

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with Defense Minister Rabin  
of Israel (U)

PARTICIPANTS: United States  
The President  
James A. Baker, III, The Secretary of State  
Richard B. Cheney, The Secretary of Defense  
John H. Sununu, Chief of Staff  
Brent Scowcroft, Assistant to the President  
for National Security Affairs  
William Brown, US Ambassador to  
Israel  
Dennis Ross, Director, Policy Planning  
Staff, The Department of State  
Richard N. Haass Senior Director, Near East  
and South Asian Affairs, NSC Staff,  
(notetaker)

Israel  
Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin  
Ambassador Moshe Arad  
David Ivry, Secretary General, Ministry of  
Defense  
Amos Yaron, Defense Attache

DATE, TIME May 24, 1989, 4:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.  
AND PLACE: Oval Office

The President began the meeting by expressing his delight at meeting with Rabin. He noted U.S. respect for Rabin's leadership and for what he had done to further the possibility of elections in the occupied territories. We were interested in his sense of where things stood. We also wanted to be helpful and act as a catalyst. Despite the successful visits of Mubarak, Shamir and Hussein, the U.S. was not prepared at this juncture to support a major policy thrust beyond elections and direct talks. (Ø)

Defense Minister Rabin, thanking the President for this opportunity, stated that Israeli policy moved along two parallel lines. The first involved maintaining military strength -- the best assurance Israel had against large scale hostilities. In this context, he expressed the hope that the U.S. would maintain

aid levels in FY91. The second policy direction was to find a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, something wanted by the people of Israel. Although the Cabinet approved a four-point initiative, the Defense Minister said he would focus on the fourth point, in that elections were the key to movement on the others. The challenge was how to get the Palestinians in the territories involved. It had been Israel's preference for Egypt or Jordan to take the lead, but for different reasons each had decided not to. A peace process required a partner, and Israel saw the Palestinians in the occupied territories as this partner. (Ø)

Defense Minister Rabin explained that the intifada had given the Palestinians in the territories self-respect and a stake in finding a political solution. Many of them saw the elections proposal as providing a unique opportunity, especially if additional details were added. The challenge was how to create conditions in which Palestinians would feel free of fear from the Arab world and the PLO that prevented them from taking advantage of this opportunity. The key issue was how to get Palestinians and Israelis together, something made more difficult by the certainty that Palestinian extremists would oppose such a dialogue. He had already started to talk on a political level with Palestinians, making clear that this was a unique opportunity and that a resort to violence on their part would not get them anything better. The question was to what extent Israel, the U.S. and the Europeans, working with Arab governments, could deliver the message to Palestinians to engage. No commitment regarding final status was being asked for. What had to be made clear that was this was the track that Israel intended to move on. It would take much courage on both sides to overcome the animosity of the past. This was a conflict between two national entities, not within the same nation. He believed it was possible for Israel and the U.S. to work together to create conditions so that this approach would succeed. (Ø)

The President asked whether an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue would be more likely to occur if it were made clear that the elections would be open and broad in terms of participation? (Ø)

Defense Minister Rabin explained that he had recently held discussions with prominent Palestinians with pro-PLO sympathies. What was clear was that without a green light from Tunis, it would be difficult for them to participate. He did not believe that Egypt would press the PLO to approve elections. He told the Palestinians that history showed that when they were given a choice between all or nothing they sought all and ended up with nothing. By contrast, the Jewish community always took something. It took 40 years for the Palestinians to accept UNSCR 181 and the concept of partition. Once again, they were faced with a fair proposal. They would not be wise to debate its details at the outset; instead, Israel wanted the Palestinians to

first accept elections in principle, after which details could be discussed. Israel had shown in 1976 that it could conduct free and democratic elections, something even Bethlehem Mayor Freij acknowledged. (Ø)

The President asked whether Israel could publicly provide details of its plan so that world opinion would swing to its side? (Ø)

Defense Minister Rabin said that such details were secondary. The key was the ability of Palestinians to enter a dialogue with Israel given the attitudes of Arab governments and the PLO. Palestinian leaders in the territories already enjoy freedom of speech on Israeli television, while Israel's own communist party favored a two-state solution and negotiations with the PLO. The problem was not with details but rather how to overcome the fear of Palestinians to go it alone. (Ø)

The President said that modalities were a significant part of the problem. As Egyptian President Mubarak had made clear, the Arabs would be suspicious of elections unless they had assurances on final status and other details. (Ø)

Secretary Baker stated that assurances on permanent status, participation, and guarantees that Israel would deal with those elected were key. We know that Israel would conduct open and fair elections. The Minister was right to say that the key next step was how to get a yellow if not green light from Tunis. But getting this signal might require Israel to fill in some details. (Ø)

Defense Minister Rabin said that Israel first required Palestinian acceptance of elections in principle. After this, Israel would be prepared to discuss details. Israel believed it was poor bargaining practice to play all its cards now. (Ø)

The President stated that this was a fair point. (Ø)

Secretary Baker said that the PLO might view accepting elections as playing their key card and as a result would be inclined to hold off. (Ø)

The President introduced the subject of Lebanon, stating his personal concern and that of Christian church organizations here with the mounting violence. He stated our policy was not to get out front but rather to call for a cease-fire and the withdrawal of all foreign forces. (Ø)

Defense Minister Rabin said the Syrians had suffered a series of setbacks in Lebanon and had been unable to elect a president or unite either the Parliament or the Army. Israel had recently met with Walid Jumblatt in Europe, advocating that Christians and Druze work together. The problem was that the Druze feared Syrian reactions. In Rabin's view, General Aoun had gone too far in confronting the Syrians. Israel did not want to see Syria provoked into introducing more force. The key question was what would happen after the Arab League Summit. Iraq had provided the

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

Christians with weapons and might be interested in inflaming the situation. Israel was advising caution on all parties. He did not know what were Syria's intentions, but it was noteworthy that Syria had recently increased its reconnaissance activity over Lebanon. As a result, Israel had signaled Syria in a manner designed to make Damascus question the extent of its freedom to act in Lebanon. He suggested the U.S. needed to talk to Kuwait's foreign minister about next steps. For its part, Israel wanted to keep a low profile and was happy to see Syria sink more deeply into Lebanon's morass. (S)

The President asked whether Rabin believed that Iran had recently increased its force levels in Lebanon? (S)

Defense Minister Rabin said that to the contrary, the number of revolutionary guards had declined to under 1,000. It appeared that although some new troops had been rotated in, more had left. In addition, Hizbollah had lowered its profile in Lebanon. (S)

The President, returning to the situation in the occupied territories, expressed his concern and that of the American people over the violence there. We were aware that it takes two to tango but all the same the images of violence had shaken the American people. (S)

Defense Minister Rabin said that he was aware of the implications of the television pictures and also wanted the violence to stop. Israel reacted to the violence but did not provoke it. He added that he took the President's point seriously. (S)

The President closed the meeting by expressing his great confidence in the leadership abilities of the Defense Minister and by stating his commitment to a close relationship with Israel. (S)

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~