



Comments on Panel 1

2007 SHAFR Conference

21 June 2007

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**Comments on Panel 1: The Foundations of Middle East Conflict and Cooperation:
New Interpretations on the 1967 War**

Chair: **Salim Yaqub**, University of California at Santa Barbara

“Attack at Samu: A New Perspective on Hussein's Reconciliation with Nasser”

Clea Lutz Bunch, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

“US-Israeli Strategic Relations, 1964-1967”

Zach Levey, University of Haifa

“Tactics of Peace: Reason and Caprice behind Nasser's Post-war Policies”

Noa Schonmann, University of Oxford

Commentator: **Salim Yaqub**

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Comments on Papers by Zach Levey, Clea Bunch, and Noa Schonmann

This is an opportune moment to discuss the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, since it was of course forty years ago this month that the Six Day War broke out, dramatically transforming the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and overlaying onto the preexisting Arab-Israeli conflict a whole new set of issues that remain unresolved to this day, as the violent situation in Gaza so sadly attests.

We've heard three very fine papers today, which I will now consider in turn. **Zach Levey** looks at U.S.-Israeli relations over the three years preceding the 1967 war, with a particular focus on the Johnson administration's decision, in early 1966, to provide Israel with Skyhawk bombers. Levey notes that the administration decided to sell Israel these aircraft as a way of heading off two less attractive alternatives: a strategic alliance with Israel and the development of an Israeli nuclear arsenal.

(Of course, one could also point out—though Levey does not do so—that each of these unwanted outcomes came to pass anyway. The U.S.-Israeli alliance is informal and the Israeli nuclear arsenal unannounced, but both are stark realities that we dare not ignore.)

In any event—and this is a point Levey does make—Israeli leaders were extremely gratified by Washington's decision to sell the Skyhawks, seeing it, in the words of Israeli

Foreign Minister Abba Eban, as “a development of tremendous political value.” And so it was.

Levey’s account of the bureaucratic and diplomatic maneuverings that resulted in the Skyhawk sale—an account drawing on both U.S. and Israeli archival sources—is meticulous and convincing. Levey successfully captures the vexing dilemmas U.S. officials faced as they tried, simultaneously, to protect Israel’s security, maintain good relations with Jordan, forestall an uncontrolled Arab-Israeli arms race, and prevent the Soviet Union from expanding its influence in the Middle East.

The only change I would recommend would be for Levey, occasionally, to step outside the confines of the official documents and comment more freely on the evidence he uncovers. As I read this paper, a number of passages jumped out at me on which I would have loved to see Levey’s commentary. The first was the startling exchange in which Israeli leaders, in conversation with Secretary of State Dean Rusk, “spoke frankly of their government’s desire to develop the means to bomb and release the waters of Egypt’s High Dam and [of] their view that only a nuclear device could achieve this aim.” The Johnson administration may have had an interest in turning a deaf ear to such talk, but students of history tend to be more curious, so it would be nice to hear more about this remarkable proposal and the circumstances under which Israel might have pursued it.

I was similarly struck by Abba Eban’s response to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s concern that Israel might use the U.S.-supplied Skyhawk aircraft to drop nuclear bombs on an Arab adversary. “We will not,” Eban pledged, “use your aircraft to carry weapons we haven’t got”—an artful statement that committed Israel to exactly nothing. Which brings me to the larger observation that much of the language that U.S. and Israeli officials used to discuss the nuclear question was designed not to resolve the issue but to avoid confronting it at all. Consider, for example, Israeli leaders’ oft-repeated pledge that “Israel will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the Arab-Israeli arena.” This sounded like a definitive pledge that Israel would not build or deploy nuclear weapons until one of its Arab neighbors did so first.

But the true meaning of the Israeli pledge became clearer in a November 1968 conversation between Yitzhak Rabin, then Israel’s ambassador to the United States, and Paul Warnke, an assistant secretary of defense in the Johnson administration. Asked to elaborate on the Israeli pledge, Rabin said that Israel would have “introduced” nuclear weapons to the Middle East only if it had tested those weapons and publicly announced their existence. “Then in your view,” Warnke said, “an unadvertised, untested nuclear device is not a nuclear weapon.” “Yes, that is correct,” Rabin replied. (In fact, it is believed that Israel acquired its first usable nuclear weapons earlier that year.)

The Warnke-Rabin exchange is beyond the chronological scope of Levey’s paper, but it sheds retrospective light on the issues he so cogently discusses, and helps fill in some of

the blanks contained in the documents he so industriously unearths. I look forward to hearing his further discussion of these matters.

Clea Bunch looks at relations among the United States, Jordan, and Israel during the several months preceding the 1967 War, and in particular the immediate aftermath of the Israeli raid on the village of Samu' in November 1966. She convincingly shows that the raid destroyed an informal *détente* between Jordan and Israel that had lasted for over three years and that had involved secret contacts between King Hussein and top Israeli leaders. Bunch further demonstrates that the U.S. government failed to grasp the seriousness of Hussein's predicament in the wake of the Israeli attack and refused to provide the king with adequate assurances or military aid, leaving him with little option but to forge a military alliance with Nasser's Egypt.

Bunch makes a very strong case that this sequence of events was a fundamental precondition for the 1967 War. What is less clear is why the main actors would have acted they way they did. If the Israeli-Jordanian contacts had been, as Bunch states, a "critical counterbalance to Nasser's influence in the Middle East," then why would Israel have risked destroying those contacts by launching the raid against Samu'? Granted, Israel had been subject to Fatah commando raids, but these provocations hardly seem to warrant rupturing the relationship with Jordan.

And why was Washington so obtuse about the situation? Even those U.S. officials who had not been aware of the secret Israeli-Jordanian contacts must have appreciated, in a general sense, the crucial importance of Jordan's relatively conciliatory posture toward Israel. Why would those officials have done so little to dissuade Israel from undermining Jordan's posture, and why would they themselves have been so unresponsive to King Hussein's subsequent appeals for U.S. aid and assurances?

And finally, why would King Hussein have been so reckless as to demand that Nasser remove the United Nations Emergency Force from the Sinai and Gaza? Surely he must have appreciated the symbolic importance of UNEF and the destabilizing impact its sudden removal would have on the region. Perhaps Hussein was convinced that, no matter what he said, Nasser would never seek the removal of UNEF and that the force's presence on Egyptian-controlled territory would remain, for the foreseeable future, a convenient punching bag for Nasser's critics.

These are some the questions that come to mind in reading Bunch's excellent paper. I look forward to hearing her further comment on them during the Q & A period.

Noa Schonmann shifts our focus to the immediate aftermath of the 1967 War. In particular, she analyzes Nasser's diplomatic activities during the second half of 1967. On three separate occasions, Schonmann points out, Nasser secretly reached out to the U.S. government via intermediaries, holding out the promise of a more conciliatory Egyptian

position on the Arab-Israeli impasse. In each case Nasser received an encouraging U.S. response but severed the contact before it could bear fruit.

What to make of this behavior? As Schonmann sees it, the fact that Nasser's actions formed a clear and consistent pattern, composed of carefully planned steps that had to be coordinated with other actors, suggests that Nasser was behaving rationally "rather than impulsively." While this supposition is probably correct, one can't help noting that the behavior Schonmann describes—repeated identical actions leading invariably to the same failed result—is also consistent with obsessive compulsive disorder, which is not ordinarily associated with rationality. But assuming that Nasser was acting rationally, why did he repeatedly court rapprochement with the United States only to abandon the effort as soon as it seemed in danger of succeeding?

Here, Schonmann's paper would benefit from a fuller exposition of Nasser's motives. Schonmann hypothesizes that the Egyptian leader made periodic conciliatory gestures toward the United States in order "to regain Washington's good will with minimum concessions while keeping his options open." At the same time, she speculates, Nasser hoped "to dodge the overbearing shadow of the Soviets, who were anxious to step in and extend their influence over Egypt." But how could Nasser have expected such a tactic to succeed? Wasn't it more likely that repeatedly tempting the U.S. government with better relations, only to pull back at the last moment, would simply alienate Washington further, making it even harder for Nasser to dodge Moscow's shadow? U.S. officials had already come to regard Nasser as a volatile and unreliable interlocutor. If Nasser truly wanted "to regain Washington's good will"—even if only temporarily—what interest did he have in reinforcing that impression? Additional clarity on these basic questions would be a welcome complement to what is already a challenging and thought-provoking paper.

That's it for my comments. I commend the presenters for their stimulating and path-breaking papers and look forward to hearing the audience's comments and questions.

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