

What is Henry Kissinger's legacy in the Middle East?

An interview with [William B. Quandt](#), conducted by Mouin Rabbani June 15, 2023 for his Connections podcast program.

*William Quandt twice served on the US National Security Council, first in the Nixon administration from 1972 to 1974, and then from 1977 to 1979 in the Carter Administration. Quandt was actively involved in the negotiations that led to the 1978 Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel, and the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty. He is a past president of the Middle East Studies Association Mesa. His numerous publications include **Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967**.*

The full interview can be viewed on Youtube [here](#). The timestamps on this transcript correspond to those on that recording. This transcript, which was prepared by Just World Educational with Mr. Rabbani's permission, has been lightly edited for clarity.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:01:00](#)):

To start off, within a year of your joining the National Security Council in 1972, Henry Kissinger had become both Nixon's National Security Advisor and his Secretary of State, and for all intents and purposes had no significant bureaucratic competitors in formulating US foreign policy. In this context, what were his objectives in the Middle East and did these go beyond superpower rivalry and reducing Soviet influence in the region?

William Quandt ([00:01:32](#)):

To understand Kissinger's approach to the Middle East, you have to realize that he had never spent much time thinking about or writing about the Middle East before he got into government. And when he was first appointed as National Security Advisor, Nixon actually told him not to deal with the Middle East. Nixon wasn't quite sure that he was the right man for the job because he didn't know much about the region. And I think, quite frankly, Nixon suspected that he was too closely committed to Israel, and Nixon was trying to be a bit more even-handed. So initially, in the first couple of years of the Nixon administration, the State Department largely managed foreign policy on the Middle East under Secretary of State William Rogers -- not a terribly effective Secretary of State, but he did make an effort to develop a kind of framework in cooperation with the Soviet Union for an Egyptian Israeli peace agreement, the so-called Rogers Plan. And something similar was done on the Jordanian front. He didn't touch the Palestinian issue, but he at least addressed those others.

Kissinger was profoundly skeptical, partly because it was being done by the State Department, partly because it was being done in coordination with the Soviet Union. Now, I think it's important to also add that Kissinger approached international relations and foreign policy very much as a product of his European experience and as an academic who had written about the conditions under which European security had fallen apart in the 20th century, following the largely peaceful Concert of Europe in the nineteenth century. His intellectual framework was European state-to-state relations, and when he came of age as an academic in the United States in the 1950s and sixties his writing shifted more toward the Cold-War dynamic with the Soviet Union and the geopolitics of the new power relations that came out of World War II.

The Middle East was not irrelevant to his concerns, but the region was on the sidelines. To some extent, through the 1950s and even into the 1960s, it was seen largely as a British or French sphere of influence, which had to be dealt with through some kind of decolonization and then competition with the Soviet Union. Up until the time Kissinger entered government in 1969, I doubt if he had ever met with or dealt with any senior Arab diplomatic figure. So, this was largely unknown territory for him. The first time he really exerted some influence on American foreign policy toward the Middle East was during the Jordan crisis of 1970.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:04:43](#)):

When it was known as Black September.

William Quandt ([00:04:45](#)):

Right. That was partly because there was a real concern at the time when the Syrians sent troops into Northern Jordan that this could escalate the conflict to include the Israelis.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:04:59](#)):

And, to clarify, this was an armed confrontation between Palestinian guerillas operating under the umbrella of the PLO and the Jordanian military. Syria at one stage intended to send mechanized forces into Jordan in support of the Palestinians.

William Quandt ([00:05:19](#)):

Right. And there was some concern on the American side that the Israelis would respond by also intervening, and this could have created a major crisis in the Middle East. So, Kissinger, at Nixon's urging, got involved in this. The crisis ended with the Syrian troops [that had actually entered northern Jordan] withdrawing, and King Hussein remaining on the throne. Several thousand Palestinians were killed or wounded, and most of the rest of the PLO fighters were forced out of Jordan and eventually ended up in Lebanon. This was an outcome that Kissinger felt was positive because the Soviet-backed Syrians had not prevailed. The American-oriented King Hussein was still on the throne, and Israel had not directly intervened because the United States had urged it not to and had tried to coordinate between Jordan and Israel.

So that was Kissinger's first tactical intervention in Middle East. Nixon began to look toward him for ideas of what to do with the problems of the Middle East. Nixon himself had ideas on the Middle East, and they were not exactly the same as Kissinger's. He was more worried that the

Arab-Israeli conflict post-1967 was explosive, that it was going to blow up at some point. He used to use the analogy of the Balkans before World War I -- in and of itself, the region might look like a local conflict, but it had the potential to explode and draw in other major powers.

Nixon would frequently urge that the U.S. needed to pay more attention to the Middle east region. But the problem for both Nixon and Kissinger was that they had inherited a conflict that was time-consuming and costly for the United States, and that was the Vietnam war. They had to figure out either how to solve it or get out of it or win it. It's clear that Nixon thought it was a losing war and the cost of trying to prevail in Vietnam was too great. But he also wanted to get reelected in 1972 without looking like he was the first American president to lose a major war. So, he was constantly trying to think as a politician, when should we make our moves to start negotiating on Vietnam? How can we get someone like either the Russians or the Chinese to help us in that endeavor? And the real brilliance of Nixon, in my view, was that he saw the possibility of the opening toward China as a way of defusing the risk that Vietnam would become even more explosive, the Chinese might even help get negotiations started, and that would give him more influence in his relations with Russia. The opening to China was more Nixon than Kissinger. Kissinger was the implementer of the policy – and he turned out to be very good at that. He wasn't initially as good at conceptualizing what needed to be done, but when he was given a specific task, he turned out to be a very good negotiator. In his face-to-face relations with Mao Tse-tung, with Chou En-lai, and with Brezhnev, he turned out to be more skillful and interesting than you might expect from someone whose basic background had been as an academic. He'd never done negotiations before. So that's just a quick introduction to how I saw him in my first phase of working for him.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:10:02](#)):

Against this background did he develop a strategic objective for his dealings with the Middle East, or did he see it simply, as you seem to suggest, one more arena for superpower competition?

William Quandt ([00:10:19](#)):

In July 1972, just before I joined the NSC staff, President Sadat of Egypt had announced that 15,000 Soviet military advisors would be leaving the country. It caught us pretty much by surprise. And so one of the first things I tried to do, once I had access to the classified materials, was to find out where did this come from? Why did it happen, and what are we doing about it? And although there wasn't much visible reaction, most policymakers were initially unsure of why Sadat had done this. Sadat was generally viewed as a not very strong and not very serious political figure. He had almost lost power in 1971.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:11:15](#)):

I believe the consensus in, in Washington was that he wouldn't last very long.

William Quandt ([00:11:21](#)):

That's right. So, we hadn't taken him very seriously.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:11:25](#)):

And, just to expand further on this point, as you indicated the same year that you joined the National Security Council, Egypt's new president Anwar Sadat famously ended his country's alliance with the Soviet Union and expelled the 15,000 military advisors from the country. And it was, I think we can agree, one of the Soviet Union's most important reversals, right during the Cold War. And yet, and I think you've just confirmed this, it's widely reported that the US under Kissinger had virtually no role in bringing this development about, and additionally failed to exploit it. I'd be very interested to hear what was actually happening and what Kissinger's role in it was.

William Quandt ([00:12:21](#)):

I don't know to what extent before Sadat made his decision there had been any signaling to him that the presence of such a large Soviet military contingent in Egypt was a serious problem for us in terms of bettering our relations. But I have heard that at one point Nixon had told the Saudis that if the Egyptians would reduce their dependence on the Soviet Union and get the military advisors to leave, then that would open the way for a different relationship with the United States. And it's possible that the Saudis conveyed that to Sadat. But I have no idea of whether that triggered his decision. In any case, we were more or less caught by surprise. Interestingly, though, the first thing that Nixon and Kissinger did was to open a direct channel to Sadat through Hafiz Ismail, his national security advisor, which was moderately active in the remaining part of 1972. The American message in this latter part of 1972 directly to Sadat was that we couldn't do much on the Middle East in the remainder of 1972 until the presidential election was over. We were preoccupied with Vietnam and were involved in the opening toward China. We've got the détente relationship with Russia underway, but the Middle East would be the next item on our agenda. But Sadat had to understand that Nixon had an election to win first. No president wants to go into a reelection campaign with a controversial topic like the Middle East on his agenda. So, we basically said to Egypt, give us a little bit of time, but by the end of 1972, we should be in a position to take further steps. By the end of 1972, we were talking about a meeting of Nixon and Kissinger with Hafiz Ismail, which I first learned about in December. I was the number two person in the office, but my boss had worked with Kissinger for some time, and Kissinger called him in and said, he was going to be meeting next January with Hafiz Ismail. He wanted us to him prepared for it. And we had already been working on a briefing book for him, and we had about 200 pages of it already written. So, we produced a cover memo and sent it to him within a few days. Kissinger had a remarkable skill for absorbing information very quickly, even about topics that he didn't have much background on. So he prepared himself for this meeting. He met Hafiz Ismail in January. And I think for a first meeting, it was fairly constructive, it was a step in the right direction, and the personal chemistry was good.

Hafiz Ismail was a very sophisticated diplomat, but Kissinger's view was, this is the first step, but we still need some time. We've got all these other issues on the agenda. Vietnam is still not yet off the table. We were close but were not yet there. So, he needed to string them along for a bit. Kissinger understood it was frustrating for Sadat, but what was he going to do? Sadat's not

going to go to war because he would be defeated again, just as he was in 1967. So that was Kissinger's basic attitude.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:16:22](#)):

And the key issue for Egypt, of course, was the recovery of the Sinai Peninsula, which it had lost to Israel in the 1967 war. And in the context of what we were just discussing, we then of course have the most significant event in the Middle East during Kissinger's tenure, I think it's fair to say. And that was the 1973 October war. Kissinger was famously blindsided by the joint Egyptian-Syrian military assault to recover their territories that had been occupied by Israel in 1967. Why do you think this was so?

William Quandt ([00:17:05](#)):

I would say there are three points to bear in mind. The first, I've alluded to, is that Kissinger, as a realist, thought that countries don't go to war if they think they're going to be defeated. And based on what had happened in 1967, the prospects for Egypt and Syria were not very good. Secondly, I think it's also true that the Egyptians, and to some extent the Syrians, were quite good at engaging in deception operations. There was a false alert in the spring of 1973 where the Egyptians did very much the same thing that they later did in September and October. They began to mobilize. They had exercises, they went on a high alert. This time, the Israelis took it seriously and went on an alert themselves, and the whole thing then just wound down. So, when we saw it again in the fall, many in the U.S. government did not take it seriously. But this was the first time I'd really focused on a crisis happening on my watch. And I thought the military moves looked pretty realistic. They were doing things that did not look like a normal exercise. They were emptying out hospitals. We had a lot of information, but people had seen this over and over again in the preceding year,

Mouin Rabbani ([00:18:30](#)):

The boy who cried wolf was the assumption.

William Quandt ([00:18:33](#)):

Kissinger, however, in September, the month before the war began, said that maybe we needed to start paying more attention to the possibility of war in the Middle East. And he put out an order to go on a full-scale intelligence collection alert. And our information started coming in huge quantities. So he wasn't totally blindsided. Among other things, the Soviet leader had met with Nixon in June, and in one of his moments of real candor, he said if we don't do something about the Middle East, there's going to be a war by the end of the year. The Egyptians and the Syrians are not going to wait. And Nixon and Kissinger took it somewhat seriously. That's what led to this higher collection of intelligence. But they also thought it was probably the Russians bluffing, wanting us to then put pressure on the Israelis.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:19:35](#)):

Because it was also known that, that the Soviets had advised the Egyptians and the Syrians against the war.

William Quandt ([00:19:43](#)):

I think that's probably true because they also thought they would lose and lose fairly dramatically. The third issue, and at, at the time, I didn't really know this, but now I think we have pretty good evidence. The Israelis had a source in the Egyptian government.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:20:03](#)):

This was late president Nasser's son-in-law, Ashraf Marwan.

William Quandt ([00:20:08](#)):

It's still somewhat controversial as to whether he really was working for the Israelis or for the Egyptians--

Mouin Rabbani ([00:20:15](#)):

Or both--

William Quandt ([00:20:16](#)):

Or both. He was a complicated character, but the Israelis who believed in him thought that if there's going to be a war, he's going to know about it. And he'll tell us. He had given the Israelis so much information. So if he says it's going to happen, we'll take it seriously. Well, I can tell you when they heard from him that it was going to happen, that was October 5th.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:20:40](#)):

They ignored him

William Quandt ([00:20:41](#)):

No, they took it seriously on the fifth when they finally heard it, and that's when they called us and said, the war is going to start tomorrow, October 6. And I, by chance, was the first one on the American side, on the policy side to get that message. So I remember it very vividly. The Israelis finally said they had been wrong. The war would start by the end of the day on October 6. They didn't quite get the time right, but they knew it was going to happen. But that was the other reason that we were somewhat complacent. We thought if the Israelis don't think the war is going to happen, they probably have better sources than we do. So why should we worry more than they do?

Mouin Rabbani ([00:21:20](#)):

As the war progressed, there have been persistent reports that Israeli leaders were in a panic at the initial Arab advances, and at one point put the country's nuclear forces on standby or revealed them to American satellites to encourage the US to expand and accelerate its military resupply effort. What is your own recollection of these developments?

William Quandt ([00:21:46](#)):

Well, in the first two or three days, I think it is true that the Israelis were sort of stunned by how quickly the advances were made on the Syrian and the Egyptian fronts.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:22:01](#)):

The Egyptians had crossed the Suez Canal and demolished what was thought to be the impregnable Bar Lev line.

William Quandt ([00:22:10](#)):

But then the Egyptians stopped, and their forces were protected from aerial attack because they had good air defense. And on the Syrian front, the Syrians simply launched an all-out straightforward attack, and they did well for about two days. So, in that brief period, I think the one person on the Israeli side who really panicked was Moshe Dayan, who was Minister of Defense. He sought a meeting, as we now know, with Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, to at least review the possibility of doing what you said, putting the nuclear forces on some kind of an alert that people would notice, or perhaps some people have even said he considered a demonstrative test of a nuclear weapon, maybe in the Sinai somewhere, just to remind everybody that they had these things. Golda Meir apparently said, "we're not going to talk about that." But she did send her ambassador to see Kissinger and say, we need urgent resupply of military equipment, partly because we're going to be using a lot and partly because it will signal American support for us, and we need for our people to know that you're behind us.

And she also said she would come to Washington come, if necessary, and lobby Congress for this. And Kissinger said, that's a terrible idea. It looks like you're panicking. Don't even think of leaving in the midst of the war. But we'll start addressing the issue now.

At about this time, and I think I'm the only person who remembers this on the American side, I saw a piece of intelligence, just a standard report of electronic monitoring of military facilities in the Middle East. And it said the Israeli Jericho missile facilities had been put on a higher level of alert. That's all we knew.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:24:40](#)):

The Jericho was an Israeli ballistic missile--

William Quandt ([00:24:42](#)):

We didn't know what kind of warhead it might carry, but it wasn't a very accurate missile. So, you're not going to use them for precise targeting. Their Air Force was, by contrast, very effective at precision bombing. The only reason you would perhaps use a missile would be if you were going to put a nuclear weapon on it. But we didn't know that for sure. So, the Jericho missile alert got my attention. I reported it to Kissinger and Nixon. It was never discussed to the best of my knowledge. I never heard any discussion about Israel and its nuclear potential during the policy deliberations during the war. But I'm sure that if we picked up this signal, the Russians also picked it up, as did the Egyptians. Now, well after the war, and after Egypt had already made peace, Sadat was asked by an Israeli general when they met at some point, "Why

didn't you advance on the second and third day after you'd crossed the canal when we were in no position to stop you?" And Sadat broke into laughter and said, "Oh, haven't you heard? Israel has nuclear weapons." So, it may have been on his mind, but we didn't need to be reminded of it by the alert of the Jericho missiles. But that has stuck in my mind. I still remember it. No one else on the American side has confirmed it. We've never found the document, people have looked for the report. I'm sure in some dusty file it still exists. But anyway, that's the closest I got to sensing that there was a nuclear dimension in that early period.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:26:40](#)):

There, there was also another nuclear dimension that's been discussed. As the war progressed and the superpowers themselves became increasingly involved, US-Soviet tensions escalated markedly. Moscow, at one point threatened direct intervention to enforce the cessation of hostilities, particularly as Israel was surrounding the Egyptian Third Army. And Washington responded by raising its nuclear alert level to keep the Soviets out. How close did we come to a direct confrontation between the superpowers in October 1973? And what was Kissinger's role in these events?

William Quandt ([00:27:34](#)):

Two weeks into the war there was a kind of strategic breakthrough on the Israeli side. They managed to cross the Suez Canal, and they were in the process of trying to envelop the second and third Egyptian armies, that is to cut them off from behind.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:27:53](#)):

Both at this stage in the Sinai Peninsula.

William Quandt ([00:27:56](#)):

Yes. And I think this was a point when the Russians began to worry that the Egyptians might really get crushed, and they started pushing them hard for a ceasefire. And Sadat finally began to say, maybe we've gone as far as we can. And he gave them the green light to negotiate a ceasefire. So, Kissinger went to Moscow on about the 20th or 21st of October, and on the 22nd of October they reached agreement on submitting a resolution to the UN Security Council, which called for an immediate ceasefire in place. And the parties were supposed to stop twelve hours after the resolution was adopted. Kissinger then flew to Israel to explain to the Israelis that the ceasefire was supposed to go into effect in about 12 hours. And the Israelis complained. They said, we need a little bit more time. We have almost completed our military operation of surrounding the Egyptians, but we need a little bit more time, and you should have consulted us before you did this. And they played on his sense of guilt about not being a strong enough supporter of Israel. So he said, look, I'm flying back to the United States. If anything happens while I'm in the air, I can't do much about it anyway. But by the time I get back, this has to be wrapped up. So, the Israelis took that as a green light to accelerate their actions on the ground for the next 12 hours, which they did, to the great anger of the Russians and the Egyptians who felt that it was breaking the ceasefire.

By the time Kissinger returned to the United States on the 23rd or 24th, cables were going back and forth between Moscow and Washington, the Russians were saying you promised that the ceasefire would go into effect. The Israelis seemed to be breaking it. We need to work on the Egyptian side to get them to calm down. You work on the Israeli side. And at the end of a long day, on the 24th, Brezhnev, in his own handwriting, added to one of the messages being sent to Washington. He said, if you don't join us in a joint initiative to end the violations of the ceasefire, we will consider taking all means, including military, to enforce the ceasefire. So that was the closest the Russians came to threatening a direct military intervention. We didn't know whether they were serious about it. We knew they had the capability for it. They had at least three airborne divisions on high alert. All their aircraft that had been performing resupply operations had been brought back to the Soviet Union.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:31:09](#)):

And they had ships in the Mediterranean.

William Quandt ([00:31:12](#)):

Yes. So, it wasn't out the question that they could send 10,000 troops as peacekeepers to try to enforce the ceasefire. Now, the other thing that has to be remembered is that at this point Nixon was in terrible shape politically, his vice president had just resigned over a scandal. The Watergate crisis was in full bloom. The taped recordings of Nixon's conversations in the White House were being looked at and investigated. He was not functioning at his normally reasonably competent level.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:31:55](#)):

So, he was effectively out of commission.

William Quandt ([00:31:57](#)):

Well, I saw him once or twice during this period. He could still function, but he was under huge pressure. And the night that the decision was made to go onto a higher level of alert -- there are several stages of nuclear alert or military readiness -- Nixon was not at the meeting when that decision was made. It is widely believed, and I think it's true, that he had had too much to drink that night, and no one wanted him to be consulted, because he might have done who knows what? So, the decision was made by a small group of the National Security Council. I was not at the meeting, but it was Kissinger and Schlesinger and the director of CIA and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And there was no vice president at this time. And they said, we'll announce the higher level of alert, but let's try to keep it secret from the American public. Well, of course you can't do that because the alert meant that every reserve unit in the United States was called up for active duty. Report to your bases, get ready if you're a pilot to get into B-52 and prepare for operations. It's not like the next step up is get ready to go to war. This is getting your forces prepared for the possibility. I think that it was a deliberate overreaction. They wanted to make sure that the Russians had no illusions that if they went in, we would take some kind of counteraction somewhere.

And at one point, the next morning, we had a brief moment when we thought that the Russians were in fact sending troops into Egypt. We had gotten a fragment of intelligence that suggested that, but it turned out to be something else. But at that point, Kissinger turned to me and to one person from the State Department, and said, "They're going in. We have to send troops as well, figure out where in the Middle East or in the region we could send our troops." It went through my mind quickly, a base in Cyprus, or in Turkey, or do you go Diego Garcia? No place else. The Europeans wouldn't let us, and none of these were plausible. And I thought, this is ridiculous. There's just no place to go. And Kissinger had said not Israel and not Egypt, since he did not want this tangled up with the Arab-Israeli conflict. Since this was about US-Soviet intervention in the Middle East, he thought we would have to have troops somewhere near the region so that we could negotiate a mutual withdrawal with the Soviets.

Anyway, within 30 minutes, he came back and said, "Forget about it. I've just talked to Dobrynin (the Soviet Ambassador in Washington). This is all a misunderstanding. They're sending 30 military observers to Egypt." He had forgotten that when he was in Moscow a few days earlier, he had agreed that both powers would send 30 observers to monitor the ceasefire. And we had picked up the news that that group was on its way to Cairo, and we misinterpreted that as possibly a larger military deployment. So, the sense of acute crisis ended very quickly. Shortly thereafter, Kissinger brought us all together and he said, "I think we've gotten through the worst of it. I think the ceasefire's now going to hold. What we now need to do is make sure we get the diplomacy started so that it doesn't unravel." And he said, "I think we've ended up" - and he used an expression, which I, as a native English speaker didn't know -- "in the catbird seat", meaning we're in the best position we could be in because the Israelis need us, the Egyptians want us, the Russians are still dealing with us. "Now is the time for the diplomacy. My first move will be to go to Egypt." He had never been to Egypt. He'd never met Sadat. He'd always treated Sadat as something of a buffoon, not a serious person.

As he recounts in his memoirs, within about 30 minutes of talking with him, Kissinger realized that Sadat was thinking on a much bigger scale than he had ever realized. He wasn't quibbling over little details. And Kissinger suddenly started taking Sadat much, much more seriously. That's why the initial emphasis in his diplomatic moves was to try to consolidate this relationship. If Egypt were really to shift its relationship from heavy dependence on the Soviet Union to a new relationship with the United States, that would be very important. So, he took the Egyptian opening very seriously. He didn't take Saudi Arabia or Syria nearly as seriously, until he met Asad, the other Arab leader that he ended up having quite a bit of respect for. He eventually spent at least as much time with Asad as he did with Sadat. And he came away thinking, this guy Asad is actually very smart, he's very shrewd. He's a very good, albeit tough, negotiator. So, he began to see them as human beings. And he had remarkably good relations with both Sadat and Asad. Not so much with Saudi King Faisal. Faisal would talk about the Jewish conspiracy, and Kissinger would sit there and try to be polite, but he never felt comfortable with the Saudis. With King Husain of Jordan, he got along quite well, as he did with the President of Algeria, Houari Boumediene. There were certain Arab leaders that he developed a respect for, but that did not include any of the Palestinian leaders, because he didn't meet with them.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:39:05](#)):

No. But speaking of Saudi Arabia and King Faisal, how did Kissinger respond to the Arab oil boycott announced in response to the U.S. support of the Israeli war effort in 1973, and there are reports that he threatened Saudi Arabia with military intervention to end the boycott. Was that true?

William Quandt ([00:39:28](#)):

Kissinger was no smarter about the international economics of petroleum than most political scientists or historians would be. He didn't understand very much the economics of international oil. So, when people said that there might be a cut in oil production or a boycott, somebody else would say "The Arabs can't drink their oil. They've got to sell it. They threatened to use the oil weapon in 1956. It never happened. They threatened it in 1967. It never happened. So don't worry too much. There's plenty of oil to make up for any cuts elsewhere in the world."

Mouin Rabbani ([00:40:09](#)):

So a bit like the false alarm in early '73--

William Quandt ([00:40:14](#)):

Right. But this time, the more intelligent people who knew about the international oil market said in every previous crisis, there had been a lot of spare capacity somewhere, Venezuela or Mexico, but that is no longer the case. The only spare capacity anywhere in the world is Saudi Arabia. And if they really begin to cut production, it's going to have an effect on the world market, and that will include the United States. So, in the middle of the crisis in October 1973 after the war had begun, we started monitoring the possibility that the oil weapon would be activated by the Arab side. And it didn't happen and didn't happen. On October 15th, four Arab foreign ministers came to see Nixon to protest our resupply of the Israeli military with weapons. The ministers were very polite in their protest, but they didn't say anything about oil. And I remember when they walked out, Kissinger said, "That went well. There was no threat of an oil boycott." But the next day they announced it. So yes, it became a big issue.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:41:38](#)):

And this is on the 10th day of the war, more or less.

William Quandt ([00:41:41](#)):

Yes. It became a big issue because it affected domestic politics in the United States. We had lines to buy gas for cars. You'd have to wait for an hour to fill up your tank, and the gas price quadrupled by the end of the year. So, for the average American, the Middle East crisis came home in the form of the domestic effects on the American economy. But worldwide, everybody was being affected by it. Kissinger went through a period when he said, "If the Arabs want me to play a role in negotiating these disengagement agreements, I will not do it under the pressure of the oil boycott. They have to start loosening up if they expect me to play any

diplomatic role.” And it was a kind of cat and mouse game. He would say, “I’m not going to do this anymore unless you lift the boycott and start resuming production.” But the Arab oil producers didn’t lift the boycott and resume production until after the Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement in mid-1974. So, he constantly protested that he wasn’t going to negotiate under the threat of the oil boycott, and yet he did.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:42:55](#)):

Because he had no alternative. And disengagement agreement was the following year, if I’m not mistaken, in 1974.

William Quandt ([00:43:00](#)):

In early 1974 he first got an Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement in January, and then in May he got the Syrian-Israeli one. All during that time, the oil crisis was going on. The economic disruption helped Americans to understand that Kissinger’s diplomatic initiative, if it succeeded, might make their economic difficulties a little less difficult.

You asked whether there was any threat to seize the oil fields. I am not aware of any, I never heard any such thing. I know that there were people in the public arena who were close to people in the Pentagon, such as Edward Luttwak, who was also very close to the Israelis, and who wrote an article claiming it would be easy to go in and seize the Saudi oil fields that would solve the crisis. And it got a lot of attention. I’m not aware that anybody on the American government side took that seriously.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:44:13](#)):

It wasn’t on the agenda, even as a threat?

William Quandt ([00:44:16](#)):

I don’t think it was ever made as a threat. The Saudis had to understand that there was a point at which they would damage their relationship with the United States if they continued with the use of the oil weapon. But the United States wasn’t at any point planning to use its own military power to seize the oil fields, as far as I know.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:44:35](#)):

Many analysts judge that the 1973 October war, which we’ve been discussing as a seismic political event, could have also produced a genuine opportunity for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. Many also conclude that the opportunity was squandered on account of Kissinger’s prioritization of Egyptian- Israeli, and Syrian-Israeli disengagement, which you just mentioned -- what was known as “step-by-step diplomacy”, as well as commitments to Israel not to engage with the PLO and thereby effectively shelve the Palestine question. It’s also asserted that these policies ultimately led Sadat to make a separate peace with Israel, thus enabling Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the continuing expansion of Israeli settlement activity in the occupied territories, and ultimately, the realities that confront us today. How

would you assess the position that Kissinger and his policies bear significant responsibility for the current state of affairs in Israel-Palestine?

William Quandt ([00:45:46](#)):

I think there's a long story that would put all the pieces together, and you could probably make the case that had Kissinger played his hand a little bit differently it might have slightly improved the odds of getting a broader Arab-Israeli peace agreement. But starting with Egypt and Syria as the first two components of a new strategy for dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict was normal. They were the two Arab combatants in a serious war, and something had to be done to stabilize each of those fronts. So, you had to somehow get started with them first. You couldn't have easily said, "Let's go from this big war and immediately have a big conference and to settle everything overnight." It just wasn't going to realistically work. Among other things, the Israelis were facing an election, so they weren't in any position to make huge decisions on what came to be known as final-status issues. So, I think probably anybody in Kissinger's position would have said, "Let's start with something that at least defuses the immediate risk of a resumption of hostilities, gets the parties talking in some kind of indirect or direct mode, and gives us a little bit of time to develop the next step." Well, by that time came, Nixon was no longer president. He had been forced to resign in the middle of 1974. So, we had a new president on the American side, Gerald Ford. New presidents take time to get their own head around their priorities. And then Ford had to face election in 1976. So, I think the step-by-step diplomacy was a way of getting a diplomatic process started, but it reached a dead end by late 1975.

Even Kissinger knew that it had reached a dead end by then. And I'm not sure what he would have done if he had continued as Secretary of State under an elected president Ford in 1977. He certainly would not have been able to just take another little slice of Sinai or a little slice of Golan. He would have had to confront the Jordanian-Palestinian front in some fashion. Now, he personally was allergic to dealing with the Palestinians as a state-like entity. Remember, he is a realist. He thinks of states, not political movements. He did explore briefly in 1974 the possibility of a Jordanian-Israeli small step to complement the ones that had already been done. But there was no overlap in what Jordan wanted and what the Israelis would agree to. And so he spent a little bit of time on it and then just said, "It's not going to work at this moment." So, he went for a second disengagement on the Egyptian front in order to consolidate that relationship. That tells you that his main strategic objective was to bring Egypt into the American camp, to try to solidify that, and then see where things stood in 1976-77.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:49:34](#)):

And, and if I understand you correctly, making commitments to Israel that the US would have no dealings with the PLO came quite easy to him in the context of bartering that with the Israelis, if you will, in order to get the second Sinai disengagement deal.

William Quandt ([00:49:56](#)):

Yes. I think it was a mistake to give them that commitment. If you read the commitment very carefully, it doesn't exclude all forms of contact. We had a so-called security channel with the PLO through all of this period in Beirut. It's true that we rarely used it for any serious diplomatic

exchanges, but, if necessary, it could be used. What Kissinger said to the Israelis is that we would “not negotiate with or recognize” the PLO until it accepted UN Resolution 242. Well, you can do other things than negotiate. Kissinger never would have felt very much constrained by his own language. The problem later was that Congress took that language and codified it into law and said that no American official could have any contact with the leadership of the PLO, making it even more restrictive than what Kissinger had promised.

Because of this Congressional legislation, when I was in the Carter administration I couldn't talk to anyone from the PLO, not because of Kissinger's promise, but because of legislation that had been passed making that illegal, except for the security channel through the CIA. Despite that, we were able to communicate with the PLO in the Carter administration, through private Americans and through other Arab governments, which usually was not a good idea because each Arab government put it its own spin on the messages. So, I think we paid a price for not having the ability to have a normal diplomatic channel to the PLO leadership in this period when the United States had, under Carter, started to recognize that the Palestinian issue had to be on the diplomatic agenda.

Early in his presidency, Carter said that the Palestinians should have a “homeland” of their own – he didn't quite say state. That caught people's attention, and it caused Carter some political problems too. But he never backed away from it. He simply said, now we have to figure out how to fold them in. And that led to the question of could the PLO bring itself to accept UN resolution 242, which would open the door for us to deal with them directly? Or, if they couldn't do that, was there some other formulation that we could agree on that would open the door?

In September 1977, Arafat told us, “I can't accept 242 as it exists.” Partly, he said, because it doesn't even mention Palestinians. He was in Lebanon at the time. The Syrians were very much on his back, and he said, “The Syrians will not let me do this. They want to negotiate on our behalf with the United States. They see the Palestinian card as theirs to play.” So that's the excuse he gave to us. He said, if I could do it, I would, but I can't – unless you can promise to recognize me as the head of an independent Palestinian state!

Mouin Rabbani ([00:54:00](#)):

And the US ultimately recognized the PLO only after the Israelis did. I'd now like to turn to a different issue in the region, and that concerns Iraq and Iraqi Kurds. In 1972, Kissinger apparently threw the CIA's caution on the matter to the wind, engineered a shift in US policy towards Iraq, whose Baathist government had drawn increasingly close to the Soviet Union. Washington that year joined Israel and the Shah of Iran, who were both intent on weakening Baghdad, in providing direct military support to the country's Kurdish guerrilla movements, as was suggested by Kissinger at the time. The purpose of such assistance was not to enable the achievement of Kurdish aspirations, but rather to foment a Kurdish insurrection and destabilize the Iraqi government. When the Shah of Iran and Iraq's Saddam Hussein in 1975 signed an agreement in Algiers that obliged Iran to cease arming Iraq's Kurds, the US quickly followed suit, and the Kurdish rebellion collapsed and was crushed by the Iraqi military. Testifying before Congress about the episode, Kissinger famously remarked that, “Covert action should not be confused with missionary work.” With that lengthy introduction, what are your recollections of

this episode? And would it be fair to say that such cynicism and disregard for the human consequences of political decisions was a hallmark of Kissinger's approach the Middle East?

William Quandt ([00:55:49](#)):

I don't know all the details on this, partly because Iran and Iraq were not countries that I dealt with primarily. So, my impression is that in this period of 1972-74, the United States was counting quite heavily on Iran as one of the regional pillars of stability -- kind of ironic, given what happened to the Shah in 1978. This was the so-called "Nixon doctrine." As we got out of Vietnam, we were looking for pillars of stability elsewhere. So it was the Shah of Iran who really wanted the Kurdish issue to be heated up so that he could deal with Saddam Hussein more readily.

And I think that that's the instigation for it. I don't think that Kissinger cared one way or other about the Kurds per se, or Kurdish national aspirations, or Kurds as a tool of diplomacy. But I think because the Shah wanted it, we went along with it and facilitated it with the Israelis. The Shah and the Israelis were a potent behind-the-scenes lobby for policy on an issue of this sort. It also, as you imply, is a cynical manipulation of local conflicts in order to advance perhaps an illusory strategic objective. It's not unusual for politicians to do that. As Kissinger said, it's not missionary work that we're engaged in, it's power balances and things like that. So yes, I think that he was not particularly sensitive to what we would now think of as a human rights agenda.

It wasn't a concept that came naturally to him or to Nixon or any of the others who were forged in this kind of post-Cold War or Cold-War mentality where the big stakes were nuclear war. Of course, that changed significantly with Carter. I'm not saying that he was a perfect exemplar of a more human-rights oriented foreign policy, but at least he took it into account. In the two and a half years that I worked for Carter, I was never aware of anything comparable to what we did with the Kurds in the Nixon-Ford- Kissinger period, that is to say, arming a dissident group to destabilize a government. There were some minor covert actions in South Yemen, some minor issues in Lebanon that I was aware of, but honestly, we were never, to my knowledge, trying to undermine any government in the Middle East by doing such covert actions. Carter had a pretty high standard of not using those techniques. So yes, Kissinger was from a different school. He did not put, and still to this day would not put human rights near the top of the foreign policy agenda. That's who he was.

Mouin Rabbani ([00:59:45](#)):

You've mentioned the Carter administration and after a hiatus from US government service, as you mentioned, you also served in Carter's National Security Council. How would you compare Kissinger and Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and what were the most important differences in their approaches to the Middle East?

William Quandt ([01:00:09](#)):

Well, interestingly, they were both European immigrants to the United States. They both still spoke with a bit of an accent from their countries of origin. They both knew European politics and history and the Soviet Union as their foundational reference points for foreign policy. And they were rivals in the academic world. They had both sought the same chair at Harvard and

Kissinger got it. And Brzezinski went to Columbia. So there was a lot of similarity. They were both high IQ, very smart, very quick learners. There was a significant difference, though. For Kissinger, I think his biggest achievement, outside the realm of European affairs and the US-Soviet Cold War, was the opening toward China, for which he bore a significant responsibility. He didn't have that much interest in places like South America, Africa, or South Asia.

Brzezinski, by contrast, had concluded that part of the Cold-War competition with the Soviet Union was playing out in these other areas, and that he needed to get to know more about them. So, during a period of his apprenticeship, he was part of something called the Trilateral Commission, and he did quite a bit of traveling to Asia, to South Asia, to Africa, and did some writing about it. So, he had started getting involved in issues that were more on the periphery of the US-Soviet competition, but he got interested in those issues. By the time I got to know him, he was interested in the Middle East. He was involved in the so-called Brookings study group, which was about what the policy of the United States should be in 1976-77. And he had his own ideas. He'd been thinking about them.

He had written about Africa and the need for United States to take Africa more seriously. So, he had broadened himself out. He had an interest, as did I, in Algeria's experience of decolonization and its seven-year long War of Independence from France. On one occasion he was invited to visit Algeria and was asked where he would like to go apart from the formal meetings. He had read enough about Algeria to know that there was a place in the remote countryside where a meeting had taken place in 1956 which was decisive for the Algerian revolution. He said, "that's where I want to go." He saw that the Algerian case and the Palestinian case were rather similar, and that the PLO was modeled to some extent on the Algerian FLN as an armed, but essentially politically-motivated, liberation movement.

And therefore, he had some capacity for understanding that the PLO wasn't just a bunch of terrorists. These were people with legitimate national aspirations who, in desperation, were taking up arms for their cause -- not because they expected that they could win on the battlefield, but that this was their way of getting into eventual negotiations that might give them a chance to have self-determination. And that would not have been a natural way of thinking for Kissinger. For Brzezinski, it fit into his mode of trying to understand the post-colonial world so that we could compete more effectively with our strategic rivals, whether they were Russia in the old days, maybe China today. In either case, you needed to have some understanding of nationalism, of people wanting to determine their own future.

Mouin Rabbani ([01:04:38](#)):

For my final question, I'd like to also ask you about a different aspect of the Carter administration. So former President Carter, as you yourself have mentioned and as also reported by many others who've studied his Middle East policy -- his initial intention was to produce a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, including a resolution of the Palestinian question. Ultimately, he had to settle for a separate Egyptian-Israeli deal that was for all intents and purposes implemented at the expense of the Palestinians. To what extent would it be fair to say that Carter's ambitions were frustrated by policies that were put into place by Kissinger? And should we see this as Kissinger's legacy in the Middle East?

William Quandt ([01:05:35](#)):

I think that's a little bit overly deterministic. Carter had a chance to break the mold to some extent and to try a more comprehensive approach, which he did for the first several months. I think what stymied Carter was not the legacy of Kissinger but was the advent of Menachem Begin as Prime Minister of Israel in mid-1977. We had been used to dealing with a bunch of tough Israeli political figures, but they were all from the Labor Party, which fundamentally accepted the idea that they would be satisfied with less than all of historic Palestine as the Jewish state, and that more or less the 1967 lines would, as called for in UN resolution 242, be the future borders with Syria, with Egypt, with Jordan, if the security conditions could be met.

That was not the view of Menachem Begin or his Likud Party. They viewed the 1967 lines, especially in the West Bank, as having no legitimacy. Those were armistice lines, they were not borders and Begin never wavered on that, and we never could figure out a way to get him to change his views on it. So I think that was bad luck in some sense. He got elected because Rabin screwed up and his wife had a bank account that was illegal in Washington and he was forced to step down as Prime Minister, just as Carter was trying to get the comprehensive peace process going. The one time while Rabin was prime minister that he met with Carter, Carter really pressed him on how he envisaged the future of the West Bank. And he said, "I can't tell you everything I have in mind now because I'm coming up for reelection, but I can tell you my only interest in the West Bank is security."

He did not talk about major changes in the 1967 borders. He didn't talk about East Jerusalem. He said, "All we need is reassurance on our security. And that's all I can tell you now. Let me get through the election and we can then deal with Jordan, with the Palestinians." We had asked his Foreign Minister about whether he would deal with the PLO, and he said if the PLO were to accept 242, it would no longer be the PLO anymore. So that's why we initially thought maybe this attempt at a comprehensive settlement could go somewhere. But by the end of 1977, it was pretty clear that Begin was there to stay,

Begin was hard for us to deal with. And Carter had gotten the first big domestic backlash from the American Jewish community when he had tried to call for a conference with the Soviet Union in Geneva by the end of the year. And this was the one time when Kissinger's easing the Soviet Union out of center stage in the Middle East was brought back into the debate. Carter was accused of bringing the Russians back into the Middle East and all of the Republicans and Kissinger supporters said, "Carter's so naive and he's ruining everything that Kissinger achieved." Carter really did begin to think that politically he had to slow down a little bit and not rush forward. And in the meantime, Sadat was getting very frustrated.

We probably had not sufficiently appreciated that Sadat only accepted the idea of going to a Geneva conference if everything had already been worked out in advance, because he didn't fundamentally want to be in a negotiation with Asad and King Hussein in the same room with him. He wanted to make his deal on his terms and then let them make their deals and then go to Geneva and sign it all and put it in a nice package. So, when he went to Jerusalem in November 1977, which was not our idea, this was Sadat's idea, it was his way of saying, I'm going to break the log jam. I'm going off on my own. And from that time on, in my mind, I thought this idea that all the Arab parties were going to move in lock step toward a

comprehensive piece was probably not realistic. Sadat's going to go first. He's in a hurry. He wants to see some tangible results. He wants his territory back. And...

Mouin Rabbani ([01:10:37](#)):

He was facing a severe domestic crisis,

William Quandt ([01:10:40](#)):

He had domestic problems, and he also deeply distrusted Asad. Amazingly, they had started the 1973 war exactly on the same day, at the same hour. But that was their last moment of close coordination. And they both thought that each had betrayed the other during the war. Sadat was supposed to keep the momentum going so that the Israelis could not divert all their attention to the Syrian front. The whole relationship was much more complex than we had realized. And so I think that Carter did the best he could in the political circumstances he found himself in. And of course, the big unknown is would he, given his early interest in a more comprehensive approach to Middle East peacemaking, have gone back to that in a second term? There's no way of answering it, since didn't have the second term.

All I can say is he's the only former president who showed any interest in the Middle East after he left office. He wrote books about it, he met with Arafat, he wrote articles. He came to accept the idea of a Palestinian state. No other president has shown his degree of serious interest in the Middle East. And it probably has something to do with his own religious background. For him, this was not just any piece of territory. This was the Holy Land. And I think had he been able to preside over an Arab-Israeli comprehensive piece, it would've been the crowning victory of his presidency, but he wasn't able to. So, politics is the art of the possible -- that's an excuse, but it's also a reality.

Mouin Rabbani ([01:12:40](#)):

Bill Quandt, thank you very much for sharing your expertise and insights with connections. It's been a fascinating discussion.

William Quandt ([01:12:48](#)):

Thank you for inviting me and I've enjoyed reconnecting with you, and it was indeed interesting.