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37. Memorandum From the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Hoopes) to Secretary of Defense McNamara^{1/}

Washington, May 22, 1967.

^{1/}Source: Washington National Records Center, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, OSD Files: FRC 330 72 A 2468, Israel 400.137. Secret.

SUBJECT
Gas Masks for Israel

Israel asked on 19 May to buy for cash^{2/} on an urgent basis 20,000 US Army M-17 gas masks to be air shipped to Israel for immediate distribution. The US Army can make 20,000 masks available immediately from its stocks. These are being prepared for shipment and could be dispatched as quickly as the GOI can arrange air charter.

^{2/}The words "for cash" are a handwritten addition on the memorandum.

The Egyptians have used chemical agents, including nerve gas, in the Yemen recently. Israeli intelligence reports that Egypt has brought gas shells or bombs forward to the Sinai in its recent deployments. Although we believe it highly unlikely that Egypt would use gas against Israel, this possibility cannot be altogether discounted.

Secretary Rusk is aware of and supports the Israeli request to purchase American masks, even though all concerned (including the Israelis) recognize that the number of masks involved is too small to do much good and that by themselves could not assure adequate protection against the type of gas which may be used. This would be essentially a psychological gesture.

Under the circumstances I recommend we respond affirmatively to Israel, on the condition that it not publicize this action as evidence of US support for the GOI in the current crisis.^{3/} We do not believe however that a public disclosure stating (without linkage to the US) that Israeli troops were being equipped with gas masks would, on balance, be detrimental. On the contrary, it might force the Egyptians into a denial of any intention to use gas. Under Secretary Rostow is concurrently examining measures at the UN also designed to force an Egyptian denial of intent.^{4/}

^{3/}Neither the "approved" nor "disapproved" option was checked.

^{4/}Rostow discussed this in a May 20 memorandum to Rusk. He stated that according to an Israeli intelligence report, Egyptian troops in the Sinai were equipped with gas masks, and canisters of gas had been seen. Whether or not this was true, he continued, "we know that the Egyptians have used several kinds of poison gas in their aerial bombing of the Yemen, and that some of the gas at least is extremely lethal, and of Soviet origin and manufacture." He suggested several possible actions, including the possibility of briefing the Secretary-General before his trip to Cairo. (National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, Middle East Crisis Files, E. 5190, Box 19, NE Situation, May-June 1967, Folder 1)

Townsend Hoopes