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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>THE LIMITS OF DIPLOMACY'S EFFECTIVENESS ARE WHERE WE ARE ABLE TO EXPAND THEM</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<i>Interview with H.E. Amb. Dmytro Kuleba, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine</i>	
<b>DIPLOMACY IN A WORLD TO COME</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<i>Sergiy Korsunsky</i>	
<b>CONVENTIONAL DIPLOMACY VS. DIGITAL REALITY</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<i>Viktoriia Gulenko</i>	
<b>DIGITAL DIPLOMACY: HOW INTERNATIONAL ACTORS TRANSFORM THEIR FOREIGN POLICY ACTIVITY</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<i>Nataliya Pipchenko</i>	
<b>CYBER DIPLOMACY: AN INTANGIBLE REALITY OR A FAIT ACCOMPLI?</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<i>Olga Rusova</i>	
<b>TIME FOR A NEW DIPLOMACY?</b> .....	<b>34</b>
<i>Andriy Voynarovsky</i>	
<b>PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT IN COMMERCIAL DIPLOMACY</b> .....	<b>41</b>
<i>Piotr Hajdecki</i>	
<b>"SHUTTLE DIPLOMACY" IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT: RETROSPECT AND REALITIES</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<i>Iryna Zubarenko</i>	

# “SHUTTLE DIPLOMACY” IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT: RETROSPECT AND REALITIES

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*The primary purpose of the article is to demonstrate in retrospect the practical implementation of “shuttle diplomacy” in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Taking into consideration the fact that “shuttle diplomacy”, whose success falls to the first half of the 1970s, exerted the biggest influence on Egypt among all the conflicting parties, the article presents historical facts that can serve to study this phenomenon. The analysis of the US-Egyptian relations in the context of “shuttle diplomacy” is based on striving to crystallise both positive and negative experiences and shows why this model of interaction is limited.*

## Setting the Scene

The issue of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict remains relevant to this day. The territorial problems that were exacerbated by the Six-Day War in 1967 gave rise to a series of misunderstandings and, in some cases, a hostile relationship between the conflicting parties. By the beginning of the 1970s, it had become clear that a peaceful settlement between Israel and the Arabs would imply a search for new ways of interaction. The desire of Arab leaders to take revenge through the ensuing war had turned into a failure. It was that moment when the famous “shuttle diplomacy” of Henry Kissinger, the US national security adviser, was used to mitigate the long-standing conflict.

Some officials blame Kissinger for “shuttle diplomacy” by focusing on his personal sympathies and Washington’s official policy towards Israel.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, a number of factors that are presented in the article indicate his ability to keep balance skilfully in the triangle of ties among the United States, Israel, and Egypt. In this sense, the experience of Kissinger’s “shuttle diplomacy” may be useful for today’s cases due to the current geopolitical situation in which the bipolarity of the international relations system has lost its former importance.

“Shuttle diplomacy” is defined by Cambridge Dictionary as “discussions between two or more countries, in which someone travels between the different countries, talking to the governments involved, carrying

1 122. محمد حسنين هيكل، بحريف الغضب: قصة بداية ونهاية عصر أنور السادات، دار الشرف: القاهرة 1983، ص. 122.  
(M. Heikal, Autumn of Fury: The Story about the Beginning and the End of Sadat’s Epoch, Dar Ash-Sharaf: Cairo 1983, p. 122).

messages, and suggesting ways of dealing with problems".<sup>2</sup>

The very idea of "shuttle diplomacy" was put forward in the late 1960s by W. Michael Reisman, a professor at Yale Law School, who tried in his work *The Art of the Possible: Diplomatic Alternatives in the Middle East* to give it a certain historical and legal basis. By describing the multidimensionality of this region with its various economic systems, ideologies, faiths, and religious trends, Reisman found it impossible to elaborate a comprehensive approach to resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, in which all acute issues seemed to be reduced to the US-Soviet confrontation. "Relations between Israel and Egypt, Israel and Syria, Israel and Jordan and Palestinian people", Reisman wrote, "are a series of problems and each of them requires a special approach and a separate diplomatic strategy".<sup>3</sup> Under the special approach, he meant not a radical solution for the Middle East peace settlement but partial, separate agreements on certain issues. Reisman proposed to begin with the establishment of a so-called minimum order in the Middle East, the most important component of which, in his opinion, could be "a project for the Sinai Peninsula comprehensive development" under effective external control. He strongly recommended creating an international corporation titled the Sinai Development Trust whose fund would consist of the USA, the Middle East countries, and other interested parties' contributions. Egypt, in accordance with that idea, had to transfer the Suez Canal to the trust as a concession for a period of 50 years while retaining sovereignty over its territory.

As for practical implementation of "shuttle diplomacy" in the 1970s regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, the key point was to hold separate bilateral negotiations between US officials and representatives of the conflicting parties with a view to agreeing on the most effective course of action. The idea of "shuttle diplomacy" was presented to the Arabs almost as a reorientation of the US Middle East policy. Official Tel Aviv, for its part, did not cause concern about it, having contributed in fact to the growing intransigence of the Israeli position. It was not only a matter of ways how to implement "shuttle diplomacy", but also of who carried it out. President Richard Nixon entrusted maintaining contacts with the Israeli government to National Security Adviser Kissinger, who was also well known as a skilful defender of the Rockefellers' and some other influential Jewish families' interests.

It is worthwhile to mention that political leadership shift in Egypt in October 1970 became one of the most favourable factors for conducting "shuttle diplomacy". The idea of a rapprochement with the United States based on their ability to maintain contact with both parties of the Arab-Israeli conflict and to exert some influence on Tel Aviv pushed President Anwar Sadat to take radical steps. On 17 July 1972, he announced the termination of the mission of 15,000 Soviet military advisers and specialists in Egypt, who had been assisting in the reorganisation of the Egyptian armed forces since 1968. The reaction of American decision-makers to this event was rather ironic. One of the most outstanding Egyptian scholars, Mohamed Heikal, quoted

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2 Shuttle Diplomacy, "Cambridge Dictionary", Cambridge University Press 2019 [https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/shuttle-diplomacy access: 16 July 2019].

3 W.M. Reisman, *The Art of the Possible: Diplomatic Alternatives in the Middle East*, Princeton University Press: Princeton 1970, p. 20.

Kissinger: "If Sadat had informed us about such his intention earlier, we would have given him something in return. However, in politics just like in any other business, no one pays for what has already fallen into his pocket".<sup>4</sup>



***Shuttle diplomats and mediators relied on the psycho-emotional state of President Sadat, who tried, by all means, to prove to the USA that Egypt could play a role of their Middle Eastern ally on an equal footing with Israel***

Numerous contacts with the Americans, which were considerably intensified in 1972-1973 in the context of "shuttle diplomacy", demonstrated to the official Cairo that the USA had been adhering to the main six principles in the Middle East policy:

1. Elimination of the USSR from the Middle East settlement;
2. Not a comprehensive, but a partial settlement of the conflict on a bilateral basis between Israel and Egypt, Israel and Syria, Israel and Palestinians;
3. Gradual settlement of the conflict;
4. Explication to the Arabs that a return to the 1967 borders is hardly possible;
5. Emphasis mostly on the issue of refugees in the Palestinian problem; and
6. Constant coordination of the peace settlement in accordance with American interests in the Middle East.

At two secret meetings with Egyptian National Security Adviser Hafez Izmail, which took place in Paris (February and April 1973), Kissinger made it clear that "further concessions expected of Egypt must be both political and territorial; therefore the Egyptians must cede part of their sovereignty to ensure Israel's safety". He persistently imposed the psychology of the loser on the Egyptian side. Anwar Sadat cited this strategic line of Kissinger even in his autobiographical work *Soul-Searching Story of My Life*: "My advice to A. Sadat is to be a realist. We live in a pragmatic world; that is why we cannot build plans based on desires and illusions. The reality is that you, Arabs, were defeated, however, you demand and command as if you're winners. You have to make significant concessions, and then the United States will try to help you".<sup>5</sup>

Shuttle diplomats and mediators relied on the psycho-emotional state of President Sadat, who tried, by all means, to prove to the USA that Egypt could play a role of their Middle Eastern ally on an equal footing with Israel. Taking into account such an approach, it is clear why the Egyptian president informed pro-Western Arab leaders about preparations for a secret military operation and at the same time hid this information from Libya, which, according to Heikal, provided Egypt on the eve of the war with the most solid military and financial assistance of at least one billion US dollars.<sup>6</sup>

Also, it is not surprising that the US intelligence service knew about the

4 Heikal, n1, p. 124.

5 المكتبة المصري الحديث: القاهرة 1998، ص. 385 أنور السادات/البحث عن الذات: قصة حياتي ، A. Sadat, *Soul-Searching Story of My Life*, Al-Maktab al-Mysriy lil Bahs: Cairo 1998, p. 385.

6 M. Heikal, *The Road to Ramadan*, Ballantine Books: New York 1976, p. 197.

preparations for that operation already in May 1973 and immediately started to intensify its activities in Egypt in order to collect exclusive military information being mediated by diplomats from other US allies there. Kissinger himself admitted: "We were very satisfied with the work of our intelligence service. Due to its efforts, we knew everything that was going on in Egypt and there was not a single clue that we would not realize".<sup>7</sup>

The fourth Arab-Israeli war, which began on 6 October 1973 and ended 18 days later, clearly summarised the diligence of shuttle diplomacy implementation. Referring to the manoeuvres of "shuttle diplomacy", Harvard University professor Edward Sheehan admits that even during the preparation of the first agreement on the troops' separation on the Sinai Peninsula, Kissinger handed over to the Israeli government a secret memorandum of understanding. In accordance with it, the United States promised to make every effort to fully meet Israel's long-term weapons needs.<sup>8</sup> Tel Aviv also demanded from Kissinger that the given memorandum veto the Palestine Liberation Organisation's participation in the Geneva Peace Conference. Later, the Israeli journalist Matti Gollan stated: "The purpose of Kissinger's manoeuvres during the troops' separation was to avoid negotiations on the border demarcation and the final settlement".<sup>9</sup> Thus, the American side, having voted in the UN Security Council for Resolution 242, which provided that the Israeli troops must withdraw from the occupied Arab territories, at the same time pursued a behind-the-scenes policy

to circumvent the border issue, which was totally in Israel's interests.

The agreement of 18 January 1974 on the troops' separation, which obligated Egypt and Israel to refrain from military actions against each other, became a kind of Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy" triumph and, at the same time, instigated a sharp deterioration in the relations with the USSR. President Sadat took such a step without consulting the Soviet leadership notwithstanding that the UN Security Council Resolution 338 provided that negotiations on the Middle East peace settlement should be coordinated by all stakeholders under the corresponding control of the two superpowers.

The Egyptian president openly welcomed Kissinger's involvement in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict by comparing him to Albert Einstein and Winston Churchill and emphasising that his Americanism dominated over his being of Jewish origin. Sadat wrote that he totally trusted Kissinger and "it is very easy to negotiate with him because he is a very wise man who sees the problem in all its aspects".<sup>10</sup> It was obvious that he still sought to turn Egypt into a reliable ally of the United States in the Middle East on an equal footing with Israel.

From 10 to 15 February 1975, Kissinger toured the capitals of Egypt, Syria, and Israel, and later, from 8 to 22 March in the same year, he made a series of "shuttle diplomacy" trips between Aswan, Tel Aviv, and Damascus. The talks were focused on proposals to withdraw Israeli troops from

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7 H. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, Little Brown & Co: Boston-Toronto 1982, p. 378.

8 E. Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis and Kissinger: A Secret History of American Diplomacy in the Middle East*, Reader's Digest Press: New York 1976, p. 211.

9 M. Gollan, *Secret Conversations by Henry Kissinger: Step-by-step diplomacy in the Middle East*, Bantam Book, Inc.: New York 1976, p. 8.

10 Sadat, n6, p. 425.

the Mitla and Gidi mountain passes, as well as from the Abu Rudeis oil fields on the Sinai Peninsula. However, as both the Egyptian and Israeli sides were quite adamant in pursuing their own line on that issue, the US State Department decided to resort to a new manoeuvre.

On 22 March 1975, Kissinger stated that the USA should suspend attempts to help the parties of the Middle East conflict to reach a further peaceful settlement because their misunderstandings on a number of key issues had proved excessive. In response, Sadat hastened to reassure the Americans of his full loyalty. The meeting with President Ford, which took place on 1-2 June 1975 in the Austrian city of Salzburg, could serve as a proof. During the meeting, Sadat expressed the view that 99 per cent of Washington's Middle East interests are provided by the Arabs, and as for the Israelis, they oppose the US policy in the region every time when their interests run counter to American ones. "However, we do not call for Israel to be thrown into the sea and for the United States to renounce special relations with it," the Egyptian leader mentioned cautiously.<sup>11</sup> The main outcome of this meeting for the Egyptian side was Washington's intention not to allow stagnation in searching for effective methods of the Middle East conflict settlement and striving to continue to put its efforts as a mediator to establish peace between Egypt and Israel. In general, the Americans expressed satisfaction with Sadat's constructive approach to the issue of peace and his willingness to accept any form and method of settlement.

On 5 June 1975, the Suez Canal was opened for navigation after an eight-year break. Such a gesture of the Egyptian president gave a new impetus to the US "shuttle diplomacy"

between Cairo and Tel Aviv with the purpose to reach the next Egyptian-Israeli agreement on the Sinai. The second Egyptian-Israeli agreement on the troops' separation on the Sinai Peninsula was signed in Geneva on 4 September 1975. In accordance with the agreement, Israeli non-military ships were allowed to pass through the Suez Canal. Israel announced the return to Egypt a part of the occupied territories, including the Abu Rudeis oil fields.

On the eve of this agreement's signing, Washington issued a document titled "Assurance of the US Government to the Arab Republic of Egypt" (1 September 1975) that imposed on the US a responsibility for ensuring Israel's fulfilment of all obligations and reaffirmed their aid policy towards the economic development of Egypt. Despite the doubts of the Congress and some warnings of his colleagues from the State Department, Kissinger insisted on providing economic aid to Egypt in order to implement further the US plans regarding Sadat's regime. First of all, he offered the Egyptians help in rebuilding the Suez Canal and clearing it of mines and wrecks in the aftermath of the fourth Arab-Israeli war. Indeed, 85 million US dollars in aid was given to Egypt after the conclusion of the second Sinai agreement on the Egyptian and Israeli troops' separation.

In the same year, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched an assistance programme to the Arab Republic of Egypt. According to the statement of the USAID mission director in Egypt Donald S. Brown, "From the very beginning the aid program to Egypt has been directed to reap the full benefits, namely infrastructure development, technical and scientific expertise, general health, education, family planning, and improved agricultural

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 432.

productivity".<sup>12</sup> Among the first achievements of the programme were the restoration and reopening of the Suez Canal, one of the most important waterways for international business and the main centre for receiving foreign currency for the Egyptian economy. In addition, the programme provided for a significant expansion of Egypt's infrastructure in the fields of energy, telecommunications, port buildings, granaries, water supply. Thus, the second half of the 1970s marked the beginning of the strengthening of institutional and professional ties between the USA and Egypt, and it happened largely due to the skilful implementation of "shuttle diplomacy" by Henry Kissinger.

When Jimmy Carter headed the US administration in January 1977, Anwar Sadat was once again convinced that Washington would continue to play the role of a "first fiddle" in the Middle East peace settlement. On the eve of his presidency, Jimmy Carter promised to develop a more flexible and effective course of US Middle East policy. The starting point of this course was to conclude that certain measures of Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy" had exhausted themselves by the time. And such a conclusion was quite natural. American researchers Eric Brahm and Heidi Burgess state that high-profile official diplomats should not conduct "shuttle diplomacy", as its methods are working only in cases when the parties to the conflict are so angry and polarised that direct communication between them is hardly possible.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

The main mission of the "shuttle diplomacy" in the Middle East was that it was aimed both theoretically and practically at bilateral but

not comprehensive solutions of the peace settlement. Anwar Sadat, who positioned himself as a pro-Western leader, became the ideal guide for the implementation of Henry Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy" ideas for a partial solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In an attempt to take the place of the US ally on an equal footing with Israel, Sadat was ready to make impulsive decisions. The "shuttle diplomats", headed by Kissinger, first perceived the new Egyptian leader as a random and short-lived figure in the political arena; however, they soon realised that he could interact quite successfully based on his strivings to distance himself from the USSR and to draw closer to the United States.

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***the most significant results of "shuttle diplomacy" – the Camp David Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Treaty – became apparent after he had left office, it is undeniable that they became a merit of the US mediation***

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Kissinger did his best to help Egypt and Israel to eliminate the consequences of the fourth Arab-Israeli war. And although the most significant results of "shuttle diplomacy" – the Camp David Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Treaty – became apparent after he had left office, it is undeniable that they became a merit of the US mediation.

Nevertheless, the segmental approach in resolving the contradictions between the conflicting parties became a scourge to achieving a comprehensive peace in the region. Despite the fact that over time the

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12 D. S. Brown, *Egypt and the United States: Collaborators in Economic Development*, "The Middle East Journal", 35(1), p. 7.

13 E. Brahm, H. Burgess, *Shuttle Diplomacy*, "Beyond Intractability", November 2003 [[https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/shuttle\\_diplomacy](https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/shuttle_diplomacy), access 14 May 2020].

followers of Kissinger managed to bring Egypt and Jordan to a relative mutual understanding with Israel on most of the issues, the territorial problems between Israel and Syria, as well as between Israel and the Palestinians, remain unresolved to this day. Thus, “shuttle diplomacy” can be considered only an effective method in collaboration with the political regimes that are ready to interact completely following US mediation and to accept Washington’s decisions as an unconditional postulate in exchange for some concessions and financial assistance.

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