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### 57. Memorandum of Conversation/1/

New York, May 30, 1961, 4:45-6 p.m.

/1/Source: Department of State, Central Files, 033.8411/5-3061. Secret. Drafted by Talbot and approved by the White House on June 29. The meeting was held in the President's suite at the Waldorf Astoria. The time is from the President's Appointment Books. (Kennedy Library)

#### SUBJECT

Conversation between President Kennedy and Prime Minister Ben Gurion/2/

/2/Additional documentation relating to Ben Gurion's visit is *ibid.*, National Security Files, Country Series, Israel, Subjects: Ben-Gurion Visit: 5/20/61-6/2/61. A copy of the briefing book prepared in the Department of State for the President is in Department of State, NEA/IAI Files: Lot 70 D 305, Ben-Gurion Visit 1961.

#### PARTICIPANTS

The President

Prime Minister Ben Gurion of Israel

Ambassador Avraham Harman of Israel

Phillips Talbot, Assistant Secretary of State for NEA

Myer Feldman, Deputy Special Assistant to the President

After an exchange of amenities, in which each expressed his pleasure at meeting the other, the President and Prime Minister Ben Gurion plunged into a discussion of Israel's Dimona reactor. The President said he was glad that two American scientists had had an opportunity to visit the reactor and had given him a good report of it. Since some nations are disturbed at the prospect of the construction in Israel of a large reactor, with plutonium producing capability, the President suggested that--"on the theory that a woman should not only be virtuous but also have the appearance of virtue"--our problem is how to disseminate information about the nature of the reactor in such a way as to remove any doubts other nations might have as to Israel's peaceful purposes.

The Prime Minister said he wanted to talk about the reactor in the context of Israel's problems.

The greatest of these problems, and an almost insoluble one, he described as Israel's serious shortage of fresh water. Even when the Jordan River is effectively tapped there will not be enough fresh water for the southern part of Israel, he added. The only solution to this continuing shortage that Israel could discern is desalinization of sea water, a process that is technically possible but would be economically practicable only if very cheap power were available. Israel hopes that atomic power, which is now expensive, will become much cheaper and will make possible the economic desalinization of sea water. It had therefore consulted with Dr. Bhabha of India and with scientists from England and had followed the suggestion that Israel should gain the necessary scientific knowledge to take full advantage of the coming age of nuclear power. In building the Dimona reactor for this purpose the Prime Minister acknowledged that Israel had received assistance from France.

Israel's main--and for the time being, only--purpose is this, the Prime Minister said, adding that "we do not know what will happen in the future; in three or four years we might have need for a plant to process plutonium"./3/

/3/Presumably plutonium produced in the Dimona reactor could be processed in France, in the United States or in Israel. This multiplicity of processing opportunities would increase the difficulty of effective supervision. [Footnote in the source text.]

Commenting on the political and strategic implications of atomic power and weaponry, the Prime Minister said he does not believe that Russia wants to give atomic capacity to Egypt now but he does believe that "in ten or fifteen years the Egyptians presumably could achieve it themselves".

The President observed that while the Prime Minister's estimate might be correct, we do not want by our own actions to increase tensions in the Middle East. He explained that the United States is much involved with Israel in the Middle East and it is to our common interest that no country believe that Israel is contributing to the proliferation of atomic weapons. It is obvious, he added, that the UAR would not permit Israel to go ahead in this field without getting into it itself.

The President then asked again whether, as a matter of reassurance, the Arab states might be advised of findings of the American scientists who had viewed the Dimona reactor. In reply, the Prime Minister said, "You are absolutely free to do what you wish with the report. If you feel you should publish it, we have no objections."

The President expressed his appreciation of the Prime Minister's willingness to agree to this action. He added that of course the United States is sometimes suspect in matters dealing with Israel, "because we are close friends", and asked whether it would not be helpful to let neutral scientists also observe the reactor. Ben Gurion asked who are really neutrals these days? The President commented that although Khrushchev says that no man is neutral, there are, after all, such neutrals as the Scandinavians and the Swiss. The Prime Minister said he would have no objection to this. The President expressed his satisfaction at the Prime Minister's reply. He was pleased he could feel that Israel would agree to going ahead with this.

Prime Minister Ben Gurion then raised the question of Israel's security. The deficit is increasing in Israel's arms as compared to the UAR military equipment, he said; the UAR has more planes and tanks and now they have 200 Russian instructors. This means that while the gap in quantity is growing the gap in quality is being narrowed. Nasser's declared aim, the Prime Minister added, is to destroy not just to defeat Israel. "If they should defeat us they would do to the Jews what Hitler did". He asserted also that the Arabs do not value human life and that this makes the problem more difficult.

Prime Minister Ben Gurion referred to his visit last year with President Eisenhower.<sup>/4/</sup> On that visit he had asked the United States for weapons--especially for defensive weapons, because the UAR has 26 air fields and Israel has only four. Before leaving Washington he had asked whether he could leave the United States with the assumption that he would get the weapons, and had been told "that is a fair assumption". (Presumably the Prime Minister was referring to Hawks.) He said he still does not see why Israel cannot get these weapons. He felt it is in the best interest of the United States for Israel to have defensive weapons.

<sup>/4/</sup>Ben Gurion met with President Eisenhower on March 10, 1960, at the White House; see *Foreign Relations, 1958-1960*, vol. XIII, pp. 280-288.

The President commented that he had not found records which permit a firm conclusion about what had been committed by the previous Administration, but that the problem, as we see it, is that while the Hawk is a defensive weapon it is also a missile and should missiles come into the Middle Eastern area, military weaponry will escalate fast. This is a problem, he said, to which we will continue to address ourselves, because we do not want to see Israel at a disadvantage. But we are reluctant to introduce missiles into the Middle East; the other side might then introduce ground-to-ground missiles. He repeated that if Israel were faced with a critical break-through of weapons on the other side, we would have our views of what to do. But we will need a better understanding of the danger and we hesitate to be the ones to introduce missiles into the region.

The Prime Minister explained that he was not asking for these weapons on the basis of a commitment made by the previous Administration but on the merits of the case. Acknowledging this, the President observed again that what we are concerned about is introducing missiles into the region.

There followed a brief discussion of tanks and planes available to the UAR and to Israel, with figures taken from the briefing book that the President had at hand. The Prime Minister said that the UAR has 300 fighters, with 200 more they could call upon from other Arab nations. Israel has ordered 60 Mirages from the French. The first of these may be delivered by the end of this year but it will take more than 12 months for them to be delivered in full. Commenting on the performance capability of the MIG 19, the President observed that we cannot eliminate the hazard but we would not want Israel to get into such a position of inferiority that an attack on it would be encouraged. The Prime Minister again suggested that the Hawk, a defensive weapon, would be the best way to avoid this danger at the present time and that it could not threaten any other country.

Summing up this aspect of the conversation, the President said that the Hawk had been given to only a few other countries and that if it were introduced into Israel the next development on the other side might be an air-to-ground or ground-to-ground missile. He said we will watch this matter with care and added, "You don't feel that this is a satisfactory answer to your request, but you can be assured that we will continue to watch the situation."

Turning to another subject, Prime Minister Ben Gurion commented that now the President was going to see Premier Khrushchev.<sup>/5/</sup> In 1956 Khrushchev and Bulganin and Prime Minister Eden had issued a declaration for the integrity and independence of all the states in the Middle East,<sup>/6/</sup> and last year the French, on a visit in Moscow, had issued a similar declaration on May 19.<sup>/7/</sup> If a joint declaration like those of 1956 and 1960 could be issued by the President and Premier Khrushchev the Prime Minister felt it would be helpful.

<sup>/5/</sup>President Kennedy met with Soviet Chairman Nikita Khrushchev at Vienna June 3-4.

<sup>/6/</sup>The statement on the Near East was part of a broader U.K.-Soviet statement issued on April 26 regarding the discussions of Prime Minister Eden, Chairman Bulganin, and Member of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet Khrushchev in London between April 12 and 27, 1956. The U.K. Government printed it as Command Paper No. 9753.

<sup>/7/</sup>Not identified.

The President asked what in the Prime Minister's judgment would be the response of Arab countries to such a declaration. To this the Prime Minister answered that several small countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq would accept the declaration gladly because they would feel it would protect them against Nasser. The President then asked whether Russia would be likely to do anything now to displease Nasser. Prime Minister Ben Gurion called this unlikely but added that if Khrushchev would be willing to do this it would help stabilize the situation in the Middle East. The President suggested that Nasser probably would object to this declaration, because he thinks that the present borders between Israel and the UAR are not fixed and he asked whether in this circumstance Khrushchev would be likely to accept such a declaration. The Prime Minister doubted that Khrushchev would do this but commented that it would be a test to see whether Khrushchev is really interested in relaxing world tensions. The President observed in this connection that he thinks Khrushchev is pushing hard on many issues.

The President expressed interest in the Prime Minister's views of Nasser's relations with Russia. These are very close, Ben Gurion answered. "Nasser is not a Communist, but he relies on Russia and gets Russian support to get into Africa. The African leaders are not Communists either--even Sekou Toure--but they are pro-Communist. Nasser is working very hard in these countries. His efforts help bring the Russians into them also."

On a broader front, the Prime Minister said he does not believe there will be a hot war. The American people don't want war, nor do the Russian people. Agreeing, the President observed that nevertheless the danger is there. The Soviet Union wants to push us out of Berlin. We cannot permit the USSR to destroy the Atlantic Alliance and we cannot permit ourselves to be forced out of Berlin, he said. If we should be forced out of Berlin Europe would no longer associate itself with us in NATO. And then, the Prime Minister added, you would be forced out of Europe. Yes, the President said, and then back to our own shores. But we don't intend that to happen.

Prime Minister Ben Gurion pointed out the United States accepted the status quo but the Russians do not. "The Russians think you are doomed, and they say so." The President responded that one can argue that systems in many countries may be doomed but not the people, adding, "I can say that doom would be hastened if we were to be run out of Berlin. What interest would you have in a guarantee from us if we let ourselves be pushed out of Berlin?" The Prime Minister responded again that a guarantee of Middle East borders would provide a test case of Soviet intentions. To this the President replied that he was not sure our security problems are not as great as Israel's. The Prime Minister saw in the two situations the difference that "we are the only remnants of a people that have been fighting for survival for the past 4000 years. If Nasser defeats us, we are destroyed."

The President asked the Prime Minister for his estimate of current tensions in the area of Israel. The Prime Minister responded that the borders are more or less quiet; there has been a little worry about Aqaba but the Secretary General has reassured him that everything was quiet there. Nevertheless the dangers remain in such places as Jordan and Iraq where regimes depend upon the life of a single man. They are much more worried than we are, the Prime Minister said, because Nasser can send someone to assassinate one man whereas in a democracy everybody would fight. Even Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey are afraid of what might happen. Such a

declaration as he had suggested would, in the Prime Minister's view, give more confidence to all the smaller Arab and other Middle East peoples.

The President asked the Prime Minister's views of the Palestine Conciliation Commission, explaining that as the Prime Minister knew, the PCC (of which the United States is a member) is obliged to make a report in the fall of 1961. The President expressed the hope that there may be an opportunity there and asked how the Prime Minister felt about it. The latter recalled that in 1953 President Eisenhower had sent a messenger named Anderson<sup>/8/</sup> to make two exploratory trips in the Middle East. At first Nasser was agreeable to the suggestions that were evolved but the minute he discovered that Israel was serious about them he changed his mind. "All questions in the Middle East depend upon Nasser."

[/8/Reference is presumably to the Robert Anderson mission of 1955-1956.](#)

The President said he thought we have to assume that Nasser will make our lives as difficult as possible, and the Prime Minister agreed, unless some pressure is generated among his people for peace.

The Prime Minister said that all the people in the uncommitted world are watching the U.S. and other Western countries. For these people, freedom does not mean what it does to us. What makes an impression is better standards of living and health and education. It is not just money they want; they want to feel that they are treated as human beings. This is why Israel is working with Africans. "If you will succeed with the Peace Corps idea--with Americans going out not as superior human beings but to help others--this psychological factor will be more important than the large amounts of money you give away."

The Prime Minister then described how Israel has brought Asians and Africans into its population and has made its Army an educational institution, which is of great interest to other countries such as Ghana that are trying to develop themselves. He spoke of the Afro-Asian Institute in the University where Asians and Africans are taught cooperation and of other programs that attract many people to learn in Israel. Hundreds of Indians are also coming to Israel, he said, although Nehru will have no relations with Israel. He regretted Nehru's attitude on this point and said that his excuse is that he wants to make peace in the area. "It is not for me to judge him. He is a great man. I admire him. There is democracy in India; it is the only country in Asia which is democratic except Japan. If Nehru goes I am not sure what will happen; but now it has democracy."

Continuing his comments on the general world situation, the Prime Minister observed that the only imperialistic country that exists now is Russia, which keeps under its domination many Muslim countries in Asia, former parts of China and many countries in Europe. Yet in the war of propaganda they win because they go against the status quo in other countries. Unless the West can provide what other countries need, we will lose.

Returning to the subject of the Palestine Conciliation Commission, the President stated that its new efforts need a sympathetic hearing because if they fail we may get a "Troika" commission. The United Nations is trying to get a neutral representative who will in turn make the proposal which will involve the three alternatives of repatriation or compensation with resettlement in the Arab countries or elsewhere.

In response, the Prime Minister commented that any commission would be likely to fail in this effort. "They--the UAR and any Arabs--don't care what happens to people. They regard the refugees as the best weapon at hand. If they could get hundreds of thousands of Arabs into Israel we would have those and still be surrounded by many millions of other Arabs." He then recapitulated the events immediately following Israel's independence when after several quiet days the Arabs left Israel in large number and in succeeding months Israel had to accept many hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from other countries. He also stated that Israel has absorbed as many Jewish refugees from Arab countries as they have absorbed Arab refugees from Israel.

The President observed that maybe the Arabs would not agree to any realistic plan than the PCC might put forward but if so we would rather have the responsibility of disagreement on them. We are likely to have our troubles with our Congress if the US continues paying 70% of the UNRWA costs for caring for refugees. If it appears that Israel is constructive, it will make the problem easier.

"Yes, it is always worth trying", the Prime Minister responded. "But until there is peace between Israel and the Arabs I don't see much chance of success."

The President said that although we had been attacked by the press in the UAR on Cuba and other matters, we want to do our best to see if this PCC effort can succeed. The Prime Minister recalled the recent Bandung

Congress at which representatives of many states, including Communist China, attacked the U.S. He said that Israel had sent the U.S. information about this Congress about the way the people think and speak.

In summary, the President said that the conversation had covered several topics: on missiles, "I expressed a desire to continually review the missile situation. We are reluctant to give Israel missiles and you understand that, but we would be disturbed if Israel should get into a situation that would invite attack. We will keep the matter under continuing review in our Administration, I can assure you."

On the question of the security guaranty, "I'll see what the atmosphere is. We guess that Khrushchev will not wish to lessen the tension. We will have to feel our way through this. The problem probably will be that we won't get agreement on various issues. If we should, we might try to get an agreement limiting arms to all Africa also."

Before ending the conversation, the Prime Minister said he wished also to take note of the fact that Israel has good relations with Persia and Turkey. Turkey is the more stable and can take care of itself. In Persia there is a very difficult situation; while the people are monarchists, there is corruption and much difficulty. It would help if the U.S. could give them a little more help and encouragement. In response the President said that we and the previous administration have devoted more attention and effort to Iran than to almost any other country in that region. Iran has a large Army. During the recent riots some of our people had questioned whether the Army would support the Shah. There has been a good deal of corruption and there are even stories about the royal family. However, the President thought that this government represented the last best hope and we will do everything to support it. We are for this government and the new Prime Minister 100%. The Prime Minister said he was delighted to hear this.

In conclusion the President recalled his previous conversations with the Prime Minister. He wanted the Prime Minister to know that we wish relations between our two countries to be close and harmonious and that we want to be helpful in the Middle East. It was for this reason that he had recently written to Nasser.<sup>/9/</sup> Responding, the Prime Minister assured the President that he does not hate Arabs, that he regards them as human beings and that "we want you to help them." The President expressed his feeling that we want to maintain some influence with them.

[/9/See Document 47.](#)

As the Prime Minister rose to leave he handed to the President, as a gift, a book written in Latin, published in 1680. This book, he said, was a record of a visit to the Holy Land by the author, Radziwilli, who was a forebear of Prince Radziwill, the husband of President Kennedy's sister-in-law. Accepting the book with gratitude, the President said he was going to the christening of the Radziwill's child in London next week and, with the Prime Minister's permission, would present this book to the child.

The President and the Prime Minister parted with mutual expressions of respect.