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Richardson posed three issues for Rabin to respond to: the status of Israel's NPT deliberations; assurances that "non-introduction" meant "non-possession" of nuclear weapons; and assurances that Israel would not produce or deploy the Jericho ballistic missile. Rabin, however, was unresponsive except to say that the NPT was still "under study."

Nixon and Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir would have to address the nuclear issue when they met in late September.

Perhaps the most fateful event of this tale was Nixon's one-on-one meeting with Meir in the Oval Office on Sept. 26, 1969.

In the days before Meir's visit, the State Department produced background papers suggesting that the horse was already out of the barn: "Israel might very well now have a nuclear bomb" and certainly "already had the technical ability and material resources to produce weapon-grade material for a number of weapons." If that was true, it meant that events had overtaken the NSSM 40 exercise.

In later years, Meir never discussed the substance of her private conversation with Nixon, saying only, "I could not quote him then, and I will not quote him now." Yet, according to declassified Israeli documents, since the early 1960s, Meir had been convinced that "Israel should tell the United States the truth [about the nuclear issue] and explain why."

Even without the record of this meeting, informed speculation is possible. It is likely that Nixon started with a plea for openness. Meir, in turn, probably acknowledged -- tacitly or explicitly -- that Israel had reached a weanons

extreme caution. (Years later, Nixon told CNN's Larry King that he knew for certain that Israel had the bomb, but he wouldn't reveal his source.) Meir may have assured Nixon that Israel thought of nuclear weapons as a last-resort option,

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a way to provide her Holocaust-haunted nation with a psychological sense of existential deterrence.

Subsequent memorandums from Kissinger to Nixon provide a limited sense of what the national security adviser understood happened at the meeting. Kissinger noted that the president had emphasized to Meir that "our primary concern was that the Israeli [government] make no visible introduction of nuclear weapons or undertake a nuclear test program." Thus, Israel would be committed to conducting its nuclear affairs cautiously and secretly; their status would remain uncertain and unannounced.

On Feb. 23, 1970, Rabin told Kissinger privately that he wanted the president to know that, in light of the Meir-Nixon conversation, "Israel has no intention to sign the NPT." Rabin, Kissinger wrote, "wanted also to make sure there was no misapprehension at the White House about Israel's current intentions."

Kissinger informed Nixon that he told Rabin that he would notify the president. And with that, the decade-long U.S. effort to curb Israel's nuclear program ended. That enterprise was replaced by understandings negotiated at the highest level, between the respective heads of state, that have governed Israel's nuclear conduct ever since.

That so little is known today about the tale of NSSM 40 is not surprising. Dealing with Israel's nuclear ambitions was thornier for the Nixon administration than for its predecessors because it was forced to deal with the problem at the critical time when Israel appeared to be crossing the nuclear threshold.

Yet, even as Nixon and Kissinger enabled Israel to flout the NPT, NSSM 40 allowed them to create a defensible record. As was his typical modus operandi, Kissinger used NSSM 40 to maintain control over key officials who wanted to take action on the problem.

Politically, the Nixon-Meir agreement allowed both leaders to continue with their old public policies without being forced to openly acknowledge the new reality. As long as Israel kept the bomb invisible -- no test, declaration, or any other act displaying nuclear capability -- the United States could live with it.

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