

Analysis

Kissinger's Power-over-progress Paradigm Found Attentive Ears in Israel

Wednesday 6 December 2023, by [BENN Aluf](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2023).

More than any other person, Henry Kissinger set Israel's special status in America's foreign policy, as a state exempt from abiding by norms the U.S. demands of others. His approach was congruent with Israel's foreign policy

Henry Kissinger, left, with Benjamin Netanyahu in 1999. Credit: REUTERS

Over 50 years ago, Henry Kissinger shaped the strategic alliance between Israel and the United States, creating something that would successfully prevail over changes of U.S. administrations and Israeli governments, through wars and peace agreements.

More than any other person, Kissinger set Israel's special status in America's foreign policy, as a state exempt from abiding by norms the U.S. demands of others in two areas: possessing nuclear weapons and a prolonged occupation of territories accompanied by the denial of their residents' rights.

U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, left, meets with Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, Saturday, Jan. 5, 1974, at the State Department in Washington. Credit: Charles Bennett /AP

Kissinger's most important contribution to Israel was formulated in 1969, in his first months as national security advisor under Richard Nixon. He formulated, along with Israel's ambassador to the U.S., Yitzhak Rabin, the "[nuclear understanding](#)" agreed upon by Nixon and Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir at their meeting in September 1969.

This understanding established Israel's policy of "vagueness" and gave it American backing. Meir promised that Israel would not declare that it possesses nuclear weapons and would not conduct nuclear tests, and Nixon agreed not to pressure Israel to join the international Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Their successors have respected that understanding to this day.

This understanding also put an end to a decade of tension between Israel, which built the nuclear reactor in Dimona with French assistance, and the Democrat administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, who tried to restrain and monitor Israel's nuclear activities.

Kissinger stopped the American inspectors' visits to Dimona and instated the "[ambiguity](#)" policy. After he retired in 1977, Israel recruited him so that he could explain this understanding, which was never documented, to the new Democrat administration of Jimmy Carter.

Kissinger enabled Israel to retain Dimona even as the U.S. was taking action to thwart the nuclear ambitions of other friendly countries in Asia and Latin America. However, his activities were always covert. The details of the "Golda-Nixon understanding" were known to a small circle of people, and

only published many years later, when Kissinger was a former diplomat making a living by opening doors, lobbying and counseling governments and corporations.

(FILES) US President Jimmy Carter (R) meets former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to discuss Middle East peace proposals at the White House in Washington on August 15, 1977. Credit: - - AFP

In his years as national security advisor and Secretary of State, Kissinger was perceived in Israel as a controversial figure since he had twisted its arm and forced it to withdraw from some of the territory it had captured in 1967 in exchange for diplomatic agreements.

Even before the [Yom Kippur War](#), Kissinger tried to advance a deal between Egypt and Israel involving peace in exchange for a withdrawal from Sinai. He hoped, justifiably, that such a deal would move Egypt out of the pro-Soviet bloc and into the American camp during the Cold War. Meir objected to any withdrawal from territories and dragged her feet, until Sadat launched a war in October 1973.

According to historian Yigal Kipnis, Kissinger's acquiescence to a continued Israeli occupation of Sinai had a price tag: a commitment by Meir not to embark on a preemptive strike. This is why, even after a last-minute warning, Israel waited for the Egyptian attack without trying to foil it.

Yitzhak Rabin, Golda Meir, Henry Kissinger and Leah Rabin. Credit: Moshe Milner / GPO

The Yom Kippur War was Kissinger's finest hour in the Middle East. The U.S. let Israel bleed before it dispatched its airlift of vital weaponry. Kissinger then began his shuttle diplomacy between Israel, Egypt and Moscow, which led to a cease-fire and an agreement on the separation of forces. This involved withdrawing from the city of Quneitra in the Golan Heights and from the eastern bank of the Suez Canal after the war ended.

Two years later, Kissinger mediated between [Sadat and Rabin](#), Meir's successor, in achieving an interim agreement in Sinai in exchange for a further withdrawal. Opponents of the withdrawal demonstrated against Kissinger, holding antisemitic placards. Journalist Matti Golan published a book containing the minutes of Kissinger's secret talks in Israel, in which he used tough talk with Golda, which didn't add to his popularity here.

Kissinger met his strategic goals after the war: Egypt moved to the Western camp, and Arab states saw that only America could extricate territory from Israel. He didn't complete his work, and the full agreement with Egypt was signed during the Carter period.

Kissinger was less enthusiastic about the Oslo Accords, signed by his friend Rabin and Yasser Arafat. During Rabin and Kissinger's last meeting in New York, a few weeks before Rabin's assassination, the former explained the strategic logic of the process.

A CodePink demonstrator holds up "bloody" hands and handcuffs calling former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (L) a war criminal as he speaks during a U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, 2015. Credit: JIM WATSON - AFP

Kissinger believed in power and disdained abstract ideas about progress, fraternity, democracy and freedom, ideas that America disseminates around the world. In his 1994 book "Diplomacy," he justified national interests as the desired basis of foreign policy, calling on American leaders not to abandon this even after winning the Cold War.

His approach was congruent with [Israel's foreign policy](#), which since the days of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion believes in force while harboring deep reservations about international

institutions and norms such as human rights and weapons control. That is why the harsh criticism of Kissinger by the left as the person directly responsible for mass murder, atrocities in Cambodia, Laos and Chile, Bangladesh and Timor, and for the bloody and needless prolongation of the Vietnam War, is heard in Israel only among a small circle of anti-American leftists.

The Israeli establishment and the mainstream that adores America have long forgotten his shuttle diplomacy in 1973, taking pride in Kissinger as the most senior Jew in an American administration – possibly the most influential Jew in American history, along with [Bob Dylan](#).

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P.S.

• Haaretz. Dec 1, 2023:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-01/ty-article/.premium/kissingers-power-over-progress-paradigm-found-attentive-ears-in-israel/0000018c-21c0-d21c-abae-77fca3810000>