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The U.S. Policy toward Israel 1963-1965: A Case of the Tank Sales

Erika TOMINAGA *

Abstract

This thesis aims to explain why the U.S.-Israeli relationship was accelerated during the Johnson administration, as well as to examine the origins of the close connection between the two countries by using a case study approach; the Johnson administration's sales of tanks toward Israel. By showing the U.S. decision making process, it concludes that the U.S. military assurance to Israel were not given willingly by the United States, but rather coerced by Israel. Additionally, it comments that the Johnson administration's arms sale completed U.S. material support for Israel and was instrumental in creating the U.S.-Israeli relationship of today.

Keywords: American diplomacy, the Cold War, Johnson, Israel, arms sales

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The Bush Doctrine of 2002 gave Israel an excuse to justify its military actions against its traditional opponents, such as Palestinian terrorists and the militant Islamic group based in Lebanon, Hezbollah. However, after the instigation of the Bush Doctrine, President George W. Bush neither criticized Israel's military movements, nor demanded any self-control relating to the increasingly frequent Israeli raids. For example, Israel's bombing campaign against Lebanon in 2006 was harshly criticized by most governments around the world as an example of unfair military aggression, while the United States remained silent. Learning from such episodes, scholars generally evaluate that the U.S. and Israel have a unique partnership, with high levels of friendship and political and military cooperation.

Why did the United States come to be involved in such a "special" and controversial connection with Israel? Compared with the origin of the "special relationship" between the United States and Britain, the U.S. was not eager to establish an equal relationship with Israel. On the one hand, the U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill regarded the relationship between their two countries as "special" in order to formulate the use of military forces against the Axis powers, such as Nazi Germany.¹⁾ In 1962, however, the U.S. President John F. Kennedy tried to encourage Israel to give up its desire of developing nuclear weapons by also telling Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir that "the United States has a special relationship with Israel in the Middle East really comparable only to that which it has with Britain over a wide range of world affairs."²⁾ In other words, in the case of the U.S.-Israel relations, the U.S. utilized the "special relationship" as a way of controlling political challenges from Israel. Although in 1962 the U.S. government used the phrase "special relationship" for political purposes, scholars extensively use the phrase in order to point out the unusual economical, military and diplomatic support that the United States has provided to Israel over the years.³⁾ While it is difficult to refute the evidence that the relationship between the two countries has become unequivocally "special," the connection has clearly been furthered in the past forty years.

The Lyndon B. Johnson administration that succeeded the Kennedy administration contributed toward bringing together the two countries. This thesis aims to explore why the U.S.-Israeli relationship was accelerated during the Johnson administration. As a case study, the Johnson administration's sales of tanks toward Israel will be analyzed as widely considered to be a characteristic and concrete example of Johnson's pro-Israeli stance. The tank sale was the first occasion that allowed the Israelis to possess U.S. made offensive arms. Until the 1960s such arms sales were regarded by many as a significant measure for U.S. foreign policy in light of the Cold War.⁴⁾

In my opinion, most previous studies placed disproportionate emphasis on the pro-Israeli stance. One serious flaw in the previous studies is that they are based on the involuntary assumption of an

1) See Masato Ota, "Daieiteikoku no Katachi to Beieikankei," eds., by Masami Umekawa and Tomokazu Sakano, *Blair no Iraku Senso: Igrisu no Sekaisenryaku* (Tokyo: Asahishinbunsha, 2004), 78-79.

2) See Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 96.

3) See Warren I Cohen, "Balancing American Interests in the Middle East: Lyndon Baines Johnson vs. Gamal Abdul Nasser," eds. by Warren I Cohen and Nancy Bernkope Tucker, *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 282.

4) Yuzo Murayama, "Beikokuboueisangyo no Gunmintenkan to Reisengo no Bukiyusyutsushizyo," *Kokusaiseizi* 108 (March 1995): 29.

unwavering U.S. pro-Israeli political stance. Zach Levy emphasized the existence of a paradox that by early 1965 the Johnson administration began to consider the sale of jet aircraft as a means of compensating Israel for the U.S. decision to sell offensive arms to Jordan, and in 1966 concluded that "selling the Israelis jets better served a policy keeping them at a distance than a refusal to do so." Abraham Ben-Zvi insisted that the source of inconsistencies in policy between 1964 and 1966 lay in discrepancies between the Department of State, which placed importance on conservative and radical Arab states rather than Israel, and the National Security Council (NSC) staff and assistants to the President, sought to sell offensive arms toward Israel as an exigency countermeasure to oppose the development of nuclear weapons by Israel.⁵⁾ They questioned the motives of Johnson's paradoxical unwillingness to sell offensive arms to Israel. Some evidence, however, shows that the U.S.-Israeli close connection was still in its infancy at the beginning of Johnson's presidency. In the Middle East, the United States saw benefits and the potential for political stability in both the Arab states and Israel. It had attempted to avoid obvious commitment to either side, seeking instead to create political balance between them. The U.S. decision makers were rightfully cautious of supplying offensive weapons to either side as arms sales were considered as a symbol of diplomatic support by 1960's. On the other hand, some countries in the Middle East demanded the United States to sell the arms in order to counter their opponents and gain a regional military advantage. During the Johnson administration, a time when the arms race between the Arab states and Israel was escalating, the United States was often hard-pressed to act evasively.

Therefore, the most crucial point to focus on is the motive which led the United States to eventually sell offensive arms to Israel. The sales were obviously a break from the previous traditional U.S. stance toward the Middle Eastern countries. Through considering the motive, it may be possible to see the turning point of the relationship between the United States and Israel. This study will focus on the process of the U.S. tank sale to Israel and the following questions will be explored: why did the United States become involved in Israeli arms affairs? Why did Israel choose the United States as an arms supplier? What incidents led the Johnson administration to begin its arms sales despite the fact that Johnson himself was not eager to expand U.S. military assistance to Israel? In short, why did the United States sell arms to Israel?

I . Background of the Arms Deals between the U.S. Government and Israel

In the Middle East, where sustained peace was in jeopardy because of Arab-Israeli conflicts over

5) Zach Levy, "The United States' Skyhawk Sale to Israel, 1966: Strategic Exigencies of an Arms Deal," *Diplomatic History* 28, no.2 (April 2004): 255-276, Abraham Ben-Zvi, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel in the Shadow of the Hawk* (London: Frank Cass, 2004). The following articles refer to the Johnson administration's arms sales to Israel: Little, *American Orientalism*; Arlene Lazarowitz, "Different Approaches to a Regional Search for Balance: The Johnson Administration, the State Department, and the Middle East, 1964-1967," *Diplomatic History* 32, no.1 (January 2008): 25-54; Clea Lutz Bunch, "Balancing Acts: Jordan and the United States during the Johnson Administration," *Canadian Journal of History* 41, no.2 (Winter 2006): 517-536; Michael Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 1-33; Judith A. Klinghoffer, *Vietnam, Jews and the Middle East: Unintended Consequences* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 19-33; Warren I Cohen, "Balancing American Interests in the Middle East: Lyndon Baines Johnson vs. Gamal Abdul Nasser," eds. by Warren I Cohen and Nancy Bernkope Tucker, *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 279-305.

ideology, water, oil, and arms, the Johnson administration tried to seek political balance, hoping to curtail further Soviet influence in the region. Three issues, namely the administration's attitude toward Israel, Israeli arms issue, and Israel's internal political confrontation seriously influenced the Johnson administration's policymaking in arms sales to Israel.

1. The Johnson Administration's Attitude toward Israel

During the Johnson administration, there were two traditional policies toward Israel. First, the administration had to maintain balance between Israel and Arab nations. It is widely mentioned that Lyndon B. Johnson showed a markedly pro-Israeli stance. However, the Johnson administration sought to keep "at least a superficial"⁶⁾ balance of Arab-Israeli conflicts in the early days, and was mainly to act as containment of the Soviet influence. The administration's thinking dominated by Cold War stereotypes, showed a tendency of linking Arab-Israeli conflicts to a Soviet-American dichotomy. Dean Rusk, Secretary of State, was anxious about Soviets influence on Arab states and mentioned that "I believe we shall need to make a heavy investment of U.S. prestige in 1964 in support of Israel against Arab resentments on several of these issues."⁷⁾ It is perhaps indicative that at this time the U.S. counted Israel as an ally among Western countries. The Johnson administration had a sense of responsibility to backup Israel, as a Western collaborator in the Middle East.

On the other hand, the administration was committed to preserve U.S. influence with the Arab states. While the Johnson administration thought that "no benefits had as yet been derived from our attempts to reach an understanding with Nasser [Egyptian President of the United Arab Republic (U.A.R.) Gamal Abdul Nasser],"⁸⁾ who aided rebels against the American-backed government, the Arabs were nonetheless vital for Western countries. Maintaining diplomatic relations with Arab states was essential to keep access to vital oil supplies. Therefore, at the beginning of 1964 the Johnson administration tried to maintain balance between Arab states and Israel, seeking "not to keep trying to force it to an all-out pro-Israeli policy." In case the U.S. had to support Israel, the problem was twofold, "*what* the U.S. should do for Israel and *when*."⁹⁾

Another traditional stance in U.S. Middle Eastern policy was arms limitation. The Johnson administration was especially concerned about the increasing nuclear potential of Israel. The nuclear issue had set the stage for the most direct confrontation between the United States and Israel during the Johnson-Eshkol period. For the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which finally concluded in 1968, Johnson grappled with not only further nuclear proliferation in France, China and the West Germany but also various kinds of "dangerous thoughts" in the Third World.¹⁰⁾ Thus, the U.S.

6) Rusk to the President, 16 January 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume XVIII, Arab-Israeli Dispute 1964-1968* (thereafter *FRUS 1964-1968*) (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), 17. In early 1960's, internal Arab tensions became the Arab countries divided between "radical nationalist states" tied to the Soviet Union, like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, and conservative regimes, like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Lebanon, dependent on the Western arms and backing. Generally, during 1960's, "Arab-Israeli conflict" means the conflict between radical Arab states and Israel.

7) Rusk to the President, 16 January 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 17-18.

8) Memorandum from the Record: NSC meeting, 2 April 1964, NSF, Country File: Israel, Vol.3, Box 139, Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library (thereafter LBJL).

9) Enclosure 1 of Rusk to the President, 16 January 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 23, Komer to the President, 28 May 1964; Rusk to the President, 16 January 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 18.

10) Thomas L. Hughes to Rusk: Nuclear Free Zones, 21 March 1966, *The Lyndon B. Johnson: National Security Files*,

sought nuclear free zones in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Israel's signature on the NPT was an especially important objective as French-built power reactors in the Dimona plant, Israeli's nuclear facility, were to be completed in January or February of 1964.

While the United States encouraged the acceptance of IAEA controls, the Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol and his top associates had gradually become close-mouthed, pleading with Johnson for sensitivity on the issue of Israel's domestic politics.¹¹⁾ Leading up to the Knesset [the national assembly] election in November 1965, Eshkol set himself apart from his election opponents, former Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, by boasting about the recent growth in Israel's defensive power. Thus, the Eshkol administration asked the United States to put off the inspection of the Dimona plant until after the election. In the Johnson administration's assessment of the situation, which was based upon former President John F. Kennedy's, it would be easier to discuss the nuclear issue with Eshkol than with Ben-Gurion. Therefore, the Johnson administration tried to stabilize Eshkol's leadership partially so that they could go on to seek his signature on the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This stance surfaced on some White House staffs thoughts concerning the U.S. supply of arms to Israel in exchange for Israel's abandonment of nuclear weapons.

Thus, though Johnson was regarded as pro-Israeli presidents, in reality, the Johnson administration closely considered both the issues of keeping Arab-Israeli balance and limiting Israel's nuclear potential.

2. Israel and the Arms Sales

During the Cold War, while the Soviets provided weapons to Arab states, Western countries gave them to Israel and conservative Arab states. By the end of the 1950s, the Arab-Israeli arms race and its surrounding conflicts had expanded into an East-West framework. However, Israel encountered many hardships in obtaining arms suppliers. The countries selling arms always had to consider intricate complexity of the Arab-Israeli conflict and conventional arms limitations when they sold weapons to Israel. Previous to U.S. sales, only France in which President Charles De Gaulle returned to power in 1961 and struggled with Algeria that relied on arms from radical Arab states was willing to provide armaments to the country. However, as the latest arms always offered advantages in a preemptive attack, Israel was proceeding to search for modern American arms.

It was during the previous presidential election that the U.S.-Israeli situation also underwent change. John F. Kennedy depended on the American Jewish community more than his predecessors for electoral purpose, and thus Israel discovered an opportunity to obtain U.S. arms. In fact, Israel achieved U.S. sale of Hawk missiles in 1962, although such weapons was still classified as defensive. Kennedy also arranged a new relationship with not only Israel but also Egypt. In any case, the Kennedy administration hoped to make both Arabs and Israelis more unwilling to go nuclear by supplying defensive weapons. While the Kennedy administration repeated vocal support for Israel, it never allowed Israel to possess U.S. made offensive weapons. Furthermore, the vocal support

1963-1969, *Agency File*, ed. by Robert E. Lester, University Publications of America, 1993.

11) A background paper on the nuclear issue prepared by the State Department in January 1968, *Israel: National Security Files, 1963-1969*, ed. by Paul Kesaris (thereafter *Israel: National Security Files, 1963-1969*), (University Publications of America, 1987).

linked to Israel's promise to refrain from developing nuclear weapons.¹²⁾ Therefore, when Johnson took the office, France was still main arms supplier to Israel.

3. Israeli Situation during the Johnson Administration

Israel, surrounded by “enemies” who openly proclaimed war against Israel, had to prepare themselves with the latest arms, well-trained manpower and a strong economy. While Israel's economy had been dramatically growing, arms and manpower had to be strengthened. Especially after the Arab summit meetings in 1964, armaments was the first issue to be tackled.¹³⁾

In 1964, Arab states met in two summit conferences. At the first conference in January 1964, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded to encourage terror raids against Israel. The second conference, held in September 1964, reiterated the common goal of eliminating Israel as well as increased the size of the armed forces including that of Jordan. In the two conferences, Jordan accepted Gamal Abdul Nasser's position of leadership and tolerated a certain amount of interference in its Palestinian affairs.

While Israel and Jordan were superficially engaged in conflict, they did however share the objective of containing Palestine guerrillas in West Bank of the Jordan River. The ever changing and tense situation in Jordan inclined Israel to anxiety, and actively seeking stronger defensive power. The tension brought a conflict over Israeli's future direction in Israel's Worker Party MAPAI, the party which dominated Israeli politics since its independence. In 1963, the “Founding Father” of Israel, David Ben-Gurion resigned as Prime Minister and approved Eshkol's succession. He was however gradually expressed dissatisfaction with the Eshkol administration and eventually left the party. He then established a new party RAFI with his supporters. Eshkol stayed in MAPAI, heading a new administration. Consequently, the 1965 election became a battle between pro-Eshkol and pro-Ben-Gurion, with both parties strongly focusing on how to keep Israel strong enough to survive.¹⁴⁾

At that time, Lyndon B. Johnson was in a position of real power in the government. As the Israeli lobby had counted Johnson as one of its friends in the U.S. government, Eshkol succeeded in promoting a major change in U.S.-Israeli relationship in order to counter Ben-Gurion. He sought to set up closer ties with the U.S. in order to obtain, for the first time, offensive arms.

II. The Views of the U.S. toward Israeli Arms

1. Israel's Arms Request

The United States, despite its unwillingness to engage in direct sales, sold tanks to Israel at the beginning of 1965 while Israel had already possessed other arms sources. At the beginning of the Johnson's presidency, the Department of State hoped to “seek to reduce tensions and to avoid contributing to an arms race.” They considered that as “the Arab states will be likely to fear a pro-Is-

12) The Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, 2 October 1963, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963, Volume XVIII, Near East 1962- 1963* (thereafter *FRUS 1961-1963*) (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995), 720.

13) Background Paper: The Flourishing Israeli Economy, undated in 1966, *Israel: National Security Files, 1963-1969*.

14) See Peter Y. Medding, *Mapai in Israel: Political Organization and Government in a New Society* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1972), 281.

raeli swing in American policy, . . . Consequent agitation, unless tamped down, could lead to more strident anti-Israeli actions and increased interest in links with the USSR.”¹⁵⁾ Despite Arab hostility and the Israel's feelings of proximity towards the West, the Johnson administration nevertheless sought to keep a “superficial balance” between the Arab states and Israel and hesitated to expand military assistance toward Israel. However, Israeli leaders were able to purchase U.S. weapons. The Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir appealed Rusk in late September of 1963 that Israel needed to have at least the same quality arms to U.R.A. that the Soviets provided. However, U.S. State and Defense Department officials took little notice of the Israeli arms situation, stating that “it was strong enough to defend itself and had access to arms elsewhere.”¹⁶⁾

The first step toward U.S. involvement in Israeli arms was Eshkol's letter to Kennedy on 4 November 1963, which was clearly designed to set the tone of the 12 November U.S.-Israeli talks. The letter insinuated the absence of a formal U.S. security guarantee, seeking U.S. tanks, surface-to-surface missiles and naval strength against the U.A.R. missile potential and Arab weapons from the Soviet Union. The Department of State, however, viewed that “Israel might want to have the U.S. refusal in hand for public use in justifying open collaboration with the French or in explaining some new development in its existing missile or nuclear development programs.”¹⁷⁾ In any case, State Department officials wanted to avoid not only moving toward U.S. direct sales of offensive weapons, but also to halt the Israeli purchase of French missiles. They viewed that “Israel's acquisition of missiles could result in a Soviet supply of missiles to the U.A.R.”¹⁸⁾ In the meeting between Israel' leaders and State Department, however, despite the America's unwillingness, Israel stressed its needs for immediate U.S. military assistance.¹⁹⁾ The Israeli representatives complained that the U.S. military assistance to Israel could not be comparable to U.S. commitments to NATO and other allies and demanded U.S.-Israeli binding security alliance or U.S. supplying at least the same quality arms to those that the Soviets transferred the Arab states.²⁰⁾

Given Israel's position, senior staff of National Security Council Robert Komer had two points to consider. On the one hand, he objected to America's involvement in Israeli arms sales. Komer noted that “Communist influence certainly affected Nasser” and questioned “the value” of formal bilateral security arrangements with Israel. He assumed that the U.S. arms commitment to Israel would bring further Soviet involvement in the sale to Arab countries, concluding that “[t]hese [the U.S. assistances to Israel] would drive the Arabs to seek compensatory arrangements with the Soviets, then bringing the USSR back into the Middle East and they would stimulate further Arab demands for Soviet arms.”²¹⁾ On the other hand, he worried about the Presidential election in 1964 and this reveals clearly that the United States was in a dilemma. Komer thought that the U.S. commitment would lead further Arab dependence on the Soviet arms, and also considered that an absence of the

15) The Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Phillips Talbot to Rusk, 23 November 1963, *FRUS, Near East 1961-1963*, 805.

16) Memorandum of Conversation, 30 September 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 718.

17) The Department of State Executive Secretary Benjamin Read to Bundy, 9 November 1963, *FRUS, Near East 1961-1963*, 774.

18) Read to Bundy, 9 November 1963, *FRUS, Near East 1961-1963*, 774-775.

19) Circular Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Posts, 13 November 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 777-778.

20) Memorandum for the Record, drafted by Komer, 14 November 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 783.

21) Memorandum for the Record, 14 November 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 783-784.

U.S. presence in the Middle East would bring Israel to pressure the Johnson administration on the other. In order to prepare for the election campaign, the Johnson administration had to gain votes from Israel's supporters in the United States. Thus, he wrote to Special Assistant to President for the National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy that "President Johnson will be faced with a series of tough policy problems in my area [Near East], at a time when he'd prefer tranquility as [in] 1964 election," and concluded, "we need to lay out whole complex of problems" before the election campaign.²²⁾

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), in contrast to the two parties, proposed a more flexible U.S. move in the Middle East. A deputy of JCS wrote to the Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in late 1963 that "While Soviet arms continue flowing to the UAR, Syria, and Iraq, Western European arms suppliers are apparently intensifying their efforts to sell weapons in the area, sometimes [in] direct opposition to advice given by the United States,"²³⁾ and recommended U.S. direct arms sale to the Middle Eastern countries unless the arms balance was lost between the Arab states and Israel.

By the end of 1963, Komer concluded that it was not enough "just to keep telling the Israelis they can depend on Big Brother."²⁴⁾ Coming with the presidential election in November 1964, White House staffs wished to give a favorable impact to Israel's supporters in the United States and began to tilt toward the U.S. commitment to Israeli arms. However, unlike the JCS, the White House was unwilling to sell U.S. arms directly to Israel through seeking the Western European arms. They thought that unless the U.S. could maintain the balance between the Arab states and Israel, and justify both public and private military assistance to Israelis, "we may dribble away the real benefits of our last three years of uphill effort with the Arabs, and open the door against to the USSR."²⁵⁾ While Komer came to believe in the U.S. commitment to Israel, he judged that the U.S.'s moves in the Middle East would bring further Arab dependence on the Soviet weapons. Therefore, the White House formed a plan in U.S. commitment and to allocate Israel modernized weapons through the Europeans.

2. Proposals by Top Associates in the Johnson Administration

In this way, by the end of 1963, Israeli arms appeared on U.S. policymaking agenda. In early 1964, however, the United States had to tackle with the Israeli missile potential as well as a growing nuclear threat. Israelis were set to invest about 45 million dollars in a French Dassault missile. As surface-to-surface missiles had not been introduced in the Middle East at the time, Israel's missiles would encourage the U.A.R. to upgrade with the Soviet weapons. This sale would not only accelerate the arms race between the Arabs and Israelis, but also raise the fear of equipped missiles with nuclear warhead.²⁶⁾ Therefore, some policymakers came to think of U.S. commitment in allocating weapons to Israeli through the Europeans in return for Israel's abandonment of their missile pro-

22) Komer to Bundy, 3 December 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 821.

23) The Joint Chiefs of Staff to McNamara, 7 December 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 833.

24) Komer to Harriman (38a), 30 December 1963, NSF File of Komer: Israel Security- Arms/Aircraft-1965 (thereafter NSF File of Komer), Box 31.LBJL.

25) Komer to Harriman (38a), 30 December 1963, NSF File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

26) Joint State-Defense Message to the Embassy in Israel, 26 February, NSF File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

gram.²⁷⁾

On 10 January 1964 Israeli representatives again mentioned to the White House that Eshkol wished to have U.S. arms: tanks, surface-to-surface missiles and the naval equipment. McGeorge Bundy, while questioning Israeli needs for missiles, gave ground on tank issues, and stated that "we can talk about this [tanks]."²⁸⁾ It was the first time that the United States took a conciliatory attitude toward Israel's appeal for obtaining tanks. The White House was experiencing a dilemma. While they feared that Israeli missile would accelerate the Egyptian dependence on Soviet arms, Israel's growing fears from the U.A.R. armaments would lead greater pressure on the United States. The White House anticipated that the Johnson administration would be "compell[ed] to make some gesture prior to the presidential elections in November 1964, toward seeing that Israel's armor needs are at least partly met."²⁹⁾ It concluded that the United States should answer at least a minimum of Israel's armor needs and they regarded tank deals as "real issues." Finally, Komer thought of the "leverage" idea: "Israelis acquisition of a substantial missile capability would be far more destabilizing than tanks. . . . When this surfaced, Israel would risk a violent Arab reaction, especially with Dimona coming on stream in 1964. . . . So we ought to use tanks as leverage to forestall."³⁰⁾

State Department considered that were Israel to purchase arms, even tanks, from the West, the Soviet would provide additional weapons to the U.A.R. creating a further arms race spiral and feared "moving toward the UAR/USSR vs. Israel/US tie-ups."³¹⁾ Although in the end, it concluded that more importance was forwarded to missiles and nuclear weapons. Rusk wrote to Johnson that "[t]here is discussion of arms control, as well as nuclear free zone possibilities, in the United Nation context. . . . If we facilitate solution of Israel's tank problem, we should get assurance in return that Israel will not plunge the Near East into either the sophisticated missile or the nuclear weapons field."³²⁾ The Department of State considered that this exchanging strategy would be effective in both arms limitation and the balancing policy.

On the other hand, JCS and the Department of Defense proposed to offer Israel tanks unless the policy would be strayed from keeping military balance between the Arab states and Israel.³³⁾ As for the missile problem, the Department of Defense perceived that were Egypt to develop missiles, the United States should "take Israeli step taken in order to balance the situation."³⁴⁾ In order to judge the situation, the Department of Defense was able to send a small team to Israel.³⁵⁾

President Johnson, while sympathetic to Israel, did not see the need to make a final decision at that time. While Johnson had intention to use tank sales as a leverage card in order to garner votes from Israeli supporters in the United States, he wanted to wait until the election was closer to play it. Also, he was unwilling to sell weapons directly to Israel and sought the participation of Western

27) Komer to Harriman (38a), 30 December 1963, NSF File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

28) Memorandum for Record: Israeli Arms Needs, 10 January 1964, NSF File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

29) Komer to Harriman, 10 January 1964, NSF File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

30) Komer to Harriman, 10 January 1964, NSF File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

31) Rusk to President Johnson, 16 January 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 21.

32) Rusk to President Johnson, 16 January 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 21.

33) The Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara, 7 December 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 833.

34) Resume of Talks Held on Friday 27, Between the U.S. Delegation and the Deputy Minister of Defense, 27 February 1964, NSF File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

35) JCS to Secretary of Defense McNamara, 18 January 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 24.

Europe.³⁶⁾ In short, Johnson regarded Israeli tanks as a political tool useful only if it did not unbalance the relationship between the Arab states and Israel.

While each party had different opinion, by late February 1964 Johnson, McGeorge Bundy, Komer and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs until March 1965, thereafter Ambassador at Large. Elderly Harriman regarded a leading figure in the Democratic Party, Averell Harriman reached an agreement that “any decision to arrange tanks should not be conveyed to the Israelis at least until Prime Minister Eshkol’s visit [to the United State in June 1964].”³⁷⁾ This agreement would meet the President’s point about “optimum political timing” in which President Johnson would give a favorable impact on Israelis. Thus, the United States determined to delay its decision on the tank issue for the moment. By Eshkol’s visit, the Johnson administration would set a policy toward Israel for acquiring as much additional information as possible on missile and nuclear potential in the country.

While a small group of Defense Department members visited Israel in late February 1964, the U.S. government found that the Egypt had introduced a surface-to-surface missile in the Middle East.³⁸⁾ Given the information, the Johnson administration was completely divided as to whether the U.S. should back up Israel in order to balance the Egyptian missile or not. Deputy Special Counsel to the President Myer Feldman,³⁹⁾ however, discovered in the meeting with Eshkol and Meir in Israel that the country had already acquired French surface-to-surface missiles. By May 1964, despite its denial, the United States concluded that the “problem was not missiles but the difference that the Israelis could make nuclear warheads to put on their missiles while the U.A.R. couldn’t.”⁴⁰⁾ Therefore, the U.S. concern over sophisticated arms came to focus on the nuclear option in the Middle East.

The most urgent task for Israel at the time was the tank issue. In early April 1964, Feldman returned with Eshkol’s letter, which continuously stressed Israel’s arms needs, especially tanks. On 22 April 1964, President Johnson and his top associates discussed Israeli tanks. In this meeting, the Department of Defense agreed to the Department of State and the White House’s opinion: “the US tell Israel that, while recognizing Israel’s growing need for tanks, the US cannot enter into direct supply.”⁴¹⁾ The next question was “what the US should do for Israel.” Also on 30 April, the Johnson administration concluded that the U.S. would make an affirmative effort to assist Israel in obtaining tanks from Western Europe before Eshkol’s visit to Washington on 1 June 1964. In the first place, the United States sought to assure Israelis that there were good prospects for purchases outside the United States. Second, by showing the U.S. “friendship” and support for Israel at this time, they wished to connect discussion of the possibility of nuclear weapons.⁴²⁾

On 16 May 1964, President Johnson and his top associates talked about European tanks for Israel. In this meeting, Feldman was consented to “tell the Israelis that if price were a serious problem we

36) Deputy Assistant Solbert to McNamara, 15 February 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 32.

37) Komer to Harriman, 16 February 1964, NSF File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

38) Resume of Talks Held on February 27, Between the U.S. Delegation and the Deputy Minister of Defense, 27 February 1964, NSF File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

39) He was famous of his pro-Israeli stance. Komer sometimes counted him among Israeli people.

40) Memorandum for Record: Israeli Tank Discussion with the President, 16 May 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 130.

41) Memorandum for the Standing Group: Response to NSAM, “Meeting Israeli Arms Requests,” 22 April 1964, NSF File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

42) Memorandum for the Record, 30 April 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 113-114.

could consider how to help meet it.”⁴³⁾ It can be explained that while the Johnson administration was strictly limited in selling offensive weapons to Israel, it could easily give economic aid to Israel to facilitate the Israeli to purchase of offensive weapons. It means that the Johnson administration placed an importance on keeping the appearance of balance toward the Arab states and Israel. It limited its arms sale to Israel only for the purpose of curtailing the Arab antagonism toward the United States. Additional antagonism would bring further Arab dependence on the Soviet weapons. In short, the Johnson administration avoided U.S. involvement in Israeli arms to contain the Soviet influence.

Though the United States decided not to sell arms to Israel, Israeli leaders had still sought direct support from the United States. The Deputy Prime Minister of Israel Abba Eban appealed to Rusk, and commented that “Response to Israel’s request for tanks had become a symbol of U.S. willingness to give concrete support to Israel against aggression.”⁴⁴⁾ It can be assumed that Israeli leaders considered U.S. support was vital for survival in the Middle East, regarding U.S. arms sales as a symbol of the strength of the U.S.-Israeli relationship and necessary to counter the opponents. On the contrary, the Johnson administration was in more complex position. It was willing to support Israel as thoroughly as possible on the one hand, though feared that its pro-Israeli stance would accelerate the Arab dependence on the Soviet weapons on the other. Finally, on 1 June 1964, Johnson and Eshkol agreed that West Germany’s transfer of 150 units of three hundred M-48A1 tanks to Israel. Israel also signed a contract with Britain for 250 Centurion tanks.⁴⁵⁾ The total was running over seventy million dollars with the U.S. paying 38.5 million dollars.⁴⁶⁾

In sum, the United States became involved with Israel in weapons sales in order to garner the vote from Israel’s supporters in the United States in time for the upcoming presidential campaign. The most important move for the Johnson administration, while feeling sympathy for Israel, was to avoid becoming the main arms supplier to Israel. While each top associate in the Johnson administration had a different policy opinion on Israel, all were hesitant to side with Israel. The main reason for their hesitancy was that they saw the Soviets behind the Arab states and that they did not want to get drawn into a Soviet-Arabs vs. U.S.-Israeli quagmire. In 1964, the Johnson administration believed that the United States could curtail Arab dependence on Soviet arms by avoiding its commitment to Israel.

III. The Containment of the Soviet Influence and the Arms Sales

1. The Turning Points

Despite the newly arranged supply of tanks to Israel from West Germany, the Johnson administration finally decided itself to sell tanks to Israel. What incidents led the Johnson administration to begin its arms sales despite the fact that Johnson himself was not eager to expand U.S. military as-

43) Memorandum for Record: Israeli Tank Discussion with the President, 16 May 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 129.

44) This is a Deputy Prime Minister of Israel, Abba Eban’s comment. Memorandum of Conversation, between Deputy Prime Minister of Israel Abba Eban and Rusk, 4 March 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 50.

45) Memorandum of Conversation: Johnson/ Eshkol Exchange of Views, 1 June 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 155.

46) Rusk to Johnson, 10 October 1964; Feldman to Bundy, 19 October 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 226, 228.

sistance to Israel? While Israel sought to buy arms directly from the United States, Jordan also demanded U.S. weapons. The Johnson administration had to contemplate the threat that the U.S. arms in Jordan would stir up protest in Israel. This was the beginning of compelling Johnson's struggle with the Middle Eastern "arms race spiral."

In early 1964 Hussein ibn Talal, King of Jordan, who depended on the U.S. to provide weaponry and budgetary support and had been isolated in the Arab world, agreed to plans for a United Arab Command (UAC), which had concrete objectives to eliminate Israel. Hussein recognized the value of America's patronage as well as cooperating with the Arab states and skillfully manipulated the Cold War situation to draw benefits from the U.S. in order to enhance Jordan's role in the Arab world.⁴⁷⁾ In July 1964, Jordan applied the United States to purchase some arms, including F-104G jet fighters, and warned that if the U.S. declined to sell them, "Soviet arms would deliver to Jordan either through the U.A.R. or directly."⁴⁸⁾ While the Soviet Union urged the U.A.R. to pressure the Jordanians to accept Soviet arms in order to break the Western monopoly on arms in Jordan, Hussein insisted in the discussions with a UAC members that Jordan could satisfy its needs from the United States.⁴⁹⁾ At the time, according to the U.S. Ambassador to Jordan Robert Burns "the Middle East derived from the typical Cold War framework,"⁵⁰⁾ the Soviet Union was going to snatch Jordan by means of supplying arms. For the United States, political influence was a typical form of military strategy during the Cold War period. As a result, Jordan, which traditionally had been deemed politically unimportant, became strategically valuable for the United States. The Johnson administration decided a minimal proposal, M-48A2 tanks and armored personnel carriers to Hussein. It perceived that the U.S. support of Hussein's autonomy would help Israel on the one hand and believed that Israel would not approve of Jordanian arms strength on the other.⁵¹⁾ Thus, it tried to keep the plan secret from Israel.

However, on 9 February 1965, Israeli press leaked U.S.-Jordan arms negotiations. The U.S. ambassador to Israel Walworth Barbour suspected the source of the leak from cabinet colleagues in Ben-Gurion party.⁵²⁾ Furthermore, the West Germany withdrew their transfer of armor to Israel. In October 1964, a press agent in F.R.G. reported the West Germany government was to be supplying tanks to Israel. Nasser appealed to most of the Arab states for recognition of East Germany and an economic boycott of West German goods. Consequently, the F.R.G. Chancellor Ludwig Erhard finally decided to halt arms deal with Israel. Witnessing the disclosure of U.S.- Jordan arms deal and Germany abandonments, Israelis were worried that this situation would enable the Arab states to understand Israeli defensive power was losing credibility. According to Barbour, "it seems clear this impression reinforced in Israel by what they see as unusual readiness [of] Jordanians to fire on."⁵³⁾

47) Embassy in Tel Aviv to the Department of State, 3 March 1964, NSF, Country File: Israel, Vol.3, Box 139, LBJL.

48) The Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asia Affairs, Talbot to Rusk, 22 July 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 182.

49) Talbot to Rusk, 22 July 1964, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 183.

50) Bunch, "Balancing Acts," 526.

51) Special National Intelligence Estimate, 13 August 1964, NSF File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

52) Tel Aviv to the Department of States, 9 September 1965, NSF, Country File: Israel, Vol.4, Box 139, LBJL.

53) Tel Aviv to the Department of States, 9 September 1965, NSF, Country File: Israel, Vol.4, Box 139, LBJL.

2. The Decision of Tank Sales

Given Barbour's comments, the Johnson administration sent Komer to Israel to relay Johnson's position. However, Eshkol, during the meeting with Komer in Israel, firmly repeated that only the direct sale to Israel of U.S. arms could justly compensate for the loss of the German tanks and U.S. arms sales to Amman. Eshkol asked how he, especially as a politician running for re-election in November, could explain that "he agreed the U.S. should arm an Arab member of a new unified command aimed at Israel, and at a time when Germany had just reneged on arms."⁵⁴⁾ Komer wrote to Johnson that "we must become direct arms suppliers to Israel." He mentioned that "Eshkol and the others had kept coming back to the larger argument that continued Soviet arms aid to the Arabs, combined with a surprising coordination of UAC and the US, was creating a new order of threat to Israel." Also, Komer reminded Johnson and Rusk that Israel had nuclear potential.⁵⁵⁾

While the Johnson administration still preferred that Israel looked to its traditional Western European sources, most top associates in the Johnson administration considered that "if the US and Israel agree that a disproportionate arms buildup on the Arab side in developing which cannot be otherwise met, the US will make selective direct sales on favorable credit terms."⁵⁶⁾ Johnson and Rusk were still unwilling, however, to sell weapons directly. On the other hand, in the Knesset at the time, Eshkol strongly implied that the U.S. would be involved in direct arms sales to Israel. He explained how important the U.S.-Israeli relation was, stating that "her reactions to the race for arms by the Arab states . . . will be tested in the United States' policy of supporting peace in this area."⁵⁷⁾ For Eshkol, who faced a political crisis, depending on the U.S. arms was the best way to get through.

In late February 1965, the U.S. representatives and Israeli leaders again met in Israel. In the meeting, the Israelis formally requested that the United States provide them with jet bombers to counter those that the Soviets had sold to Egypt, Iraq, and Syria.⁵⁸⁾ The Americans reluctantly overcame their dilemma over U.S. direct tank sales to Israel and were puzzled over how to deal with the bomber request. While Harriman stressed to Israel that "if the German did not come through with the remaining 90 tanks, that would be something we would have to talk about," he cabled Washington that "we must give the Israelis hope on hardware if we want a deal in time to give Hussein his answer."⁵⁹⁾

When President Johnson and his top associates saw the Israeli shopping list, which including jet bombers, some of them suspected that "the Jewish state might be looking down the road toward an aircraft capable of carrying an Israeli developed nuclear weapon."⁶⁰⁾ They believed the increased internal crisis might accelerate the Eshkol administration's desire to explore nuclear weapons. Thus, Rusk cabled Harriman that "[r]egarding substitute language on IAEA, you should make it clear that we cannot accept the Israeli situation is tied to problems in other than parts of the World

54) Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, 13 February 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 325.

55) Komer to Johnson, 16 February 1965, NSF, File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

56) Memorandum of Conversation between Harriman and Komer, 21 February 1965, NSF, File of Komer, Box 31, LBJL.

57) Henry Christman ed., *The State Papers of Levi Eshkol*, (N.Y: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969) 38-41.

58) Memorandum of Conversation: Harriman Mission to Israel, 26 February 1965, *Israel: National Security Files, 1963-1969*.

59) The Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, 27 February 1965, NSF, Country File: Israel, Vol.4, Box 139, LBJL.

60) Little, *American Orientalism*, 98.

rather than solely to the situation in the Arab states.”⁶¹⁾ Harriman then discussed the nuclear issues in the next day. Eshkol only replied “I am not prepared to say more than I have said.”⁶²⁾ Barbour explained that Eshkol was in politically difficult place and that he could not go along with Johnson’s non-proliferation commitment.⁶³⁾

Given the negotiations, Rusk said to Harriman that “if Eshkol feels he must have something specific, you [Harriman] can tell him that the United States itself will provide those tanks,” but he also advised him not to encourage them “to believe that they can [could] get jet bombers merely by asking for them.”⁶⁴⁾ Rusk told Harriman to pay special attention to the point that Eshkol understood the U.S. could not accept the idea that we should proceed to assist in the arming of Israel.⁶⁵⁾ On 1 March 1965, the U.S. “exceptionally” consented to sell tanks directly to Israel in order to complete the transactions, of which in the end, the Germans failed to deliver all of their 150 tanks. It was the first occasion on which the United States accepted, even conditionally, to directly sell arms to Israel.

The reason why the Johnson administration began to consider its arms sales was to calm down the political confusion in Israel. The Johnson administration had two intentions in curtailing the internal crisis in Israel. First, the United States included Israel within its Western allies, and had a sense of responsibility to back up the country. Israeli deputy Eban said in March 1964, “the US response to Israel’s request for tanks as [was] a symbol of U.S. willingness to give concrete support to Israel against aggression.”⁶⁶⁾ Second, the Johnson administration wanted an Israeli signature on the NPT, as it assumed that internal crisis might accelerate the Eshkol administration’s desire to explore nuclear weapons. The Johnson administration thought that supplying conventional weapons could become leverage for Israel’s abandonment of developing nuclear arms.

But the Johnson administration viewed this commitment as an “exceptional” case to compensate for the Jordanian arms sales and the failure of the German tank transaction. They found a point of compromise to sell tanks directly to Israel when they stressed “such sales create no precedent.”⁶⁷⁾ As the predecessors avoided becoming an offensive arms supplier to Israel, the Johnson administration was unwilling to expand military assurances.

While the Johnson administration “exceptionally” sold offensive weapons to Israel in early 1965, eleven months later it also sold jet bombers to the country. While the Johnson administration was reluctant to supply additional weapons to Israel, it nonetheless considered a transfer of jets to the country in order to compensate for the sale of weapons to Jordan and avert Israel’s ambition of introducing nuclear weapons in the Middle East. At the time, it had little real intention to sell weapons to Israel and sought to provide arms to Israel through West European sources. However, no sources were to be found. The United States eventually decided to sell the bombers to Israel as an “exception.” These two “exceptions” soon created an undesirable precedent, and eventually, in 1968

61) The Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, 28 February 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 360.

62) Exclusive Distribution: Harriman Mission- The Nuclear Question, 1 March 1965, NSF, Country File: Israel, Vol.4, Box 139, LBJL.

63) The Embassy in Israel to the Department of States, 2 March 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 374.

64) The Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, 28 February 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 367.

65) The Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, 28 February 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 368.

66) Rusk to President, 1 February 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968*, 286.

67) The Department of State to the Embassy in Israel, 3 March 1965, NSF, Country File: Israel, Vol.4, Box 139, LBJL.

the United States also made a decision to sell supersonic jets to Israel. Although the Johnson administration attempted to maintain a balance between the Arabs and Israelis and avoid becoming an arms supplier to Israel U.S. support had completely tilted toward Israel by the end of the Johnson presidency.

Conclusion

We can conclude that the United States became an arms supplier to Israel by attempting to contain future influence from the Soviets. While the sympathetic to Israel, President Johnson was not eager to expand overt military assistance as he feared support for Israel would bring further Arab dependence on Soviet arms. However, we must admit that the U.S. had dual cause to sell arms to Israel in order to support a free nation as well as preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. The Johnson administration considered maintaining the independence of Israel as the U.S.'s major interest in preserving "freedom" in the region from Soviet influence. While the administration viewed the benefit in preserving U.S. influence in the Arab states, supporting a western leaning free nation was absolute. Additionally, U.S. tank sales were thought to be a sufficient reassurance for Israel, who was assumed to have developed nuclear capabilities. The Johnson administration anticipated that Israeli nuclear development would lead to the same development by the U.A.R., which would then bring Soviet further involvement in the region. Therefore, the U.S. government sought to indirectly avert further Soviet influence by selling tanks directly to Israel.

However, another aspect must be considered. While the Johnson administration saw the "freedom" of Israel directly connected to Soviet influence in the region, Israel regarded the Arab states as its opponents, not the Soviets. The Israelis, correctly reading U.S. motives in the region, utilized U.S. support not against the Russians, but against the Arabs. The United States was concerned with the Soviet influence in the region, and Israel utilized the U.S. Cold War strategy for the express purpose of gaining the U.S. military support. More attention should be given to this point. While the Cold War is generally considered to have been between Superpowers attempting to preserve their influence, through weapons sales in the Middle East, we can also see that governments in the region utilized tension between the U.S. and Soviets in order to seek their own aims.

What effect did the Johnson's tank sale have on the U.S.-Israeli relationship? The main reason that some observers conceive the U.S.-Israeli relationship as "special" is because of the remarkable level of diplomatic and material support, such as economic and military support that the United States provides to Israel.⁶⁸⁾ In the early 1960's, the United States declared a "special relationship" with Israel, and the Arab states gradually came to count the United States as being Israeli side. However, the United States, by utilizing the term "special relationship," sought to superficially reassure the Jewish state while avoiding the expansion of U.S. military support. In truth, at the beginning of the Johnson administration, while the United States told Israel that they can depend on "Big Brother," it gave little "remarkable" support to the country except for economic assistance.

68) John Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 4.

Consequently, the Johnson administration did finalize concrete arms sales to Israel. Thus, this thesis comments that the Johnson administration's tanks sales was the origin of U.S. military support for Israel. This paper indicates that it was the Johnson administration that played a significant role in solidifying this "special relationship" between the two countries, although it did not always take a positive attitude toward arms sales to Israel. In fact, pro-Israeli Congressmen had continuously pushed for the sales of offensive weapons to Israel, while the administration tried to avoid a concrete U.S. commitment. In short, the U.S. military assurance to Israel was not given willingly by the United States, but rather coursed by Israel.

In contact with traditional Cold War studies, which focus on the superpowers intervention in the Third World, this study stresses the influence of regional administrations in the Third World. This study, though having suggested the crucial role of collaborator, demonstrated that Israel attempted to invite assistance from the United States by utilizing the conflict between the superpowers. In order to fully understand the Cold War, moves of the Third World countries should be analyzed more closely.

In any case, it is a proven fact that the Johnson administration expanded military support to Israel. The administration was instrumental in creating today's U.S.-Israeli relationship. The U.S. pro-Israeli stance has greatly affected policy toward the Middle East. While pro-Israeli scholars claim that strong American support for Israel has been a low cost way of keeping order in part of the Middle East, it can also be explained that American support for Israel has exacerbated the conflict in the Middle East. It was however, after the Johnson administration consented to allow Israelis eligible to obtain U.S. conventional weapons unconditionally, the United States has continuously, that provided strong assistance toward Israel.