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Memorandum of Conversation/1/

Washington, February 3, 1961.

/1/Source: Kennedy Library, President's Office Files, Country Series, Israel General.

Confidential.

Drafted by Jones.

Secretary Rusk forwarded to President Kennedy a copy of this memorandum of conversation under cover of a memorandum indicating that Jones had raised the reactor issue with Harman in response to a suggestion from the President. (Ibid.)

SUBJECT
Israeli Reactor

PARTICIPANTS
His Excellency Avraham Harman, Ambassador of Israel
G. Lewis Jones, Assistant Secretary for NEA

Ambassador Harman called on me today at his request to discuss tactics in connection with the Arab refugees at the resumed United Nations. Having in mind the President's interest in the Dimona reactor/2/ and the few words exchanged with the Secretary February 2 before the luncheon for Loy Henderson, I arranged to see Harman alone before our meeting on the refugees. I told Harman that he should not take what I was about to say as an official démarche: instead it was talk between friends who were interested in US-Israeli relations continuing on a smooth course undisturbed by doubts and suspicions.

/2/On February 6, while attending Secretary Rusk's staff meeting, President Kennedy expressed his concern that the Israeli reactor might stimulate Egypt to press the Soviet Union for aid in nuclear weapons development. According to the memorandum of conversation, the President indicated that "this might make it urgent for us to push a public announcement concerning the peaceful uses of the Israeli project." (Department of State, Secretary's Staff Meetings: Lot 66 D 147)

I said that we fully accepted the statements of Prime Minister Ben Gurion with regard to the peaceful uses of the Dimona reactor. There was no question of doubting his word. **We had, however, noted with pleasure his offer to invite an American to the Dimona site as soon as the publicity died down both in the United States and in Israel--the timing to be Ben Gurion's.** The affair of the Dimona reactor having arisen in somewhat dramatic circumstances, the technicians associated with such matters maintain a keen and continuing interest in the quiet visit suggested by Ben Gurion. There was interest at higher levels as well: Ambassador Reid had encountered this in paying his calls around Washington. Moreover, the Arab neighbors of Israel not infrequently raised the question of Dimona and its potential use as a source of nuclear weapons.

Now Israel was in the throes of what appeared to be a political crisis. Ben Gurion had announced his intention to take four weeks vacation. Also he was still the head of a "caretaker government". Israel had a record of caretaker governments lasting for months. Could Harman advise me what to reply to the question: "When do you think Ben Gurion will invite someone to see the Dimona site?" Did he think that such an invitation would have to be delayed because of the internal political crisis?

Harman replied that: "In Israel no one is thinking about anything else except the political crisis. The parties are holding meetings which last for hours and hours. Ben Gurion can think of nothing except the reputation of the

Mapai Party. I do not see how I could get to him or think that he would be inclined to give an invitation at this time".

Harman went on to say that in Israel the story of the Dimona reactor is very simple: They are building a reactor which will take some two years to complete. There is no plutonium. There is plenty of time. Ben Gurion has given all the assurances that anyone could and additionally has explained that he proposes to hand back the plutonium to the country supplying the uranium. The Israelis, Harman said, could not conceive why there should be continuing interest in Dimona in the United States or anywhere else. In good time, when there was something more to see, the visit might be arranged but no Israeli, let alone Ben Gurion, could conceive why there was such a hurry about it.

I said that I could understand the Israeli attitude being as he had described it but the idea of the proliferation of nuclear weapons was absolutely anathema to the United States and, although rightly or wrongly, the suspicion of obtaining such a capability had fallen on Israel. Since the United States and Israel are such close friends and since the offer of a visit had been volunteered by Israel it seemed to me it was simply good common sense for the visit to take place very quietly and without publicity at an arranged date. The fact of such a visit by qualified experts would be invaluable in allaying suspicions.

I reiterated that I was not giving a *démarche*. He and I were good friends and I was simply "tipping him off" with regard to a continuation of United States interest. I thought that when he paid his courtesy call upon the Secretary some time in the next ten days it would be an excellent gesture if he could at that time suggest a quiet visit by an American or some other friendly expert. Ambassador Reid had indicated that this would not be at all difficult to arrange.

Harman thanked me for the "tip off" and said that he would see what he could do. He was not sanguine of results because of the Israeli internal political situation. He himself indicated that he agreed with me that "getting the visit over with" would be a good thing./3/

/3/On February 11, Harman informed Jones that he was authorized to tell Rusk that Ben Gurion did not know whether he would be the next Israeli Prime Minister, but if he were, one of his "first pieces of business" would be to invite an American to visit the Dimona reactor. (Memorandum of conversation; *ibid.*, Central Files, 684A.86B/2-1161)

Comment:

Although Harman would have been far happier had I not raised the subject, because he will have difficulty getting anything out of Israel, I am confident that he considered my nudge a tactful one. I imagine that he will have something to say on the subject when he calls on the Secretary, which otherwise might not have been the case.

Since we spoke alone in an "off the record" manner I do not think that the talk with Harman described above should be cited as a definite U.S. approach in any future chronologies on this subject.