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May 24, 1967

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Record of National Security Council Meeting held on May 24,
1967 at 12 noon -- Discussion of Middle East Crisis

Those Present: The President
The Vice President
Secretary Rusk
Secretary McNamara
Secretary Fowler
General Wheeler
Mr. Leonard Marks
Under Secretary Eugene Rostow
Assistant Secretary Lucius Battle
Mr. Walt W. Rostow
Mr. Farris Bryant
Mr. George Christian
Mr. Bromley Smith
Mr. Francis Bator
Mr. Harold Saunders

Secretary Rusk opened the meeting with a report on the current Arab-Israeli situation. He described it as serious but not yet desperate:

-- The U.N. Security Council is meeting, and it is important to have it in session on this issue. We do not yet have a full report from U Thant's talks in Cairo, but Bunche reports that the Egyptians have suggested a return to the General Armistice Agreements as they stood before the 1956 fighting. That might relieve the pressure in the Straits of Tiran, but the Israelis might not be in the mood to make that kind of concession.

-- We are in touch with the USSR. Privately we find the Russians playing a generally moderate game, but publicly they have taken a harsh view of the facts and have laid responsibility at Israel's door -- and by inference at ours. Syria and Cairo say publicly they have Soviet support; but our general impression is that this is somewhat less than complete.

-- Israeli Foreign Minister Eban will be here on May 25. We have insisted on consultation, and he is here to consult. The borders have been reasonably quiet, but the Straits to the Gulf of Aqaba are the main issue, both for Israel and for the major maritime nations. We are consulting with the British about this today.

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None attached

-- In a "thoughtful discussion" with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on May 23, he found unanimity that we should not act unilaterally, and that we should work through the UN and multilaterally.

In summary, he could not promise that this crisis would be over in 24 hours; but he had the impression that no government wants war.

Secretary Fowler asked to what extent we were looking into economic sanctions and to what extent we should be trying to influence the IMF and World Bank to operate in this situation. He had in mind economic sanctions that might be in the nature of a counter-blockade. We might hold the Israelis off if we could convince them we are hurting the UAR more than the blockade is hurting them. Secretary Rusk said that from the Fund's viewpoint, any agreement with the UAR consummated today would be reckless.

The President suggested that Eugene Rostow and Secretary Fowler look at all the cards we have had to play in this field. Secretary Fowler indicated that he was seeing Mr. Schweitzer of the IMF and private bankers from New York in the next couple of days, and we could begin laying any ground work necessary.

The President then said he would like to hear views on what we do if all these other measures fail. We should play out the UN and other multilateral efforts until they are exhausted. "I want to play every card in the UN, but I've never relied on it to save me when I'm going down for the third time. I want to see Wilson and De Gaulle out there with their ships all lined up too." But all of these things have a way of falling apart. He mentioned, for instance, early Congressional support for his actions in Vietnam. Therefore, we have to figure out what we can do if all these other courses fail.

In a parenthetical exchange, the President alluded to statements by Senators Symington and Fulbright to the effect that the U. S. could not manage two crises at once. They see it as a choice between Israel and Vietnam and believe we ought to withdraw from Vietnam. He told Secretary Rusk to let Senator Mansfield know that this kind of music in the Senate is just what Kosygin wants to hear.

Secretary Rusk before leaving the meeting commented that we were witnessing an interesting reversal of roles -- doves have become hawks, and vice versa.

The President then turned to Secretary McNamara for a military appraisal of the situation. The Secretary said in general that there is

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no substance to the Fulbright/Symington notion that the U. S. cannot manage both Vietnam and the Middle East crises at the same time. He then turned to General Wheeler for a detailed run down of our military posture in the Mediterranean and the current disposition of Arab and Israeli forces.

In addition to those facts widely current in our intelligence estimates today, General Wheeler indicated that it would be harder to open the Gulf of Aqaba than we had at first thought. Because of the two Egyptian submarines in the Red Sea, we would need a ASW unit, the nearest of which is now in Singapore -- two weeks away.

General Wheeler suggested that if Israel does try to open the Gulf, it will attack first by air, striking initially the UAR's naval forces in the Red Sea and the air bases in the Sinai. Only after establishing air superiority would the Israelis try to take out the battery at Sharm al-Sheikh. Therefore if the Israelis move, it might not be possible to localize a strike designed simply to open the Straits.

A brief discussion of possible presence of unconventional weapons followed. [REDACTED]

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(5) [REDACTED] However, Mr. Helms was quite positive in stating there were no nuclear weapons in the area. General Wheeler said he was less well informed "but more skeptical."

In summary, General Wheeler noted that we have a powerful naval force in the Mediterranean; that our land forces are few, limited to about 1400 Marines now ashore at Naples, three days away; that our nearest ASW unit is two weeks away, since we cannot send one through the Suez Canal; that the UAR coastal battery and naval and air forces in the Red Sea will be the units employed to blockade the Gulf of Aqaba; that we will have trouble with overflight and staging rights in Turkey, Libya and Spain if we have to introduce our own ground forces; and that the Israelis can hold their own.

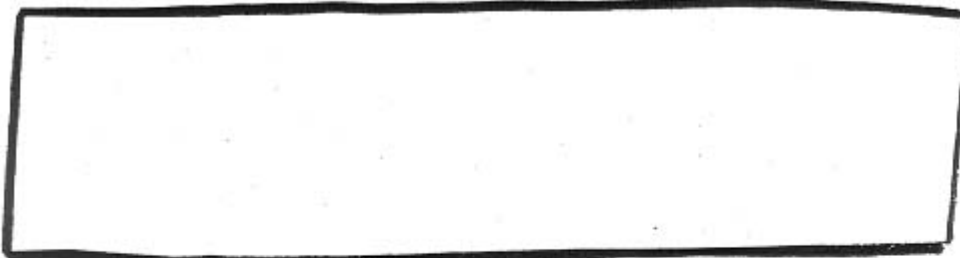
On the last point, the President asked for a new reading on Israeli capability. He said Ambassador Goldberg is less certain about Israeli superiority. Mr. Helms noted that he had sent a recent assessment to Ambassador Goldberg but had had no response yet. Both Mr. Helms and General Wheeler promised to review this estimate.

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The President came back to his initial question: "Suppose Gene doesn't deliver in the UN and suppose Bob is not as persuasive with Healy as he is with us, and suppose we have to have somebody carry a message to Garcia. What do we do?"



The President then turned to Soviet motives and asked General Wheeler whether or not the Soviets had staged this Middle East crisis, the trouble in Hong Kong, and other such diversions simultaneously to force us to turn our attention from Vietnam. Neither General Wheeler nor Mr. Helms saw any sign of Soviet calculation behind these crises, though of course both admitted that the Soviets would view them as a godsend.

The President returned to the question of what we would do after relying on Israeli forces. General Wheeler noted that a long war would hurt the Israeli economy. At that point we would have to decide whether we were going to send in forces and confront Nasser directly.



Secretary McNamara saw the whole situation evolving somewhat differently. He thought the initial exchange would be a fierce air battle for air superiority which would deplete aircraft inventories on both sides. Then both the U. S. and the USSR would be faced with requests for air support. He felt that the USSR might supply Soviet-piloted aircraft.

The President returned to Soviet motives. Mr. Helms said that he felt the USSR likes the situation as it is now but is not ready to rush in. The Soviets would like to bring off a propaganda victory as in the 1950's with them as the peacemakers and saviors of the Arabs, while we end up fully blackballed in the Arab world as Israel's supporter.

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Mr. Helms said he was not as bearish as Secretary McNamara on Israeli air capability. He said the Israelis had taken the MIG that defected from Iraq last year through all kinds of maneuvers in Israel and had demonstrated in the 7 April air battle with Syria that they had learned their lessons well.

The President asked what is in Nasser's mind. Mr. Helms thought he had achieved his objective now. Secretary Fowler asked whether he might be looking for someone to hold him back. Mr. Eugene Rostow noted that he was looking for someone to hold the Israelis back.

The President asked about British Minister of State George Thomson and Israeli Foreign Minister Eban, and whether he should see either of them. Eugene Rostow said that Thomson had not raised the subject, but that Eban will definitely want to see the President. When the President asked whether this would be desirable, Mr. Rostow replied that he felt we had held the Israelis back from a strike yesterday and that the President would undoubtedly have to see Eban.

In conclusion, the President asked Mr. Battle for an assessment of what is in Nasser's mind. Mr. Battle said that, until Nasser threatened to blockade the Gulf of Aqaba, he would have agreed with Mr. Helms that all Nasser wanted was a limited propaganda victory. Now that he has gone as far as he has, Battle said he cannot help but wonder whether Nasser either has more Soviet support than we know about, or had gone slightly insane. He noted that it is most uncharacteristic for Nasser not to leave a door open behind him, and that is exactly what he appears to have done in this case.

Battle sketched Nasser's problems and motives on the broader front to include internal economic trouble and a tightening food supply, his drive to regain leadership in the Arab world, and his need to recoup his position on the world stage.

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