

MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

TOP SECRET

September 23, 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: Harold H. Saunders *HS*  
Richard T. Kennedy *RTK*

SUBJECT: WSAG on Jordan--afternoon, September 23

The main purpose of this meeting is to consider on a contingency basis a possible response to the Israeli note if we learn that King Hussein still desires an air strike. Sisco should bring a draft.

A note to use if Hussein declines should also be discussed. Sisco will probably not have a draft yet.

At Tab I are talking points which identify the main points that must be dealt with in our response and suggest formulations for each.

At Tab II is the Israeli note for reference.

At Tab III is the earlier U.S. answer to the first Israeli questions.

At Tab IV is a factual update with the latest cables.

A working group is meeting simultaneously with the WSAG to deal with the paper on deterring the USSR.

We also suggest you ask Mr. Seelye for an update on the evacuation plans.

TOP SECRET

DECLASSIFIED/RELEASED ON 4/2/02  
by NARA on the recommendation of the NSC  
under provisions of E.O. 12958 *RS*

TOP SECRET

Air Strikes Against Syrian Forces in Jordan

I. Timing of Decision

Given the seriousness of a decision to intervene, there will be an argument for waiting to see whether outside intervention is necessary. Against that natural tendency to hold off must be weighed the advantages of early decision.

A. An early decision could have these advantages:

- The earlier the Syrians are turned back, the less likely are the Fedayeen to consolidate their position in northern Jordan and the more likely is the King to strengthen his position.
- An early threat to the Syrians could encourage them to decide to treat this as an in-and-out incursion, saving face in a way that they could not if they established a foothold in Jordan.
- An early decision even if not immediately executed could be communicated to the Israelis and perhaps forestall a move on their part.
- An early decision, if in favor of U.S. intervention, would permit the implied threat that could be made by flying aerial reconnaissance from the Sixth Fleet.

B. Holding a decision would have these advantages:

- The best possible outcome would be for Hussein to stave off the Syrians on his own. Although his forces are taking losses, a premature move from outside would deprive him of the advantages of proving his ability to defend Jordan.
- A premature move could cut short the time in which our approach to the USSR might have some effect.

TOP SECRET

DECLASSIFIED/RELEASED ON 4/2/02  
by NARA on the recommendation of the NSC  
under provisions of E.O. 12958 *RS*

II. Are there actions yet to be tried before armed outside intervention?

If a Syrian armored force appears to be moving south into northern Jordan, there will be a limited amount of time for any but decisive military moves. However, it is necessary to canvass all alternatives.

- A. Israeli show of force. It is possible that a massing of some Israeli forces on the Golan Heights or the appearance of Israeli air action toward the Syrian rear might cause the Syrians to pause.
- B. U.S. tactical air reconnaissance over the battle area could serve as a warning of impending U.S. air attack. This would require overflight of Israel.
- C. UN Security Council. Although this is unlikely to prove a decisive deterrent to the Syrians, the Jordanians may well feel compelled to call the Council into session.

III. Whether to encourage or try to prevent Israeli air intervention?

The basic question is whether the U.S. should move quickly to deter Israeli air intervention. The question of whether or not there should be any intervention at all may be academic unless the situation in Jordan quiets quickly because Israel may be tempted to move if the Syrians seem on their way to gaining a foothold in northern Jordan.

A. The arguments that U.S. intervention is preferable to Israeli are:

- There is a general argument that perhaps the time has come in the broader Mid-East context to show a capacity for decisive U.S. action. If we stand back, we may well find that we have lost much of whatever U.S. capacity to influence events that may remain. The Soviets and others may already doubt that the U.S. in its present mood will not undertake action that could bring it face to face with the USSR.
- In the context of our peace initiative, it could be argued that the Arabs in the end do respect force. U.S. demonstration of air power and willingness to use it could have



a useful effect in reasserting U.S. determination (within the limits of its power) to see a responsible settlement.

- If either of the above arguments has merit, it can be argued that air strikes in Jordan may be the best means available for such a demonstration. They could be reasonably effective since Syrian armored units will present a well-defined target while at the same time setting limits to U.S. involvement. Congressional support might be more likely.
- One school of thought holds that the Soviets would probably conclude that they had little choice but to let the U.S. get away with a limited intervention as long as Israeli forces were not involved. If the Israelis became involved, the Soviets are likely to be swept up in a broad Arab reaction.
- For the U.S. to stand back would be read as a sign that the U.S. had finally written Hussein off. Failure to come to his aid would be the last in a long series of blows to his confidence in us. In this vein, it would also be a blow to the U.S. position in Saudi Arabia and other moderate countries which have in a general way depended on U.S. power.
- The U.S. would be maintaining an independent policy in the Middle East. Israeli involvement has the dimension of renewing general hostilities, although even Israeli air strikes could be limited. The U.S. could make a better case for a limited operation. This could be presented to the Arab world as a U.S. move to pre-empt further Israeli forward movement and to limit spread of hostilities.
- U.S. action would preserve U.S. control and set limits. Israeli air action could be a first step to ground intervention, and the U.S. would have little ability to prevent such escalation.
- In relation to either of the last two points, the breakdown of the cease-fire seems more likely if Israel intervenes than if the U.S. does.
- U.S. intervention, even on a "quick-strike" basis would be a rallying point in the Arab world for those who charge that Hussein is a "Western lackey." But in this context

Israeli intervention could have an even worse effect. It could - especially if it expanded to ground action -- give anti-government forces a rallying point.

B. The arguments that Israeli intervention is preferable are:

- The Israelis are operationally in a much better position to mount such an operation. They have the reconnaissance capability and, by being on the ground, they have much greater logistical capability. They also have the freedom to bomb the Fedayeen. If the U.S. did so, that would do great damage to the U.S. position in the Arab world.
- The Israelis have a clear-cut national interest which, while the Arabs will not like it, they will understand.
- Air strikes seem likely to be indecisive in a contest of this kind. They might disrupt a tank column, but if the Syrians pour in manpower to reinforce Fedayeen units, air strikes are not likely to present clear targets decisively defeated from the air.
- If the U.S. intervened and then found that its air attacks were indecisive, pressure would then mount to make good via ground intervention. The U.S. would then be on the way to another land war, probably more difficult to sustain than that in Southeast Asia.
- Following up the previous point, if the U.S. intervened in the air and then backed off, it would look as if Israel had to bail the U.S. out if Israel moved. This would be a damaging sign of U.S. weakness.
- U.S. air intervention could be the first step to further involvement. Given Congressional views and the difficulty of supporting a sustained ground operation, it would be better not to take the first step.
- Another way of putting these points is that this is a Middle Eastern war which outsiders cannot settle. It is likely to go on for some time. The U.S. has carefully avoid involvement of combat forces to date. It is of paramount importance to avoid any provocation to further Soviet

involvement; neither of us has an interest in confronting the other directly in a war neither of us can finish. Whatever the disadvantages of Israeli involvement, they are outweighed by the importance of keeping this a cool conflict if we can.

- A quick U.S. move before full Congressional consultation could create a "Vietnam syndrome" on the Mid-East and tie the President's hands in the future. It is important for the future Presidential strategy to establish a basis for Presidential Congressional cooperation.
- Israeli action reduces the possibility of Soviet reaction and preserves future U.S. flexibility. Instead of being directly involved, the U.S. can contribute to the operation by sustaining Israeli operations.
- Any U.S. intervention will provoke a sharp reaction from the Arab radicals. This could cause harm to the hostages in Amman; turn the PFLP to a round of attacks and kidnapping against U.S. personnel and installations throughout the Arab world; provoke retaliation against U.S. oil properties, especially in Iraq. If the Israelis move, the U.S. will share some of the blame but probably it would not be as immediately directed at the U.S.
- Despite a predictably strong Arab reaction to Israeli attacks, these would be understood in terms of known Israeli interests. U.S. attacks -- especially if Fedayeen became the targets -- would be seen principally as attacks against the Arab cause, i.e. on Israel's behalf.