Ben Gurion’s [*sic*] domestic problems or the Jewish holidays as reasons for delaying the visit” (“The First American Visit to Dimona” n.d., n.pag.).

By late March Ben-Gurion realized that the visit could not be postponed any longer and was persuaded by JFK’s aids “that a meeting between him and Kennedy, in return for an American visit to Dimona, was necessary to avoid confrontation and save the Dimona project” (ibid). A deal between the two states followed later in 1961: “in exchange for U.S. military aid for the first time (risking a political crisis in the Middle East), Israel allowed a U.S. inspection team to visit the incomplete Dimona site annually to a pre-arranged schedule” (Green 2014, 101). However, the inspectors were – against the wishes of Golda Meir, “who was, apparently, concerned about the implications of misleading the American scientists” (“The First American Visit to Dimona” n.d., n.pag.) – shown a fake control room and thus reported that nothing suspicious was taking place in the Negev Desert site, which was repeated during the consecutive visits, too. A positive report from the first Dimona visit was especially critical for making the meeting scheduled for May 30 between JFK and Ben-Gurion successful. Consequently, “the confrontation over Dimona was delayed for another two years” (ibid).

The nuclear dimension of the relationship represented an ongoing problem and resurfaced in the spring of 1963 as “an acute source of crisis between Washington and Jerusalem against the backdrop of the president’s relentless drive to persuade Israel to suspend altogether its activities in Dimona, or to open its nuclear reactor to intrusive and periodic inspections” (Ben-Zvi 2009, 225). In fact, there is a wealth of declassified correspondence between the two statesmen that proves how extensive the dealings were and where each of the states had its leverage. JFK remained unconvinced and until Ben-Gurion’s resignation<sup>18</sup> a few months before his own assassination, he sustained “an increasingly acrimonious correspondence” (Green

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<sup>17</sup> Ben-Gurion’s official statement on the character of Dimona.

<sup>18</sup> He did not resign over his problems with the U.S.



101) in which he, explicitly said “I am sure you will agree that there is no more urgent business for the whole world than the control of nuclear weapons” which clearly shows his concern over the Israeli nuclear status (JFK in “252. Telegram From the Department of State” 1963, n.pag.).

In fact, JFK specifically warned Ben-Gurion’s successor Eshkol ten days before he became the PM that the U.S. relationship with Israel might be “seriously jeopardized” by their nuclear program (“10. Israel and the United States” n.d., 124). Such a statement was sending a clear message of JFK’s standing on the nuclear question, as “not since President Eisenhower’s message to Ben Gurion [*sic*], in the midst of the Suez crisis in November 1956, had an American president been so blunt with an Israeli prime minister” (“The Kennedy/Ben Gurion/Eshkol Nuclear Exchange” n.d., n.pag.). In addition, his demands to inspect Dimona were unprecedented, since the U.S. was not involved in its construction, and there were no international agreements or laws being violated, hence his demands amounted to an ultimatum (*ibid*).

The pressure from JFK was more than evident. Upon Eshkol’s assuming office, he received a telegram<sup>19</sup> from JFK confirming his friendship and best wishes. Nonetheless, in JFK’s words, to continue in such a manner, it was necessary to discuss one of Eshkol’s new tasks. JFK then immediately proceeded to his concern regarding the Dimona site and his previous interaction with Ben-Gurion on this matter. He stressed that: “We welcomed the former Prime Minister’s strong reaffirmation that Dimona will be devoted exclusively to peaceful purposes and the reaffirmation also of Israel’s willingness to permit periodic visits to Dimona” (JFK in “289. Telegram From the Department of State” 1963, n.pag.). However, he added that he regretted

. . . having to add to your burdens so soon after your assumption of office, but I feel the crucial importance of this problem necessitates my taking up with you at this early date certain further considerations, arising out of Mr. Ben-Gurion’s May 27 letter, as to the nature and scheduling of such visits. (*ibid*)

It was in this telegram where he stressed his desire to introduce the semi-annual visits by the end of 1964 as well as the importance of having access to all areas of Dimona. Although the tone of the telegram was very civil and diplomatic, it still highlighted JFK’s concerns regarding the nuclear question. This was especially obvious in its last lines reading: “Knowing that you fully appreciate the truly vital significance of this matter to the future well-being of Israel, to the United States, and internationally, I

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<sup>19</sup> This is the document mentioned above when claiming that JFK’s demands amounted to an ultimatum.

am sure our carefully considered request will have your most sympathetic attention” (ibid), where he presses Eshkol, as well as demarcates his power as the U.S. President towards both the new Prime Minister as well as his country.

It was during JFK’s administration that Dimona approached its completion, which instigated a real nuclear debate within the Israeli government as well. This debate took place behind closed doors in 1962. There was a polarization even within Israeli inner circles, yet Ben-Gurion’s protégés Shimon Peres and General Moshe Dayan argued for “‘stable’ nuclear deterrence as an independent security guarantee under a ‘doctrine of self-reliance’, instead of a debilitating conventional arms race with the Arabs” (Green 2014, 101). Dimona became operational in 1964 and its supporters managed to convince most of the Israeli leadership that “only nuclear weapons could provide an absolute deterrent to the Arab threat,” adding that the Arabs were receiving an increasing amount of Soviet economic or military aid (Green 2014, 102).

This decision is what Levi Eshkol, Ben-Gurion’s successor, dubbed as “the Samson Option”<sup>20</sup> in order to justify the decision to build nuclear weapons. Eshkol also decided – under heavy pressure from JFK’s administration requesting the opening of Dimona to “more intrusive semi-annual U.S. inspections” – that denial was no longer feasible, which made him move to a policy of ambiguity. After assessing several postures, he avoided “a showdown by agreeing in principle to U.S. visits without undermining Israel’s future nuclear option,” penalties for which were “undermining Israel’s sovereignty and further movement towards nuclear opacity” (Green 2014, 102).

## **8. Case Study II: Lyndon Baines Johnson (1963 – 1969)**

Lyndon B. Johnson (D, TX) served as the 36<sup>th</sup> President of the United States between November 22, 1963, and January 20, 1969. Due to assuming office after the assassination of his predecessor, he inherited the initial domestic as well as foreign policies of the previous administration. LBJ was largely anti-nuclear, pushing for NPT to be signed. His 1964 election spot “Daisy” portraying the possibility of a nuclear Armageddon only two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis is said to have

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<sup>20</sup> “In the Bible’s Old Testament, Samson had been captured by the Philistines and put on public display in Dragon’s Temple in Gaza. He asked God to give him back his strength for the last time, and pushed apart the temple pillars, bringing down the roof and killing himself and his enemies” (Green 2014, 102).

contributed to his victory against the pro-nuclear Barry Goldwater, though the campaign ad ran only once (Mann 2016, n.pag.) (Rothman 2014, n.pag.). LBJ's nuclear fears were intensified in 1964 when China became the fifth nuclear power, and three years later, "the US forced NATO to enhance its conventional military options as part of a new NATO nuclear doctrine, Flexible Response" (Green 2014, 39). This policy was, in the light of the invulnerable Polaris submarines, land-based ICBMs,<sup>21</sup> and long-range bombers, which were all making the Assured Destruction feasible, an attempt to "make war less likely by increasing the credibility of deterrence" which turned out to be too idealistic; the bipolar dynamics entered the age of MAD: Mutual Assured Destruction (ibid). Additionally, his administration saw a ratification of the so called Outer Space Treaty in 1967.<sup>22</sup>

With LBJ's administration came a warmer, yet not fully unquestioning, approach to Israel. LBJ was largely sympathetic with the plight of the Jewish people and supportive of the Jewish state. This is to be seen in his deeds during WWII when he helped Jews to escape the Nazi persecutions, but also in the Jewish turnout at the elections. It is believed that he received 90% of the Jewish vote during the 1964 elections, which was, at that time, "considered the highest percentage of any Presidential candidate in history" ("President Lyndon B. Johnson" 1973, n.pag.). Moreover, during his long political career, and especially during his presidency, he had Jews among his closest confidants. It was also during his presidency when the U.S. became the chief diplomatic ally to Israel. Additionally, he strengthened the relationship through various formal agreements, as well as financial aid programs, regardless of the USS Liberty incident,<sup>23</sup> nuclear pressure, and the NPT issue.

Johnson's deployment of ground troops in Vietnam in 1965 by extension also influenced an American strategic re-evaluation of its ties with Israel, since it overstretched the U.S. military. Just one year prior to one of Israel's military and historic pinnacles – the Six-Day War in 1967 – the U.S. lifted its arms embargo<sup>24</sup> and became Israel's chief offensive arms supplier. After JFK's assassination, Eshkol approached LBJ with an offer to defer "a decision on going nuclear in return for a U.S. commitment to supply offensive arms to match those being supplied by the Soviets to Egypt" (Green 2014, 102). As a result of some of the early dealings,

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<sup>21</sup> Intercontinental ballistic missiles

<sup>22</sup> Although not primarily modeled as an anti-proliferation treaty, it limits nuclear testing with one of its provisions stating that "States shall not place nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction in orbit or on celestial bodies or station them in outer space in any other manner" ("Treaty on Principles" UNOOSA" n.d., n.pag.).

<sup>23</sup> An attack on this US technical research ship during the Six Day War by Israeli Air Force and Navy; it was ruled an accident, although disputes related to this ruling keep resurfacing from time to time.

<sup>24</sup>It was temporarily re-imposed during the Six-Day War for 135 days.

LBJ's administration sanctioned sales of 48 advanced A-4E Skyhawk strike jets, with the justification being that Israel had become a U.S. surrogate in the area when the U.S. was militarily stretched and pre-occupied in Vietnam (ibid). Tension was growing in the Middle East, and it would be difficult to contain should a war break out. Hence, reaffirming and strengthening ties with Israel in order to create a local ally and asset who could substitute for America's own temporary military deficiencies was essential.

In fact, the Six-Day War proved to be a grave test not only for Israel, but also for LBJ. It also meant a failure of Eisenhower's, JFK's, and LBJ's administrations in their attempts to prevent a renewed Arab-Israeli conflict ("The 1967 Arab-Israeli War" n.d., n.pag.) while it also posed a risk in terms of possible escalation between the U.S. and the USSR. Therefore, LBJ declared neutrality and repeatedly warned Israel not to strike first ("The 1967 Arab-Israeli War" n.d., n.pag.). He further "told Israel in June 1967 that the U.S. could not support a preemptive strike against Egypt and Syria" (Maoz 2010, n.pag.). Nonetheless, when the war was over, "[LBJ] demonstrated adroitness and courage in blocking the threat to Israel on June 10, 1967 when Soviet Premier Aleksei N. Kosygin was on the hot line from the Kremlin to the White House with threats of the use of Soviet force against Israel" ("President Lyndon B. Johnson" 1973, n.pag.). Additionally, LBJ "resisted international calls to pressure Israel into relinquishing the vast swaths of territory it had just captured" which was in contradiction with the UN RES 242 (Maoz 2008, n.pag.).

Although LBJ was far more sympathetic to Israel, he still continued with JFK's policy objectives related to Dimona (Green 2014, 101). Nonetheless, "once the trauma of Kennedy's assassination in November 1963 began to wear off and Johnson settled in as president, the relationship between the U.S. and Israel quickly soared to new heights" and the pressure on Dimona slowly ceased, too (Maoz 2008, n.pag.). In 1964, Dimona became operational and Eskhol's "Samson Option" became a reality.

Additionally, by 1965, "the White House and the CIA concluded that the Dimona visits could not accomplish the goal set for them by the Kennedy administration [as] the visits could not determine the status of nuclear research and development in Israel" (Cohen 1998, 206). Thus, the "American alternative to the visits was IAEA safeguards on Dimona" which Israel objected to (ibid 206). The negotiations, led by Robert Komer from the National Security Council, were said to be tough and rough, and Yitzhak Rabin<sup>25</sup> even recalls Komer saying "if Israel embarked in [a nuclear] direction, it might cause the most serious crisis she ever had

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<sup>25</sup> Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. beginning in 1968.

in her relations with the U.S.” (ibid 206), however, the threats did not work and the Americans eventually gave up.

Therefore, on March 10, 1965, the “Memorandum of Understanding” was signed by Eshkol, Komer, and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. It is this memorandum that is “a landmark in the evolution of Israeli nuclear opacity” (Cohen 1998, 207). In the memorandum, “the Government of the United States has reaffirmed its concern for the maintenance of Israel’s security,” wherefore it renewed its commitment “to the independence and integrity of Israel,” while the Israeli government, in return, “has reaffirmed that Israel will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Arab-Israeli area,” which is the first time “that the Israeli verbal formula became the foundation of U.S.-Israeli understandings” (ibid 207). LBJ, just like JFK before him, wanted to place Dimona under the IAEA safeguards; he just used a different approach. This proved to be more successful, and even though he did not achieve his ultimate goal, at least some guarantees were reached thanks to the 1965 MOU (ibid). However, the question of the meaning of the clause “to introduce” remained unanswered and became a matter for discussion in late 1968 and early 1969.

Yet, shortly before the Six-Day War, “US intelligence learned that Israel completed its basic weapon design and was capable of manufacturing warheads for deployment on both aircraft and missiles,” rendering Israel’s nuclear weapons capability consisting of two deliverable nuclear devices – although rudimentary – operational, (Green 2014, 103). By 1968, Dimona began full-scale production, being capable of producing about 5 warheads a year (Green 104). Moreover, there were already reports in 1966 that “Israel had purchased medium-range ballistic missiles from France [which] raised Arab fears that they were part of Israel’s nuclear programme, and prompted a public debate in the Arab press” (Green 2014, 103).

One year later, the Six-Day War broke out. Although it is said that “none of the reports considered that the nuclear issue played a role in the outbreak of war,” Cohen still argues that since the nuclear infrastructure of Israel was completed in 1966, “it was concerned that Dimona could cause hostilities with Egypt” (in Green 2014, 103). These weapons were said to be readied for use and were supposed to be delivered by “a French-Israeli version of the ballistic missile supplied by Dassault,<sup>26</sup> known as Jericho I” (Green 2014, 103). It is important to mention, though, that Israel showed no indication of deploying its nuclear arsenal, and neither the U.S. nor Egypt “appeared to have taken the Israeli nuclear potential into their calculations” (Green 2014, 103). In fact, the Six-Day War, the subsequent arms embargos

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<sup>26</sup> Dassault is an international French manufacturer dealing in aviation technologies. The company was approached in 1962 by the French government to manufacture the Jericho missiles on behalf of Israel (“MD 620 Jericho” n.d., n. pag.).

on Israel, and the Soviet re-arming of Egypt, showed the “inapplicability of nuclear weapons to almost all military situations for Israel” (Green 2014, 104 and Cohen 1998, 276). What’s more, LBJ also “publicly disavowed any firm commitment to defend Israel in a crisis” (Green 2014, 104); he needed a local ally, but he did not seek a war, let alone a nuclear war, with the USSR over an ally.

Israel had to respond to such realities, and the reaction was the “bomb in the basement” posture, meaning “keeping the program under full secrecy, making no test, declaration, or any other visible act of displaying capability or otherwise transforming its status” (Cohen and Burr 2006, 29). Moshe Dayan<sup>27</sup> argued that “if the Soviets could be persuaded that the Israeli nuclear threat was credible, they would be deterred from jeopardizing Israel’s survival” (Green 104). Although Cohen claims that the “evolution of Israel’s nuclear posture was completed after the 1967 war” (1998, 277), it was during the 1967-70 period when Israel moved from “nuclear ambiguity” to “nuclear opacity” (ibid). Cohen and Frankel explain that “nuclear opacity is not an issue of ‘uncertainty’ regarding Israel’s nuclear capabilities, but rather ‘the result of a political, even cultural, refusal to incorporate its nuclear status into its ongoing political and military practices and thinking’” (in “Israel” n.d., n.pag.).

LBJ’s great legacy in the U.S.-Israeli dynamics was his fervent effort to make Israel sign the NPT. In fact, “the advent of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, co-sponsored and signed by the United States in the summer of 1968, reshaped the U.S.-Israeli dialogue on the nuclear issue” (“Israel” n.d., n.pag.). Cohen says that the NPT “set the stage for the most direct confrontation between the United States and Israel over the nuclear issue during the Johnson-Eshkol period” (1998, 293). Throughout the 1960s, Johnson and Eshkol “crafted the nuclear issue with political ambiguity, and the NPT threatened to shatter that ambiguity [as] it forced Israel to take a position on an issue on which Israel preferred to be ambiguous” (ibid 293). Having Israel sign the NPT was one of the great U.S. policy objectives, yet for Israel, renouncing the development or use of nuclear-weapons was not an option: it “could not sign the treaty because of this implication” (ibid 293). Nonetheless, it still sorely needed a new military technology: the U.S. Phantom jets, which “set up the context for the confrontation” (ibid 293).

By November 1968, “against the background of strong U.S. pressure to join the NPT” (“Israel” n.d., n.pag.), and in exchange for an offer of fifty F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers – at that time the most advanced in the U.S. arsenal – as well as additional twenty eight A-4 Skyhawks that were to replace war losses, together with French Mirage Vs that were under embargo (Green 2014, 104), “Israel conditioned

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<sup>27</sup> By then, he had become a war hero and also a Defense Minister.

its signature on the following preconditions: provision of a positive security assurance<sup>28</sup> from the United States, especially against the Soviet Union; guaranteed long-term supply of U.S. conventional arms to Israel; and establishment of a link between Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories to regional peace” (“Israel” n.d., n.pag.). Such conditions were hardly to be met by the U.S. By that time, “the NPT had already been completed and submitted to states for their signature” (Cohen and Burr 2006, 24) and President-elect Nixon was already involved in the dealings, too.

Still trying to reach an agreement, “U.S. officials believed that the F-4 deal provided leverage that would be America’s last best chance to get Israel to sign the NPT” (Cohen and Burr 2006, 24). Nonetheless, “it was clear that the two negotiators<sup>29</sup> came to the table with completely different mindsets” (ibid) and this is where the interpretation of the 1965 “nonintroduction” arose. Warnke understood that “the physical presence of nuclear weapons entailed the act of introduction,” while Rabin “argued that for nuclear weapons to be introduced, they needed to be tested and publicly declared [by which criteria] Israel had remained faithful to its pledge” (ibid 24). This was the moment when Warnke realized that Israel already had the bomb, as “Rabin’s refusal to accept his physical possession definition of ‘introduction’ said it all” (Cohen 1998, 318-319).

In the end, the Phantom deal was not linked to the Israeli concession on signing the NPT (ibid 31). It is important to highlight that F-4s were capable of making a one-way nuclear mission from Israel to Moscow (Green 2014, 104). This seemed not only convenient for Israel’s own protection against its Soviet-sponsored neighbors, but it also indicated its true position as a local ally who could potentially carry out (a) U.S. mission(s) in case the cold war turned hot. Yet, the dealings were protracted and both the issues – the NPT as well as the Phantom deal – fell to Nixon “when he came to the office three months later” (Cohen and Burr 2006, 24).

## **9. Case Study III: The Presidency of Richard Milhous Nixon (1969 – 1974)**

Richard M. Nixon (R, CA) served as the 37<sup>th</sup> President of the United States between January 20, 1969 and August 9, 1974. Just like LBJ before him, Nixon, too, inherited the Vietnam War conflict. However, unlike his predecessors, he ended the war in Southeast Asia. Although being largely anti-Communist, his time in the office was

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<sup>28</sup> “A guarantee given by a nuclear weapon state to a non-nuclear weapon state for assistance if the latter is targeted or threatened with nuclear weapons” (“Glossary” *Nuclear Threat Initiative* n.d., n.pag.).

<sup>29</sup> Rabin and Paul Warnke, who was Assistant Secretary of Defense at that time.

also marked by a significant reduction of tension between the U.S. and two Communist countries: China and the USSR; a period known as the *détente*. This was orchestrated not only by Nixon, but also by his right-hand man, Henry Kissinger.

In terms of the arms race, his administration also continued to make attempts at the limitation of nuclear weapons, while still pursuing the Assured Destruction doctrine. His time in office saw the introduction of the Schlesinger Doctrine, and Nixon also managed to sign treaties with Brezhnev on the limitation of strategic nuclear weapons known as SALT I & II. In fact, several treaties on limiting the nuclear arms race were signed or came into effect during Nixon's administration: the so-called Sea Bed Treaty,<sup>30</sup> the NPT entered into force in 1970, and last but not least, the so-called ABM Treaty.<sup>31</sup>

In terms of U.S.-Israeli dynamics, it was during Nixon's time in office that the relationship with Israel reached the dynamics that continue to be drawn on until the present day. U.S. foreign policy during Nixon's years was managed under the so-called Nixon Doctrine, which was introduced due to the protracted Vietnam War, with Nixon claiming that the U.S. could no longer afford to defend its allies fully. Yet, he "he assured [them] that the United States would continue to use its nuclear arsenal to shield them from nuclear threats" ("Nixon Doctrine" n.d., n.pag.). It was under the influence of this doctrine that the U.S. sold arms to both Israel and Iran in the 1970s. It is further argued that "although the sale of arms to Israel improved U.S. relations with that country, application of the Nixon Doctrine in that case may have inadvertently spurred Israel's development of nuclear weapons" ("Nixon Doctrine" n.d., n.pag.).

However, Nixon was convinced "that the Arab-Israeli standoff over the fate of the occupied territories could damage America's standing in the Arab world and undermine prospects for U.S.-Soviet *détente*" ("The 1973 Arab-Israeli War" n.d., n.pag.). Yet, both he and Kissinger also saw "increased support for Israel as an effective way to counter Soviet influence throughout the region" (Mearsheimer and Walt 2008, 51). It is additionally important to highlight that after 1967, Israel indeed helped the US as a strategic proxy in the area, by which it also helped "to contain

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<sup>30</sup> The Seabed Treaty "sought to prevent the introduction of international conflict and nuclear weapons into an area hitherto free of them," in this case in international waters and on sea beds ("Treaty on the Prohibition" n.d., n.pag.).

<sup>31</sup> Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems, now a terminated treaty, was an agreement between the U.S. and the USSR "to limit deployment of missile systems that could theoretically be used to destroy incoming intercontinental ballistic missiles launched by the other superpower" ("Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty)" n.d., n.pag.).



Soviet expansion in that important region and occasionally helped the United States handle other regional crises” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2008, 51). Moreover, by “inflicting humiliating military defeats on Soviet clients like Egypt and Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War and 1973 [Yom Kippur] War, Israel also damaged Moscow’s reputation as an ally while enhancing U.S. prestige” (ibid 51-52).

The Yom Kippur War of 1973 indeed proved to be the decisive point in the relationship for years to come, with the 1973 emergency airlift – Operation Nickel Grass – being the final sign that the U.S. had decided to openly support Israel and make it its ally. It helped to cement the transition from the “special relationship” as declared by JFK, through “special partnership” under LBJ, to “strategic partnership” under Nixon. By the Yom Kippur airlift, the U.S. finally openly showed it was on the Israeli side: not only did it send arms, but it also endangered its own domestic policy and economics, as the support it provided brought the U.S. on high nuclear alert and cost it an OPEC oil embargo. It was also a decisive point in terms of the arms supply in general, since Nixon realized that saving Israel was no longer a matter of the Jewish state alone, but also a matter of the superpowers’ struggle; losing Israel was simply unthinkable to the U.S. Israel, in return, supplied the U.S. with intelligence about Soviet capabilities as well as about its client states in the Middle East by which it “facilitated the broader American campaign against the Soviet Union” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2008, 52). Israel also provided access to Soviet equipment captured in the 1967 and 1973 wars. Last but not least, the U.S. “benefited from access to Israeli training facilities, advanced technology developed by Israeli defense companies, and consultations with Israeli experts on counterterrorism and other security problems” (ibid 52). However, Roger Stone, Nixon’s close confidante and an advisor in his post-presidential years, in an excerpt from his second book that was released to commemorate 40 years since Nixon’s resignation remembers that “it is one of history’s great ironies that Nixon’s proposed airlift played an integral role in the salvation of the Jewish state, as in the years since the release of the Watergate Tapes it has become one of the established facts of the Nixon mythos that the president was a raving anti-Semite” (Stone 2014, n.pag.). Yet, Medoff mentions that Nixon, similar to Roosevelt and Truman before him, “embraced individual Jews when their talents and expertise proved useful – so long as they did not press him on Jewish issues” (2013, n.pag.).

In terms of the nuclear question, there are two main areas that need to be addressed in connection to Nixon’s presidency: the U.S. treatment of the Israeli nuclear program in general, together with the question of Israel signing the NPT, and the nuclear escalation during the Yom Kippur War. In fact, Nixon’s presidency

might seem paradoxical in this respect: the Dimona inspections ended and the issue of NPT was eventually unofficially dropped, yet it was during his administration that the superpowers came very close to actual nuclear escalation. His and Kissinger's approach can thus, in fact, be understood as pragmatic as well as being another extension of their *realpolitik*: once their initial efforts proved to be fruitless, they assessed the risks and opted for the most secure option in terms of U.S. interests.

It was clear from the very beginning that his administration would have a different attitude to the nuclear issue than LBJ or JFK: "the Nixon team was initially quite skeptical about the effectiveness and desirability of the NPT" (Cohen and Burr 2006, 24). Green (104) goes so far as to claim that Kissinger considered the NPT as a "futile exercise in morality." From what is known today, some of the high-ranking officials recall "the sense of anxiety among arms control professionals over whether the new president would support ratification of the treaty," the more so because when some of them "went to lobby National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger on the matter, they were bluntly told that any country with major security problems would try to get the bomb and the United States should not interfere" (Cohen and Burr 2006, 24).

There is still a lot of secrecy related to the 1969 meetings, as not all of the documents have been declassified yet. In the light of the documents that are available, together with the obscurity of what is not known, Cohen and Burr raise an interesting hypothesis that "the president appears to have believed that nuclear proliferation by America's close allies was tolerable may have reduced his concern about Israel, and indeed he may have given personal assurances to some Israelis even before he took office" (2014, n.pag.). Yet a series of recently declassified documents covering Nixon's presidency and his stance on the Israeli nuclear question show that neither he nor any of his top government officials took this issue lightly. It is a declassification from 2015 that shows that the NPT and Israeli nuclear program were, in fact, one of Nixon's first policy objectives after assuming office. The now available document consists of 1,100 pages, covers meetings from 1969 to 1976,<sup>32</sup> and "details American strategy on Israel's program" (Newman 2015, n.pag.). Thus, it is now clear that 1969 represented a turning point in the U.S.-Israeli nuclear relationship: "Israel already had a nuclear device by 1967, but it was not until 1968-1969 that U.S. officials concluded that an Israeli bomb was about to become a physical and political reality" ("Israel Crosses the Threshold" 2006, n.pag.). Additionally, "U.S. government officials believed that Israel was reaching a state

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<sup>32</sup> In includes Ford, too, as he took over Nixon's second term.

‘whereby all the components for a weapon are at hand, awaiting only final assembly and testing’” (ibid). It can only be seen as ironic that such a document was declassified weeks after “Iran and world powers reached a deal to restrict the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program” (M. Newman).

Another series of declassified documents – from September 2014 – shows that at the beginning, Nixon’s administration believed that a nuclear-armed Israel was not in their interest (Cohen and Burr 2014, n.pag.). David Packard, who was the Deputy Defense Secretary, warned Melvin Laird, the Defense Secretary, that if “Washington did not use its leverage to check Israel’s nuclear advances, it would ‘involve us in a conspiracy with Israel which would leave matters dangerous to our security in their hands’” (ibid). Cohen and Burr further stated that “the overall apprehension was palpable for National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, who consequently signed off in 1969 on National Security Memorandum (NSSM) 40, a request for a set of inter-agency studies – including policy recommendations – of the problems posed by the Israeli nuclear program” (ibid). It is now known, thanks to many de-classifications that “NSSM 40 was the Nixon administration’s effort to grapple with the policy implications of a nuclear-armed Israel” (Cohen and Burr 2006, 23-24).

Additionally, a memo from July 1969 reveals Kissinger’s vast attempts to handle the matter: it proposed an approach that could be taken, the cornerstone of which was to keep the issue of Israeli nuclear activities concealed from the American public. The memorandum also shows a disagreement among the top officials as to what leverage to use to push Israel into signing the NPT. One thing, however, was clear to all the men involved in the dealings: they all “agreed . . . that urging Israel to sign the NPT was a top priority” (Newman 2015, n.pag.). They, nonetheless, also realized that even if Israel signed the NPT by the end of 1969, which was what they desired, it would not be an assurance that could ultimately prevent a clandestine acquisition (ibid). The memo reads:

Everyone agreed that, as a minimum, we want Israel to sign the NPT. This is not because signing will make any difference in Israel’s actual nuclear program because Israel could produce warheads clandestinely. . . . Israel’s signature would, however, give us a publicly feasible issue to raise with the Israeli government — a way of opening the discussion. It would also publicly commit Israel not to acquire nuclear weapons. (“38. Memorandum From the President’s Assistant” 1969, n.pag.)

Furthermore, the memo states that there was a need for bilateral understanding on “Israel’s nuclear intentions because the NPT is not precise enough and because the

Phantom aircraft are potential nuclear weapons carriers” (ibid). Nonetheless, all of the officials agreed that the U.S. needed to make an impression that it had done all it could. The Joint Chiefs of Staff felt that if “Israel’s program becomes known, we should be in a position to say we did everything in our power to prevent Israel from going nuclear.” The Department of Defense, on the other hand, believed that “we could live with the existence of Israeli nuclear weapons provided they were not deployed,” while the State Department felt that “we should try to keep Israel from going any further with its nuclear weapons program – it may be so close to completion that Israel would be willing – and make a record for ourselves of having tried” (ibid).

Yet, the officials disagreed over whether to use the Phantom jets and arms deliveries as leverage, as there were some serious setbacks if such a fact became public knowledge. Marissa Newman states that the problem would be in explaining such a situation to the public without disclosing the actual reason, which would bear some serious political implications for the U.S. At the same time, it was believed that Israel would not take them seriously until it believed that the U.S. was serious about withholding the arms supplies. Cohen and Burr, in a summary to their article, add that Nixon was apparently “‘leery’ about using the jets as pressure,” which eventually proved to be fateful for the entire exercise (2006, 26).

Later, in July 1969, a meeting with Rabin took place, where Rabin kept quoting Eshkol’s statement about Israel reviewing the NPT. However, the meeting minutes state that “Rabin said he wanted to make clear that he was not accepting the US assumption that Israel has the capability to build nuclear weapons. He could say neither that Israel was capable nor that it was not” (“41. Memorandum of Conversation” 1969, n.pag.). There, Elliot Richardson, the Acting Secretary of State, “made a tough statement arguing that a nuclear Israel would threaten U.S. national security by complicating the Cold War conflict with the Soviet Union” (Cohen and Burr 2014, n.pag.). He further demanded, to no avail, that “Israel sign the NPT, that it not ‘possess’ nuclear weapons, and that it not develop the Jericho missile because of its nuclear capability” (ibid). Nixon is said to have “endorsed Rabin’s suggestion to leave the issue for his meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir a few weeks later” (Cohen and Burr 2014, n.pag.).

The meeting details from September 26, 1969 between Nixon and Meir are, until now, largely unknown, unknown not only to the public but are said to be unknown even to the officials who otherwise had a need to know access, and largely unknown even to Kissinger who was debriefed by Nixon (Cohen and Burr 2006, 27). Cohen and Burr claim that the two leaders “made a secret deal that tacitly recognized the undeclared reality of nuclear Israel” 2014, n.pag.). This meeting, Cohen

and Burr believe, was the “key event in the emergence of the 1969 US-Israeli nuclear understanding [and] subsequent documents suggest that Meir pledged to maintain nuclear restraint - no test, no declaration, no visibility - and after the meeting the Nixon White House decided to ‘stand down’ on pressure on Israel” (“Israel Crosses” 2006, n.pag.).

In the end, Nixon took the path which was in discord with what Paccard suggested and what others preferred. Marissa Newman clarifies that “in an October 1969 memorandum to Nixon, Kissinger appears to resign himself to the fact that Israel would not imminently sign the NPT.” Kissinger’s memo from October then states: “What we have to settle for, I believe, is an Israeli commitment that will prevent Israeli nuclear weapons from becoming a known factor and further complicating the Arab-Israeli situation” (“55. Memorandum From the President’s Assistant” 1969, n.pag.). Kissinger, therefore, offered an alternative to Nixon:

Since the Israeli phrase “nuclear power” suggests the concepts of the NPT, you propose that Israel assure us it will remain a “non-nuclear-weapon State,” assuming the obligations of such a state as defined by Article II of the NPT. [”. . . not to receive” and “not to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices . . . .”] This would in effect ask the Israelis to accept privately the key obligation of the NPT while allowing them more time to sort out their position on more generally unpalatable aspects of the treaty (e.g. safeguards and public renunciation of the nuclear option). (ibid)<sup>33</sup>

Marissa Newman (2015, n.pag.) concludes that this recommendation was approved by Nixon, a contributing factor which was probably “an updated intelligence assessment suggesting that it was too late to push the Israelis to accept ‘non-possession’ of nuclear weapons as the meaning of ‘nonintroduction’ [since] background papers prepared by the State Department for the meeting with Meir . . . suggested that the horse was already out of the barn” (Cohen and Burr 2006, 27). These papers further specified that “Israel might very well now have a nuclear bomb” and that it certainly “already had the technical ability and material resources to produce weapon-grade uranium for a number of weapons” (ibid). Such a reality would indeed render NSSM 40 pointless, and other solutions would have to be found to make sure a nuclear-armed Israel did not endanger U.S. foreign policy interests and did not make an impression it had gone nuclear under U.S. tacit approval.

In 1970, Rabin finally confirmed to Nixon that Israel “had no intention to sign the NPT,” referring to the results of the September 1969 meeting. Yet he responded

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<sup>33</sup> The entire quote, including the brackets, quotation marks, and ellipses, was taken from the original source in this form.

to Kissinger's initial request to address the nuclear issue and to respond to his questions in writing, defining the "nonintroduction" issue, again corresponding with the Nixon-Meir meeting. Thereafter, "the White House decided to end the secret annual U.S. visits to the Israeli nuclear facility at Dimona, [yet] lower-level officials were not told of the decision and as late as May 1970 they were under the impression that the visits could be revived" (ibid). Last but not least, based on the mutual understanding with Israel, "the State Department refused to tell Congress that it was certain that Israel had the bomb, even though U.S. intelligence was convinced that it did" and they managed to keep it a secret until 1975 (ibid). This corresponds with Steinberg's findings: he claims that, similar to LBJ before him and drawing on what Eshkol had already started with JFK, "in 1969, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger made one more effort to force Israel to relinquish the deterrent option," yet, when "Golda Meir refused, the US and Israel agreed to the 'don't ask, don't tell' compromise that has served both countries well for more than 40 years" (2010, n.pag.).

As for the Yom Kippur War, as mentioned above, it brought the superpowers to the verge of nuclear war, which has happened only twice since, once in 1945, and the 1973 situation was comparable only to the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 (Cohen 2003, n.pag.). Yet, after the ceasefire was reached, "the US and Israel reverted to their policy of mutual denial, even when Sadat<sup>34</sup> announced in 1974 that he had intelligence that Israel had developed tactical nuclear weapons" (Green 2014, 105).

Concretely speaking, when taken by surprise due to an intelligence failure during Yom Kippur of 1973 and after suffering heavy losses during the first initial days of the war, "Israel came close to making a nuclear preemptive strike when it seemed to be facing defeat at the hands of Syrian armor" (Sale 2002, n.pag.). On October 9, the question of using the "doomsday weapon" arose, as Moshe Dayan felt Israel "was fast approaching the point of "last resort" (Cohen 2003, n.pag.). Green (2014, 105) sums the situation up as follows: "Israel responded by starting to arm its nuclear arsenal (appropriately codenamed 'Temple' weapons), tipping off the Egyptians who would inform the Soviets," expecting the news of the nuclear escalation to reach the U.S., hoping they "would order their Arab clients not to advance beyond the 1967 borders". The Soviets then raised the alert status of their airborne divisions and, as discussed above, the Arab oil-producing countries boycotted oil supplies to the U.S.; Nixon, busy with his Watergate Scandal, ordered Kissinger to make sure Israel accepted a ceasefire, yet placing "the US nuclear forces on high alert until the ceasefire was secured" (Green 2014, 105).

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<sup>34</sup> Anwar Sadat was the president of Egypt.

Sale (2002, n.pag.) offers some additional details: to halt Ariel Sharon, then a major general commanding a division, “Kissinger raised the state of alert of all U.S. defense forces worldwide . . . and [on October 25] ordered a DefCon III.”<sup>35</sup> He further states that “according to a former senior State Department official, the decision to move to DefCon III ‘sent a clear message that Sharon’s violation of the ceasefire was dragging us into a conflict with the Soviets and that we had no desire to see the Egyptian Army destroyed.’” However, Israel “went on nuclear alert for a second time, until Meir quickly ended the crisis by ordering her army to stop all offensive action against the Egyptians” (ibid).

Cohen (2003, n.pag.), however, points out the importance of Golda Meir’s nuclear legacy in connection to this war: it was she who, although responsible for the decision-making failure, “refused to concede to Mr. Dayan’s gloom and doom rhetoric”. Instead, she offered “to fly secretly to Washington and, as Henry Kissinger later wrote, ‘for an hour plead with President Nixon’” (ibid). Cohen then states that Kissinger “flatly rejected that idea, explaining such a rushed visit ‘could reflect only either hysteria or blackmail’” (ibid). By that time, Cohen highlights, “American intelligence had signs that Israel had put its Jericho missiles, which could be fitted with nuclear warheads, on high alert (the Israelis had done so in an easily detectible [*sic*] way, probably to sway the Americans into preventive action)” (ibid), which contributes to some theories that the entire nuclear alert was a mere bluff to get American help. Nonetheless, Sale (2002, n.pag.) mentions that the major deterrent against actually deploying the missiles, as stated by the same State Department official, was that “if Tel Aviv had used those weapons, most of the fall-out would have blown back on Israel because of the pattern of prevailing winds at the time,” which must have contributed to the Israeli decision-making processes.

## **10. Conclusion**

The presented paper has aimed at elucidating the fact that Israel has played an increasingly important role for the U.S. from the Cold War era onward. In the context of the Cold War and the contemporary U.S. foreign policy, it is customary to talk about the Vietnam War or the Korean War. That is, to talk about the area of Southeast Asia where the U.S. engaged militarily in proxy battles, in order to protect its interests and to balance the USSR. However, the area of the Middle East, too, was another

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<sup>35</sup> “Called DefCons, for defense condition, they work in descending order from DefCon V to DefCon I, which is war” (Sale).

stage for proxy battles, although without U.S. ground operations. In fact, the U.S. interest in the Middle East was directly related to its endeavors in Asia. The area has been of U.S. interest until the present; therefore, it was important to explicate how the relationship with its key ally was established. Especially so since the establishment of such an alliance was in the national interest of the U.S., while defying another of its national interest imperatives – to control the spread of nuclear armaments.

As one of the introductory chapters established, cultural ties between the U.S. and the Jewish people go back to the beginnings of the Republic. Yet, ties to the Jewish state are much younger. In terms of recognition, Truman acted fast and recognized the new state earlier than any other country's leader. Like many of his predecessors and successors, he acted on the idea of shared democratic values and Biblical belief. It was equally established that the groundwork for some tangible ties of a political nature had already started, not with JFK, but during the second Eisenhower administration. Although Eisenhower's relationship with Israel was strained by the 1956 campaign, the first signs of change, related to the changing Cold War environment, date back to him. It was JFK who introduced elements that further warmed the partnership, such as the first arms sales to Israel in 1962. Although defensive in nature, the Hawks were, primarily, a sign of the gradual change and the U.S. opening to Israel. The number of Soviet client states among the Arab nations rose, and the Cuban Missile crisis showed that the tension between the two superpowers was far from subsiding. Israel was the only like-minded state in the area, which was, from a strategic point of view, convenient. Yet JFK never approved any sales of arms of an offensive nature.

With LBJ came "the golden age" of special relations. Militarily stretched due to the unpopular Vietnam War conflict, the U.S. kept deepening its local ties with Israel. There were several moments of tension, such as the 1967 USS Liberty Incident. However, none of them meant a U.S. withdrawal of any kind. The Six-Day War then proved to be a great test not only for Israel itself, but also for the U.S. Worried about possible escalation over a proxy ally, the U.S. remained disengaged militarily from the conflict. Moreover, it temporarily re-introduced its arms embargo. Nonetheless, a wealth of U.S. communications with Israel as well as its adversaries and the Soviet Union during the war shows a serious interest to mitigate the conflict from behind the curtain. Additionally, after the war, the U.S. became Israel's chief arms supplier and diplomatic ally, starting to supply the Jewish state with offensive weapons, too. LBJ also changed the nature of the foreign aid and the way it could be used, which further facilitated Israel's situation. Furthermore, he was personally engaged in the formulation and interpretation of the key UN Resolution 242.



Nixon's foreign policy was shaped by the Nixon Doctrine, which meant helping and protecting its allies, but it also meant no further direct military engagement overseas. The Yom Kippur War of October 1973 became a decisive moment in terms of U.S.-Israeli engagement. It brought the superpowers to high nuclear alert, comparable only to the Cuban Missile Crisis 11 years earlier. The U.S. emergency airlift then finally and decisively tied the U.S. to Israel, the more so since the U.S. itself suffered from the oil embargo imposed by the OPEC countries because of the airlift. Additionally, the war pushed the arms dynamics and military aid to a whole new level, which was foreshadowed also by the Phantoms sales from the late 1960s. The matter of Israel was no longer only a local matter, but became the superpowers' matter, too, because losing it became strategically unthinkable for the U.S.

In terms of the governments' relationship, it would be a stretch to describe JFK as a friend of Israel, unlike his successor, but he introduced elements that warmed the relationship, especially compared to his predecessors. Lifting the defensive arms embargo was one of them. Most importantly, JFK declared the relationship between the two countries "special," by means of which he moved Israel, on the declaratory level, to a position comparable only to the UK at that time. LBJ introduced a warmer, yet not unquestioning relationship with Israel and he moved the governments closer by becoming the main diplomatic ally after the Six-Day War. It is also necessary to mention the 1965 Memorandum of Understanding on the "non-introduction" of nuclear weapons by Israel, which later shaped the dynamics under Nixon and onwards. Nixon then finalized what JFK started and moved the relationship from "special" to "strategic." By means of the emergency airlift in 1973, he openly showed that the U.S. was on Israel's side. In return, Israel sustained the balance of power in the region as well as providing the U.S. with vital intelligence and Soviet equipment it managed to seize during some of its campaigns. The U.S. further benefited from access to local training facilities as well as from sharing Israeli advanced R&D technologies.

The discourse on Israeli nuclear research and armament was important during all three administrations. Although JFK's own policy of Flexible Response was introduced shortly after the beginning of his presidency, it was quickly exchanged for the Assured Destruction triggered by the Cuban Missile Crisis. Additionally, the groundwork for NPT was laid in 1961 and the first serious treaty, the Limited Test Ban Treaty, was signed in 1963. So, although the question of a nuclear arms race was still taking place primarily between the two superpowers, the role of their satellites was on the rise, too, which is why the Israeli nuclear program caused concerns in Washington. The nuclear crisis then culminated in the spring of 1963, with

JFK increasingly expressing his concern, leading up to a near-ultimatum in his first letter to Levy Eshkol upon the latter's becoming the Prime Minister. This was unprecedented pressure, given that the U.S. was not anyhow involved in building the nuclear site, and no laws had been broken. For the U.S., nuclear weapons increasingly symbolized the risk of Armageddon and fear, while for Israel they meant a nuclear and defense self-sufficiency in the face of possible annihilation from its Arab neighbors, with the Nazi holocaust still fresh in their memory. Hence the nickname for the nuclear program introduced by Eshkol: "The Sampson Option," as well as the move, under JFK's increasing pressure, to the policy of ambiguity.

Dimona approached its completion during the JFK administration, but it became operational in 1964, that is during LBJ's era. LBJ, although more sympathetic compared to JFK, still continued with the annual Dimona inspections. However, the pressure slowly eased. Since Israel refused to subject the site to the IAEA inspections and the U.S. inspections could not prove anything suspicious, the solution was to sign the Memorandum of Understanding, saying that Israel was not to be the first state to introduce nuclear weapons to the region. This memorandum, however, became a landmark of an Israeli opacity that was complete by 1970. Although the U.S. supposedly learned shortly before the Six-Day War that Israel was able to arm its military arsenal with nuclear weapons, it was still assumed that the nuclear infrastructure did not play any role in the breakout of the conflict. In fact, LBJ stopped any arms and other supplies to Israel during the war, even in the face of the Soviets rearming its client states, which shows his reluctance to go to a war over an ally. The ally was convenient, but not worth another superpowers proxy war, especially not nuclear. Israel thus adopted "the bomb in the basement posture," and LBJ started pressuring Israel to sign the NPT that became negotiable by the end of his term. Even though he established a further relationship for both personal as well as strategic reasons, he still pursued the U.S. anti-proliferation policy. It was, in fact, the NPT that caused the greatest tension between LBJ and Eshkol. Signing the treaty would mean renouncing the hard-built ambiguity and giving the weapons up was not an option for Israel. The U.S., having the NPT as one of its imperatives, then tried to persuade Israel by offering offensive weapons in exchange for the signature.

The Phantom deal, as well as the NPT talks, were then passed to Nixon. Compared to his predecessors, Nixon and Kissinger were political realists and pragmatists, and their *realpolitik* as well as *détente* also influenced the nuclear question in Israel. They eventually ended the Dimona inspections, and when they realized that Israel already had developed "the bomb," the pressure to sign the NPT was unofficially dropped, too. Nixon spent his first year in office dealing extensively with the nuclear question in Israel, but when he realized there was nothing to be done, in the

spirit of realism, he adopted the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, while keeping the ally whose nuclear opacity, in fact, could help to balance the contemporary Soviet-influenced Middle East. Moreover, he realized that Israel could produce the bomb clandestinely even if forced to sign the NPT, which would be for him, as the ally, more complicated than unofficially dropping the issue. The paradox was that although the nuclear pressure eventually ceased, Nixon’s presidency witnessed a high nuclear alert during the Yom Kippur War.

To summarize the above-mentioned details, it was during the three administrations in question when most of the groundwork for today’s relationship was laid. It slowly evolved from JFK’s declarations, through LBJ’s easing approach, and Nixon’s realism. The result was that the U.S. became Israel’s political, diplomatic, as well as military partner. All the three presidents followed U.S. national interests and, in the light of America’s own security issues and Cold War environment, they outsourced a like-minded ally on another crucial proxy stage, notwithstanding the fact that the ally and its security issues clashed with the U.S. policy approach. Although the nuclear question posed an issue during the majority of the three administrations under examination, and the U.S. several times preferred its own interests over the interests of its ally, the pressure eventually ceased, namely, under Nixon’s realization that it was too late, in light of which he adopted a realistic approach better suiting U.S. interests. The hypothesis that Israel moved from a lukewarm approach, through a special relationship, to a strategic partnership due to national and strategic interests, as well as due to the world politics and the balance of power during the Cold War era, proved to be correct. Besides, each of the administrations harvested additional benefits either for their domestic politics from the American Jewish community, or by following their personal beliefs and foreign policy imperatives.

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