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(21) SECRET/[redacted] HOS Dec 31, 1967

ISRAEL: The Nuclear Issue and Sophisticated Weapons

POSITION PAPER 12/31/67

A. Nuclear Weapons

On the basis of our irregular visits to Dimona we are reasonably, though not entirely, confident that Israel has not embarked on a program to produce a nuclear weapon. However, our visits to the Dimona research facility do not guarantee that production facilities are not being built elsewhere in Israel. Eshkol and his top associates in this field have been notably close-mouthed, pleading, at times, the sensitivity of this issue in Israel's domestic politics (an argument which we find of only limited validity). The most Eshkol and Eban have been willing to state either privately or publicly is that Israel will not be the first to introduce a nuclear or other advanced weapons system into the (Near Eastern) area.

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The Israeli Government is probably determined to preserve its nuclear option as long as there remains a possibility of eventual introduction of nuclear weapons into the area by another nation, or of Israel's losing its relative superiority to the Arabs in conventional military power. Nevertheless, we have consistently taken the approach with the Israelis (following our discovery in 1960 of the true purpose of the so-called "textile plant" at Dimona, built with French assistance) that we are unalterably opposed to

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Israel's acquiring nuclear weapons. Secretary Rusk has in several conversations stressed our absolute determination and that "we are as old as Methuselah" on this question. President Kennedy expressed himself forcibly to Foreign Minister Meir in December 1962. Yet your letter to Eshkol of May 1965 urging Israel to accept IAEA safeguards over all its reactors (including Dimona) has gone unanswered. Our efforts will be considerably strengthened if you personally lay out to Eshkol your feelings on the danger of further nuclear proliferation.

We therefore recommend you make it clear to Eshkol that the United States Government's position on this question has not changed. / You wish regular visits to Dimona to continue. ~~You may~~ wish to ruminate out loud on the dangers of nuclear proliferation in general, and your plans for an effective NPT. You might then assure Eshkol that the United States will uncompromisingly oppose ~~not countenance~~ the introduction of nuclear weapons into the area by any other nation, and cannot visualize any eventuality in the foreseeable future when Israel's self-regenerating military superiority over the Arabs with conventional weapons will disappear. (In the words of General Weizman, as quoted in an interview in The American Zionist, October 1967, "The Arabs don't fight badly. They just don't know how to wage modern war.")

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B. Missiles

A French firm has nearly completed development for Israel of a surface-to-surface ballistic missile system with a nuclear-carrying capacity. There is also tentative evidence of a similar indigenous Israeli missile development program, perhaps tied into the French effort. Eshkol and his associates have been equally elusive on these programs, arguing that Israel does not intend to arm the missiles nuclearly but wishes to have them available as a psychological deterrent to the Arabs. We think this argument pretty thin and likely to encourage Arab acquisition of similar missiles.

We recommend you tell Eshkol that you regard production or acquisition of nuclear-capable ballistic missiles part and parcel of the nuclear question. As long as there are no comparable nuclear-capable missiles in the Near East (and Israeli intelligence now agrees with us that the Egyptians have vitually abandoned their earlier efforts to develop missiles along similar, though more primitive, lines) the presence of such missiles in Israel would constitute unnecessary and detrimental escalation. This would be true even if Israel's missiles were not actually deployed. (Israel is already well advanced in the development and production of short-range tactical guided missiles to match present or projected Egyptian capabilities from Soviet sources).

END.