

Honoring Henry Kissinger at 100

written by David M. Weinberg | 03.10.2023

Even as he turns this weekend 100 years old Dr. Henry Kissinger is relevant and worth listening to. World leaders continue to consult with him, and he pumps out sage book after prescient opinion column. His record regarding Jews and Israel remains controversial, but I think that on balance Kissinger deserves respect.

Arriving in the US in 1938 as a fifteen-year-old Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, Kissinger rose to become the most consequential figure in US foreign policy of the past century, serving as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State to US presidents Nixon and Ford.

He crafted the policy of détente towards the Soviet Union, led diplomatic rapprochement with China, helped bring an end to the Vietnam war (for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize alongside Le Duc Tho of North Vietnam), and broached the beginnings of Arab-Israel peace after the Yom Kippur War.

His erudite books are staples for those who study statecraft, beginning with *A World Restored* (about the Congress of Vienna that ended the Napoleonic wars), through his three-volume memoir of government service, to the more recent books *Diplomacy*, *World Order*, *Crisis*, *On China*, and *Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy*.

All this has kept him at the forefront of international affairs discourse, and global leaders still beat a path to his New York office. In these interactions, Kissinger promotes a realpolitik strategic outlook.

For example, over the past year he has expressed concern about too-severe Western sanctions that could lead to the breakup of Russia - which would be a global security nightmare given its nuclear weapons. Kissinger has suggested that even though Russian President Vladimir Putin certainly does not deserve to be placated with ill-gotten territory, the war in Ukraine could best be ended by “a balance of dissatisfaction” whereby Russia retains Sevastopol and Ukraine joins NATO.

In Mideast matters, Kissinger was and remains a critic of President Obama’s nuclear deal with Iran. He worries about Tehran’s hegemonic advances and its

ballistic missile program. He is supportive of the Abraham Accords and believes that Washington should work harder to bring Saudi Arabia into the circle of peace with Israel. He is mindful, however, of raw Islamic antisemitism in Riyadh. (That antisemitism was well-evident when Kissinger managed ties with the Saudis in the 1970s.)

In an eight-hours of discussion with editors of *The Economist* this month, Kissinger sounded the alarm about Chinese and Russian forays into Asia, Europe, and the Middle East at the expense of American leadership, due to “a dangerous lack of strategic purpose in US foreign policy.” He also expressed concern that “the shared perception (by all sides in US politics) of American worth has been lost. In order to hold a strategic view, you need faith in your country.” Instead, he insinuated, Democratic/liberal education “dwells on America’s darkest moments.” (It is worth studying the 20,000-word *Economist* transcript.)

Most lately, Kissinger is seized with the human future in an age of artificial intelligence (generative AI), as advanced machines take over the decision-making processes associated with nuclear deterrence and warfare - ungoverned by ethical or philosophical norms. He is worried that AI is going to supercharge Sino-American rivalry too. “We are on the path to great power confrontation,” he warns.

TO SOME AMERICAN JEWS, mention of Kissinger elicits extreme scorn, mainly because of his opposition to the Jackson-Vanik amendment which was crucial in pressuring the Soviet Union to allow Jewish emigration. Kissinger advised Nixon that “the emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union is not an objective of American foreign policy.” He and Nixon did not like Congressional (or Jewish or other) interference in foreign policy, especially not in the administration’s centerpiece détente policy.

I think that Kissinger was wrong in de-emphasizing human rights as it pertained to the Soviet Union. He should have been supportive of the movement to free Soviet Jews, despite détente. Kissinger also erred in remaining silent as Nixon often let loose with notoriously antisemitic tirades. In these matters, alas, Kissinger never has expressed remorse.

To some Israelis, Dr. Kissinger is recalled as a foe because he supposedly held-up American supply to Israel of weapons during the first crucial week of the 1973

Yom Kippur War.

This is a false allegation. From my in-depth study of the historical and biographical literature relating to the Yom Kippur War, and from personal conversations with Dr. Kissinger in Israel in 2017 and in New York in 2022, I am convinced that he has been maligned in this regard.

(I will add that in conversation with me, Kissinger has been personally gracious, honest in tackling criticism, and open to hearing new perspectives.)

The delay in weapons supply to Israel on days two through six of the war cannot be attributed to Kissinger but rather then-Defense Secretary Schlesinger, along with unfriendly European leaders who refused stopover landing rights for planes carrying supplies for Israel.

The delay also was a function of the fact that nobody thought, including Israel, that the IDF truly needed a massive airlift of weapons. The assumption was that any heavy weapons sent to Israel would anyway arrive after the war had been quickly won (just like Israel swiftly had won the Six Day War).

When the situation worsened, Jerusalem finally did beseech Washington for significant weapons supply - on the seventh and eighth days of the war, Oct. 12-13. Kissinger then got Nixon to okay an immediate emergency airlift of arms in US military planes. Over the first full day of the airlift, the US shipped to Israel more weaponry (1,800 tons) than the USSR had sent to Egypt, Syria, and Iraq over the four previous days; and 3,000 tons more of equipment were to follow.

Furthermore, any fair assessment of Kissinger's conduct at that time must consider the fact that he shrewdly counseled Israel *against* agreeing to a ceasefire on the fifth day of the war, because at that time Israel had lost territory. Kissinger warned an exhausted and dispirited Prime Minister Golda Meir that she should agree to a ceasefire only when the IDF had the upper hand and had pushed back into enemy territory.

Of even greater import is that fact that the following week, on Saturday October 20, Kissinger defied a directive from Nixon to cut a deal with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev at Israel's expense.

Nixon had written to Brezhnev that he was ready to "get his client in line" (i.e.,

Israel), as Brezhnev should do with his Arab client states, and the two superpowers then should “determine” an Arab-Israeli settlement, on their own. Nixon then cabled Kissinger, who had just arrived in Moscow, instructing him to disregard “the intransigence of the Israelis,” and find a way to impose a permanent Middle East settlement.

Nixon: “I want you to know that I am prepared to pressure the Israelis to the extent required, regardless of the domestic political consequences” (meaning, the anger of American Jews). From Moscow Kissinger issued an unprecedented retort to President Nixon, refusing to do Nixon’s “unacceptable” bidding in this regard.

After the war, Prime Ministers Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin called Kissinger a true friend, even though Kissinger played hardball with Israel during the arduous “shuttle diplomacy” he undertook to reach armistice agreements between Israel and Egypt and Syria.

THE MAIN THING to understand about Kissinger’s actions in the 1970s are that he acted from an American superpower prism. He sensed a historic opportunity to peel Egypt away from the Soviet Union and push Moscow out of the Middle East, and then begin a process of moving Egypt towards a more normal relationship with Israel and the West.

Kissinger conceptualized this as a strategic goal enormously important to Israel’s security, which he cared about; as well as to America’s global position, which was his primary responsibility.

Kissinger thus discouraged Israel from obliterating the Third Egyptian Army in the Sinai and he sought Israeli territorial concessions that would pry the door open to the first-ever direct Arab-Israel negotiations. And while he was very tough with Israeli leaders, Kissinger never ran roughshod over Israel’s core interests. Nixon might have preferred to do so, but Kissinger was respectful of Israel.

Most importantly of all, Kissinger was prescient. Anwar Sadat’s bold visit to Jerusalem in 1977 and the ensuing Egypt-Israel peace treaty of 1979 never would have materialized if not for Kissinger’s triangulating diplomacy of 1973-75. In grand historical perspective, this determines that Kissinger acted wisely.

In sum, there is no denying that Kissinger is one of the great practitioners and theoreticians of foreign affairs in the modern age. For the enormous contributions

he has made to American diplomacy and Mideast security he merits best wishes on his 100th birthday. And I would be happy to see him visit Israel again this year.

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