

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Memorandum of Conversation

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DATE: March 29, 1977
TIME: 11:00 am-1:45 pm
PLACE: The Kremlin, Moscow

SUBJECT: MBFR; Middle East

PARTICIPANTS: US PARTICIPANTS

Secretary Cyrus R. Vance
Ambassador Malcolm Toon
Mr. Paul Warnke
Mr. William Hyland
LTG Edward Rowley
Mr. William D. Krimer, Interpreter

USSR PARTICIPANTS

Foreign Minister A.A. Gromyko
Deputy Chairman of the Council
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Deputy Foreign Minister G.M. Korniyenko
Ambassador A.F. Dobrynin
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Foreign Minister Gromyko opened the meeting by recalling that yesterday the two sides had set forth their positions on the preparation of a new SALT Agreement. Today, if this suited Secretary Vance, and if the Secretary had no additional considerations to add to what he had said yesterday, Gromyko would suggest that they take up other political questions which in their common opinion required discussion. These were the Vienna negotiations and the Middle East. He would suggest to take up the Vienna negotiations first, because the exchange of views would

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(MBFR)

Middle East

Gromyko said that there were a number of disarmament matters he thought it would be useful to discuss, but now he would take up the Middle East because this problem was most acute. The situation in the Middle East had been the subject of discussions between the two countries for many years now, including some at the highest level. It was discussed when President Johnson was in office, later on with President Nixon and then with President Ford. It was also discussed with the Carter Administration, although not too deeply. (Gromyko regarded this as the first small step taken.) However, we still had no solution to the Middle East

problem. If the Secretary believes that peace in the East could be bought for 1 million or 1 billion dollars, he would be sure that the Secretary was deeply mistaken.

The Secretary said we did not believe that peace could be bought.

Gromyko said that was good. What the Secretary had just said was encouraging. If this was indeed so, we must jointly look for a political solution. He did not know whether the Secretary was aware of the fact that at one point the Soviet Union had agreed with the United States that both countries would coordinate their activities in the Middle East. But, what had happened then? Nothing serious had happened. There was no coordination, not even a more or less regular exchange of information. This understanding had been suspended in mid-air and demonstratively not carried out. Unfortunately, this situation prevailed to the present day and, as he had told the Secretary before and during today's lunch, the Soviet Union regarded the present situation in the Middle East as fraught with much explosive potential. It was true that for the moment the cannons were silent, but this did not prove anything. Both our countries had witnessed a variety of surprises in that region. In 1973, toward the end of that year, there was a moment when through the joint efforts of our two countries it had seemed that a beginning could be made in the process of settling the conflict between the Arab countries and Israel. There was an unofficial understanding to continue acting jointly in the interests of establishing a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. Unfortunately, however, very soon after that the United States chose a separatist way of proceeding. It was quite evident that in so doing, the US was not guided by long-term considerations, but by the prospects of gaining purely temporary advantages. The short-sightedness and erroneousness of that mode of action by the United States appeared to him to be quite obvious. Gromyko wanted to say outright that the Soviet Union had not sought and was not now seeking any special rights or advantages for itself, but, neither should anyone else. The only desire the USSR had for that area, which is situated in direct proximity to the borders of the Soviet Union, was peace. But peace could only be based on taking account of the legitimate interests and legitimate rights of all the parties concerned, above all those states which were directly involved in the conflict.

Gromyko said that three key elements were of importance for real cooperation between our countries to promote settlement of this problem. What he was saying now would perhaps also be useful to bear in mind in future discussions between him and the Secretary later this year, but he would set forth these key elements now. First, he was deeply convinced that the starting point of any settlement was agreement on the principle that was codified in a well-known resolution of the UN Security Council--the inadmissibility of territorial acquisition by war. In other words, this meant that the result of a settlement should be that Israel remove its forces from all the Arab territories it had occupied in 1967. In this connection, Gromyko reminded the Secretary that he had headed the Soviet delegation at the Special Session of the General Assembly, which had discussed a Soviet and an American proposal to establish a state of Israel. Our two delegations had tabled corresponding proposals almost simultaneously. The Soviet Union had firmly favored the establishment of a Jewish state in the Middle East. By the way, Israel should really be grateful to the Soviet Union for such a way of looking at the situation. After all, the 1967 borders represented a considerable increase in the size of the Israeli state when compared to the borders established by the United Nations in 1947.

But it seemed to be forgotten now that at that time not only an independent Jewish state was established in that area, but also an independent Arab state, which had simply disappeared because part of it was later seized by Israel and another part by Jordan. Thus, when he talked about a return to the 1967 borders, that would already represent a considerable expansion of Israeli territory by comparison with the 1947 borders. The fact that Tel Aviv resisted a return to the 1967 borders could not be explained as anything other than the result of having completely lost a feeling for reality. He thought the Israelis probably reasoned that since a rifle was more effective today than the rule of law, they should rely on the rifle. All this, however, produced a very unstable situation in the area.

Now Gromyko wanted to tell the Secretary something very unpleasant, but he felt he would be remiss if he failed to do so: those who encourage Israel in territorial annexations instead of acting to bring it to its senses were only rendering a disservice to the cause of peace in the Middle East and, he would say, to Israel itself. "Defensible borders"--how many wise men did it take working day and night to come up with that euphemism? If Israel, Israeli leaders, those who determined its policy believed that they could indefinitely live under conditions of war with the Arabs, they were deeply mistaken. It would require a major miracle indeed for this to be possible. Although the Middle East was known as an area that had produced some major miracles, this one would have to be even larger than any previous miracle. Attempts to acquire ownership of Arab lands could only multiply the hatred of Arabs toward Israel. In this connection, Gromyko referred to Sadat and said that anyone who wanted to base his long-term policy on all sorts of memoirs that were published would find himself in a very complex situation. Quite recently Prime Minister Rabin had made a statement couched in aggressive terms. It had amounted to saying that even if agreement was reached, Israel would in any case retain a portion of the Arab lands it had occupied in 1967 in the form of Israeli military bases. This was the road toward unceasing enmity between Israel and the Arabs. Was that the road Israel wanted to take, or did it want peace? If it wanted peace it could get peace. If that was so, he would suggest that the Soviet Union and the United States help them achieve it, and reinforce Israel's right to exist as a sovereign, independent state. The Soviet Union was firmly for that, and had indeed never deviated from that stand. In fact, the Israelis should have said "thank you" to the Soviet Union for such a policy but, in Israel they don't know how to pronounce these words. The Soviet Union was deeply convinced that it would be much more promising for the United States and the Soviet Union to take a joint action to promote peace. It would be much more promising and might even be cheaper. What was missing now was our common and weighty word. Let President Carter resolutely say that there must be peace, and the Soviet Union would add its words to the same effect immediately.

Gromyko said that another element concerned the legitimate rights of the Arab people in Palestine. There would be no peace in the Middle East if the legitimate rights of Palestinians were not satisfied. What this really required was a very small piece of territory for the Palestinians. They were not asking for much. Looking at a map recently, Gromyko found that the eraser part of his pencil was larger than the territory involved. Providing that territory would bring about a great and most significant change in the situation. Among other things it would also stop promoting certain activities that were undesirable for the Soviet Union, for the United States, and for Israel, i.e., the various terrorist and extremist tendencies among Palestinians. Such undesirable phenomena would then be undercut. Actually, in terms of specifics, when Gromyko spoke of a small piece of land, he was referring to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. What the relationship of such a state would be with neighboring Arab states, particularly Jordan, was something the Palestinians and the Arab states themselves could decide. It could perhaps take the form of close-knit economic ties, perhaps even economic ties with Israel.

Now on the matter of Palestinian participation in the Geneva conference to settle this problem. What form that participation should take should be decided by the Arabs themselves. Whom else could we ask about that? President Amin, perhaps? He knew, of course, that the US had cordial relations with Amin, but the Palestinians themselves would have to decide this issue. Perhaps the Arabs would decide to go to Geneva in one single delegation including Palestinians. Why should we, the Soviet Union or the United States, object to this? The Soviet position on this matter was anything but rigid.

Finally, Gromyko wanted to repeat again that if necessary, political guarantees should be provided for the independent, sovereign existence and development of all states in the Middle East. The Soviet Union was prepared to affix its signature to a solemn document to that effect, along with the signature of the United States. Perhaps other major powers, such as France or Britain, might want to join in providing guarantees if they shared the same goal of peace and fairness. Of course, it goes without saying that the result of such a radical settlement must be a

cessation (Gromyko repeated "cessation") of the state of war, as Israel itself had insisted all along. After that, let anyone try to open fire in that region. It would be sufficient for either of us to just wag a finger to put a stop to it.

There were other issues in the Middle East that required discussion. Gromyko would prefer to leave these for the future. Notable among them was the question of timing and organizing the Geneva Conference. Now Gromyko would like to hear from the Secretary whether or not the new Carter Administration was prepared to act in concert and coordination with the Soviet Union, to implement in practice the statements already made by President Carter and by the Secretary. Major international issues cannot be resolved without the active participation of the Soviet Union and the United States. Gromyko regarded that as an axiom.

The Secretary said that he welcomed the opportunity to talk about the Middle East, because he believed that this was one of the three or four most important issues facing us today. He believed that the danger to peace in this region, but also to world peace, was very great indeed because of the lack of a just and lasting settlement to the conflict there. He also believed that we, the United States and Soviet Union, as co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference, had the solemn obligation to see to it that the necessary steps were taken to bring this conflict to a final and just conclusion. That could only be accomplished by cooperation between our two countries. The Secretary would point out that he had said on many occasions that we could cooperate with the Soviet Union in discharging this responsibility. President Carter shared that view. The Carter Administration had acted accordingly since coming into office. Immediately after returning from his Middle East trip the Secretary had informed the Soviet leadership through Ambassador Dobrynin of his discussions there. We had also informed the Soviets about the discussions with Prime Minister Rabin after the latter's visit to Washington, and intended to keep the Soviet Union informed of the results of discussions with Arab leaders after their visits to the United States. The Secretary had also already indicated to Gromyko that he looked forward to meeting him in Geneva later this year in order to agree on steps to reconvene the Geneva conference. Thus, Gromyko could see that we were serious in our desire to cooperate in these areas.

The Secretary now wanted to turn to the key issues before us. First, the question of boundaries, the question Gromyko had raised in his principle number 1-- the inadmissibility of territorial acquisition by war. Our position on this was well-known. We strongly supported Resolution 242 of the UN General Assembly and reaffirmed it today. Nothing said by President Carter goes counter to that resolution. On defensible borders, when the President had been asked to amplify his views he had said that we had not changed our views about Resolution 242. Indeed, he had specifically talked of Israel's 1967 borders with minor changes. When President Carter had spoken about defensible borders, what he had in mind were defense arrangements primarily. It seemed to the Secretary that it would be necessary for a period of time to make certain defense arrangements in order to insure that the borders were inviolable. The exact framework of such arrangements might include such things as demilitarized zones, patrols, reconnaissance, a "black box" perhaps, possibly UN troops in demilitarized zones. This would have to be discussed at the Geneva Conference.

As for the legitimate interests of the Palestinian people, the Secretary said it was our view that the question of how these interests were to be taken care of was primarily a question for the Arabs to resolve. During his recent trip to the Middle East, he had put this question to various Arab leaders. Each held a different view. He had urged them to try and coordinate their views so that we could better understand how best to proceed. He hoped that he would get further clarification on that next Monday, when President Sadat came to Washington.

Gromyko asked if the Secretary could be sure that he would obtain further clarification.

The Secretary said that we would keep the Soviet Union informed. He would mention, however, that there was a fundamental question that both of us had to consider and see if a solution could be found to it, and that was the current refusal of the Palestinians to recognize the right of Israel to exist as a nation. Such refusal was completely contrary to our views and indeed Soviet views. The Secretary expressed the hope that Gromyko could use his influence with the PLO to eliminate the corresponding provision from its Charter.

Gromyko asked whether in that case the United States and Israel would be ready to recognize the right of the Palestinians to an independent and separate state entity. Obviously these two matters were closely related.

The Secretary replied that, of course, he could not speak for Israel but, removal of that provision from the PLO Charter would create a different situation; at this time it was a stumbling block.

Gromyko said that he could say the same for the Palestinians, although he could not speak on their behalf. It was surely important that Israel state that it was ready to recognize the rights of the Palestinians. As to who would be the first to say "A," that should not be a difficult matter to resolve, that was precisely what diplomacy was all about.

The Secretary agreed. As for PLO participation at the Geneva conference, he agreed that in the final analysis this was in large part a question the Arabs themselves should decide. However, he had found that Arab leaders were split right down the middle on this issue. President Assad had said that unless the Arabs came to Geneva as one delegation, he would not participate. On the other hand, President Sadat had said that he would not come to Geneva if the Arabs came as a single delegation. The Secretary had urged them to make an effort to see if they could not agree on what form their participation would take in Geneva.

Gromyko said that things would be considerably easier if the Secretary could say whether the United States today held to its old position, or whether it had a new position regarding the possibility of the Palestinians participating in Geneva, regardless of whether it was in the form of a single delegation or a separate delegation.

The Secretary said that we wished to discuss this matter with the Arab leaders he was expecting in Washington. Our discussions with the Arabs would be concluded by the middle of May, by the time he and Gromyko would meet in Geneva.

Gromyko said that we must not permit questions of substance to flounder in matters of procedure, organization, minor secondary matters, because the fundamental issues of war and peace far outweighed the minor issues in importance.

The Secretary said that he agreed in part, but had to point out that the question of Palestinian participation was a question of both substance and procedure, because it involved what was going to be resolved in the future.

Gromyko said it did not matter what we called it, it was his only desire that we not lose substance over procedure.