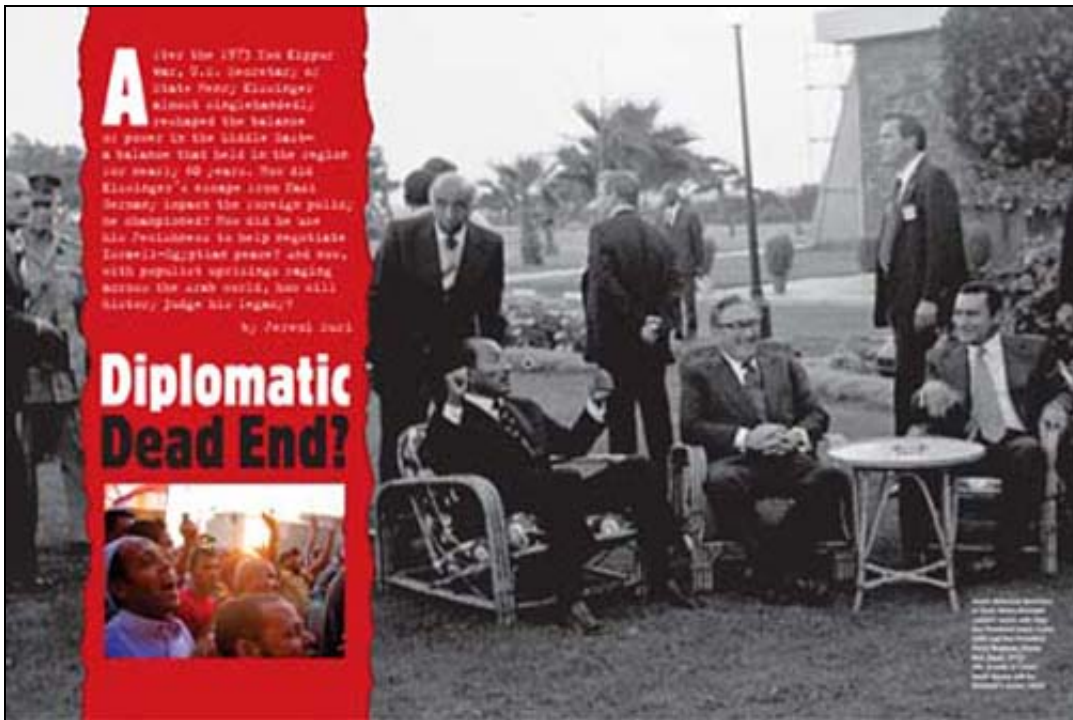


## Diplomatic Dead End?

by Jeremi Suri

*After the 1973 Yom Kippur War, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger almost singlehandedly reshaped the balance of power in the Middle East—a balance that held in the region for nearly 40 years. How did Kissinger's escape from Nazi Germany impact the foreign policy he championed? How did he use his Jewishness to help negotiate Israeli-Egyptian peace? And now, with populist uprisings raging across the Arab world, how will history judge his legacy?*



At his emotional swearing-in as U.S. Secretary of State on September 22, 1973, Henry Kissinger declared: “There is no country in the world where it is conceivable that a man of my origin could be standing here next to the president of the United States.” Indeed, Kissinger’s parents, who had been driven out of Nazi Germany in 1938, could hardly believe that, thirty-five years later, their son had reached America’s highest appointed executive office.



Henry Kissinger was born on May 27, 1923 in Fürth, Germany, a town of about 70,000 residents just outside of Nuremberg. The Kissingers—Henry, his brother Walter, and parents Louis and Paula—lived a life of separation from the mainstream German community. Their social lives centered around the 2,500-member Jewish community and the area’s most Orthodox synagogue.

After enduring escalating intolerance and violence from neighbors and local Nazis alike, the family fled Germany just three months before the outbreak of anti-Jewish riots known as

*Kristallnacht*. Kissinger's maternal grandparents and about a dozen close relatives who stayed behind would die at the hands of the Nazis.

Kissinger's first years in the United States were not exceptional. He resided in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan from 1938 to 1942, attended the local high school, and took a menial job in a brush factory to help support the family. His social life revolved around the Orthodox Jewish community and the larger German-Jewish population that dominated the neighborhood. After graduating from high school, he attended night school at City College for one year, studying to become an accountant.

But just as the Nazi rise to power forced Kissinger out of Germany, World War II pulled him out of the German-Jewish immigrant community of Washington Heights. A young man with a proven aptitude for complex analysis and practical problem-solving, he served admirably in United States Army Counterintelligence Corps., where he acquired extensive experience in local administration, political organization, economic reconstruction, and civil-military relations—all before the age of twenty-five. This experience opened many new doors, including acceptance at Harvard, America's premier university.

Herbert Englehardt, who lived downstairs from Kissinger in the segregated living quarters for Jews at Harvard, recounts that Kissinger was an outcast among his peers, including other immigrant Jews: "He was deadly serious all the time."

At Harvard, Kissinger founded the International Seminar, which convened young, politically ambitious individuals from Western Europe and other non-Communist states to discuss common intellectual and governance challenges. Despite his success, he remained segregated as a Jew, never gaining access to elite clubs on campus. He did, however, find favor in the eyes of powerful American government officials, who recognized in him and other European refugees unique qualifications for policy decision making and intelligence analysis: they possessed the language skills and cultural familiarity with postwar Germany, a key battleground in the struggle against Communism. And so it was that President John F. Kennedy's national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy, wrote to Kissinger a week after Kennedy's inauguration: "[The] president has asked me to talk with you at your early convenience about the possibility of joining up down here. We count on having your help, particularly in the general area of weapons and policy and in the special field of thinking about all aspects of the problem of Germany."

During the first year of the Kennedy administration, Kissinger served as an informal adviser on American policy toward West Germany, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and nuclear strategy. He had little direct influence on policy, but became an acknowledged "policy insider," with access to classified planning documents and to high level leaders, including President Kennedy and Bundy.

Not satisfied with his informal role, Kissinger sought a more prominent position through contacts with other political figures, especially Republican presidential-hopeful Nelson Rockefeller, who later appointed Kissinger as his chief international advisor and had him direct many studies of American foreign policy.

In all of his activities, Kissinger was driven by the desire to prevent a recurrence of the horrors he had personally witnessed in Nazi Germany. He embraced a set of core assumptions, beliefs,

and policies that hinged on his fear of mass hatred and violence—forces that could imperil democracies and lead even “advanced” societies into totalitarianism. He believed the American state was the embodiment of Western civilization and values, and that only a powerful America could safeguard international human rights, justice, and social progress. To protect the nation from what he interpreted as Communist expansion in Europe and Asia during the 1950s and 1960s, Kissinger called for mobilizing public opinion to support the use of force, including nuclear weapons if necessary. He argued that the United States needed to combine conspicuous displays of force with an unwavering determination to rid the world of extremist ideologies. Commenting on the Korean War after the devastating Chinese attack on American forces north of the thirty-eighth parallel, he cautioned against making any concessions to the Communists: “The stark fact of the situation is...that Soviet expansionism is directed *against our existence, not against our policies.*”

By the middle of the 1960s, Kissinger’s work for Kennedy, Rockefeller, and other politicians had earned him a regular seat at high level policy discussions. He was also a prolific writer for journals such as *Foreign Affairs*, the *Reporter*, and even the *Saturday Evening Post*. Meanwhile, many of America’s established foreign policy figures had discredited themselves during the Vietnam War. Influential political observers began to see in Kissinger a fresh and needed voice on foreign policy matters. He had become one of the most respected and recognized foreign policy experts in the United States.

Kissinger’s “inside” knowledge, combined with his “outsider” background, made him particularly attractive to President-elect Richard Nixon in late 1968. Nixon distrusted traditional elites, knew he needed a skilled foreign policy advisor, and searched for new ideas to salvage American policies under attack both in Vietnam and at home. In this context, Kissinger became the obvious choice for Nixon’s national security assistant, despite the president’s strong reservations about Jews.



Henry Kissinger's biggest test as both a statesman and a Jew came during and after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The invading Arab armies had fought better than expected, driving deep into Israeli-held territory on the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. The Israeli military found itself on its heels, disorganized and uncertain. Believing that the Israelis would halt the Egyptian and Syrian advances and eventually launch an effective counterattack, American officials, including Kissinger, refused at first to supply the military aid Israel requested. The belligerents should be allowed to beat upon one another “for a day or two and that will quiet them down,” Kissinger advised.

After a desperate personal appeal from Golda Meir and confirmation of increased Soviet military aid to the Arabs, President Richard Nixon approved an emergency arms airlift on October 13, 1973, a week after the war began. The U.S. supplied Israel with 11,000 tons of ammunition, electronic equipment, and other material—a course of action Kissinger recommended, although he remained reluctant to place Washington firmly on one side of the Middle East conflict.

With U.S. support, Israeli forces under the command of General Ariel Sharon broke through Egyptian lines and crossed the Suez Canal into Egypt. Israeli soldiers also pushed through the Arab-held sections of the Golan Heights, entering Syrian territory.

On the retreat, Arab leaders now looked to the United States for a diplomatic solution to end the war. Through the course of the conflict, Washington had acquired unique leverage: Israel felt beholden, at least in part, to the United States because of its reliance on American military assistance. At the same time, the Soviet Union's support for another failed Arab war had been a serious blow to its credibility and influence in a possible Middle East peacemaking role. The fact that Moscow lacked serious relations with Israel further strengthened America's hand. "Everyone," Kissinger declared, "knows in the Middle East that if they want a peace they have to go through us."

As the war drew to a close, Kissinger added yet another weapon to his diplomatic arsenal: his Jewishness. Kissinger understood that conspiracy theories about Jewish power and influence abounded in the Arab world. To those who falsely believed that Jews ran the world, Kissinger—as the leading American *and* Jewish foreign policy official—would appear all-powerful. Preparing for his first trip to the Arab countries of the Middle East in 1973, just two weeks after the cessation of Arab-Israeli military hostilities, Kissinger noted Cairo's anxious anticipation of his visit. Speaking with Brent Scowcroft, then deputy special assistant for national security affairs, Kissinger remarked: "In the nutty Arab world I am sort of a mythical figure. The Arabs think I am a magician." Their prejudice against Jews, ironically, would increase his ability to bribe, threaten, and cajole.

Kissinger staked his diplomatic efforts to bring American-led stability to the Middle East on Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, whose attempts to augment his own power through better relations with the United States after the Yom Kippur War defeat corresponded with Kissinger's pursuit of a world order built around strong and stable regional figures. Washington did not seek to dominate the Middle East directly, nor to build up Israel as a fortress nation isolated from its Arab neighbors. The 1973 war had made it clear to Kissinger that the Middle East needed a series of powerful states—Jewish and Arab—roughly balanced in military capabilities. The leaders of these states, recognizing that a military victory was not attainable, would have no better option than to seek cooperative relations. The United States therefore pushed for what Kissinger called "a diplomatic revolution" in the region, predicated upon "a triumph of the moderates."

Sadat described Kissinger as "the real face of the United States, the one I had always wanted to see." He and the American Secretary of State became, in Sadat's words, "friends." Both sought to assure Egyptian strength as a bulwark against Arab extremism and Soviet meddling. They envisioned a stable Middle East dominated by Egypt and Israel, cooperating to restrain belligerent forces and allied with the United States.

Assuming that Kissinger, the most prominent international Jewish diplomat, had unique leverage over Israel, Sadat assured the U.S. Secretary of State that he would manage the other Arab leaders; in return, he expected Washington to "put pressure" on Jerusalem. Egyptian foreign minister Ismail Fahmy brushed aside Kissinger's protestations about Israeli intransigence, exclaiming that Prime Minister Rabin "is your boy." Kissinger responded, "I need a few months to work on him."

Kissinger's Middle East "shuttle diplomacy" from capital to capital between 1969 and 1977 followed the model of the transatlantic networking he had developed in the International

Seminar at Harvard: He established himself as the closest and most effective link between various leaders and turned their various prejudices to his advantage. He could not, however, control Israeli leaders or the opinions of the American Jewish community. In frustration, he frequently complained about the opposition voiced by Israeli and American Jews. “They are,” he told Brent Scowcroft, “as obnoxious as the Vietnamese.”

For their part, Israeli and American Jews believed that Kissinger was over-compensating for his Jewish background by making excessive concessions to the Arabs—and in the process trading Israel’s security for his own international influence. Rabbi Daniel J. Silver of Cleveland accused Kissinger of trying too hard to show the Arabs that “being a Jew doesn’t count.” Others feared he was an appeaser, a “Chamberlain” seeking to conciliate enemies bent on destroying the Jewish people.

Despite their criticism of Kissinger, Jewish leaders still considered him part of their family. Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler, then president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now URJ) and chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, exemplified this sentiment when he declared: “We sense in [Kissinger’s] depths a commitment to Israel and the Jewish people. He may have been objective, but he was never detached.”

Kissinger appealed precisely to this sentiment and drew on this presumed bond during negotiations with Israeli leaders. Meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in September 1974, a particularly difficult moment when it appeared that Israel and Egypt might end their negotiations without agreement, Kissinger explained: “We read often of disagreements. One, there are no disagreements. Two, if there are, they’re family disagreements. We are working for a common strategy, one element of which is a strong Israel.”

As a result of Kissinger’s prodding, Rabin agreed to push forward with negotiations for territorial withdrawals from Egyptian-claimed lands as well as discussions with Jordan and Syria. Kissinger, in turn, pledged increased American support for Israel through an expanding list of military supplies and billions of dollars in foreign aid.



In playing the Jewish card, Kissinger had to guard against potential antisemitic accusations within his own government. In October 1973, for example, upon reviewing a list of State Department appointees to the United States Senate for confirmation and noticing a preponderance of Jewish names, he commented to David Abshire, his assistant Secretary of State: “I’ve got to reserve one position for a WASP on this. I know it takes ten in the Jewish religion for a prayer service, but I can’t have them all on the seventh floor.” He also worked to calm a jealous President Nixon, who suspected him of excessive loyalty to the Jewish state. When the Secretary of State, and not Nixon, received the 1973 Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the Vietnam negotiations, Nixon called him and thundered: “I would not put any [of the award money] in for Israel.” Taken aback, Kissinger responded: “Absolutely not. That would be out of the question. I never give to Israel.” “You should not,” Nixon repeated. “No. That is out of the question,” Kissinger confirmed.



By the time he stepped down as Secretary of State in January 1977, following Jimmy Carter’s



presidential inauguration, Kissinger had redrawn the map of the Middle East. Following a war that threatened to unleash years of armed conflict between the Arab states and Israel—and escalate to possible superpower intervention—Kissinger created a framework for peace among powerful governments in the region. He negotiated military disengagement near the Egyptian-Israeli border, the return of Israel-occupied territory on the Sinai Peninsula, and a commitment to basic cooperation between the two states, with the United States as trusted mediator.

Speaking “from the heart” to the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations upon his leaving office, Kissinger explained: “I thought it was important for the future of Israel and for the future of the Jewish people that the actions that the United States government took were not seen to be the result of a special, personal relationship...but the basic national interests of the United States, transcending the accident of who might be in office at any particular period....The support for a free and democratic Israel in the Middle East is a moral necessity of our period to be pursued by every administration, and with a claim to the support of all freedom-loving people all over the world....Throughout their history, Jews have been saying to themselves: ‘Next year in Jerusalem.’ I would like to think that sometime soon we can say this in its deepest sense—in an Israel that is secure, that is accepted, that is at peace.”



The geopolitical stability that prevented another war with Jordan, Egypt, and Syria masked deep domestic discontent in these and other Middle East nations. Kissinger’s beliefs—of peace in the Middle East deriving not from justice or democracy, but from state-centered stability, and of basic freedoms ensuing not from popular consensus but from strong leadership—had the effect of reinforcing dictatorships. Among those seeking freedom, his policies cast the U.S. as the preeminent sponsor of iron-fisted, authoritarian leaders such as Sadat, his successor Hosni Mubarak, the Shah of Iran, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, and Saddam Hussein. While cooperating with Washington, these dictators brutalized their own populations. Kissinger was aware of the democratic shortcomings of his policies, but took little heed of the anger, resentment, and desire for political change among ordinary Arab citizens. For him, statesmanship required tolerating brutality as a bulwark against even greater suffering that would result from a breakdown of law and order. He believed that Washington had to work closely with unsavory regimes to prevent the region from immolating itself in a fire of mass hatred. Moreover, increased democracy in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia would only heighten the chances of war with Israel. Antisemitism and other hatreds had popular appeal, and violence was a simple and attractive option for angry citizens. Was it not better to work with figures like Sadat, a dictator who also used his power to repress popular calls for war? Was it not better to acquiesce in Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza than to allow those lands to become a base for renewed attacks on the Jewish state? Sustainable, rational, political stability in the region had to be built before other far-reaching reforms and democratization could be pursued.



As the "Arab Spring" erupted in December 2010, the pillars of Kissinger’s Middle East policy began to crumble. An April 10, 2011 *Washington Post* essay Kissinger co-authored with former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker commented on the promise and the peril of the spreading

revolt: “The Arab Spring has the potential to become a great opportunity for the people of the region and the world. Over time, fostering democracy may provide an alternative to Islamic extremism; it may also, in the short term, empower some of its supporters. We need to develop a realistic concept of what is achievable and in what timeframe.” A “realistic concept,” according to the authors, requires “long-term stability in the Arabian/Persian Gulf” and “seeing that countries in the region do not become breeding grounds for Islamic extremists.”

Kissinger and Baker warned that rapid democratization without strong, authoritative leadership to guide the way is dangerous because it can create a cycle of violence and extremism as new groups seek to fill a power vacuum after the overthrow of a long-serving dictator. “We need some assurance,” Kissinger and Baker wrote, “that a succession would not create its own major problems; therefore, it is important to have a concept of order after regime change. The last thing the region needs is a series of failed states.”

Kissinger is correct to warn about the rise of more “failed states” in the Middle East, but his policies have contributed to this very outcome in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and perhaps Saudi Arabia as well. Focused on order and stability, Kissinger and his successors in Washington failed to push effectively for the reforms and increased political participation demanded by the repressed citizens of these regimes. Kissinger promised that democratization would accompany order, but in the Arab regimes that Washington bankrolled, it never did. American policies gave the dictators who resisted democracy more—not less—power.

For decades, American leaders had cultivated close ties with Arab rulers who served U.S. interests. The Saudi royal family, for example, kept oil flowing to the West without interruption since the late 1970s. All the while, Washington claimed it wanted democracy, freedom, openness, and prosperity for all in the region. On June 4, 2009, less than a year before the Arab Spring, President Obama proclaimed to the Muslim world from Cairo: “No matter where it takes hold, government of the people and by the people sets a single standard for all who hold power: you must maintain your power through consent, not coercion....” But in 2011, when the Saudi leadership sent military force into Bahrain to crush public demonstrations, and Washington did not object, the brutality reflected badly on the U.S.—the major supplier of the Saudi kingdom’s military equipment. From the perspective of many Arab residents in the Middle East, this was yet another example of the U.S. preaching democratic values while sponsoring abusive regimes in the region.

Nevertheless, foreign policy is about trade-offs, balance, and compromise. Even the most powerful country in the world cannot get everything it wants. Even the strongest and most idealistic nation cannot avoid relationships with unsavory leaders, especially in a complex region like the Middle East. Kissinger deserves credit for leading a peace process after the 1973 war that brought stability between Egypt and Israel, and increased American influence in the larger region. On the other hand, Kissinger may be faulted for propping up dictatorial regimes in countries with large restive populations. He is not a man for all seasons; the Arab Spring shows his season has passed.

One can only imagine what Kissinger might have said had he been called as a witness in the trial of ousted Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Would he have credited Mubarak as a great leader and hero who, in the tradition of Anwar Sadat, kept his nation at peace—or as a failed leader whose refusal to institute democratic change damaged his people and nation?

The court in Cairo will decide Mubarak's guilt or innocence. History's judgment of Kissinger will be more uncertain.

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