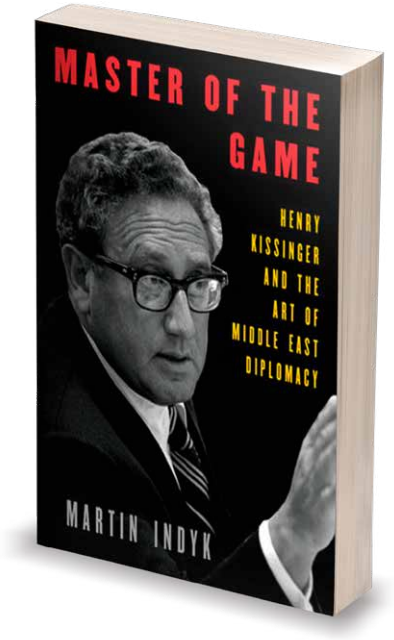

The Middle East According to Kissinger

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Master of the Game: Henry Kissinger and the Art of Middle East Diplomacy
by Martin Indyk
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Even 50 years later, the discourse about the Yom Kippur War in October 1973 continues to be bitter and incisive, replete with accusations and counteraccusations about Israel's losing its way, debacles, treachery, hubris, lies, and more. Those studying the war and its military, political, and personal aspects have not stopped writing, and it is seemingly difficult to add anything new to the debate. Yet here we have the publication of Martin Indyk's book on Henry Kissinger, whom he calls "master of the game" and who was one of the central figures in the international arena in diplomatic activity and thought. The book discusses at length Kissinger's role in the period preceding the war, during the fighting, and the two-year period following the war, and the immense effort he invested in the disengagement agreements between Israel and Syria and between Israel and Egypt. The book offers new insights and is fascinating and thought-provoking, in part because Indyk adopts an original approach to the topic.

Indyk built his book on three central pillars. The first is a chronological description of Kissinger's activity during the three periods of the military and political campaign that saw his involvement (in the fourth period—the 1977-1979 negotiations over the peace agreement during the Carter [i.e., Democratic] presidency, Kissinger, who had served as secretary of state under Republican presidents Nixon and Ford, was no longer involved). The second pillar is the "leap to the future"—the connection and the comparison the author makes between Kissinger's activity during the years 1971-1976 and the United States' political efforts to achieve agreements between Israel and its neighbors two decades later and beyond. The singularity of this section is Indyk's personal perspective, as one who was involved in the majority of these efforts by virtue of his positions in the White House and the State Department. The third pillar is the "judgment of history," in which Indyk campaigns for the positive presentation of elements of Kissinger's narrative in the real time of the events. Equally important is the positive perspective regarding the impact of the agreements, which were the product of Kissinger's strategic thinking and his determination to work for their achievement.

The Judgment of History

Reading Indyk's book left me no doubt that his first aim in writing the work is the desire to change opinions, beliefs, and impressions that have emerged regarding the book's subject matter due to his own experience in Israel during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. In effect, this is also a dialogue that Indyk has with himself, because he does not hide his

criticism of Kissinger, and in this too the book is unique. Indyk, like many others over the past six decades, admires Kissinger for his strategic thinking, for translating his ideas into practice, and for his ability to enlist the various actors in the international arena toward achievement of the political objectives that he envisioned. Still, the author does not hesitate to criticize Kissinger several times during the book, in relation to two main points. Already in the opening chapter he writes:

> Kissinger made errors along the way, some with high human cost and others with strategic consequences that continue to impact peacemaking to this day. Had he taken Sadat seriously at the outset, he might have averted the Yom Kippur War. And had he enabled King Hussein of Jordan to regain a foothold in the West Bank when he had the opportunity to do so, the outcome of the most intractable dimension of the conflict—the Palestinian issue—might well have been dramatically different. (p. 14)

Both parts of the sentence are chilling, and it requires great personal intellectual integrity to put them in writing, considering the thousands on both sides that fell in battle in 1973, and considering the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is far from resolved and continues to take lives to this day.

In describing Kissinger's two big failures, Indyk taps the large pool of documents in Israel and the United States, but especially the many hours during which he interviewed and spoke with the protagonist himself. Presumably some of the explanations given in the book, even if they do not appear as quotations, were voiced by Kissinger in these conversations.

The Failure to Relate to Sadat

Central cornerstones in the approach to the world order in general and the Middle East in particular were removing the influence of the Soviet Union and severing key countries in the region from their dependence on Moscow. Already by the end of 1970, when Defense Minister Dayan asked Kissinger about the dogfights between Russian and Israeli pilots over the Suez Canal, Kissinger answered that Israel must be resolute and not let up (p. 58). Sadat, out of his own considerations, did his part without receiving compensation at the time from the United States, when in July 1972 he removed thousands of Soviet experts from Egypt.

Sadat urged Kissinger to open a secret channel of dialogue with him, but only on February 25, 1973, after many long months of waiting, did Kissinger's first meeting with Sadat's National Security Advisor, Hafez Ismail, take place. The meeting revealed Sadat's willingness to reach a separate agreement with Israel as early as that year, and without waiting for the rest of the Arab countries (p. 85). Indyk strongly criticizes Kissinger for not exploiting the opportunity; he explains the lapse by the fact that early in 1973 Israel entered a campaign period in advance of elections scheduled for November, and that the willingness that Golda Meir expressed in her meeting with President Nixon in September 1971—to consider Sadat's idea regarding a partial withdrawal to the Sinai passes—had dissipated (pp. 95-96). Nevertheless, in a meeting with Nixon on March 1, 1973, Meir said she was willing for Kissinger to check with Ismail the idea of Egyptian sovereignty over all of Sinai, in return for an Israeli presence at certain points such as Sharm el-Sheikh. A few years later, she clarified that by "all of Sinai" she did not mean to the international border (p. 99).

However, Kissinger was entrenched in a worldview in which peace was not an end in itself, but rather a global arrangement, such as the agreement that the 1815 Congress of Vienna created and lasted until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. An agreement is not meant to prevent conflicts, but to contain them and to

prevent their undermining the stability of the system (p. 30). Kissinger believed in the idea taken from Immanuel Kant's essay *Perpetual Peace*, whereby nations will make peace with their adversaries only when they reach a point of exhaustion from the wars between them. The Muslim world in 1973, in Kissinger's estimation, had not reached a state of exhaustion that would lead it to give up on the struggle of "the house of Islam" and on expanding its rule over the world of the infidels in order to live in peace with Israel—an extension of the Western, secular, and democratic world (p. 551). Herein lies the origin of the failure, as Kissinger did not hear the war drums and did not understand the urgency of Sadat's desire to develop an American alternative to Egypt's dependence on Russia, or his need to restore the Sinai Peninsula to Egyptian control.

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In their second meeting, on May 20, 1973, Kissinger and Ismail took a walk through a park on the outskirts of Paris. There are neither notes nor a recording documenting the meeting, but according to what Ismail told the CIA representative who organized the encounter, Kissinger said to him, "If you want us to intervene with Israel, you'll have to create a crisis. We only deal with crisis management." Ismail understood from this that Kissinger wanted Egypt to start a war against Israel (p. 106). In a conversation in February 1974 with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, Kissinger told him that he had intended to renew the diplomatic initiative after the elections in Israel, even though it would have failed. "I would have to say that military actions were necessary. I did not recommend them but…" and he explained that the Arabs had a need to restore their honor and the Israelis needed to suffer a military failure, and only war would enable an effective American diplomatic initiative (pp. 111-112).

Kissinger translated this formula into action during the war, when on the one hand he pressured Israel to cross the lines that it held before October 6, 1973 (p. 123), while on the other hand he threatened Israel that if it did not approve the opening of a supply route to the Egyptian Third Army, the United States would allow the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Israel (p. 196), or in Kissinger's words: "'a costly victory' for Israel 'without a disaster' for Egypt" (p. 127).

Kissinger continued to adhere to his approach in 1975, after the war and two disengagement agreements between Israel and Egypt, and did not understand that Sadat had reached the end of his rope and was willing to make peace. During Sadat's visit to Washington a month after the interim agreement was signed on September 1, 1975, Kissinger raised the idea of an Israeli withdrawal to a line in Sinai that was 25 km away from the international border line in return for a non-aggression agreement with Israel, similar to what Ismail proposed in his first meeting with Kissinger (p. 549). But during the negotiations over the interim agreement, Egypt refused the Israeli demand to include the term "non-belligerency," and under pressure agreed to include the following sentence in the first clause: "The conflict between them and in the Middle East will not be resolved by military force but by peaceful means." In the next clause, the two countries commit to not threatening the use of military force or a military blockade. Despite the important shift in Sadat's thinking, Kissinger chose not to report this to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who visited Washington in January 1976 (p. 549).

Kissinger did not have a monopoly on conceptual rigidity. The Israeli leadership was also limited by it, especially the idea that Egypt did not have a military option. Aside

from the State Department's research division, the intelligence branches in the United States likewise shared this assessment (p. 110). Like Kissinger, the Israeli leadership preferred the status quo, and the occasional deviations from this line stemmed from the desire to ensure the supply of weapons from the United States more than from the desire to investigate the messages that Sadat was conveying. Only toward the middle of the book does Indyk quote Kissinger, who dared to say with extreme caution: "Rightly or wrongly, the present perception is that Israel was excessively obstinate for six years [since the Six Day War] and contributed to the October war" (p. 281).

Facing this wall of conceptual rigidity, Sadat did not succeed in evoking in the Israelis a level of trust that would lead them to adopt a braver and more generous approach toward his ideas. In January 1974, Sadat conveyed a message to Golda Meir via Kissinger: "You must take my word seriously. When I made my initiative in 1971, I meant it. When I threatened war, I meant it. When I speak now of peace, I mean it" (p. 328).

Despite Meir's positive response to the message from Sadat, 18 months passed until the second interim agreement was signed following exhausting negotiations, mainly between the United States and Israel, but also with Egypt, against the backdrop of the meager trust that most of the Israeli cabinet ministers had in Sadat's declared intentions. While the Israeli insistence on including non-belligerency in the second interim agreement can be justified, it is difficult to understand the insistence on moving the separation line in Sinai even after the agreement was given to withdraw from the passes themselves. Indyk describes in detail the other reasons for the difficulty to extract positive Israeli initiatives, especially during the years of Rabin's first government (1974-1977), which stemmed mainly from the bitter personal rivalry between Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, then the Minister of Defense. Indyk encountered it from the first few months of his term as US ambassador in Israel until Rabin's murder in November 1995.

On the other hand, when Kissinger came to Israel on February 11, 1975, he engaged in a dialogue of the deaf with Rabin. Indyk claims that Kissinger simply didn't understand that Rabin was offering "land for peace," and if he had delved further, he would have discovered that Rabin was prepared for a full withdrawal, if Sadat was prepared for a full peace (p. 458). When Kissinger met Sadat the next day, he did not even try to examine this possibility (p. 459). This was without a doubt conceptual rigidity on Kissinger's part.

Sadat is portrayed as a visionary leader who saw the bigger picture beyond the technical details, but he was also sometimes forced to accept the opinions of Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy, who opposed any inclusion of political elements in the disengagement agreements and resigned from his position when Sadat declared his willingness to visit Israel. At times he was also compelled to accept the stances of Mohamed Abdel Ghani el-Gamasy, who during the years of negotiations was promoted by Sadat to chief of staff and subsequently was appointed minister of war. Nonetheless, Egypt, Israel, and the other states of the region have to thank Sadat for his devotion to peace, which led to the secret negotiations in Morocco, his visit to the Knesset, and later the signing of the peace treaty.

The Failure to Relate to King Hussein and the "Jordanian option"

In most and perhaps even all his 20 years in US administrations, Martin Indyk dealt with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the issue is close to his heart, beyond its relevance as a professional issue throughout his career. Therefore, it is not surprising that the second critical vector regarding Kissinger is his lack of success in exploiting the momentum following the war to effect change in this arena. Jordan did not play a central role in building a regional agreement after the Yom Kippur War. Unlike

Syria and Egypt, it did not come into direct conflict with Israel in the war, though it sent forces to the Golan Heights.

Despite his affection for King Hussein, Kissinger believed that there were political forces in Israel that would prevent his reaching an achievement that would advance the solution. Egypt clearly had priority in his eyes (p. 419), and nevertheless, when on December 16, 1973, he discussed proposals submitted to him by Zaid al-Rifai, the king's advisor, with the Israeli cabinet, regarding the transfer of a small piece of territory in the Jericho region to Jordanian management, he discovered a positive Israeli attitude that he conveyed the next day. However, he did so with blatant indifference, and placed the blame on the Israelis, who didn't understand that "the art of politics is to make a concession before you're forced to" (p. 422). Nor did the meetings between Meir and Dayan with the king and his advisor in January 1974 interest Kissinger, who at that time was already immersed in the attempt to impel Syria to join the regional order that he sought to create (p. 424).

Kissinger did not have a monopoly on conceptual rigidity. The Israeli leadership was also limited by it, especially the idea that Egypt did not have a military option.

When Kissinger returned to the issue in summer 1974, he encountered familiar Israeli political machinations, as Rabin was busy adding the National Religious Party to the coalition he headed, and any withdrawal in the West Bank would have thwarted its joining (pp. 431-432). When Rabin, Yigal Allon (then foreign minister), and Peres met with King Hussein in the Arava area on August 24, 1974, they could only agree that a third country would not be established between Israel and Jordan (p. 438). At the Arab League summit at Rabat in 1974, the Palestine Liberation Organization was declared the sole representative of the Palestinian people, which would receive any piece of land liberated from Israel. This was the "Jordanian option's" first death, and it was followed by subsequent deaths later on.

Indyk laments the loss of the opportunity in 1974 and claims that Kissinger could have managed two parallel tracks (p. 442). In Kissinger's opinion, the West Bank and Jerusalem are the problems of Israel, not of the United States (p. 443). In concluding the book, after he lists Kissinger's achievements and the importance of the agreements that he helped engineer, Indyk says that on the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, his cautious approach of one step at a time, focusing on what seems to him essential and mainly changing the equation of "land for peace" to "land for time" led to the opposite result. At the end of Kissinger's tenure, the settlement population was 1,900, while at the end of 2020, according to Indyk, there were 466,000 people in over 130 settlements (p. 562).

Regarding the process that Kissinger built on the Egyptian track, it is easy to validate his contention that the proof lies in the end result, and the agreement that he built serves to this day as a stable foundation for relations between Israel and Egypt. However, the Jordanian option is not necessarily an opportunity that was missed. It can also be claimed that had an Israeli-American investment of political effort restored Jordanian control in the West Bank and direct involvement in managing the eastern part of Jerusalem, over time Jordan would not have survived the demographic, economic, and national pressures stemming from such control. The damaging chaos that would have emerged from a failure of Jordan to wrestle with these pressures would not have been less than the damage of the continued Israeli occupation.

In conversations with Indyk, Kissinger said that his preferred solution was building a "Palestinian state-in-the-making," one step at a time, and Israeli and American recognition of such a state with provisional borders, but with more territory under its control and fewer

settlements than the situation today. After its establishment, the founding of a confederation with Jordan should be encouraged (p. 567).

Indyk adds a kind of personal confession as a person who invested two decades of his life in advancing a full resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He says it is possible that Kissinger's method of measured steps might produce more positive results than the approach [of all or nothing] that has characterized all the American attempts so far to resolve this conflict.

Kissinger's Jewishness and his Attitude toward Israel

Indyk invests much effort to describe Kissinger's actions through the prism of his Jewishness, including his attitude toward Israel, and this is not an easy task. He was the first Jewish person to reach the most senior position in an American administration (followed by Madeleine Albright and Antony Blinken). According to the US constitution, the secretary of state is third in line to replace the president, if the vice president and afterward the speaker of the House of Representatives are unable to act as president. Kissinger would not have been eligible, because the constitution requires that the president be a native-born United States citizen. He experienced Nazism, which left a significant impact on him and influenced his emotional and intellectual identification with Israel. But Kissinger was an American citizen who pledged allegiance to serve his country and to advance its interests. Many Israelis have difficulty understanding how these can be reconciled.

Kissinger is quoted as having said that it is impossible to live the life that he experienced without feeling a sense of shared destiny with the Jewish people, but United States-Israel relations go beyond the personal realm (pp. 557-558). While throughout the years he served in the administration he demonstrated opposition to the principle adopted by all US administrations of Israel returning to the 1967 borders with agreed-upon changes and opposed an international conference, Kissinger was the first person who succeeded in obtaining territorial concessions from Israel with threats and pressure. On the other hand, Kissinger withstood his ground against pressure by both Nixon and Ford to convene an international conference aimed at quashing what they saw as Israel's unyielding positions during the negotiations over the interim agreements.

Beyond Kissinger's threat to the Israeli leadership that the United States would allow the Security Council to impose sanctions on Israel, no less severe was his recommendation to President Ford in early 1975 to use the threat of suspending the supply of American weapons to Israel. The first American president who approved supplying weapons to Israel was Kennedy, and Israel's sharp transition from using European-produced weapons, mainly French, to American-made arms occurred after the Six Day War in 1967. In each of the meetings between Israeli prime ministers and US presidents, the request for new weapons arose, and Golda Meir's meeting with President Nixon on March 1, 1973, was no different. However, out of concern that the weapons would be delayed, Israel's prime minister agreed to Kissinger checking with Hafez Ismail about whether Egypt would agree that in return for Israeli recognition of Egyptian sovereignty, Israel would be permitted a military presence in Sinai. As mentioned, Meir retracted this a few days later (p. 99).

During the war in 1973 Kissinger fought with the Pentagon and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger (who was born Jewish but converted), who tried to delay the arms shipments. Only in November 1974 did Kissinger start to use the delay of arms shipments to Israel as a means of pressure (p. 451), and in parallel he conveyed to Sadat in December 1974 that the United States would begin to supply weapons to Egypt (p. 452). From here, the deterioration in Israel-United States relations and in Kissinger's relations with the Israeli leadership was quick. On March 21, 1975, a dispatch from President Ford (that Kissinger formulated) was received:

> I am writing to convey my deep disappointment over the position taken by Israel during the course of the negotiations….Secretary Kissinger's mission, which your government strongly encouraged, involved the vital interests of the United States in the area. The failure to achieve an agreement is bound to have far-reaching effects in the area and on our relations.
>
> I have directed an immediate reassessment of U.S. policy in the area, including our relations with Israel, with a view to assuring that the overall interests of America in the Middle East and globally will be protected.
>
> You will be informed of our decisions. (pp. 474-475)

The pro-Israel lobby won the arm wrestle that ensued with the administration, because the administration—and especially Kissinger—was of two minds. They were caught between the desire to prove to Israel and the Arabs that United States policy in the region was decided in Washington and not in Jerusalem, and on the other hand, the desire to deny the Soviet Union achievements, especially since the change of direction and the transition from Kissinger's method of "small" agreements and one step at a time to comprehensive regional peace required an international conference attended and exploited by the Russians (p. 492). The letter from the 76 senators landed in the White House on May 21, 1975, stating that an Israeli withdrawal should be in return for significant steps toward peace with its Arab neighbors and arms and economic aid for Israel, which would deter the Arab countries from renewing the war. The number of signatories underscored to the White House that it could lose in a battle in Congress. Given the upcoming November 1976 presidential elections, President Ford decided to return to the idea of an interim agreement between Israel and Egypt. Indyk rightly comments that President Obama, whose relations with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also deteriorated, refused to harm Israel's security and did not reduce the level or quality of aid (p. 539).

This was one of the lowest points in the 75 years of Israel-United States relations, when the US administration placed two almost existential threats on Israel within a short period. At the center of the drama stood the prime minister of Israel, a prestigious sabra commander who led the Israeli army to victory in the Six Day War and served as an Israeli ambassador to Washington, facing the foreign minister of the world's leading superpower, a brilliant and proud Jew who had received global recognition for his diplomatic achievements.

The appreciation evinced by the Israeli leadership toward Kissinger was accompanied by their suspicion, which was sometimes based on intelligence regarding his conversations with Arab leaders. He valued figures such as Rabin, Dayan, and Allon, who held face-to-face conversations with him and brought up brilliant ideas, but when he returned to Israel after the "reassessment" crisis, he thought that he was participating in a discussion with "a group of potato salesmen" (p. 525).

In retrospect, Indyk is right in saying that Kissinger's great contribution to Israel was replacing the mantra of land for peace with land for time, which Israel exploited to rebuild the army, build a strong economy, become a global technological center (p. 561) [and absorb the large waves of immigration after the collapse of the Soviet Union]. The step by step approach led to the Oslo Accords, the peace agreement with Jordan, and the Abraham Accords. Hopefully, these achievements will not obstruct reaching a comprehensive settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Indyk's book is monumental because the person at its center is such. Today, in the 50th year after the Yom Kippur War, Indyk opens a window to our understanding of the central figures and their deliberations on the American, Israeli,

Egyptian, and Syrian sides. The agreements, those that they reached and those that they avoided or were prevented from reaching, have shaped the face of the region.

The book is mandatory reading for everyone who deals with the triangle of relations between the United States, Israel, and the Arab countries.

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