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71. Memorandum From Secretary of State Rusk to President Johnson¹

Washington, May 26, 1967.

SUBJECT

Your Conversation with the Israeli Foreign Minister

As you know, the Israelis have told us their intelligence indicates that an Egyptian and Syrian attack is imminent. They have therefore requested a U.S. public statement of assurance and support to Israel against such aggression. Our intelligence does not confirm this Israeli estimate. Foreign Minister Eban, in his conversation with me last evening, indicated that he would not press this Israeli view and request. He said the telegram would not have been written as it was had he been there. He seems satisfied on this point with the precautionary message we gave the Egyptian Ambassador. He also agreed that improved cooperative arrangements with our intelligence were urgently needed.

In our conversations with Eban last night, he made clear that Ambassador Barbour's intervention on May 23 held off a preemptive strike. Barbour was authorized to float the British idea of a maritime group, which could effectively protect maritime rights in the Gulf of Aqaba if UN action failed. That idea gave the Israelis hope for the first time that there might be a third choice for them, apart from surrender or war. Eban is here to find out whether this alternative is feasible. Their Ambassador describes the visit as "a fateful mission".

You have two basic options now:

- (1) to let the Israelis decide how best to protect their own national interests, in the light of the advice we have given them: i.e., to "unleash" them. We recommend strongly against this option.
- (2) To take a positive position, but not a final commitment, on the British proposal. The British Cabinet meets on the plan tomorrow.

We recommend this policy, as our best hope of preventing a war which could gravely damage many American national interests.

Leaving aside detail, the essence of the plan that we have in mind following our talks with George Thomson is this:

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- (a) a short, energetic effort in the Security Council;
- (b) a public declaration by the maritime powers, which would be made as soon as possible, preferably while the Security Council was in session; and
- (c) a contingency plan for an international naval presence in the area of the Gulf. That plan is now being drafted by British and American experts. If the governments reached agreement on the program as a whole, the naval force would be assembled as soon as the scheme was approved. It would not become operational for a time. And hopefully, its presence would itself deter UAR from an attack on shipping.
- (d) at the same time, we should prepare the way to propose in the U.N. that a U.N. presence between Israel and Egypt take a position along both sides of the Israeli-UAR frontier. If Egypt refuses, we can ask Israel to accept. Such a force could prevent hostilities along that frontier, if both sides pulled back, as Eshkol has proposed.

Eban's preliminary reaction to the British idea is hopeful, provided we can be positive enough about our commitment to it to justify Israel in not going to war at once. He now thoroughly and I think sympathetically understands your political and constitutional problem. What he wants is as specific and definite a statement as you can make under the circumstances that we are seriously considering joining with other maritime nations at the end of the U.N. road in the plan for an international naval presence.

We put the case against preemptive strikes to Eban very hard last night, both from the military and the political points of view. I pointed out to him that we have lived with this issue a long time in connection with the Soviet Union, and come down definitively against the idea.

Despite this, Eban still believes, I think, that in the context of Israel's problem, surrounded by menacing concentrations (armed among other things, with nerve gas), he needs something pretty solid to hold the line against his hawks.

They have absolutely no faith in the possibility of anything useful coming out of the U.N.

Continuing informal consultations with Congress indicate support for an international approach and caution regarding U.S. unilateral commitments and action. We will have a draft joint resolution for your consideration by the end of the day.

We would suggest that you make the following principal points to Foreign Minister Eban:

1. We do not disagree with the Israeli assessment of the unlikelihood that the Security Council will be able to adopt a resolution which would be effective in assuring free and innocent passage through the Straits and the Gulf. However, we do believe that an attempt must be made even if only to [\[Page 125\]](#) demonstrate that the United Nations is unable to act in this situation. The proposals which are presently being discussed in New York are: a resolution assuring the free and innocent passage of vessels in the Straits and the Gulf; the resumption of full implementation of the Egyptian-Israeli Armistice Agreement; and a possible UN naval patrol comprised of such middle powers as Canada, the Scandinavian countries and others. Moreover, the Secretary General is apt to come up with some other ideas, but his report is not expected before Saturday of this week. These matters being discussed in New York will have to be dealt with even though it is unlikely that formal Security Council action will result.
2. We believe that the UK proposal for a declaration on the part of the principal maritime powers in support of freedom of passage in the Gulf of Aqaba should move forward, after appropriate consultations with Congress and concurrently with the UN consideration. We would then be prepared to encourage maritime powers to join in such a Declaration which would be presented to the Security Council, not for formal approval, but for inclusion in the record of proceedings. Several governments have already made or have under consideration statements to this effect.
3. Our intention is to see to it that the Straits and Gulf remain open to free and innocent passage of vessels of all nations.² We cannot, at this time, see all the steps that would be required to achieve this objective. To this end, we are examining thoroughly and carefully the UK proposal calling for the creation of an international naval force to escort merchant vessels safely through the Strait of Tiran. We assure the Israeli Government of our positive interest in this proposal.
4. We will consult with the Israeli Government at every step of the way, and we expect the Israelis to reciprocate. We know and appreciate that in light of the difficulties which have developed as a result of Nasser's unilateral steps, it is difficult for Israel to be patient and prudent in circumstances [\[Page 126\]](#) where its vital interests could be adversely affected. Nevertheless we can proceed only on the assumption that Israel will make no military move that would precipitate hostilities in the area. Preemptive action by Israel would cause extreme difficulty for the United States. In our position of world leadership, the American people would do what has to be done if "the fault is on the other side and there is no other alternative". Therefore, the question of responsibility for the initiation of hostilities is a major problem for us. Of course if we had information that the other side was moving this would be a matter of great concern.
5. The fundamental guiding principles of the U.S. are the preservation of international peace and security and the preservation of the political independence and territorial integrity of states of the Near East. We have opposed aggression from any source in the past and will continue to do so.
6. We recognize the stresses and the economic cost to which the current situation is subjecting Israel. Bearing this in mind, the United States is prepared to discuss with Israel means of relieving the economic impact of current special burdens on the Israeli economy. We will continue to review the military supply requirements in light of the changing situation.

Dean Rusk

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1. Source: Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, Israel, Vol. XII, 1965–1968. Secret. No drafting information appears on the memorandum. Walt Rostow forwarded it to the President at 12:07 p.m. with a covering memorandum commenting: "It follows the lines you suggested to me earlier but lacks an answer to the questions: Who would join the British party; What would be consequences of this approach in Arab world and elsewhere." (Ibid., NSC Histories, Middle East Crisis, Vol. 2)↵
 2. A memorandum Rostow sent to Johnson at 12:35 p.m. summarizes Goldberg's comments, conveyed through Sisco, on Rusk's recommendations. It states that Goldberg thought this sentence went too far; he preferred: "Our intention is to pursue appropriate measures that the Straits and Gulf remain open." (Ibid., Country File, Middle East Crisis, Vol. II) A message from Goldberg to the President, conveyed by telephone at 2 p.m. that day, suggested a "face-saving solution" involving recognition of UAR sovereign rights over the Straits of Tiran, recognition of the right of international innocent passage through the Straits for non-strategic cargoes, and a confidential "gentleman's agreement" that the UAR would not intercept non-Israeli flag ships for inspection and that Israel would neither send Israeli flag ships through the Straits nor send strategic goods through the Straits on flag ships of other nations. He suggested that such a proposal might be floated through a third party. (Message from Goldberg to the President, received by telephone May 26; *ibid.*)↵