

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Review ESSAY- Response

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### **Author's Response to H-Diplo Review Essay on Yigal Kipnis. *1973: The Road to War.***

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Author's Response by **Yigal Kipnis**, Department of International Relations, Haifa University

**H**istoriographic research about the events which preceded the Yom Kippur war of 1973 and which led to it are at a turning point, which is characteristic in the development of historical research. The rich documentation of the Israeli national archives (Israel State Archives in Jerusalem) which has recently been released to public scrutiny and which had been unavailable to researchers whose work was published before 2012, and the integration of this documentation with information from U.S. national archival documents (National Archives at College Park, Maryland) has brought about this research transition. Up-to-date research has emphasized the central role of political conduct on the way to the war and has reduced the role of the intelligence failure in Israeli and U.S. decision-making in the months, days, and hours before the war broke out.

The H-Diplo book review written by Craig Daigle of my book, *1973, The Road to War*, focused on the political aspects of these events and on the question: Who was to blame for the political stalemate? I am grateful to Daigle for his evaluation of the book as "a fascinating and highly engaging study" and his statement that "[w]e now know from Kipnis's impressive study the depths of Israel's political failure."

Daigle is right in determining that National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger related to Middle Eastern affairs as a means to manage his global policies and especially his policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. But on a number of points, Daigle has missed the current documentation illuminating Kissinger's positions and his moves in 1973. From the end of February 1973, Kissinger viewed Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's peace initiative as a political and personal achievement and considered his response to this initiative as being in the interest of the United States. The Egyptian application made directly to him through a secret channel conformed to his efforts to weaken the status of the Soviet Union in the region. On a personal level, the secret channel afforded him a success in the internal struggle with Secretary of State William P. Rogers to direct American foreign policy. On the

basis of the principles of the Sadat initiative, Kissinger presented an outline to promote the plan. He counted on the support of the American President but he met with the intransigent refusal of Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir to conduct negotiations for a comprehensive settlement between Israel and Egypt on the basis of this initiative. Faced with this reality, he saw fit to avoid getting involved in negotiations which would have been doomed to failure before the general elections in Israel. He also chose not to clash with Meir before the Israeli elections with regard to her demand that Israel annex sizable sections of Sinai in the framework of a peace agreement, a demand opposed by the United States. In addition, the documentation indicates that, in contrast to Daigle's argument, Kissinger was committed to uphold the secret understandings between Meir and himself, which had suited the interests of both sides when they had been decided upon ("The Understandings of December, 1971"). According to these understandings, the political stalemate would be maintained until the end of 1973 and no political moves would be made that contradicted the Israeli position without Meir's agreement.

The following are several examples of the documentation, a small part of the total:

On February 26, 1973, immediately after the two-day secret meeting in which the Sadat initiative had been proposed to Kissinger by his envoy, Hafez Ismail, Kissinger updated President Richard Nixon and informed him of his (Kissinger's) intention to have discussions on two separate tracks – one to achieve an interim agreement and the second to aim for a comprehensive one. "By summer, we put the two (channels) together...It gets the Russians off our back...By September 1 we have two things going, an interim settlement and direct negotiations...and it will look lovely, and it will be a tremendous boon.<sup>1</sup>

Two days later, on February 28, Kissinger met unofficially with Meir at the home of Israeli Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin. There is no written record of this meeting in the American archives, but the minutes do exist in the Israeli archives. According to the minutes, Kissinger asked the Prime Minister to deal with a new reality and to return a practical and positive response to the Egyptian initiative. However, indicating the "Understandings of December 1971" he added: "I don't want to talk to the Egyptians while there is no understanding between us" and then: "But again, I will try only if you and I agree to it." Meir's reaction was quick, short and clear: "We will just not go along with this."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Based on discussion between Nixon and Kissinger at the White House, February 26, 1973, 18:31-19:15. NA NR Nixon, White House tapes, Nos. 413-433. Kissinger transmitted an orderly summary in writing about the meeting with Ismail and his conclusions a week later. His recommendation was to let the State Department prepare an interim agreement "under his direction" while a comprehensive agreement would be discussed with Egypt in the secret channel. "Summary of my discussions with Ismail," Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, March 6, 1973, NA RN NSC Files, HAK Box 131.

<sup>2</sup> Israeli protocol of the meeting, Israel State Archives, Aleph-7064/8.

On March 9 Kissinger met with Rabin.<sup>3</sup> He asked Rabin to transmit his outline to the Prime Minister including his time schedule, aiming to reach an agreement on principles between the United States and Egypt by Spring which would be based on Sadat's initiative and which would recognize full Egyptian sovereignty over Sinai. He intended to conduct negotiations through 1973 to reach a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. In order to implement his outline, as reported by Rabin: "Shaul (Israeli code name for Kissinger) again asked me if we would be ready to deviate from our position demanding significant border changes to the international border."<sup>4</sup> Rabin called Meir. The conversation was long and difficult. The ambassador tried unsuccessfully to convince her to accept Kissinger's outline and then transmitted Meir's negative response to Kissinger.

On May 13, about a week before Kissinger's second secret meeting with Ismail, which took place near Paris, Kissinger met with Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz and directed him to the outline he had presented to Meir two months earlier via the previous Israeli ambassador, Rabin. Dinitz responded with Israel's demand to annex significant areas of Sinai – a line west of the city of El-Arish and south of it.<sup>5</sup> Kissinger: "Why couldn't you take it in the form of a security zone instead of annexation? Sovereignty would remain in Egyptian hands but you would be there in practice." And more: "My estimate of what you want [as a final border] is a straight line west of el-Arish." Dinitz's reply clarified Israel annexation demands: "It might not be a straight line...but in general terms, you are right..." Kissinger insisted: "Why couldn't you take it in the form of a security zone instead of annexation?" Dinitz answered: "On the subject of borders, we are talking about a change in sovereignty. That was a government decision."<sup>6</sup>

On September 30, six days before the war broke out and a few days after Kissinger had been appointed Secretary of State, he met with Dinitz against the backdrop of the military deployment in Egypt and Syria on the borders with Israel. The Ambassador had just returned from consultations in Israel to which he had been called after Kissinger had reported to Israel on the accelerated negotiations he was planning to initiate in the near future. This message was being transmitted in the media, as well: "Israeli will be acting

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<sup>3</sup> Based on the American protocol: NA RN NSC, HAK, Country Files Box 135. Also for the private conversation ISA, 7062/8, Report of discussion with Shaul, Map Room, Friday March 9, 1973, 18:00-18:30. Also, details of a conversation between Meir and Rabin the details of which can be found in the American documentation of a telephone conversation between Rabin and Kissinger, March 10, 1973. NA, RN, HAK, Box 19, Telcon, 17: 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Dinitz's report to the prime minister about his meeting with Kissinger: May 13, 1973, Lamed Vav/670, Lamed Vav 673 Aleph-7052/1. Also Lamed Vav/674 and Lamed Vav/675, Aleph- 7052/2, ISA; Also the protocol of the non-confidential discussion about details, in the first part of the discussion which was not private. NA RN, NSC Files, HAK, Box 135.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

foolishly if it rejects the Kissinger plan.<sup>7</sup> At the meeting, Kissinger received the Israeli Prime Minister's response to his demand to begin negotiations: "As you know, we are not of the opinion that the present situation is the ideal one. But an election season is not a convenient time for serious discussion." Kissinger reacted to the political stagnation with: "That horse is dead," as Dinitz reported to the Prime Minister.<sup>8</sup>

In these examples and in others in the book, we may conclude that Daigle was in error when he presented a claim that I did not make, that is, that "Kissinger was working more for Israeli interests instead of US goals," and stated that I had argued that Kissinger was acting "more as an Israeli agent than as an architect of his own policy." The findings of the book testify that Kissinger was conducting government policy in accord with the interests of the United States. In order to carry out this policy, in 1973, until the Israeli general elections, he had to maneuver between advancing the initiative of the Egyptian president and dealing with strong opposition by the Israeli Prime Minister to negotiations for a comprehensive settlement which would have prevented Israel from annexing a significant amount of Egyptian territory in Sinai.

As testified by the Israeli archival material regarding what was said in private conversations between Kissinger and the two Israeli ambassadors, Daigle also erred when writing about the 'Understandings of December 1971'"that the secret 'understanding' (if there was one) only existed in Israeli minds" and again erred, writing: "Kissinger gave little indication that an 'understanding' existed with the Israelis that would prevent a settlement until 1974."

We may learn about the seriousness with which Kissinger considered these understandings, according to which the political standstill would have been maintained for two years, from the following Israeli document revealing details which have no American documentation:

Immediately following Dinitz's meeting with Kissinger on September 30, 1973, Dinitz informed Meir that Kissinger had told him that "when he formulated a common strategy with us two years ago, he totally kept his word and neither of us has been the loser for it." Kissinger added, as noted previously, "But that horse is dead and now it is important to design a new common strategy."<sup>9</sup> Dinitz indicated that Kissinger had also posed a target date for Israel to accept his proposals to advance the peace process – by January 10, 1974.

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<sup>7</sup> *Haaretz* newspaper, October 2, 1973. Quoted from an editorial in the *London Times*, October 1, 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Based on ISA. Lamed Vav/934, September 30, 1973, Aleph-4996/2, Dinitz to the Prime Minister regarding his meeting with Kissinger.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. (Based on Lamed Vav/934, September 30, 1973, ISA Aleph-4996/2. Dinitz to the Prime Minister regarding his meeting with Kissinger.)

The importance in understanding the political conduct during the period which preceded the Yom Kippur War exceeds the desire to understand why the war was not prevented or who was responsible for the political stagnation in the months which preceded the war, leading Sadat to the conclusion that he had no other alternative but to initiate a limited war in order to advance the political process. Recognition of the way decisions were made during this period is important for understanding political conduct today as well. Along with the United States commitment to the security of Israel, the question arises as to what extent the United States should be involved in shaping and even in determining what Israel must do to aid the United States in its commitment to Israeli security. The political conduct which led to the Yom Kippur War testifies that in 1973 it was not enough to base Israeli security solely on military superiority. A political agreement was needed in addition to military predominance and the American government should have played a major role in its achievement.

**Dr. Yigal Kipnis** is an Israeli historian and former pilot in the Israel Air Force. He completed a BS in Civil Engineering from the Technion in Haifa and an MA and Ph.D. in Land of Israel Studies from the University of Haifa. He teaches at the University of Haifa and researches the settlement geography and political history of Israel. His first book, *The Mountain that Was as a Monster: The Golan Between Syria and Israel*, was published by Magnes Press – The Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2009. An updated version of that book was published in London entitled *The Golan Heights: Political History, Settlement and Geography since 1949* (Routledge 2013). His next book, *1973: The Road to War*, in Hebrew, was published at the end of 2012. In this book Kipnis, for the first time and on the basis of updated documentation, revealed the political conduct which led to war in the Middle East in October 1973. The English version of *1973: The Road to War*, was published in 2013, in U.S.

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