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ISRAELI STRIKE
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have seen a copy
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OP IMMED
DE RUEHTV #9138/01 1601845
O 091840Z JUN 81 ZFF-4
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7592

INFO WHITEHOUSE WASHDC

~~SECRET~~ SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 09138

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NODIS/NOFORN
FOR THE SECRETARY FROM AMBASSADOR LEWIS
E.O. 12065: RDS-1,3,4 6/9/01 (LEWIS, SAMUEL W.) OR-M
TAGS: MNUC, MILI, MOPS, IS, US, IZ
SUBJECT: ISRAELI STRIKE ON IRAQI NUCLEAR FACILITY:
- BACKGROUND FOR THE DECISION
REF: TEL AVIV 9063

1. (S - ENTIRE TEXT)

2. AS I REFLECTED ON THE EVENTS OF THE LAST 48 HOURS, IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT WITH THE CHANGE OF ADMINISTRATIONS IN WASHINGTON THERE MAY HAVE DEVELOPED INADVERTENTLY A GAP IN OUR INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY. THE TIMING OF THE ISRAELI STRIKE ENORMOUSLY COMPLICATES MANY ASPECTS OF AMERICAN POLICY IN THIS REGION AND I AM NOT FOR A MOMENT TRYING TO DEFEND IT. BUT AS YOU CONSIDER HOW TO DEAL WITH THE FALL OUT, AND WITH BEGIN HIMSELF, IN THE DAYS IMMEDIATELY AHEAD, YOU AND THE PRESIDENT SHOULD BE THOROUGHLY BRIEFED ON THE HISTORY OF OUR VERY SENSITIVE DIALOGUE WITH BEGIN DURING THE FINAL SIX MONTHS OF THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION. THIS WAS A VERY FRUSTRATING SERIES OF EXCHANGES FOR BEGIN, AND VERY OMINOUS FOR US. IT LEFT ME WITH NO DOUBT THAT BEFORE THE IRAQI REACTOR BECAME OPERATIONAL, THE ISRAELI FORCES WOULD DESTROY IT.

3. I WILL SUMMARIZE HERE THE EVOLUTION OF THE DIALOGUE, THEN PROVIDE CITATIONS TO RELEVANT, HIGHLY SENSITIVE MESSAGES WHICH SOMEONE CAN REVIEW FOR YOU. PERHAPS NONE OF THEM WERE EVER BROUGHT TO YOUR ATTENTION DURING OR AFTER THE TRANSITION. THE DIALOGUE LAPSED AFTER DECEMBER AND WAS NOT SUBSEQUENTLY PRESSED EITHER BY BEGIN OR BY US. THAT FACT MAY HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE UNFORTUNATE DECISION

SIT:
EOB: KEMP, GUHIN, RUBERMAN
WHSR COMMENTS:

DECLASSIFIED IN PART

96-12011 #238
dlb, NARA, Date 6/7/00

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TO STRIKE ON SUNDAY.

4. DURING JUNE AND JULY OF 1980, THERE WAS A SUDDEN DELUGE OF STORIES IN THE ISRAELI AND INTERNATIONAL PRESS FOCUSING ON DANGERS THE EVOLVING IRAQI NUCLEAR PROGRAM WOULD PRESENT FOR ISRAEL. BEGIN SPENT ABOUT TEN DAYS IN THE HOSPITAL IN EARLY JULY. HE ASKED ME TO SEE HIM AT HOME ON JULY 17 FOR OUR FIRST MEETING DURING HIS CONVALESCENCE. THE ENTIRE MEETING WAS DEVOTED TO HIS FEARS THAT IRAQ WOULD SOON POSSESS NUCLEAR WEAPONS. HE ASKED ME TO TRANSMIT AN EMOTIONAL PERSONAL MESSAGE TO PRESIDENT CARTER (TEL AVIV 13256--1980). IN ESSENCE THE APPEAL WAS THAT WE DO EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO STOP FURTHER ENRICHED URANIUM SHIPMENTS TO IRAQ BEFORE IT WAS "TOO LATE." I COMMENTED IN REPORTING THAT APPEAL: "UNLESS WE CAN SOMEHOW CHANGE THE COURSE OF FRENCH POLICY AND REASSURE THE ISRAELIS, WE MUST ANTICIPATE THAT THEY WILL FEEL COMPELLED IN THE NOT TOO DISTANT FUTURE TO TAKE SOME KIND OF UNILATERAL ACTION TO THWART THE IRAQI NUCLEAR PLANS WELL BEFORE THE IRAQIS ACTUALLY POSSESS A WEAPON. AND BY THE 'VERY NEAR FUTURE,' I MEAN WITHIN THE NEXT SIX MONTHS. . . WE COULD NOT AND SHOULD NOT RULE OUT ANY POSSIBILITIES, PARAMILITARY OR EVEN PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKES WITH CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS AGAINST THE IRAQI NUCLEAR FACILITIES

5. THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY AND STATE OFFICIALS LABORED TO PRODUCE A REASSURING RESPONSE WHICH I WAS FINALLY ABLE TO GIVE TO BEGIN ON AUGUST 22 (TEL AVIV 15691). IN THE MEANTIME WE HAD SOME PRIVATE EXCHANGES WITH THE FRENCH, AND AMBASSADOR EVRON WAS GIVEN A PARTIAL INTERIM REPLY BY THEN ASSISTANT SECRETARY SAUNDERS. BEGIN WAS NOT REASSURED; HE WAS "MOST SUSPICIOUS OF FRENCH MOTIVES." HE CONCLUDED THAT DISCUSSION BY SAYING: "ISRAEL DOES NOT INTEND TO RELY ON PROMISES." I ASSURED HIM WE WOULD BE MAKING STRONG DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS WITH BOTH THE FRENCH AND THE ITALIANS AND WOULD SHARE IN DETAIL WITH HIM OUR ASSESSMENTS OF THE PROGRESS OF THE IRAQI NUCLEAR PROGRAM, WHICH WAS DONE THROUGH INTELLIGENCE LIAISON CHANNELS IN THE SUBSEQUENT WEEKS. DURING LATE AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER BEGIN ASKED ME SEVERAL TIMES WHETHER WE HAD ANYTHING MORE TO TELL HIM, AND I COULD ONLY STALL.

6. ON SEPTEMBER 29, WE REPORTED THAT WE WERE PICKING UP A NUMBER OF THINLY VEILED STRAWS IN THE WIND SUGGESTING THAT ISRAEL WAS SORELY TEMPTED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE COVER PROVIDED BY THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR TO CARRY OUT AN AIR STRIKE AGAINST THE IRAQI NUCLEAR FACILITIES (TEL AVIV 17685).

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7593

INFO WHITEHOUSE WASHDC

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DAYS AND DESCRIBED HOW WE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE CARRIED OUT. IN THE EVENT, THERE WAS A STRIKE BY TWO F-4'S THE FOLLOWING DAY, SEPTEMBER 30. IT TURNED OUT TO BE AN IRANIAN OPERATION WHOSE ONLY "SUCCESS" WAS TO SCARE AWAY THE FRENCH AND ITALIAN TECHNICIANS AT THE FACILITY FOR SEVERAL MONTHS. WHEN I SAW BEGIN OCTOBER 5, HE VOLUNTEERED THAT IT WAS NOT ISRAEL WHICH HAD ATTACKED THE BAGHDAD FACILITY. HE THEN REMINDED US THAT HE HAD BEEN ASKING US TO DO EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO STOP FRENCH AND ITALIAN ASSISTANCE TO THE IRAQ PROGRAM (TEL AVIV 18108). IN RETROSPECT, I AM EVEN MORE CONVINCED THAT THE ISRAELIS HAD INDEED PLANNED A STRIKE BUT CALLED IT OFF WHEN THE IRANIANS GOT THERE FIRST. SINCE THE TECHNICIANS IMMEDIATELY LEFT THE SITE FOR A PROLONGED PERIOD, THEY PUT THEIR PLANS ON ICE UNTIL THE THREAT THEY PERCEIVED OF THE REACTOR'S BECOMING OPERATIONAL WAS AGAIN RENEWED AFTER THE RETURN OF TECHNICIANS EARLIER THIS YEAR.

7. DURING OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER THERE WERE EXCHANGES OF INTELLIGENCE BETWEEN OUR STAFFS. I CONTINUED TO REASSURE BEGIN THAT WE WERE DOING EVERYTHING POSSIBLE ON THE DIPLOMATIC TRACK WITH THE FRENCH AND WOULD GIVE HIM A FULL-SCALE BRIEFING AGAIN SOON. THE THEN-ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR OES, AMBASSADOR TOM PICKERING, WAS THE CHIEF ACTION OFFICER IN THE DEPARTMENT ON THIS PROBLEM. IT WAS HE WHO WAS CARRYING ON THE MAIN DISCUSSIONS WITH THE FRENCH. HE PLANNED TO VISIT ISRAEL IN LATE NOVEMBER TO BRIEF BEGIN IN DETAIL ON THE PROGRESS OF OUR EFFORTS. HIS TRIP WAS CANCELLED BUT I WAS EVENTUALLY AUTHORIZED BY DEPUTY SECRETARY CHRISTOPHER TO CARRY OUT THE BRIEFING FROM INSTRUCTIONS POUCHED TO ME BY PICKERING. THIS WAS AFTER THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, AND THERE WERE NOW GREAT RESERVATIONS IN THE WHITE HOUSE ABOUT CONTINUING TO KEEP BEGIN INFORMED ON THIS SUBJECT, FOR REASONS I COULD NOT DIVINE. I WAS INSTRUCTED TO MAKE

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THE PRESENTATION BUT TO REPORT ON THE MEETING ONLY BY LETTER TO TOM PICKERING.

E. I MET WITH BEGIN FINALLY DECEMBER 17 (AND REPORTED BY LETTER ON DECEMBER 24 IN DETAIL). AT THAT MEETING INTER ALIA, I WENT THROUGH THE TALKING POINTS PROVIDED ME WHICH INCLUDED SOME OF THE FOLLOWING:

A. THE UNITED STATES SHARES ISRAEL'S SERIOUS CONCERN ABOUT IRAQ'S NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM.

B. ALTHOUGH WE HAVE NO HARD EVIDENCE THAT IRAQ INTENDS TO BUILD NUCLEAR WEAPONS, THE PACE AND SCOPE OF THE PROGRAM
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. . . EXCEEDS IRAQ'S APPARENT NEEDS AND, WE BELIEVE, ARE INTENDED TO GIVE THAT COUNTRY'S GOVERNMENT THE OPTION OF DEVELOPING NUCLEAR EXPLOSIVES IN THE FUTURE.

C. THE IRAQI MILITARY HAS TAKEN CONTROL OF THE NUCLEAR SITE. THOSE FRENCH TECHNICIANS WHO REMAIN IN THE BAGHDAD AREA DO NOT HAVE ACCESS TO IT AT PRESENT, ALTHOUGH IT IS THEIR OPINION THAT THE HIGHLY ENRICHED URANIUM HAS NOT BEEN TAMPERED WITH.

D. WE ARE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE WIDESPREAD CONCERN ABOUT THE IRAQ-IRAN WAR TO PRESS ITALY AND FRANCE TO REASSESS THEIR NUCLEAR COOPERATION WITH IRAQ.

E. IT IS OUR STRONG BELIEF THAT PRECIPITATE ACTION AGAINST IRAQ'S NUCLEAR INSTALLATIONS WOULD BE A SEVERE SET BACK TO THE PROSPECTS FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE.

F. THE UNITED STATES IS UNDER NO ILLUSIONS ABOUT THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE DANGER THAT IRAQ'S POSSESSION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS WOULD POSE. WE WILL CONTINUE TO DEVOTE SIGNIFICANT EFFORT TO MONITORING IRAQI NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENTS AND WILL WELCOME VIEWS AND INFORMATION THAT YOU MAY WISH TO SHARE WITH US.

IN THAT CONVERSATION I ALSO NOTED FOR BEGIN THAT THE ASSESSMENTS OF THE SITUATION MADE BY OUR RESPECTIVE EXPERTS WERE IN BASIC AGREEMENT. THERE WAS NO DISAGREEMENT ABOUT WHERE IRAQ'S STATE OF THE ART WAS AT THAT TIME, OR ABOUT THE GRAVE DANGERS INFERENT IN ANY IRAQI ACQUISITION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS. THERE WERE SMALL DIFFERENCES IN OUR JUDGMENTS REGARDING THE DATE AFTER WHICH IRAQ COULD EXPLODE A NUCLEAR DEVICE. IN RESPONSE BEGIN THANKED US FOR WHAT WE WERE DOING IN PARIS AND ROME BUT MADE CLEAR THAT HE WAS STILL DEEPLY WORRIED THAT THE DIPLOMATIC TRACK WAS NOT SUCCEEDING. I CONCLUDED MY REPORT ON THIS MEETING WITH THE FOLLOWING WORDS: "THIS SESSION WILL SATISFY THE NEED HERE FOR A TIME. I SHOULD BE GIVEN THE INFORMATION AND AUTHORITY TO UPDATE BEGIN AT TWO-THREE MONTH INTERVALS IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN CREDIBILITY. GENERAL EITAN WILL CONTINUE TO PRESS BEGIN HARD; HE RAISED THE SUBJECT YESTERDAY WITH GENERAL JONES, ET

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TEL AVIV 0138
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CHARACTERIZING IT AS THE MOST SERIOUS THREAT ISRAEL FACES ANYWHERE. TO MAINTAIN ANY KIND OF INFLUENCE OVER THE VERY DANGEROUS POSSIBILITIES FOR DIRECT ISRAELI MILITARY PREVENTIVE MOVES, IT IS VITAL THAT WE CONTINUE TO CARRY ON A FRANK DIALOGUE WITH BEGIN OR HIS SUCCESSOR. AT SOME POINT, THE NEW ADMINISTRATION SHOULD BE CAREFULLY BRIEFED, WITH THIS POINT UNDERSCORED."

9. THAT WAS THE LAST OF SUCH EXCHANGES BETWEEN BEGIN AND ME. HE HAS NOT PRESSED FOR FURTHER MEETINGS ON THIS SUBJECT, AND WE HAVE NOT INITIATED THEM. OUR INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITIES HAVE CONTINUED TO SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRESS OF THE IRAQI NUCLEAR PROGRAM. SEVERAL MONTHS PASSED. THEN THE STRIKE OCCURRED AT A MOMENT WHEN IT COULD SCARCELY HAVE BEEN MORE DAMAGING TO OUR DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS IN THE REGION. BEGIN SAID PUBLICLY YESTERDAY THAT "THE DECISION TO ATTACK IRAQ'S NUCLEAR REACTOR WAS ADOPTED MANY MONTHS AGO. BUT THERE WERE HINDRANCES, AND THERE WERE ALSO VARIOUS CONSIDERATIONS AND A NUMBER OF DELAYS. WE THEN ARRIVED AT A SITUATION WHERE IT WAS CLEAR TO US THAT IF WE DID NOT ACT NOW WE WOULD MISS THE PROPITIOUS TIME." I HAVE NO DOUBT THAT THROUGHOUT THE MONTHS SINCE DECMEBER, GENERAL EITAN AND ARIK SHARON IN PARTICULAR HAVE CONTINUED TO PRESS BEGIN WITH THE ARGUMENTS THAT THE DIPLOMATIC EFFORT WAS INEFFECTUAL AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO ELIMINATE THE REACTOR WOULD BE LOST ONCE IT BECAME OPERATIONAL, BECAUSE OF THE DANGER OF RADIOACTIVE FALL OUT AFTER A STRIKE ON A "HOT REACTOR." THE PRECISE DECISION TO MAKE THE STRIKE THIS PAST WEEKEND COULD WELL HAVE REFLECTED THE OTHER CONSIDERATIONS WE OUTLINED SUNDAY NIGHT IN TEL AVIV 0063, ESPECIALLY THE DESIRE TO GIVE A CLEAR MESSAGE TO THE SYRIANS ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOT REMOVING THEIR MISSILES PEACEFULLY. ELECTORAL CONSIDERATIONS WERENOT TOTALLY ABSENT. HOWEVER,

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I UNDERSTAND [REDACTED] THAT WE SHARE THE ISRAELI ASSESSMENT THAT THE REACTOR WAS ESSENTIALLY READY TO GO OPERATIONAL AS SOON AS THE ADDITIONAL FUEL ELEMENTS WERE SHIPPED AND INSTALLED. THEREFORE, BEGIN'S ARGUMENT THAT THERE WAS ONLY A VERY NARROW WINDOW WHEN THE STRIKE COULD BE LAUNCHED HAS CREDIBILITY, ONCE YOU ACCEPT HIS PREMISE--THAT A NUCLEAR WEAPONS CAPABILITY IN IRAQ WOULD WITHIN ONE, TWO OR THREE YEARS PRESENT AN UNACCEPTABLE RISK TO THE STATE OF ISRAEL. AND THAT CERTAINLY HAS BEEN BEGIN'S CLEARLY ARTICULATED PREMISE FROM THE MOMENT OF OUR FIRST CONVERSATION LAST JULY.

10. RELEVANT MESSAGES IN THIS SERIES OF EXCHANGES ARE LISTED AS FOLLOWS:

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| - 1980 STATE 195154 | 1980 TEL AVIV 13265 |
| - 1980 STATE 196084 | 1980 TEL AVIV 13396 |
| - 1980 STATE 197260 | 1980 TEL AVIV 13553 |
| - 1980 STATE 202274 | 1980 TEL AVIV 15691 |
| - 1980 STATE 214371 | 1980 TEL AVIV 17685 |
| - 1980 STATE 215253 | 1980 TEL AVIV 18109 |
| - 1980 STATE 209889 | 1980 TEL AVIV 18504 |
| - 1980 STATE 220917 | 1980 TEL AVIV 22340 |
| - 1980 STATE 226934 | OFFICIAL INFORMAL LETTER DATED |
| - 1980 STATE 245782 | DECEMBER 24, 1980, TO ASSISTANT |
| - | SECRETARY PICKERING |

LEWIS
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