Symbol not Substance? Israel's Campaign to Acquire Hawk Missiles, 1960-1962

The decision by the United States in August 1962 to sell Hawk ground-to-air missiles to Israel, after years of refusal to sell Israel major weapons systems, was seen by both contemporaries and later scholars as signalling a shift in the relationship between the two states. The decision is usually explained as the result of a process that took place in Washington, an explanation which fails to address the question of what prompted John F. Kennedy's decision in the first place. Like his predecessors, Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower, Kennedy at first refused to sell weapons systems to Israel. His change of mind was not the result of a US impulse, nor did his administration offer the missiles to Israel in return for concessions elsewhere. Although the decision is described as 'a reversal of US policy,' it followed from decisions taken by the Eisenhower administration combined with Israeli lobbying and geopolitical changes in the Middle East.

Israel's quest for Hawk missiles was a sham. However useful, they were not needed urgently, and some military commanders thought that the cost of them would drain the defense budget. Their value was political and symbolic: they were used as a means to persuade the United States to reverse its decision not to provide major weapons systems to Israel. Although Israel cherished the moral, political, and economic support given to it by the United States, its leaders, obsessed with existential fears, sought one assurance they lacked: a clear, formal, and preferably public US guarantee of Israel, either a formal security pact or, failing that, an agreement to sell weapons systems. Truman and Eisenhower had baulked.  

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3 See D. Tal, 'American-Israeli Security Treaty: Sequel or Means to the Relief of Israeli-Arab

Israel's Quest for Hawk Missiles

Israel first asked the United States to supply weapons in 1950, but was refused: US intelligence reported that Israel, in no danger of an Arab attack, was militarily stronger than its neighbours. Hence the Tripartite Declaration of 25 May 1950 which set criteria for arms sales to the Middle East based on self-defence and internal security needs. Israel's qualitative and quantitative superiority lasted until September 1955 and, after 1954, it found a supplier of weapons systems in France. The Truman and Eisenhower administrations were able, therefore, to maintain good relations with the Arab states without compromising Israel's security.

The Egyptian-Czech arms-for-cotton deal, announced by Gamal Abdel Nasser in September 1955, shifted the military balance against Israel. The United States, which feared that an Arab-Israeli war could jeopardize its attempt to set up an anti-Soviet Middle Eastern defense organization excluding Israel, formulated its 'friendly impartiality' policy: it would not take sides in the event of a conflict. The secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, replied in December to a request for arms from Israel's minister of foreign affairs, Moshe Sharett, in the administration's usual manner: he turned it down. Nevertheless, during late 1955 and early 1956, the administration secretly promoted the sale of arms to Israel by France, other members of NATO, and even Nicaragua. The successful outcome, a major arms sale to Israel by France in June 1956, buttressed the policy of 'friendly impartiality.'

The events of July 1958, when US and British forces rescued the Lebanese government and King Hussein of Jordan from pro-Nasser forces, gave Israel the opportunity to try to raise its standing with the United States. Israel's contribution was small: it merely allowed Britain to overfly its territory. Nonetheless, the crisis marked the United States's recognition of the changes occurring in the Middle East and the death knell to its efforts to bring the entire region under its cold war umbrella. Given the

5 Statement by Dulles to senate foreign relations and armed services committees, 14 Jan. 1957 [Mudd Library, Princeton University, John F. Dulles Papers, box 108].
latter aim, Israel had been a burden, as the Arab-Israeli conflict threatened to disrupt US attempts to contain the Soviet Union. Once it was clear, in the aftermath of 1958, that the Middle East was divided between the two blocs, Israel became an asset; one of three Middle Eastern states (together with Jordan and Saudi Arabia) willing to support the United States in its confrontation with Nasser’s version of Arab nationalism. Eisenhower stated in April 1957 that “the people in the Middle East who are with Nasser ought to be called what they really are, puppets of the Kremlin.”

As a result, Israel began to receive encouraging messages: Eisenhower told the prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, on 25 July of the ‘United States’ interest in the integrity and independence of Israel.’ A similar letter from Dulles in August embellished the commitment: ‘With regard to Israel’s security ... we believe that Israel should be in a position to deter an attempt at aggression by indigenous forces, and are prepared to examine the military implication of this problem with an open mind.’ No wonder Ben-Gurion hoped that such statements heralded an end to the US policy of refusing to supply Israel with major weapons systems.

Ben-Gurion turned out to be mistaken. The United States continued to act on the assumption that ‘political considerations militate against our being a large supplier of heavy military equipment to Israel.’ But although the United States would not supply weapons, it allowed Israel to spend its US foreign aid on British, French, and Italian weapons and encouraged the European states to do the same. The arrangement met Israel’s military needs.

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Israel made its first request for Hawk missiles in February 1960, at the end of prolonged and bitter debate within the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) about doctrine and orientation. After the Sinai campaign of 1956, the IDF high command sought to update its doctrine of deterrence and, if deterrence failed, decisive preemptive attack on the enemy’s forces, by creating an offensive air force and an armoured corps. The Israelis disagreed, however, about the preferred source for weapons. One group, led by the director-general of the defence ministry, Shimon Peres, preferred to rely on European suppliers, France in particular, where Peres had excellent connections. The IDF high command, however, especially the chief of staff, Lieutenant General Haim Laskov, wanted to replace France with the United States. The IDF assumed that France’s interest in Israel was transient: traditionally, it had tied itself to the Arab states. The United States’s ties with Israel were permanent.1

The IDF, seeing a request for US ground-to-air missiles as a step in the right political direction, tried to anticipate a refusal. Israel pointed to the Arabs’ growing strength, particularly in air power, which only US weapons could counter. More precisely, Israel attributed its need of Hawk missiles to the Soviet Union’s willingness to supply Egypt with the latest model planes, such as the MiG-17 fighter in 1957 and the MiG-19 fighter and the TU-16 bomber later that year.2

General Ezer Weizmann and the air force commanders opposed the purchase of Hawk missiles, on the grounds of both unsuitability and cost: the IDF would be unable to afford as many planes and tanks as it had planned for.3 Weizmann was also afraid that once in possession of ground-to-air missiles, the government would adopt a defensive doctrine and reject the offensive doctrine of a pre-emptive air strike ahead of an armoured assault.4

After the air force was overruled, on 9 February 1960 the Israeli ambassador to Washington, Avraham Harman, submitted a list to the state department which included ‘nearly 100 aircraft of latest models, 530 tanks, 500 armoured cars, 60 howitzers, 250 recoilless rifles, 600 missiles of the Sidewinder and Hawk types, 2 small submarines and a large quantity of electronic equipment’. Although the list was long, the assistant secretary of state, Lewis Jones, grasped its true meaning: ‘The Israelis do not really expect us to provide the heavy equipment. They probably feel we might be willing, however, to provide their electronic needs and then to some extent subsidize through indirect means their purchase of aircraft and heavy armament from French or other non-American sources.’ Jones was right. The only item Israel expected to buy from the United States was the Hawk missile; everything else could be purchased in Europe. The list was designed to convince the Eisenhower administration of the threat to Israel, expected from the West German sales of Hawks to the British.5

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3 Dulles to Ben-Gurion, 1 Aug 1958, FRUS, 1958-60, xii, 78, emphasis added.
6 A. Yanir, Deterrence without the Bomb (Lexington, 1987), p. 75.
in the hope of alarming US officials and to justify Israel’s request for financial aid.1

Henceforth, Israeli diplomacy focused on the Hawks and repeatedly made three points in various ways: the United States had revoked Dulles’s assurance of August 1958 that it would maintain Israel’s deterrent capability; the shipments of advanced Soviet planes to the Arab states exposed Israel to an air strike; and the weapons systems which were needed to counter the threat were available only in the United States.2 When Ben-Gurion met Eisenhower in March 1960, he claimed that Nasser would use the new MiG-19 to ‘finish’ Israel in a surprise attack. Hence Israel urgently needed ground-to-air missiles and electronic early-warning equipment ‘which can only be obtained here’. Eisenhower replied that ‘the nations of Western Europe ... could better supply arms to Israel than could the United States,’ though he added that ‘the United States is not indifferent to the future of Israel, and the United States certainly agrees that Israel has a right to exist.’3

According to the state department’s record of the meeting, Eisenhower said: ‘Ben Gurion should not think that the US is “indifferent” to Israel’s arms needs.’4 The wording may explain the secretary of state, Christian Herter’s, reply to the request for Hawk missiles: ‘we will consider his request sympathetically and urgently.’5 When Ben-Gurion asked whether the reply ‘was a positive one’, Herter added: ‘that was a fair assumption, unless factors which I don’t know about are brought to my attention.’

Herter’s reply triggered a debate within the Eisenhower administration. The department of defense turned down the request for missiles until technical as well as political grounds. The Hawks would not be available until 1963-4, and the training facilities for them were fully booked through 1965. More important, the department saw no reason to change the policy of refusing Israel major weapons systems. According to the deputy assistant secretary for international affairs, John Dabney, Israel enjoyed a qualitative superiority over its neighbours and its armed forces were far the more effective. He recommended that the United States should supply only the electronic early-warning and detection systems.6

Although Herter saw no reason to refuse Israel defensive weapons such as the Hawk, his senior aides disagreed with him. They agreed with the

defence department that $60 million worth of ‘early warning electronic equipment of highly advanced design’ would improve Israel’s security.1 The Hawks were not needed, as the Israeli air force was about to take delivery of the French Mirage, a better plane than the MiG-19, which would cancel the threat from Egypt’s bombers. By extending the ‘appearance of impartiality’, supplying Israel with Hawk missiles would start an arms race in the Middle East, hindering the United States’s attempts to keep the peace and benefiting the Soviets. To export the sophisticated highly classified Hawk would reveal important military secrets. After Herter gave way and sent the under-secretary of state, Douglas Dillon, to communicate the decision,2 Harman acknowledged that the administration had correctly assessed Israel’s priorities: the IDF was less dis-appointed by the refusal to supply Hawks than appreciative of the early-warning system. Pentagon officials suggested unofficially that Israel should buy ground-to-air missiles in Europe and reapply to the United States for Hawks when the MiG-19 arrived in Egypt.3

Ben-Gurion’s disappointment notwithstanding, the exchange upgraded Israeli–United States security relations. The Eisenhower administration announced that Israel’s security needs would be met, and both urged Israel to apply to the European states and urged them to meet Israel’s needs. And by offering credit, the United States eased the financial burden. Ben-Gurion noted in his diary Dillon’s statement that ‘we never told you not to buy arms. We don’t need to check every item you buy; just send us the bill, and we will do everything we can to assist.’4 He added that Dillon had explained how Israel could clear any obstacles in Congress to the transfer of funds.

Although Israeli politicians from the foreign minister, Golda Meir, on down complained loudly and often at the US refusal to supply Hawks,5 the campaign to acquire them was interrupted at the end of 1960 when the reports that Israel was building a nuclear reactor were confirmed. When the state department received the first reports in 1959, it demanded to know whether Israel planned to put its nuclear research program under the observation of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Israel’s refusal led to an exchange of messages late in 1960 in which the United States tried to find a way to prevent Israel’s nuclearization, and in Israel, in order to evade the subject, temporarily gave up its bid to acquire the Hawk missile.6

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1 Diary entry, 14 Jan. 1959, BGD; Aver to Harman, 11 Jan. 1960, ISA, FO 3994/5.
2 Eretz to FO, 9 Feb., Harman to FO, 16 Feb. 1960, ISA, FO 3994/5.
4 State dept., memo of con., 19 March 1960, ibid.
5 Memo for the pres., 17 March 1960, ibid.
6 Memo of con., 1 April 1960, FRUS, 1956-60, xiii. 302-9; Dabney to Herter, 14 June 1960, ibid., pp. 346-7.
The Kennedy administration, like its predecessor, devised its Middle Eastern policy state by state rather than region by region. As relations with one state were not necessarily affected by developments elsewhere, decisions about Israel were taken independently of relations with Egypt, and vice versa. Kennedy tried to improve relations with Egypt, irrespective of the Israeli-Arab conflict, in an effort to extend US influence throughout the third world. Seeing Nasser as the leader of a strong and important Middle Eastern state, Kennedy therefore notified him of steps he was about to take towards Israel, such as inviting Ben-Gurion to visit the United States or supplying Israel with Hawk missiles. But the decisions leading to the steps were not influenced by Kennedy's relationship with Nasser. Similarly, the deterioration in relations with Egypt, after the revolution in Syria in September 1961 and Syria's withdrawal from the United Arab Republic, had only a marginal impact on relations with Israel.

Israel reopened the campaign to acquire Hawk missiles soon after Kennedy's inauguration. Despite the perceived massive support for Kennedy from American Jews, Israeli diplomats, in lobbying for the Hawks, did not try to activate the Jewish community or others of Israel's supporters either in Congress or outside. Kennedy may well have been sensitive to Jewish opinion, but it does not seem to have influenced his decisions. Nor was the issue important enough to Israel to warrant a breach with an administration that had, after all, shown its good intentions.

Although the Kennedy administration at first followed its predecessor's policy regarding arms sales to Israel, a gradual change took place. In February 1961, when the special assistant for national security affairs, McGeorge Bundy, rejected a request for Hawk missiles, he repeated the arguments used previously. However, the deputy assistant secretary of defense, William Bundy, accepted Israel's claim that it was vulnerable to a surprise air attack, and thus saw no reason to turn down the request when the missiles were a defensive weapon. He 'was not particularly impressed' with the state department's argument that supplying them would lead to an arms race in the Middle East. Signs of change, however slight, were also evident within the state department. The assistant secretary, Phillips Talbot, mentioned on the eve of Ben-Gurion's visit to New York in May 1961, that the United States should assume the 'procurement of [Israel's] heavy and advanced arms from traditional European suppliers', but willing to approve the 'occasional sale of modest amounts of defensive arms' to Israel.1

When Ben-Gurion met Kennedy for the first time, in New York on 30 May, three items were on the agenda: Israel's nuclear program, its security, and the Palestinian refugee problem. The nuclear issue took little time. As Israel had already allowed two American scientists to examine its reactor at Dimona, Kennedy had with him their report confirming Israel's claim that the facility had been built for peaceful purposes.2 Ben-Gurion warned Kennedy, nonetheless, that although 'for the time being the only purposes are for peace', as to future developments, 'we will see what happens in the Middle East. It does not depend on us.' With that, Israel's nuclear program was removed from the Israeli-US agenda until 1965. Neither US nor Israeli decisions about the Hawk missile were affected by it.4

Ben-Gurion had decided to ask Kennedy for Hawks the first time they met in the hope that, after Dulles's and Herter's near promises, the new administration might have difficulty in refusing. He was encouraged by Israel's chief of staff-designate, Major General Tsvi Tsur, who told him that the Hawks might deter an Arab attack.5 Ben-Gurion tried, therefore, to convince Kennedy that the reasons which had prevented the sale of the ground-to-air missiles in the past no longer applied. Fear of an arms race was irrelevant, as Egypt enjoyed both a fifteen-to-one superiority in manpower and superior weapons. Israel's small size left its 'three airfields' vulnerable to a surprise air attack from Egypt's 'twenty-six airfields'. The threat was greater, Ben-Gurion claimed, on account of Nasser's 'officially declared aim' of destroying Israel. If he 'were to defeat Israel he would do to the people of Israel what Hitler did to six million Jews in Germany'. The Hawk missiles were needed to prevent him. In the hope of overcoming the United States's unwillingness to 'be a principal supplier of arms to Israel', Ben-Gurion reminded Kennedy that the Hawk was a defensive weapon which could be obtained nowhere else: 'If we get it, we are more or less safe.'6

The points Kennedy made at the meeting had been prepared for him by

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5 Diary entry, 8 Dec. 1960, BCD.  
the secretary of state, Dean Rusk, and on the state department’s advice, Kennedy held to his predecessors’ line. He conceded that the Hawk was a defensive weapon; nevertheless, “it is a missile,” and supplying missiles to one side would lead “the other side to get missiles, too, and there would be a danger of missile escalation.” Nor was Israel in danger while it held the military upper-hand: owing to the imminent arrival of the Mirage from France, Israel was not placed at a “disadvantage that would imperil you.” Kennedy summed up the United States’s position thus: “it is our desire not only because of our friendship for Israel, but as a matter of our interest, that Israel should not come into a position which will encourage aggression or invite attack. The situation needs continuous examination and, I can assure you that we will do that.”

Clearly, there is no reason to describe the talks as a success for Israel. Kennedy, who held to the established US policy, repeated the arguments made by the Eisenhower administration. And like his predecessor, he left the door open for another request at a later date.

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The most important of the developments in the Middle East that enabled Israel to ask again in 1962 was the shift in the alignment of France expected to follow the agreement in March 1962 between the president, Charles de Gaulle, and the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). The Franco-Israeli rapprochement followed from the Algerian revolt in 1954 and France’s claim that Nasser supported the FLN. The principle that “my enemy’s enemy is my friend” induced the French to abandon their traditional pro-Arab policy and to draw closer to Israel. The Israeli leadership understood, however, that with the Algerian war winding down, France was likely to return to its traditional pro-Arab stance.4

Israel might lose the backing of France just as the United Arab Republic significantly strengthened its air and ground forces. Israeli intelligence claimed in May that the United Arab Republic had more than doubled the number of its armored brigades. Egypt already flew the TU-16 long-range bomber, able from bases in southern Egypt to reach far beyond Israel, and Egyptian pilots were training in the Soviet Union to fly the MiG-21. The Soviets were also teaching Egyptian technicians how to fly missiles, which meant that Egypt would soon receive SA-2 ground-to-air missiles.5

These two developments led to the renewal across a wide front of the Israeli campaign in Washington for Hawk missiles. The campaign began with a visit in May 1962 by Peres, itself the clearest sign of Israel’s awareness that its close relations with France were about to come to an end. Peres was the most fervent advocate of the rapprochement with France and had been one of its architects. Now he joined the campaign to turn the United States into Israel’s major supplier of arms. In Washington, he met with a gallery of senior officials. To William Bundy, he challenged two of the standard arguments used to deny Israel the Hawks. He claimed that with the termination of the hostilities in Algeria, France “would feel much relieved if others could pick up a part of the burden” of supplying arms to Israel. And he noted that Israel’s vulnerability to a surprise air attack had increased with Egypt’s acquisition of the MiG-21 and ground-to-air missiles. Peres claimed that under these circumstances, “the Hawk represented a vital element in Israeli military requirement for putting up a convincing deterrent to UAR and/or Syrian attack.”

Other Israeli officials, notably Meir and Harman, joined the campaign, adding details about the Soviet Union’s military build-up of the United Arab Republic. At the same time, the Israeli embassy planted a story in the Washington Post to the effect that Egypt had used US aid to buy Soviet weapons and listed Egypt’s recent purchases.6

Peres’s claims were supported by a Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report, which concluded that Israel’s alarmism was militarily justified. Indeed, the DIA assumed that the Soviet Union would supply Egypt (and Iraq) not only with ground-to-air missiles, but also with ground-to-ground models. As if to add weight to the DIA’s report and to Israel’s claims, in July 1962 Egypt successfully launched in front of the domestic and foreign press its own ground-to-ground missile, built with the help of East and West German scientists. Ben-Gurion explained Israel’s fears in a letter to Kennedy, in which he spared no words in justifying the request for the Hawks:

We are confronted with a unique security problem. It is not our democratic system, or our borders and independence alone which are threatened, but our very physical existence is at stake. What was done to six million of our brethren twenty years ago could be done to the two million Jews of Israel, if, God forbid,

4 Diary entries, 13 March, 11 June 1962, BGD.
5 Bundy to Talbot, 23 May, Rusk to embassy, Tel Aviv, 28 May 1962, JFKL, NSF 118.
6 Peres to Ben-Gurion, 29 May 1962, ISA, FO 43171/.
7 Rusk to US embassy, Tel Aviv, 28 May 1962, JFKL, NSF 118, embassy, Tel Aviv, to sec. state, 9 June 1962, JFKL, NSF 118; record of mg., Israeli ambassador and Kayser, 26 June 1962, ibid.
8 Budge to Talbot, 3 May 1962, JFKL, NSF 118.
the IDF are defeated ... For these reasons it is of utmost importance to provide the IDF with sufficient deterrent strength which will prevent our neighbors from making war on us.¹

The reaction to the Israeli campaign revealed the fissures within the administration and the state department. Robert Komer of the National Security Council (NSC) staff argued that Arab hostility to Israel was driven by inter-Arab politics; that Arab leaders assailed Israel as a means to divert public opinion from domestic problems. On the one hand, he called for measures to lessen the danger of war, by deterring the Arabs from attacking Israel by furnishing it with 'some form of new security guarantee, perhaps Hawks air defense missiles', while, on the other hand, reducing the likely sources of friction by a greater effort to solve the refugee problem; by forcing Israel to collaborate with the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) and the United Nations Truce Supervisory Organization (UNTSO); and by persuading Nasser 'to hold back his Soviet arms purchases', and Jordan and Saudi Arabia to break off their propaganda campaign against Israel.²

Although Talbot still preferred to avoid a formal security pact with Israel and not to supply it with Hawks, he conceded that, owing to the Soviets' sale of weapons to the Arabs, Israel was more exposed to a surprise air attack. The Hawks would strengthen the weak link in Israel's defense, and thereby reduce any temptation to take preemptive offensive action. He added that 'from the domestic standpoint, American supporters of Israel would be pleased and would be less critical of US policy.'³ Nonetheless, the decision should be postponed until it brought some advantage or until the Soviet Union supplied similar missiles to the Arab states. The chiefs of mission from the Middle East and North Africa, meeting in Athens in June, echoed Talbot's views.⁴

Another of the state department's barriers collapsed when the secretary of defence, Robert M. McNamara, notified it in July 1962 that, because of the recent arrival in Egypt of more Soviet TU-16 bombers, which increased Israel's exposure to attack from Egypt, the Hawks were vital to Israel's security. Nor, given the expected strengthening of the United Arab Republic's air force and the defensive nature of the Hawks, would they upset the military balance between Israel and its neighbours. The department of the army offered both to supply the missiles and to train the Israeli crews.⁵

Owing to reports of the supply of missiles to Middle Eastern states by the Soviet Union, the vigorous Israeli campaign, support from the department of defense and the NSC, and the erosion of opposition in the state department, the real question was no longer if the United States would supply Israel with Hawk S, but when. The Israeli mission in Washington received numerous hints that a change of policy was imminent, as Talbot and Komer worked out a formula to limit the political fallout. They suggested that the United States should ask both Egypt and Israel to agree to arms limitation and, as part of the agreement, Nasser should agree to forgo Soviet ground-to-air missiles. As he was expected to refuse, the way would be clear to supply the Hawks to Israel. When the US ambassador at Cairo, John Badeau, made the suggestion to Nasser in August, he did in fact reject it.¹

The timing was set by Joseph E. Johnson, the special representative of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine, who produced, after a year of study, a plan to solve the Palestinian refugee problem. The subject was dear to Kennedy, who treated Johnson's plan as a key ingredient of his Middle Eastern policy.² Israel, however, strongly criticized the plan, which allowed refugees to choose between repatriation to Israel, resettlement elsewhere, or compensation for lost property. As Israel's declared policy was not to allow refugees to return, it suggested that the refugee problem should be treated as part of a general settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict, and the refugees settled where they were.

The state department suggested a quid pro quo: the Hawks for 'Ben Gurion's pledge of cooperation in [the] Johnson Plan'.³ At the White House, however, Kennedy and his advisers, who hesitated to use missiles as a tool with which to extract Israel's agreement to the Johnson plan, recognized Israel's difficulty in dealing with the refugees, in particular the risks entailed in their return.⁴ When the two subjects, the Hawk missiles and the Johnson plan, were broached to Israel on 15 August in a personal letter from Kennedy to Ben-Gurion, Kennedy claimed that the United States had 'been reviewing intensively certain matters that are of prime importance to Israel's security and well being, as well as to the improvement in the atmosphere in the Near East ... I refer to Israel's requests for a security guarantee and for the Hawk missile, and to the mission of Dr

¹ Ben-Gurion to Kennedy, 24 June 1962, ISA, FO 431/5.
² Memo, Komer to Feldman, 31 May 1962, FRUS, 1961-2, xvii. 691.
³ Memo, Talbot to Rusk, 7 June 1962, FRUS, 1961-3, xvii. 724-76; embassy, Athens, to state dept., 15 June 1962, ibid., p. 728.
⁴ W. Bundy to Grant, 16 July 1962, FRUS, 1961-3, xviii. 8-9; memo, Komer to McC. Bundy and
⁵ Ben-Gurion to Kennedy, 3 May 1962, ISA, FO 431/5.
Joseph E. Johnson.1 Owing to the wording, Israeli diplomats, in both Washington and Jerusalem, failed to grasp the proposed link between the Hawks and the Johnson plan.2

The letter led in August to a visit to Israel by Myer Feldman of the NSC staff as the president’s special envoy. Feldman told Ben-Gurion both that the United States would supply Hawk missiles to Israel and that Kennedy expected Israel to co-operate in implementing the Johnson plan. In meetings with Ben-Gurion and other senior Israeli officials, however, he did not imply that the two issues were linked, at least not according to the records made by Ben-Gurion and Meir. Supposing that the Kennedy administration was agreeing to Israel’s wishes, they described Feldman’s talks with Ben-Gurion and Meir as ‘excellent’.3

The state department, which had linked the two issues, tried to keep them linked despite the actions of the White House. For example, the department tried to withhold publication of the Hawk deal until the fate of the Johnson plan was known, until questions from the press forced its hand.4 However, when the director of the Middle East desk at the state department, Robert Strong, explained to Harman in Washington the reasons for the United States’s agreement to supply the Hawk missiles, he made no mention of the Johnson plan.5 Nor were the missiles mentioned during discussions within the administration about the difficulties the Israelis were making.6

As Rusk, who disliked the idea of selling arms directly to Israel, tried to stave off the inevitable, Britain seemed to offer a way out. Israel had tried since August 1958 to persuade Britain to sell it the Bloodhound, the British ground-to-air missile, but Britain, following the US lead, had stalled.7 When Britain learned that the United States was reconsidering its ban, the British enquired whether they might now supply missiles to Israel.8 Rusk was keen to take up the British offer, and to maintain the established policy of helping Israel to obtain weapons systems without supplying them. He told Israel and Britain on 18 August 1962 that ‘we recognize [Israel’s] need

for the ground-to-air missile system ... but we are not making a judgment for them as to whether they should seek US, British or other systems.9

For Israel however, more than supply was at stake. The crucial issue was the United States’s readiness to take such a far-reaching step. Israel did not consider the possibility of obtaining missiles from Britain, even though the Kennedy administration made it clear that delivering the Hawks and training Israeli personnel to use them would take time. More than the missiles, Israel sought a US commitment to its security, whether directly in the shape of a defence pact, or indirectly through the supply of major weapons systems. Thus, although the first Hawks did not arrive in Israel until 1965, the Israelis hailed Kennedy’s agreement in August 1962 to supply them as a great victory.2

Peres, the architect of Israel-France special relations, saw in Kennedy’s agreement a first step towards the turning of the United States into Israel’s major arms supplier: US agreement to sell ‘the Hawk missiles ... was a first, really serious breakthrough in [the] US embargo wall.’ The IDF chief of staff in the 1967 war, Yitzhak Rabin, who was twice prime minister, summarized the affair in dramatic terms: ‘Ben Gurion’s’ historical decision — and if he did only that in his life, it was enough to inscribe his name on Israel’s history pages in golden letters — was his struggle for a breakthrough into the American weapons market.10

Although Israeli diplomacy played a role in winning the victory, the sea change in the Middle East was more important: it had ceased to be under the hegemonic influence of the West. When Arab nationalism and Soviet penetration created a camp hostile to the West, Israel’s claims and requests were viewed differently by the United States than they had formerly been. US interests, whether domestic or foreign, neither necessitated agreement nor warranted refusal. When the Soviet Union armed its Arab allies, however, Israel’s claims that it was vulnerable to surprise aerial attack were vindicated. Hence the Kennedy administration could more readily accede to the request to supply Hawk missiles.

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2 Embassy, Washington, to FO, tel. 735, 16 Aug. 1962, ISA, FO 33777.7.
4 Harman to Yahali, 3 Oct. 1962, ISA, FO 33757/3.
5 Harman to Yahali, 3 Oct. 1962, ISA, FO 33757/5.