



## **ARMORED BREAKTHROUGH: THE 1965 AMERICAN SALE OF TANKS TO ISRAEL**

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*In late July 1965, the United States sold 210 M-48 Patton tanks to Israel. Though the Kennedy administration had already agreed to provide Israel with heavy weapons, this sale constituted the first occasion on which the United States consented to transfer offensive arms. The Johnson administration's decision to do so proved to be a complex one, motivated by a number of interrelated considerations, including Soviet arms deliveries to Arab states, Israeli research into long-range surface-to-surface missiles and nuclear weapons, Israeli inability to acquire conventional arms in Western Europe, potential Arab-Israeli hostilities, and American arms transfers to Jordan. Domestic politics in the United States, on the other hand, did not play a central role in administration decisionmaking.*

In a July 29, 1965 exchange of letters between Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Peter Solbert and Special Assistant to the Defense Minister Zvi Dinstein, the United States and Israel reached a formal agreement on the sale of American tanks to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Under the terms of the agreement, the IDF would receive 210 M-48 Patton tanks. It would also receive conversion kits--to be used by it to replace the M-48's standard 90mm cannon with a more powerful and accurate 105mm cannon--as well as spare parts and ammunition.(1) The addition of these tanks to the Israeli arsenal, in a nutshell, would significantly boost the IDF's combat capabilities.

In one sense, this sale did not represent a breakthrough in the American-Israeli arms relationship. The Kennedy administration, after all, had already sold a number of Hawk surface-to-air missile batteries in 1962, ending the long-standing American ban on the direct supply of heavy weapons to Israel.(2) In another sense, however, the sale of tanks did indeed represent a breakthrough--and a very

important one to boot. Unlike the Hawk missile, a strictly defensive weapon that could only be employed to protect air bases and other sensitive targets within Israel, the M-48 could be used in offensive warfare, to strike deep into Arab territory.(3) Not only did the M-48 constitute the first offensive weapon furnished to Israel, but its sale also set a precedent for the future. In contrast to the Hawk deal, which had not been quickly followed up with other arms sales, the United States agreed to supply Israel with 48 A-4 Skyhawk attack aircraft--another offensive weapon--not long after it had concluded the M-48 deal.(4) Of even greater consequence, the Johnson administration consented in November 1968 to furnish Israel with 50 F-4 Phantom aircraft.(5) A very powerful and sophisticated machine, the Phantom's capabilities far exceeded those of any warplane then in Arab arsenals. Collectively, these three arms sales signaled that the United States had chosen, albeit with some reluctance every step of the way, to become Israel's principal arms supplier, a considerable change from Kennedy administration policy.

The Johnson administration did not decide to sell tanks to Israel on the spur of the moment. Rather, it spent more than a year carefully considering the implications of such a deal for American national interests in the Middle East. Moreover, President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara--the administration's most senior officials in the realm of foreign policy--involved themselves closely in the debate surrounding the sale, as did the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and high-ranking Middle East experts in the National Security Council (NSC), the Department of State (DoS), the Department of Defense (DoD), and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Clearly, the Johnson administration felt that a decision to supply Israel with tanks constituted a major initiative on its part.

Unlike the Hawk missile sale, which has attracted considerable scrutiny in the literature on the American-Israeli relationship, the M-48 deal has not received nearly its due from historians. To the contrary, it remains a largely obscure episode in the relationship. While a number of historians have made an effort to probe the M-48 sale, their inquiries have usually focused on a particular aspect of the deal to the exclusion of other considerations.<sup>(6)</sup> The purpose of this article, therefore, is to offer a more general and inclusive review of the sale. Specifically, the article traces and then analyzes the Johnson administration's complex decisionmaking process in order to determine the mix of policy goals that finally prompted a positive response to Israel's arms request.

Among the questions to be addressed are: To what extent did Soviet arms shipments to Arab states affect the administration's deliberations? How did arms ties between the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel enter into American calculations? How did Israel's surface-to-surface missile (SSM) and nuclear research

programs affect the Johnson administration's thinking? What impact did the potential for the outbreak of a full-scale war over Arab efforts to deny Israel its share of the Jordan River's water have on the United States? How did the American-Jordanian relationship influence the Johnson administration? And, lastly, did American domestic politics play a major role in the administration's thinking? The motives behind the tank sale reside in the answers to these questions.

### **THE WINDING ROAD TO THE SALE**

Israeli pleas for American arms did not suddenly begin in the early 1960s. Ever since its birth in 1948, Israel had sought to obtain arms, as well as an explicit security guarantee, from the United States.<sup>(7)</sup> The Truman and Eisenhower administrations, though, steadfastly refused Israeli pleas for arms and a security guarantee as a result of Cold War pragmatism. The United States, both administrations reasoned, had to keep Israel at arm's length in order to protect American access to Arab oil and military bases in the face of perceived Soviet expansionism. The lone exception to this policy of denial occurred in 1958, when the Eisenhower administration consented to the sale of a small number of infantry weapons in the form of anti-tank recoilless rifles.<sup>(8)</sup> Once the Kennedy administration broke the taboo on providing heavy weapons, however, Israeli pleas became that much more insistent, despite repeated American statements that the Hawk missile sale should be viewed as an "exceptional" event.<sup>(9)</sup>

With respect to the supply of tanks, Israeli inquiries actually preceded the Johnson administration's rise to power. The idea had first been broached, in fact, with the Kennedy administration in November 1963.<sup>(10)</sup> At the time, Israeli officials contended that the IDF would need 500 modern tanks, 300 during the next year and 200 more in two or three years, in order to

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offset the quantitative and qualitative advantage in armor possessed by the Arab "confrontation" states, mainly as a result of Soviet arms deliveries.(11)

The United States recognized the basic validity of this request, but it did not necessarily approve of the number of tanks desired by Israel. On at least three occasions, the JCS concluded that the IDF needed modern tanks to counter the expanding armored units of its Arab opponents.(12) The IDF had general military superiority over any combination of Arab armies, this body averred, but it risked falling behind in the preparedness of its armored units if it did not upgrade its tank inventory. So long as the IDF mothballed one obsolete tank for every modern vehicle it put into service--that is, so long as the IDF did not increase the total number of its tanks--American generals felt that its acquisition of new vehicles, specifically the M-48, would not unduly upset the local military balance in Israel's favor.

Civilian officials essentially concurred with the judgment of their military experts. By early 1964, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy had already acknowledged the legitimacy in principle of Israel's request for tanks.(13) McNamara echoed this sentiment by giving his blessing to a tank deal.(14) Even Rusk, never known to be a friend of Israel, seemed willing to offer tanks under the right set of circumstances.(15) Most importantly, Johnson believed that Israel required modern tanks. In a memorandum to his Deputy Special Council (for Jewish affairs) Myer Feldman, Johnson said, "On tanks specifically, we recognize Israel's armor needs gradual modernization to keep a dangerous imbalance from developing . . . *We intend to see that Israel gets the tanks it needs . . .*" [italics in original](16)

Nevertheless, during the first months of 1964, upon the advice of his advisors, Johnson demurred on a tank sale to Israel. With the prominent exception of Feldman, who argued for an immediate sale, none of them felt that the time had yet come to provide tanks.(17) Officials in the NSC, DoS, DoD, and CIA advanced several reasons to support their position. These reasons revolved around Israel's SSM and nuclear research programs, expected Arab reaction to an arms sale, and traditional American arms policy in the Middle East.

Israel's development of a long-range SSM, in conjunction with its nuclear research agenda, caused much worry in the United States.(18) Military experts surmised (correctly) that Israel sought to acquire at least the capability to produce SSMs fitted with nuclear warheads in order to possess the "ultimate deterrent" to Arab aggression. A very expensive weapon to design and build, they realized that an SSM armed only with a conventional warhead made no sense from an economic or military point of view, even though American inspections of Israel's nuclear reactor at Dimona had uncovered no concrete evidence of a nuclear weapons program.

In their talks with Israeli counterparts, American officials repeatedly tied the prospects of a tank sale to Israel's "cooperation" on SSMs and nuclear weapons. American officials, quite simply, implied to their Israeli counterparts that a tank sale would be made contingent on an Israeli agreement to forgo SSMs and nuclear weapons. Johnson himself in a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol made the connection, albeit in veiled terms:

As you know, we have been giving careful thought to your expressed concerns about Israel's security needs. In particular we can

understand your worries over the growing imbalance between Israeli and Arab armor, and can see the justification for your feeling that you must take steps to modernize Israel's tank forces and anti-tank defenses. We are fully prepared to discuss this problem further with you.

At the same time we are disturbed lest other steps which Israel may contemplate taking may unnecessarily contribute to a heightened arms race in the region without in fact contributing to your security. Among other things, we seem to have quite different estimates with respect to the likely UAR [Egyptian] [surface-to-surface] missile threat, and the potential costs and risks of various ways of meeting it.(19)

Israeli leaders, not surprisingly, reacted quite angrily to this stance. They categorically rejected any connection between SSMs and nuclear research, on the one hand, and the acquisition of tanks, on the other hand. They had no intention of giving up the option to produce SSMs and nuclear weapons, even if it meant losing out on the opportunity to acquire American tanks, especially in light of the Johnson administration's refusal to translate its commitment to Israel's security into a formal guarantee.(20)

Another sticking point for the United States concerned Arab reaction to a tank sale. NSC, DoS, DoD, and CIA experts all believed that supplying Israel with tanks now would undoubtedly inflame Arab opinion against the United States and would quite possibly lead to serious setbacks for American national interests in the area.(21) These experts especially feared that American oil concessions would be jeopardized and that Soviet influence among the Arabs would grow.

Furthermore, American officials preferred to adhere for the time being to their traditional stance with regard to arms transfers to the Middle East--that is, the United States should avoid becoming a prominent supplier of weapons to either the Arab states or Israel. To this end, American officials still clung to the notion that they could reach some sort of understanding with the Soviet Union to restrict weapons deliveries to the Middle East in order to prevent an unrestrained Arab-Israeli arms race. American officials, in short, did not want to create a "polarized" Middle East, with the United States identified as Israel's benefactor and the Soviet Union identified as the Arabs' benefactor.(22)

#### **THE GERMAN OPTION TO THE FORE**

The Johnson administration, therefore, decided to adopt a middle ground on a tank sale to Israel. While the United States would still refuse to sell tanks directly, it would employ its considerable influence in Western Europe to ensure that either Great Britain or the Federal Republic of Germany met Israel's requirements. The United States, to be sure, had long urged Israel to shop for weapons in Western Europe.(23) Indeed, successive administrations had quietly approved of French arms deliveries throughout the mid-1950s and early 1960s. Thus, the inclination to tell Israel to look to Western Europe did not constitute a radical departure from the past concerning source of supply; however, never before had an American administration promised to exercise its diplomatic and financial clout so openly to fulfill Israeli arms needs.

The idea of an American-engineered sale of tanks to Israel from Western European states began to gather steam based on a joint DoS-DoD recommendation in the spring of 1964.(24) The Johnson administration quickly bought into the plan.(25) In his June 1, 1964 White House meeting with Eshkol, Johnson made

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it manifest that the United States would see that the IDF received tanks to offset its growing inferiority in armor. According to the minutes of the meeting:

The President took up the specific problems on the agenda. With regard to tanks, he said he appreciated the readiness of Israel to agree to the manner in which tanks could be provided. He pointed out that we [the United States] could not provide tanks directly but we would be glad to help Israel in every way possible to get a sufficient quantity of tanks elsewhere.(26)

Significantly, the only *quid pro quo* that the United States demanded from Israel was secrecy. Though American officials would continue to express their concerns about Israel's SSM and nuclear programs--and would continue to pressure Israel on these programs in the future--they were no longer absolutely insisting on major Israeli concessions as the price of a tank deal.(27) The Johnson administration seemed to accept the notion that it could not compel Israel to give up its SSM and nuclear programs while Egypt refused to stop its own SSM and weapons of mass destruction programs.(28) Still, the United States could at least wield a restraining influence over the Eshkol government's decisionmaking on these arms if it assisted in the acquisition of conventional weapons for the IDF.

The Johnson administration proposed two options to solve Israel's dilemma: purchase additional Centurion tanks from Great Britain or purchase M-48 tanks from the Federal Republic of Germany. The IDF already possessed the Centurion (and would buy more in later years), but it strongly preferred the M-48, which had

greater "autonomy" than the Centurion--that is, it could operate on the battlefield for a longer period before having to re-arm and re-fuel. The Eshkol government also preferred the M-48 for political reasons: the purchase of this tank would help to establish an American-Israeli arms pipeline, however roundabout, which Israel could later strengthen. Thus, Israeli officials pressed for the German alternative. They expressed discomfort, of course, that Israel had to acquire American tanks indirectly, but they determined that the importance of getting these tanks took precedence over the actual source of supply.(29)

Despite the fact that the Federal Republic of Germany had been quietly sending arms to Israel since the late 1950s, it initially balked at providing M48s.(30) German officials thought that furnishing a large number of tanks could not be kept secret for very long. Once the arms relationship became public knowledge, they feared, the Arab world would retaliate against West Germany. The Arab world might well seriously hinder, or even entirely sever, the lucrative economic ties that existed between itself and the Federal Republic. Of even more concern, the Arab world might decide to recognize formally the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), a development that the Federal Republic sought desperately to avoid.(31)

Nevertheless, after complex, three-way negotiations among American, Israeli, and German officials--negotiations during which the United States placed significant pressure on West Germany--the Federal Republic agreed to supply Israel with 150 M-48s. The United States agreed to restock West Germany's arsenal with a more modern variant of the M-48. It also agreed to furnish Israel with upgrade kits, spare parts, and ammunition, but not before some hard bargaining over prices and delivery

schedules. All three states pledged to maintain strict secrecy about the existence of the deal.(32)

The Johnson administration facilitated this tank sale in part because its efforts to reach an accommodation with the Soviet Union on arms limitations in the Middle East appeared to be going nowhere. On a number of occasions, Rusk had instructed American diplomats to impress upon their Egyptian counterparts that the United States was under heavy pressure to supply Israel with arms in order to correct "imbalances" caused by large-scale Soviet deliveries of sophisticated weapons to Egypt (and, presumably, to other Arab states).(33) American diplomats relayed the message, but it apparently had no effect on either Egyptian or Soviet conduct.(34) Moreover, the Johnson administration had early indications that Jordan would soon be seeking more and better American arms than it had received in the past.(35) Given its commitment to Israel's security, the United States could not stand aloof as the Arab world acquired increasingly sophisticated weapons in ever greater quantities. In addition, the administration realized that a major Jordanian arms initiative would spell trouble domestically if Israel were not "compensated" in some fashion.

Predictably, the tripartite tank deal did not stay secret for very long. By October 1964, the American and West German media had got wind of the arrangement. How it leaked to the media has never been explained satisfactorily, though suspicions fall most strongly on disapproving officials within the West German government. Whatever the case may have been, Prime Minister Ludwig Erhard announced in February 1965 that the Federal Republic of Germany intended to cease arms shipments to Israel immediately.(36) Only 40 tanks had reached the IDF by the time of the cutoff. The Eshkol government, naturally, turned to the Johnson administration,

arguing that the United States should now supply tanks directly, as Israel's needs could no longer be satisfied by Western European sources.(37)

#### **WATER WOES AND ARMS FLOWS**

While the tripartite tank deal unraveled under the glare of intense publicity, the Johnson administration confronted two more problems that drove it further down the road to direct weapons sales to Israel: the Arab world's Jordan River diversion project and Jordanian arms requests. The first problem was not a new one. Back in 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower had dispatched Ambassador Eric Johnston to the Middle East in order to reach an equitable agreement between Arabs and Israelis over the division of the Jordan River's water.(38) After several years of tortuous negotiations, Johnston worked out an informal understanding on how to apportion the water called the Unified Plan. But, because it would have implied recognition of Israel, the Arab world refused to sanction an official accord. Despite the lack of a formal agreement, Israel proceeded to build its National Water Carrier to implement its plan to use its share of the river's water to irrigate agricultural land.

There matters stood until 1964, when the National Water Carrier was set to begin pumping water throughout Israel. To abort this irrigation plan, the Arab world decided to divert the Jordan River's water from flowing into Israel, claiming (falsely) that the pumping would undermine its water rights. In a Knesset speech delivered on January 21, 1964, Eshkol warned in response that "Israel will oppose unilateral and illegal measures by the Arab states and will act to protect its vital interests."(39) Though force had not been threatened openly, the Israeli government had certainly signaled that it would resort to the military instrument if necessary. It

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reiterated this sentiment in a September 1964 communique.(40)

The United States strongly supported Israel's right to draw water in order to irrigate farmland. It steadfastly opposed, however, the use of force to protect this right, contending that Israel must take its case to the United Nations Security Council.(41) The Johnson administration worried that a flare up over the Arab diversion project had the potential to escalate into a full-scale Arab-Israeli war. This fear was heightened by Israeli-Syrian border skirmishes, which began in late 1964 over diversion-related engineering works on the Golan Heights.(42) For its part, the Eshkol government regularly tried to re-assure the Johnson administration that it would show restraint in the face of Arab provocations, but it consistently refused to forswear the use of force to defend its water rights under Johnston's Unified Plan.

The United States viewed the Jordanian arms issue as an even more urgent dilemma. Ostensibly, Jordan required additional arms, including tanks and aircraft, to offset the growing strength of the IDF. Actually, as Jordanian officials privately acknowledged and as American officials noted, it needed them primarily to resist pressure from Egypt to acquire Soviet arms.(43) Indeed, in less-than-subtle remarks, Jordanian officials told their American counterparts that Jordan would have to adopt Soviet arms if American weapons were not forthcoming.(44)

While the Johnson administration sought to keep Jordan firmly within the American sphere of influence, it also concluded that meeting King Hussein's demands in total would generate dangerous tensions in the Middle East. Not only would it undermine the administration's policy with respect to limiting weapons sales to the region, but it would also put the United States under tremendous pressure to

compensate Israel by establishing a direct arms pipeline. An overt arms relationship with Israel, in turn, would push the Arab world more firmly into the Soviet orbit, creating a polarized Middle East and threatening American oil interests.(45)

Faced with the prospect of a very difficult choice, the Johnson administration decided on a middle-of-the-road approach. It would sell Jordan tanks, but not aircraft. Jordanian officials would be encouraged to shop in Western Europe for the latter. The administration felt that this compromise would serve its purposes on two fronts. First, it would keep Jordan within the American sphere of influence. Second, it could be "sold" to Israel, which would be told that its security was safeguarded better by an American-armed rather than a Soviet-armed Jordanian army, as well as that the United States had no choice but to supply arms to Jordan now that the American-Israeli-West German tank deal had become public knowledge.(46)

At first, Jordan did not react well to the American compromise proposal. Jordanian officials complained about the deal's scope--they wanted an advanced version of the M-48 tank and aircraft, whereas American officials had offered only the basic M-48--and timing--they wanted the arms immediately, whereas American officials wanted to spread delivery out over a number of years. But, after some tough bargaining, Jordan essentially came around to the American point of view. In return for not seeking Soviet arms, the United States would supply 100 M-48 tanks. Furthermore, Jordan would defer for the time being its request to acquire more advanced M-48s and aircraft. Jordanian officials also promised that American tanks would not be deployed on the West Bank.(47)

### THE HARRIMAN-KOMER MISSION TO ISRAEL

The Johnson administration knew that a tank sale to Jordan would be met with protests from Israel's supporters within the United States if the Eshkol government objected to the deal. One influential official even argued that the United States needed Israel "not just grudgingly acquiescent *but actively in favor* [italics in original] of minimum arms aid to Jordan. Only if we can say [the Eshkol government is] 100% with us, can we protect our domestic flank."(48) Therefore, the Johnson administration had to reach some sort of accommodation with its Israeli counterpart. These negotiations proved to be far more complicated and contentious than the parallel American-Jordanian talks.

When first apprised of the prospective tank sale, Israeli officials reacted vehemently to the idea. The sale of tanks to Jordan, they asserted, would upset the Arab-Israeli balance of power by undermining the IDF's deterrent posture, particularly now that Israel had lost its West German source of arms. Furthermore, it would constitute a severe psychological blow to the Israeli people. Consequently, they went on, the IDF would be more inclined to take pre-emptive action in a future crisis.(49)

Still, the Eshkol government displayed a willingness to swallow a tank sale to Jordan--under the right circumstances. Israeli officials indicated that they would be willing to silence their opposition if (1) Jordan kept its American tanks on the East Bank of the Jordan River and (2) the United States agreed to sell arms to Israel directly.(50) The fact that some American officials had already resolved that it would be necessary to establish an arms pipeline to Israel in order to justify a tank sale to Jordan notwithstanding, the Johnson administration continued to evidence hesitancy in this regard.(51)

Into the tense atmosphere of the American-Israeli relationship in February 1965, Johnson dispatched Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs W. Averell Harriman and NSC staff member Robert Komer to the Middle East in order to hammer out a mutually acceptable agreement with the Eshkol government. Johnson, with the concurrence of Rusk, informed Harriman and Komer that they could tell the Eshkol government that the United States would consider "selective direct sales" of arms in the future, but only in exchange for a number of Israeli concessions. Not only must Israel quietly support American arms for Jordan by helping to mute opposition within the United States, but it must also give ironclad assurances that it would not develop nuclear weapons and would not take pre-emptive action against the Jordan River diversion project.(52)

Johnson and Rusk had to know that it was completely unrealistic to expect the Eshkol government to make these kinds of concessions in exchange for nothing more tangible than an American promise to consider direct arms sales. In any case, Israeli officials soon left the administration in no doubt as to their position in face-to-face talks with Harriman and Komer, stressing with great vigor that they could not enter into a one-sided agreement in which Israel made major concessions while the United States offered none of its own. As a counter to the American proposal, they said that they would acquiesce in an arms sale to Jordan if the United States supplied weapons directly to Israel. They also pledged that Israel would not undertake to manufacture nuclear weapons for the moment, though it would not give up the option to do so. And, on the Jordan River diversion project, they would only go so far as to say that Israel would exhaust peaceful means before resorting to the use of force.(53)



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Harriman and Komer's recommendation that the Johnson administration obligate itself to direct arms sales, as well as soften its demands on nuclear weapons and the Jordan River diversion scheme, combined with the pressure to consummate an arms deal with Jordan before it turned to the Soviet Union, finally broke the impasse over an American-Israeli agreement.<sup>(54)</sup> Perhaps reluctantly, Johnson and Rusk acknowledged the logic of the Harriman - Komer position.<sup>(55)</sup> They opted for a limited agreement with the Eshkol government, largely on Israeli terms. On March 10, 1965, therefore, the United States and Israel signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The central points of the agreement appear in clauses II and V:

II. The Government of Israel has reaffirmed that Israel will not be the first [state] to introduce nuclear weapons into the Arab-Israel area.

V. [The] United States will sell Israel on favorable credit terms, or otherwise help Israel procure, certain arms and military equipment as follows:

A. The United States will ensure the sale directly to Israel at her request of at least the same number and quality of tanks that it sells to Jordan.

B. In the event of the Federal Government of Germany not supplying to Israel the remainder of the 150 M48 tanks outstanding under the German-Israeli tank deal of 1964, the United States will ensure the completion of this program.<sup>(56)</sup>

Other clauses of the MoU stipulated that Jordan would keep any tanks sold to it by

the United States on the East Bank of the Jordan River and that the American-Israeli tank deal would remain secret until such time as the Johnson administration and the Eshkol government mutually agreed that it could be announced officially.

Before the American-Israeli tank deal could be completed and made public, the United States had to acquaint Arab states, especially Jordan and Egypt, with its existence.<sup>(57)</sup> The news, as expected, went down more easily in Jordan than in Egypt. The latter, after all, already had a strained relationship with the United States over its intervention in Yemen, not to mention its efforts to overthrow pro-Western Arab monarchies. Despite Egyptian displeasure, once the Johnson administration had formally informed Jordan and Egypt of the sale, and after a bit of last-minute haggling with the Eshkol government, the American-Israeli tank deal was officially concluded in the summer.<sup>(58)</sup>

### THE MOTIVES BEHIND THE SALE

Even though the Johnson administration attempted to portray the tank sale as a onetime deal--as an anomaly in American Middle East policy--it represented in retrospect yet another significant step down the road to a full-fledged American-Israeli patron-client relationship.<sup>(59)</sup> A "special relationship" had become inevitable by the early 1960s in light of America's commitment to ensure Israel's security. The gradual loss of the IDF's traditional sources of arms, particularly France and West Germany, combined with the Soviet Union's large-scale weapons transfers to the Arab world, meant that the United States was bound to become Israel's benefactor. Moreover, unlike its predecessor, the Johnson administration from the outset had essentially abandoned the notion of cultivating Egypt as a potential partner in the Middle East, which

served to lower further America's inhibitions about selling arms to Israel. If not on this particular occasion, then, the United States would have furnished arms on another.

Even so, the Johnson administration had a number of potent motives for supplying tanks to Israel in 1965. The proximate causes of its decision were the unraveling of the American-Israeli-West German tank deal and the need to arm Jordan in order to prevent Soviet weapons from going there. The administration could not leave Israel in the lurch while it transferred weapons to Jordan. If it had done so, it would have violated not only its vow to ensure Israel's security, but also its desire to maintain a balance of power in the Middle East.

Less pressing reasons affected its decision as well. The Johnson administration recognized that it could not ultimately prevent Israel from developing SSMs and nuclear weapons (even if this realization did not prevent it from repeatedly trying to do so). Supplying arms to Israel, however, would give it a degree of leverage over these programs. Israel would feel safer with an American arms pipeline and, therefore, would be more inclined to respect administration pleas for restraint on SSMs and nuclear weapons. Indeed, Israel's policy of nuclear "opacity"--that is, its policy of keeping its bomb and missile capabilities almost entirely hidden in the shadows--can be traced to America's decision to supply arms.(60)

Furthermore, while the Johnson administration conceded that it could not stop Israel from employing the IDF to protect the state's national interests, it felt that it could at least moderate the Eshkol government's propensity to resort to the military instrument if the United States furnished arms. In this vein, Rusk stated:

It is important to preserve an adequate Arab/Israeli [arms] balance, in order to prevent such

periodic crises as that approaching over the Jordan waters from flaring into open war which we would have to intervene [in] to stop. To deny arms to Israel will greatly reinforce its tendency to take early preemptive action against the Arabs.(61)

Put differently, the administration thought that, if the United States sent arms to Israel, the Eshkol government would be morally obliged to take America's national interests into account before unleashing the IDF. The validity of this belief would be amply verified by the train of events leading up to the 1967 Six-Day War. The Eshkol government refrained from embarking on war until the Johnson administration had tacitly given it a "green light" to do so--after the United States had failed to achieve a diplomatic solution to the crisis.

Lastly, a few words must be said about the role of domestic considerations in the Johnson administration's decision, especially in light of the common perception that the American-Israeli relationship has been driven largely by currents within the United States. Unquestionably, Johnson himself had a friendly attitude toward Israel. He also developed very cordial relationships with both Eshkol and Ephraim Evron, the number two man at the Israeli embassy in Washington.(62) In addition, an extremely astute politician, Johnson knew that an arms sale to Israel could only help his and the Democratic Party's stature at home.

Still, no evidence exists to suggest that purely domestic considerations had a major impact on American decisionmaking. The Johnson administration did not sell tanks to Israel in order to curry favor with Jewish voters or the pro-Israel lobby. If it had been worried about appeasing these groups, it would have shipped arms directly to Israel in 1964, an election year. The administration's apparent lack of concern

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with regard to a domestic backlash over a refusal to provide tanks during this year is attested to by the position of the NSC Standing Group on arms to Israel:

The only foreseeable adverse result would be increased Israeli pressure on the American Jewish community to support the tank request. [This] can be counteracted by a careful explanation of 1) past and present U.S. economic and military assistance to Israel, 2) Israel's present strong military posture, 3) Israel's remarkably flourishing economy, and 4) the nature of the extent of U.S. assurances of support for Israel in such matters as security and the Jordan waters off-take.(63)

In fact, the only key administration figure who supported a tank sale to Israel in 1964 was Myer Feldman, Johnson's advisor on Jewish affairs.

At most, domestic considerations buttressed a sale based on a firm strategic rationale. Indeed, officials like Rusk and McNamara would not have endorsed the deal unless they felt certain that it would advance America's foreign policy agenda in the Middle East. Domestic considerations, in short, entered into the decision primarily to the extent that the administration sought the Eshkol government's assistance in convincing Israel's American supporters that a substantial arms sale to Jordan would be in the national interests of both the United States and Israel.

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*working on a book manuscript tentatively titled Struggle for Survival: Defense and Diplomacy in the Israeli Experience.*

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### NOTES

1. The terms of the deal are outlined in a July 29, 1965 memorandum (230) from National Security Council staff member Robert Komer to President Lyndon Johnson. This document is contained in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XVIII, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1964-67. The documents in this volume are permanently archived at the Department of State's web site, <[http://www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xviii/index.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xviii/index.html)> [the general FRUS page can be found at <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/>>].

Unless noted to the contrary, all of the documents cited in this article are contained in this online volume. (Each document's reference number in Volume XVIII appears in parentheses after its date of circulation.)

2. A comprehensive treatment of this deal can be found in Abraham Ben-Zvi, John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Arms Sales to Israel (London: Frank Cass, 2002). Also see Warren Bass, Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), especially pp. 144-185.

3. Two years after the sale, during the 1967 Six-Day War, M-48s would participate in the IDF's strike against Egypt in the Sinai.

4. Steven L. Spiegel, The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 134.

5. See Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul Warnke's November 27, 1968 letter (333) to Israeli Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin. Also see the memoranda of conversations between American and Israeli officials dated November 22, 1968 (330) and November 26, 1968 (332). These documents are contained in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XX, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1967-68.

<<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/johnsonlb/xx/>>

6. For assessments of the deal that are narrowly focused see, for example, Avner Cohen, Israel and the Bomb (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 196-208 and David Schoenbaum, The United States and the State of Israel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 142-145.

7. For Israel's arms requests during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations see Abraham Ben-Zvi, Decade of Transition: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Origins of the American-Israeli Alliance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and Zach Levey, Israel and the Western Powers, 1952-1960 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

8. On this sale see Ben-Zvi, Decade of Transition, p. 83.

9. Kennedy ultimately decided to supply Israel with this missile for two major reasons. First, Israel had a genuine requirement for this weapon in order to fend off the growing Arab air threat to its military facilities, industrial assets, and population centers. The Pentagon verified as much. Second, Kennedy's vigorous effort to draw Egypt firmly into the

American camp had run aground over differences stemming from the large-scale Egyptian military involvement in the Yemeni civil war; hence, the president and his advisors eventually came to the conclusion that closer ties to Israel, including an arms sale, would not do further damage to American-Arab relations. See Bass, Support Any Friend and Ben-Zvi, John F. Kennedy for in-depth treatments of these reasons.

10. Cohen, Israel and the Bomb, p. 198.

11. The Israeli position is summarized in a January 3, 1964 memorandum of conversation (3) circulated by Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Phillips Talbot.

12. The assessments prepared by the JCS are dated January 18, 1964 (10), March 12, 1964 (28), and May 6, 1965 (211).

13. Bundy's opinion appears in Komer's January 10, 1964 memorandum for the record (7).

14. For the Secretary of Defense's perspective see Solbert's February 15, 1964 memorandum (13).

15. For the Secretary of State's perspective see his January 16, 1964 and February 25, 1964 memoranda (9 and 18) to Johnson.

16. Johnson's memorandum to Feldman is dated May 15, 1964 (55).

17. See Feldman's March 14, 1964 memorandum (29) to Johnson. For the contrary view see Bundy's March 8, 1964 memorandum (27) to Johnson. McNamara and Rusk, it should be noted, displayed a greater willingness to involve the United States in a tank deal sooner rather than later in comparison to the NSC, DoS, DoD, and CIA experts working on this issue.

18. An exceedingly thorough description and evaluation of Israel's SSM and nuclear research programs in the 1960s is contained in Cohen, Israel and the Bomb. The former program would eventually result in the Jericho family of missiles, while the latter program saw at least two

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bombs readied for use on the eve of the Six-Day War.

19. These lines are taken from Johnson's February 20, 1964 letter (14) to Eshkol. The link between Israeli SSMs and nuclear weapons and American tanks is rendered unambiguously in many documents. See, for example, Rusk's January 16, 1964 memorandum (9) to Johnson and the joint DoS-DoD April 25, 1964 memorandum (47).

20. The Eshkol government's position that the acquisition of tanks should not be connected to Israel's SSM and nuclear research programs is reflected in Komer's March 5, 1964 memorandum for the record (26).

21. This theme, too, appears in many documents. See Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs John Jernegan's February 28, 1964 memorandum (21) to Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson and the Special National Intelligence Estimate of April 15, 1964 (42). Also see the telegrams from United States embassies throughout the Arab world, which can be found in "Israel, Tanks Vol. 2," Country File, National Security File, Box 145, LBJ Library.

22. This attitude is forthrightly expressed, for example, in Rusk's January 16, 1964 memorandum (9) to Johnson as well as in his August 20, 1964 telegram (92) to the United States Embassy in Jordan.

23. On this policy see Ben-Zvi, Decade of Transition and Levey, Israel and the Western Powers.

24. For this recommendation see the late April 1964 memoranda (47 and 49) outlining joint DoS-DoD thinking.

25. The administration's support for the plan is evident in memoranda among senior officials dated May 15, 1964 (55), May 16, 1964 (57), and May 28, 1964 (63).

26. The Johnson-Eshkol exchange of views is summarized in a June 1, 1964 memorandum of conversation (65).

27. Ibid.

28. Egypt had shown no genuine willingness to halt its SSM and chemical warfare programs in its contacts with the Johnson administration.

29. The Israeli position on acquiring tanks in Western Europe can be gleaned from memoranda dated May 17, 1964 (58) and June 2, 1964 (67).

30. For West Germany's reluctance, see Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John McNaughton's May 16, 1964 memorandum (56) to McNamara. Also see Spiegel, The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict, p. 132. For arms links between the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s see Lily Gardner Feldman, The Special Relationship Between West Germany and Israel (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 122-136. For a list of specific items furnished to Israel by the Federal Republic, see telegram, United States Embassy in the Federal Republic to DoS, February 15, 1965, "Israel, Tanks Vol. 2," Country File, National Security File, Box 145, LBJ Library.

31. On West German fears see Feldman, The Special Relationship Between West Germany and Israel, p. 161.

32. The terms of the American-Israeli-West German tank deal can be found in memoranda dated September 23, 1964 (95) and October 19, 1964 (99).

33. See Rusk's telegrams to the United States Embassy in Egypt dated February 29, 1964 (22) and May 3, 1964 (50).

34. See, for instance, the telegram from the United States Embassy in Egypt to the DoS dated March 4, 1964 (24).

35. Jordan's appetite for American arms is foreshadowed in an April 15, 1964 memorandum of conversation (40).

36. Feldman, The Special Relationship Between West Germany and Israel, p. 182.
37. For this Israeli demand see the DoS's February 13, 1965 telegram (148) to the United States Embassy in Israel and Komer's February 16, 1965 memorandum (152) to Johnson.
38. Historical background information on the Jordan River water problem can be found in Michael Brecher, Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 173-213 and Avner Yaniv, Deterrence Without the Bomb: The Politics of Israeli Strategy (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1987), pp. 104-107.
39. Eshkol's Knesset speech is available at the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs web site, <[www.mfa.gov.il](http://www.mfa.gov.il)>.
40. This communique is also archived at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs web site.
41. The American objection is reflected in numerous memoranda and telegrams, including those dated February 13, 1965 (149), February 16, 1965 (152), February 21, 1965 (157), February 26, 1965 (160), February 28, 1965 (168), March 1, 1965 (169), and March 3, 1965 (175).
42. For this border skirmishing see Yaniv, Deterrence Without the Bomb, pp. 106-107.
43. See the memoranda to Rusk dated July 22, 1964 (78) and July 24, 1964 (79).
44. On Jordan's position see the memorandum to Rusk dated July 22, 1964 (78).
45. For the administration's concern see the Special National Intelligence Estimate of August 13, 1964 (91), the memorandum of conversation dated January 14, 1965 (121), and Komer's memorandum to Johnson dated January 21, 1965 (124).
46. The thinking of American officials is outlined in Rusk's February 1, 1965 memorandum (129) to Johnson, the NSC's February 1, 1965 meeting summary (130), and the DoS's February 1, 1965 telegram (131) to the United States Embassy in Israel.
47. The course of American-Jordanian negotiations over the arms sale can be traced in a series of memoranda and telegrams dated February 7, 1965 (140 and 141), February 9, 1965 (143 and 145), February 13, 1965 (149), February 19, 1965 (154 and 155), and March 12, 1965 (188).
48. See memorandum, Komer to Johnson, February 7, 1965, "Israel, Tanks Vol. 2," Country File, National Security File, Box 145, LBJ Library.
49. The Eshkol government's response is cited in two DoS telegrams dated February 6, 1965 (137) and February 13, 1965 (147).
50. See the DoS telegram of February 13, 1965 (148) and Komer's February 16, 1965 memorandum (152) to Johnson.
51. Under Secretary of State George Ball and Komer were two key officials who held this opinion. See Ball's telegram to the United States Embassy in Jordan dated February 8, 1965 (142) as well as Komer's memoranda to Johnson dated February 6, 1965 (138), February 9, 1965 (143), and February 16, 1965 (152).
52. These guidelines are contained in Johnson's February 21, 1965 memorandum (157) to Harriman and Komer. Also see Rusk's February 26, 1965 telegram (160) to the United States Embassy in Israel.
53. The Eshkol government's reaction to the American proposal, as well as its counterproposal, appears in a pair of telegrams sent to the DoS by American Ambassador to Israel Walworth Barbour. These telegrams summarize Harriman and Komer's talks with Israeli officials. The telegrams are dated February 26, 1965 (161) and February 27, 1965 (163).
54. The Harriman-Komer recommendation is contained in a pair of telegrams sent to the DoS by Barbour. These telegrams are dated February 28, 1965 (165) and March 2, 1965 (173). See also Komer's messages

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to Bundy dated March 1, 1965 (172) and March 6, 1965 (180).

55. See Rusk's telegrams to the United States Embassy in Israel dated March 3, 1965 (175), March 7, 1965 (181), and March 8, 1965 (182).

56. The complete text of this MoU appears in Barbour's March 11, 1965 telegram (185) to the DoS.

57. See Rusk's March 10, 1965 telegram (186) to the United States Embassy in Jordan and his March 18, 1965 telegram (193) to the United States Embassy in Egypt.

58. A hint of the ongoing wrangling can be detected in Komer's May 20, 1965 memorandum for the record (216).

59. See Rusk's March 19, 1965 telegram (194) to United States embassies throughout the Middle East.

60. This theme is a very prominent one in Cohen, Israel and the Bomb.

61. See memorandum, Rusk to Johnson, February 19, 1965, "Israel, Tanks Vol. 2," Country File, National Security File, Box 145, LBJ Library.

62. On Johnson's warm ties to Eshkol see Aaron S. Klieman, Israel & the World after 40 Years (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, Inc., 1990), pp. 74, 88. On Johnson's warm ties to Evron see Abba Eban, Personal Witness: Israel Through My Eyes (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1992), p. 479. On the latter relationship also see transcript, Harry McPherson Oral History Interview III, January 16, 1969, by T. H. Baker, Internet Copy, LBJ Library, pp. 16-17. McPherson inherited the job of liaison between the White House and the American Jewish community from Feldman.

63. See NSC memorandum, April 28, 1964, "Israel, Tanks Vol. 1," Country File, National Security File, Box 145, LBJ Library.