

First U.S. Weapons to Israel (1962)

“Israel's security is the keystone of American policy, both generally and in the Middle East. If you, therefore, think that from the point of view of your security the Hawk is necessary, we shall let you have it.”

Kennedy adviser Myer Feldman to Ben-Gurion,
August 19, 1962

What was the significance of the Kennedy administration's 1962 decision to supply Hawk missiles to Israel?

The Hawk sale marked the **first major U.S. arms transfer to Israel**, breaking a de facto embargo on advanced weapons and inaugurating a new phase in U.S.–Israel ties. Until 1962, Washington tried to **avoid fueling an arms race**, leaving Israel to European suppliers while balancing Arab relations. Approving the **Hawk (MIM-23) surface-to-air missile**—a clearly **defensive** system—let President **John F. Kennedy** signal support without overtly endorsing offense. It also established channels for training, logistics, and policy coordination. In practice, the deal **normalized direct U.S. military supply**, set precedents for future sales, and laid groundwork for the later strategic partnership.

What were Israel's primary motivations for requesting the Hawk missile system from the U.S.?

Israel sought Hawks for **security and symbolism**. Militarily, **Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt's president)** was acquiring **Soviet bombers and rockets**; Israel lacked modern air defenses. The mobile, medium-range Hawk promised coverage against **low-altitude raids** on strategic sites—especially **Dimona**. Diplomatically, **David Ben-Gurion (Prime Minister)** and **Shimon Peres (Deputy Defense Minister)** prized a U.S. sale as **de facto recognition** of a security partnership, breaking the American embargo and enhancing deterrence. A visible U.S. system would reassure the public, dissuade adversaries, and anchor Israel closer to Washington. Thus the request married operational needs with a bid for enduring **political alignment** with the United States.

What arguments did the U.S. State Department present against the Hawk sale, and what alternatives did it propose?

The **State Department (NEA bureau)** warned the sale would **expose classified technology**, inject new sophistication into the arms race, and force the U.S. to “**balance**” with parallel Arab sales—shattering a fragile regional posture and pushing Arabs toward the **USSR**. It feared a precedent for escalating Israeli demands. As alternatives, State urged: reaffirm the **1950 Tripartite Declaration**; resume **Sixth Fleet** port calls; allow non-sophisticated U.S. purchases; expand **economic aid**; and **delay two years**, pending changes (e.g., Soviet SAMs in Arab states, progress on the Jordan waters dispute). The emphasis was preserving maneuver space and avoiding a visible tilt.

How did the Cold War context and Soviet actions influence the decision?

By 1961–62 the USSR was supplying **Egypt (UAR)** and **Iraq** with long-range bombers and **SAMs (e.g., SA-2)**, while **Nasser** tightened defense ties to Moscow. **John F. Kennedy** (President) faced pressure to **counterbalance** without igniting war. Framing the **Hawk** as **defensive** let Washington claim it was **responding** to an existing Soviet-driven escalation rather than initiating one. Officials argued that limited SAMs would check offensive capabilities, **reduce Israeli incentives for preemption**, and steady deterrence. Positioning the sale as a **Cold War stabilizer**—not favoritism—aimed to blunt Arab backlash, sustain Western credibility, and deny Moscow a monopoly on modern air-defense provisioning in the region.

What role did domestic political considerations and Israeli lobbying play in approval?

Israeli lobbying was **quiet and targeted**—notably **Shimon Peres** and **Avraham Harman (Ambassador)**—while **Myer Feldman (White House liaison)** amplified pro-Israel views. With **1962 midterms** looming, the administration knew a defensive sale would **please key constituencies** and elicit bipartisan support on Capitol Hill. Kennedy denied electoral motives, but **domestic goodwill** clearly **reinforced** Cold War logic. The White House also weighed Congress's receptivity to a defensive, limited package versus broader arms restraint. Net effect: politics **smoothed** a decision primarily justified by strategy; after announcement, favorable public and congressional reaction confirmed that the move carried **low domestic cost** and tangible diplomatic benefit.

What core strategic rationales ultimately convinced President Kennedy to approve the Hawk sale?

Four rationales converged. **Stability**: Hawks would “**strengthen the weak link**” in Israel’s defenses, lessening pressure for **preemptive strikes**. **Counter-Soviet**: with **SA-2s** and bombers flowing to Arab states, a defensive counter kept parity without introducing new offense. **Confidence/Influence**: as **McGeorge Bundy (National Security Adviser)** noted, the sale would **renew Israel’s confidence** in U.S. friendship, sustaining American leverage on broader issues. **Leverage on Dimona and refugees**: informally, Washington tied the deal to **biannual inspections at Dimona** and restraint on **nuclear weapons**, and to cooperation on the **Johnson Plan**—using the Hawk as **bargaining capital** for nonproliferation and diplomacy.

How did the Kennedy administration manage Arab fallout from the Hawk sale?

Washington **packaged** the deal as **limited, defensive, and case-specific**. Briefings stressed the Hawk’s **short-range SAM** role against low-altitude attack, not offense; the sale **did not alter U.S. policy**. Diplomats cited prior **Soviet buildups** to argue the U.S. was **reacting**, not escalating, and reiterated concern about proliferation. To ease optics, officials said comparable **Arab requests** would receive “careful consideration.” **Gamal Abdel Nasser** protested, and Moscow exploited the narrative, but the focus on defense muted ruptures: no Arab state **broke relations**, and most governments **calibrated** responses, concluding the sale did not immediately threaten their force balances.

What long-term consequences did the Hawk decision have for U.S.–Israel relations and U.S. Middle East policy?

The Hawk sale **ended the embargo** in practice and opened a pipeline culminating in major U.S. supplies—**M48 Patton tanks, F-4 Phantom** aircraft, and more—transforming Washington into Israel’s **principal armorer**. Strategically, it marked the pivot from 1950s **equidistance** to an emerging **security partnership**. As **Nasser** gravitated further toward Moscow (e.g., over **Yemen**), the U.S. tilted correspondingly toward Israel. The episode also set a **process template**: the **White House** balancing Cold War strategy and domestic politics sometimes overrode **State Department** caution on regional balance. In retrospect, 1962 stands as the **starting point** of the modern U.S.–Israel military relationship and its policy logic.

Timeline

- **1950s:** U.S. **arms restraint** toward Israel/Arabs; **Tripartite Declaration (1950)** as minimal security pledge; **France** supplies Israel.
- **Early 1960s:** **Soviet arms** flow to Egypt/Iraq (e.g., TU-16, SA-2); **Kennedy reset** aims to balance Arabs and Israel; Israel seeks **HAWK SAMs** to protect Dimona and signal a U.S. partnership.
- **Early 1962:** **Peres/Harman** lobby Washington; domestic pressure grows; **Kennedy hesitates**; **Rusk/NEA** urge caution.
- **June 30, 1962:** **State/NEA review**: Israel faces “little actual danger”; weighs pros/cons; **recommends ~2-year delay**.
- **July 1962:** **Rusk to Kennedy** with options (arms limits, HAWK if control fails); probes **arms-limitation** with Egypt; floats **British Bloodhound** alternative.
- **Mid-1962:** **Arms-limitation stalls** as Nasser pursues Soviet weapons; **Bloodhound** option fades.
- **August 1962:** Soviet shipments mount; midterms loom; **Ben-Gurion letter** presses case; **Aug 14** WH meeting; **Feldman mission**: U.S. will sell **HAWKs**; links to **Johnson Plan** and cooperation.
- **Late August 1962:** **Formal approval**—sale on **U.S. credit**.
- **September 7, 1962:** **Circular 1008** to posts: HAWK is **purely defensive**, response to Soviet buildup; **late September** public confirmation; **Arab protests muted**, U.S. domestic praise.
- **October 1962:** **Cuban Missile Crisis** underscores logic of bolstering a friendly state’s air defenses.

- **Aftermath:** First major U.S. arms sale to Israel; U.S. tilts toward Israel; **Dimona** leverage (inspections/assurances) tied to sale; **first HAWK deliveries by early 1965.**



U.S.-supplied Hawk missiles on parade in Israel.



President Kennedy and Prime Minister Ben-Gurion.

**Memorandum of a Conversation,
Department of State, Washington**

April 11, 1960

SUBJECT: Department's Initial Reponse to Israel's Request for Arms Assistance

PARTICIPANTS: The Under Secretary (Douglas Dillon)¹; NEA—Mr. G. Lewis Jones²; NE—Mr. William Hamilton³; Ambassador Avraham Harman (Israel)⁴; Minister Yaacov Herzog⁵; Minister Aryeh Manor⁶

Under Secretary Dillon said he had invited Ambassador Harman to come in to inform him of our present thinking on Israel's arms request.... Mr. Dillon said that the Pentagon had produced a preliminary report. Unfortunately, missiles appeared to be unavailable in terms of the immediacy with which Israel had asserted its requirements. The Hawk system⁷ is set aside for our own forces whose requirements will absorb the supply for several years to come. A more serious bottleneck is the availability of facilities for training missile operators. If Israel were to receive Hawks immediately after our own requirements for them had been met in 1963 or 1964, another year would pass before training slots could be made available to Israel personnel....

Ambassador Harman expressed appreciation. Referring to the question of missiles, he recalled that Prime Minister Ben-Gurion⁸ had given this weapon the first order of priority and would be very much disappointed if it could not be obtained. Was it not possible, Ambassador Harman wanted to know, for the Department to consider some partial satisfaction of the Israel request within a reasonable period of time?

Mr. Dillon said that he would not suggest that any possibility was permanently or totally out of the question. Nevertheless a more positive response was not possible for a considerable period and one wondered as to the utility of speculating about possibilities thereafter. Changes in this field are rapid and unpredictable. He cited the example of the Bomarc⁹ on which we had placed a very high evaluation and expended a great deal of money, none of which altered the fact that we had been obliged to relegate it to the category of obsolete weapons.

Ambassador Harman referred to a recent message from Jerusalem containing additional intelligence from very sound sources to the effect that MiG-19¹⁰ deliveries to the UAR will begin perhaps as early as September and not later than the end of this year. Furthermore, he said, the UAR has now reached a state of competence permitting it to open jet conversion training schools in its own territory whereas heretofore it has had to rely on Soviet schools.

The Under Secretary recalled that Prime Minister Ben-Gurion had talked a great deal about the MiG-19 as a formidable advanced type. Noting that MiG-19's bomb-carrying capacity is limited,

Mr. Dillon said he assumed that the Israelis were not concerned with MiG-19's ability to destroy Israel urban centers but rather clearing the skies of the Israel fighters after which bombers would move in. Ambassador Harman agreed that this was the basis of Israel's worry about the MiG-19's.

Mr. Dillon said that knowing a little about the competence of the Israel Defense Forces, he was confident that Tel Aviv, for example, would not be destroyed in a day or two. He asked the Ambassador about the prospects for obtaining the French super-super Mystère, the Mirage¹¹. Ambassador Harman replied that it is his understanding the French are going ahead with production of this aircraft but that it would not be available for two or three years.

He adverted to the missile question again, asking if Mr. Dillon would agree to study a more modest program on a longer delivery schedule. Mr. Dillon replied that the Department is prepared to keep almost anything under review but he would not wish to stir up false Israel hopes for a different answer in the near future.... Mr. Dillon reiterated his earlier statement that training facilities represented a more serious bottleneck than the availability of missiles.

Ambassador Harman... wondered whether Nikes¹² might not be more readily available than Hawks. Mr. Dillon said he did not wish to give the impression that availability is our only problem with missiles. With the Nikes there is an additional consideration not present with the Hawk. This is the fact that the Nike is adaptable to ground-to-ground purposes. If the Arabs became aware of Israel's acquisition of the Nike they would assume Israel had in mind its use against Arab cities and other land targets....

Mr. Dillon concluded by saying he appreciated that the US decision regarding missiles would be a disappointment to the Israelis.

Ambassador Harman asked what consideration we had given to the economic aspects of Israel's request. The Under Secretary replied that grant assistance appeared to be out of the question. We had in mind extending credit under the Reimbursable Aid Agreement¹³ as with the anti-tank recoilless rifles which were sold to the Israelis in 1959. If Israel's economic straits worsened, we could consider other assistance, perhaps under PL 480¹⁴ or DLF¹⁵.... If it appeared in the future that Israel's projections were threatened by defense expenditures, the US might reconsider its attitude with respect to economic assistance, but, as the Israelis knew, we did not feel it was necessary at the moment.

Notes

1. **Under Secretary (Douglas Dillon):** U.S. Under Secretary of State (1959–61); later U.S. Treasury Secretary.
2. **G. Lewis Jones:** Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (NEA),

1959–61.

3. **William Hamilton:** Office of **Near Eastern Affairs (NE)**, Bureau of NEA.
4. **Ambassador Avraham Harman:** Israeli Ambassador to the U.S., 1959–68.
5. **Yaacov Herzog:** Senior Israeli diplomat (later Director-General, PM's Office; son of Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Herzog; brother of later Pres. Chaim Herzog).
6. **Aryeh Manor:** Minister at the Israeli Embassy, Washington.
7. **Hawk:** **MIM-23 Hawk** medium-range surface-to-air missile, then being fielded for U.S. air defense; early 1960s export was highly restricted.
8. **Ben-Gurion:** **David Ben-Gurion**, Israel's Prime Minister and Defense Minister, pressing a **priority** for modern air defense/air superiority capabilities.
9. **Bomarc:** U.S. **CIM-10 BOMARC** long-range antiaircraft missile; cited as a costly program whose **operational value** was later downgraded—an example of rapid obsolescence in missile systems.
10. **MiG-19 to UAR:** **MiG-19 (NATO “Farmer”)** supersonic fighter deliveries to the **United Arab Republic** (Egypt–Syria union, 1958–61) were anticipated/underway ca. 1959–60; Israeli anxiety focused on **air superiority** and **interception**.
11. **“Super-super Mystère, the Mirage”:** Israeli shorthand for next-generation **Dassault Mirage III** (French delta-wing interceptor) beyond the **Super Mystère B.2**; France was beginning production, with Israeli deliveries expected only **mid-1960s**.
12. **Nike vs. Hawk:** **Nike Ajax/Hercules (MIM-3/MIM-14)** were heavy SAMs fixed-site capable and seen as **ground-to-ground adaptable**, raising Arab concerns; **Hawk** was a mobile, purely SAM system but constrained by U.S. **training pipeline** and force priority.
13. **Reimbursable Aid Agreement:** U.S. **cash sales/credit terms** (Foreign Military Sales-type) used for limited items—e.g., Israel's purchase of **106mm recoilless rifles** (anti-tank) in **1959**—as opposed to **grant MAP aid**.
14. **PL 480:** U.S. **Food for Peace** concessional agricultural sales/aid (Public Law 480), sometimes used to **ease foreign exchange** constraints.
15. **DLF: Development Loan Fund** (U.S. development finance instrument, 1957–61) offering **long-term credits**; cited as possible **economic relief** if defense outlays strained Israel's balance-of-payments.

**Memorandum From the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Merchant)¹
to the Secretary of State²**

July 15, 1960.

As you know, I have been brooding over the problem of the Israeli request for Hawks.⁴ I have also checked again with Jim Douglas.³

The relevant facts at this end appear to be that the Hawk is a defensive weapon incapable of offensive use; it could be produced starting at the end of 1961 against Israeli contracts with at least individual training spaces concurrently available for Israeli personnel; and the total cost for six batteries with the missiles would run close to \$40 millions. It should be mentioned also that provision of the Hawk and training for Israelis would present a declassification problem.¹¹ It could also produce some problems with our NATO⁵ allies whose full needs would not be met from the NATO production line until after the Israelis had equipped themselves by purchases from the United States.

I have come to the conclusion that it would not be in our interest to agree at this time to make the Hawk available to the Israelis. The controlling arguments against doing so are, in my mind, the following:

1. The very size of the order and the sophistication of the weapon would, I think, be construed by the Israelis, our allies, and the Arab countries as an abandonment of our policy of avoiding the role of a major supplier of military equipment to Israel.⁹ It would almost certainly be interpreted by Nasser⁶ as a significant change in U.S. policy.
2. My judgment is that as a result of this interpretation Nasser would turn to the Soviet Union for increased shipments of weapons of the latest type and design. This would result not only in his moving politically closer to the USSR, but also in an increased economic dependence on the USSR since payment would presumably be in Egyptian exports. We could expect a corresponding deterioration in our own relations with the UAR.⁷
3. I cannot help but feel that Ben-Gurion's request,⁸ while openly based on a persuasive military rationale, has nevertheless concealed in it a desire to change our policy on supplying weapons and to worsen our relations with the UAR to Israel's benefit.

I would suggest, however, that... in turning down at this time the Hawk request on grounds of policy, it should nevertheless leave a little hope alive by saying something to the effect that this policy would be kept under constant review in light of changing circumstances.¹⁰

Notes

1. **Livingston T. Merchant** (1903–1976), a career diplomat, served as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (1959–1961) in the Eisenhower administration.
2. The **Secretary of State** in July 1960 was **Christian A. Herter** (1959–1961).
3. “**Jim Douglas**” is **James H. Douglas Jr.**, Deputy Secretary of Defense (1959–1961), previously U.S. Secretary of the Air Force.
4. **HAWK** (MIM-23, “Homing All the Way Killer”)—a medium-range, radar-guided **surface-to-air missile** for point and area air defense; first fielded by the U.S. Army in 1959.
5. “**NATO production line**” refers to U.S./allied procurement and licensed assembly geared to equip NATO air defenses, whose requirements were prioritized over third-party sales.
6. **Gamal Abdel Nasser**, President of Egypt and, in 1960, head of the **United Arab Republic**; since the **1955 Czech-Egyptian arms deal**, he had turned to the Soviet bloc for major weaponry.
7. **UAR** = **United Arab Republic**, the Egypt–Syria union (1958–1961); in U.S. usage often shorthand for Egypt.
8. **David Ben-Gurion**, Israel’s prime minister (and defense minister), personally pressed Washington for HAWK batteries to counter Egyptian/Syrian air threats.
9. **U.S. policy baseline** in the 1950s sought to avoid becoming Israel’s principal arms supplier, leaning on European sources (notably France) and aiming to limit an Arab–Israeli arms race.
10. **Subsequent shift**: this cautious stance was later revised when the Kennedy administration **approved HAWK sales to Israel in 1962**, widely regarded as the first major U.S. arms sale to Israel; deliveries followed later in the decade.
11. “**Declassification problem**”: exporting HAWK systems and training foreign crews entailed sharing sensitive radar, guidance, and IFF technologies that were then highly classified.

Memorandum of Conversation
SUBJECT: "Hawks" for Israel

Washington, May 8, 1961

PARTICIPANTS

William Bundy, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs¹

Admiral Grantham²

Ambassador-designate Walworth Barbour³

Colonel Stanley Harding⁴

NEA/NE—William L. Hamilton⁵

FYI.¹⁰ A briefing arranged with the above-named officials for Ambassador Barbour³ became largely a discussion of Israel's request for the "Hawk" missile⁶ and the pros and cons of making it available to Israel.

I could detect in Mr. Bundy¹ very little personal desire to deny the "Hawk"⁶ to the Israelis, whose professions of vulnerability to surprise air attack he seems to accept at face value. He remarked that if the political objection to their delivery to Israel were to be removed he would be prepared to review the classification problems, which he obviously does not regard as insuperable.⁶

Admiral Grantham² remarked that it might be difficult to deliver them to the Israelis and continue to decline to make them available to the Pakistanis and the Iranians, both of whom have requested the weapon. Mr. Bundy¹ replied that there are two differences: (1) the Israelis have the technical competence to master their use in very short order, which is not true of the Pakistanis and the Iranians; and (2) the Israel deal would be a sale, whereas our CENTO friends⁷ would expect them as gifts.

We discussed the cost of the missile, and I pointed out that the \$50 million estimated original cost would fall on the United States one way or another. Furthermore, we are averse in principle to large-scale arms transactions in the Middle East.⁸ I pointed out that our largest previous sale to Israel had a ceiling of \$1 million.⁸

Mr. Bundy¹ made much of the fact that the "Hawk"⁶ is a purely defensive weapon and he was not particularly impressed, as far as I could see, with our arguments that, regardless of its defensive character, it would mean the introduction of an advanced type of weapon technology that all other governments of the Middle East would want immediately in equivalent or more lethal form.

I left the meeting with the conviction that if the President, following his conversation with Ben-Gurion,⁹ asked a reassessment of the request for the “Hawk”,⁶ responsibility for resistance will rest completely with the Department and we shall receive no support from Defense for reasons of national security or classification.

End FYI.¹⁰

Notes

1. **William P. Bundy**—then Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ISA).
2. **Rear Adm. Elonzo B. Grantham, Jr.**—Regional Director for Near East, South Asia, and Africa in OSD/ISA.
3. **Walworth Barbour**—appointed U.S. Ambassador to Israel on **May 11, 1961**; presented credentials **June 12, 1961**.
4. **Col. Stanley Harding**—U.S. Army officer listed as a participant in this meeting; FRUS supplies no further biographical detail.
5. **William L. Hamilton (NEA/NE)**—Officer in Charge of Lebanon–Israel Affairs, Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs; he drafted this memorandum on **May 10, 1961**.
6. **HAWK (MIM-23) surface-to-air missile**—a mobile, medium-range air-defense system first fielded by the U.S. Army in 1959–60; export raised classification/technology-release concerns (radars, guidance/IFF).
7. “**CENTO friends**”—shorthand for U.S. partners **Pakistan** and **Iran** within the **Central Treaty Organization** (Turkey and the UK were the other members; the U.S. was an associated supporter, not a formal member).
8. **Policy baseline**—early Kennedy-era State Department sought to avoid creating a “special military relationship” with Israel; discussion of a possible **HAWK** sale was tied to broader regional diplomacy and arms-limitation efforts.
9. “**Following his conversation with Ben-Gurion**”—President Kennedy met Prime Minister **David Ben-Gurion** in New York (Waldorf-Astoria) on **May 30, 1961**.
10. “**FYI**”—an internal routing notation meaning **for your information**; FRUS treats it as a standard abbreviation in document headings.
11. **Subsequent development**—by **August 1962** Rusk recommended offering **HAWK** to Israel; an agreement in principle and later deliveries followed, marking the first major U.S. arms sale to Israel.

**Memorandum From the
Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Talbot)¹
to Secretary of State Rusk²**

June 7, 1962.

Israel and United States Policy

Following our meeting on June 1³ to discuss Israel's security situation we have prepared a revision of the paper on the above subject in line with your comments on the previous version. Principal changes are as follows:

1. Arguments from the US foreign policy point of view in favor of a special national security arrangement with Israel and in favor of supplying the Hawk⁴ to Israel have been added. They are few.
2. We prefer that decision on the sale of the Hawk⁴ to Israel be deferred for about two years, until after the issue of Israel's large-scale withdrawal of water from Lake Tiberias⁵ has been dealt with. We consider it wise, if possible, to deal with the Arabs on only one major issue at a time. However, we leave the door open against the contingency of earlier UAR¹³/or Syrian acquisition of ground-to-air missiles¹⁴.

ISRAEL AND UNITED STATES POLICY

A. Our Posture toward Israel.

Within the limits... dictated by the necessity for a reasonably friendly relationship with most of the Arab states, in order to protect our interest in the Near East, we:

- (1) seek to maintain cordial and close relations with Israel;
- (2) contribute heavily in money or money equivalents to enable Israel to meet its security and growth (including immigration) objectives without directly implicating the United States on the sensitive aspects;
- (3) frequently reassure Israel that it has in effect an unwritten but effective security guarantee from the US, that the Arabs understand this, and that Israel is thus in a position to conduct a policy of restraint;⁸
- (4) encourage other friendly states to assist Israel in meeting its military needs;
- (5) encourage Israel to expand its unilateral efforts to earn wider friendship and economic benefits in the community of nations; including an Israel relationship with the Common Market and the OECD;⁹
- (6) support those UN instrumentalities in the Near East which contribute to maintenance of a peaceful condition, and demonstrate support for certain UN resolutions of importance to the

world community;⁷

(7) permit Israel to buy, and provide credit for, a wide range of unclassified military equipment and supplies requiring export licenses;

(8) avoid close military relationships and consultations as well as partnership with Israel in ventures outside of Israel; and

(9) undertake a wide range of cultural contacts and placement of many research contracts in Israel.

Each matter arising in our relationship with Israel is carefully weighed in terms of its effect on our policy of impartiality as between Israel and the Arabs and of its effect on Israel's security. Over a period of years we have come to learn what can be done on behalf of Israel without creating serious tensions with the Arabs.

B. Israel's Desires and Tactics.

During the first year or so of the Kennedy Administration, Israel appeared principally to watch developments, creating no major issues, but constantly probing relatively gently in such areas as a security guarantee, military equipment, military relationships, economic assistance, cooperation in technical assistance to third countries, and an Israel relationship with the Common Market and the OECD....

....We believe the recent visit of Israel's Deputy Minister of Defense, Shimon Peres,¹⁰ has brought into focus the true Israel objectives.... Mr. Peres' principal concerns seemed to be a) an arrangement for continuing military consultations between Israel and the US, b) bolstering of Israel's air defenses by acquisition of the Hawk missile system,⁴ and the Minister of the Israeli Embassy proposed in the context of Peres' visit a c) security guarantee by letter from President Kennedy to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion.¹¹

...Israel has pressed in past years for both the Hawk⁴ missile system and US-Israel military consultations, as well as for a security guarantee. It seems reasonable to assume that in this election year another "college try"¹² will be made by Israel and its supporters here and that a serious effort will be made to show that Israel faces a situation of unusual peril in the next two to three years.

C. Israel's Security Problem.

.... We continue to believe there are a number of political and psychological factors which will indefinitely deter the Arabs, principally the UAR¹³ and Syria, from undertaking major aggression against Israel, whether by ground attack, by air attack, or by a combination of both:

(1) The Arabs have a deep fear of Israel and its military prowess.

(2) The Arabs fear, with reason, Western intervention on behalf of Israel.

(3) The consequences of defeat would be serious for those Arab leaders responsible for it.

(4) The UAR clearly has given high priority to domestic development for some years to come. The Egyptians have consistently proved capable of calculating coldly where their interests lie and are not controlled by emotions. They now appear to be considering the problem of Israel on a long-range rather than a short-range basis.

(5) A lesson learned by the Arabs in 1948 is that they cannot possibly cope with Israel if their forces are operating independently. Divisive forces in the Arab world are too deep to be overcome in a short time.

(6) The Arabs have come to have more confidence in the US as the US has continued to pursue a balanced policy and to show due regard for Arab interests. As time passes and as our policy is implemented consistently, the Arabs will have greater confidence in our will to prevent expansion by Israel.

(7) We plan to continue inspections of the Dimona reactor¹⁵ by qualified American scientists and, if possible, by "neutrals" as well, and to continue to provide the Arabs with assurances of its peaceful nature. This course of action should be sufficient to remove temptation for a surprise UAR or UAR-Syrian air raid on the reactor.

The foregoing factors must be given heavy weight in assessing Israel's security situation. In our opinion, Israel is in little actual danger of an Arab assault now and is not likely to be in any real danger over the next few years. In NEA⁶ we consider this problem practically daily and are fully alert to all its aspects.

D. The Rationale for Our Policy toward Israel.

.... We believe that in seeking continuing military consultations with the US and in proposing periodically a US security guarantee, Israel seeks not only reassurance for its own people, but also a clear demonstration to the Arabs that the US is, in effect, allied with Israel. In requesting the US to supply the Hawk⁴ missile system Israel seeks to eliminate any vulnerability it may feel to attack by manned aircraft and thus assure the security of Israel against the Arabs until such time as offensive missile systems may be introduced into the Near East.

(1) Arguments for and against a Special National Security Arrangement with Israel.

a. For

- i. From the foreign policy standpoint, there are no advantages.
- ii. From a domestic point of view, the American supporters of Israel would be pleased and would be less critical of our policy.

b. Against

- i. Would constitute a direct challenge to the Arabs by the US, destroy growing Arab confidence in our impartiality, and remove the protective covering of the UN behind which we deal with most Palestine issues.
- ii. Could not be counterbalanced by creation of a corresponding relationship with the Arabs.

- iii. Would render the US responsible in Arab eyes for every Israeli military venture.
- iv. Would encourage the more fanatical Arabs to seek a similar relationship with the Soviet Union and would hand the Soviets a very useful propaganda weapon.
- v. Would be the only US security arrangement with another country not directed against the Sino-Soviet bloc, and would cause us further problems with Pakistan in refusing to take Pakistan's side in the Kashmir dispute.¹⁶
- vi. Would lead to increasing Israeli demands for sophisticated weapons.
- vii. Would put greater pressure on Arab leaders well-disposed toward the US.
- viii. Would be unnecessary to maintain Israel's security.
- ix. Would pose security problems for DOD.

(2) Arguments for and against Supplying the Hawk to Israel.

a. For

- i. From the US foreign policy standpoint, possession of the Hawk⁴ would strengthen the weak link in Israel's defenses and thereby reduce any temptation Israel may have to take preemptive offensive action.
- ii. From the domestic standpoint, American supporters of Israel would be pleased and would be less critical of US policy.

b. Against

- i. Sale of the Hawk⁴ would jeopardize the security of its classified elements.
- ii. Although the Hawk⁴ is a defensive weapon only, its sale to Israel now would pin on the US responsibility for adding a new element of sophistication to weaponry in the Near East and would contribute to heightening of the arms race and the economic burdens attendant thereon. (At such time as the UAR and/or Syria obtains such missiles this factor will cease being a serious one.)
- iii. In the interest of impartiality the US would have to consider whether to offer the Hawk⁴ to Israel's Arab neighbors, whose ability to handle it is doubtful. Spreading such weapons around the Near East might place civil aviation in some jeopardy.
- iv. The door would be opened to further requests by sophisticated equipment such as air-to-air missiles, also allegedly defensive. We doubt that Israel would rest satisfied with having gotten the Hawk. Rather, it would set a new objective and would not have achieved appeasement or surcease of pressure by Israel.

E. How We Propose to Deal with Israel.

(1) We consider it important not to give in to Israeli and domestic pressures for a special relationship in national security matters. To undertake, in effect, a military alliance with Israel would destroy the delicate balance we seek to maintain in our Near Eastern relations.

(2) We believe a decision on sale of the Hawk⁴ missile to Israel should be delayed for approximately two years,¹⁷ or, if earlier, until

- a) Ground-to-air missiles have been introduced into the area by the Soviets,¹⁴ in which case sale of the Hawk⁴ to Israel would be more defensible. Should at any time a decision to sell Israel the Hawk⁴ be taken or become likely, we urge that NEA be allowed time to discuss the matter with the UAR¹³ and perhaps Syria with a view to reducing reaction to our decision before it becomes public knowledge.
- b) In the spring of 1964 Israel presumably will undertake large-scale withdrawal of water from Lake Tiberias.⁵ Since this is a matter of importance to the Arabs, we prefer to deal with it without the complications that would ensue from the early provision of the Hawk⁴ to Israel.
- c) Israel's Chief of Staff has stated that Israel is not afraid of the Arabs through 1966 and that the Arabs would be no real threat to Israel's existence up to 1970. If in 1964 Israel continues to have the same problems, i.e., defense against low-flying aircraft, it might prove useful in the next election year¹⁸ to have the Hawk⁴ available for discussion.
- d) We expect to be able to carry out further inspections of the Dimona reactor¹⁵ and thus to be able to continue to reassure the Arabs. This should serve to remove an Arab fear which might tempt the Arabs otherwise to attempt a surprise air attack on the reactor....

Our positions will not be fully satisfactory to Israel and its American supporters, but we believe them to be defensible and that they should be maintained as the most suitable to our own national security interests while adequately protecting Israel's security for a further period....

Notes

1. **Phillips Talbot**—Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (NEA), 1961–1965.
2. **Dean Rusk**—U.S. Secretary of State, 1961–1969.
3. **“June 1” meeting**—an internal State Department policy review on Israel's security and U.S. posture, immediately preceding this memorandum.
4. **HAWK (MIM-23)**—U.S. medium-range, radar-guided surface-to-air missile; export raised sensitive release issues (fire-control radar, guidance, IFF) despite its purely defensive role.
5. **Lake Tiberias (Sea of Galilee) / National Water Carrier**—Israel's plan to begin major withdrawals in 1964; Arab states viewed this as threatening Jordan River flows and later pursued diversion schemes, making water a focal Arab–Israeli dispute.
6. NEA—the State Department's **Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs**, which staffed and coordinated U.S. policy on the Arab–Israeli arena in this period.
7. **UN “instrumentalities”**—primarily **UNTSO** (truce supervision), **UNRWA** (refugee relief), and, when applicable, **UNEF** (peacekeeping in Sinai/Gaza, 1957–1967).

8. **“Unwritten...security guarantee”**—a standing pattern of U.S. assurances and deterrent signals to Israel short of a treaty alliance.
9. **Common Market / OECD**—Israel sought trade and institutional links with the **EEC** (“Common Market”) and with the **OECD**; exploratory efforts were active in the early 1960s.
10. **Shimon Peres**—Israel’s Deputy Minister of Defense (1959–1965); a chief architect of Israel’s procurement strategy, who visited Washington in 1962 to advocate for **HAWK** and closer consultations.
11. **Proposed presidential letter**—Israeli officials sought a formal **letter of assurance** from President Kennedy to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion; Washington preferred informal assurances and resisted a treaty-like commitment.
12. **“College try”**—American idiom meaning a fresh, determined effort.
13. **UAR**—the **United Arab Republic**: Egypt and Syria’s union (1958–1961). After Syria’s secession (1961), Egypt continued using the name “UAR” through the 1960s.
14. **Soviet SAMs**—the USSR began supplying **SA-2 “Guideline”** surface-to-air missiles to Egypt in the early 1960s; Syria followed later, with large-scale regional deployment only maturing later in the decade.
15. **Dimona**—Israel’s nuclear reactor complex in the Negev near Beersheba, built with French assistance. The U.S. pursued periodic visits by American scientists (not full IAEA safeguards) to reassure Arab governments of its “peaceful” character.
16. **Pakistan/Kashmir complication**—A special U.S.–Israel security arrangement would have undermined U.S. neutrality on **Kashmir**, awkward given U.S. ties to **Pakistan** through SEATO/CENTO.
17. **Outcome**—Despite this two-year deferral preference, by **August 1962** Secretary Rusk recommended, and the Administration approved in principle, offering **HAWK** to Israel—marking the first major U.S. arms sale to Israel.
18. **“Election year”**—a reference to the **1964** U.S. presidential election cycle, a factor in timing sensitive policy moves.

SUBJECT: UNITED STATES POLICY TOWARD ISRAEL

Washington, August 7, 1962.¹

The Department is proceeding with Israel as follows:

1. **Military Relationship Sought by Israel.** We shall avoid establishing any type of special military relationship² with Israel. To create what would in effect be a military alliance with Israel would destroy the delicate balance we have so carefully maintained in our Near Eastern relations and would bring insufficient compensatory advantages....

Decisions by the President Are Requested on the Following:

A. Sale of Hawk Missile to Israel. Provision of the Hawk³ would enable Israel to reduce considerably its vulnerability to surprise air attack by low-flying aircraft.⁴ Greater confidence in its defenses would permit Israel the better to resist any temptation to engage in preemptive attack against the UAR air strike capability. (Conversely, significant reduction of Israel's vulnerability would remove one deterrent to Israeli preemptive attack.)⁵ Principal factors operating against sale of the Hawk are: a) existence of effective deterrents to attack by the UAR and of UAR vulnerabilities and limitations, and absence of conditions requiring or favorable to attack by the UAR; b) problems of production and training schedules, and reactions from allies and friends;⁶ and c) a strong preference first to seek Nasser's reaction to a proposal for an arms limitation arrangement....⁷

However, since Israel has a military requirement for the Hawk, since the Hawk is a defensive weapon only and since United States intelligence clearly indicates that the UAR is in the process of obtaining comparable missiles from the USSR,¹⁰ we recommend that if within the next two months there is no serious prospect of an arms limitation arrangement we offer the Hawk to Israel after consultation with the British⁸ and discussion with the UAR.⁹

Notes

1. This excerpt is from the **enclosure** to Secretary of State **Dean Rusk's** memorandum to President **John F. Kennedy**, "Review of United States Policy Toward Israel," dated **August 7, 1962** (FRUS 1961–63, vol. XVIII, doc. 14).
2. "Special military relationship" refers to the Israeli push for alliance-like ties—regularized military consultations and formal assurances—which State opposed; Rusk instead contemplated reaffirming parts of the **1950 Tripartite Declaration** as a non-alliance assurance.
3. **HAWK (MIM-23)**: a mobile, medium-range, radar-guided **surface-to-air missile** fielded by the U.S. Army in 1959–60; export raised sensitive technology-release issues (fire-control radars,

guidance/IFF).

4. “Low-flying aircraft” captures the perceived Egyptian tactic to evade radar; **HAWK** was valued for its low/medium-altitude engagement envelope.
5. Washington’s calculus linked Israeli **preemption** to air-defense confidence—i.e., stronger defenses might lessen (or, conversely, remove disincentives to) a first strike. This logic is stated in the enclosure itself.
6. **Production/training constraints & allied reactions:** HAWK lines and training slots were committed to NATO customers; earlier (1960) State memoranda warned that diverting systems to Israel could shortchange **NATO** requirements.
7. **Arms-limitation arrangement:** State explored an informal Arab–Israeli arms restraint with **Nasser** in mid-1962; U.S. messages pressed Cairo to consider parallel limits, though Nasser signaled preference for global talks at **Geneva** over bilateral regional curbs.
8. “**Consultation with the British**” reflected courtesy to a principal partner in the 1950 Tripartite framework and a key regional stakeholder; London was formally notified when Washington’s position shifted on HAWK later in August 1962.
9. **UAR** here denotes **Egypt**, which retained the name “United Arab Republic” after Syria’s 1961 secession; State intended quiet **discussion with Cairo** to blunt adverse reaction.
10. “Comparable missiles from the USSR” refers to Soviet **SA-2 (S-75 “Guideline”)** surface-to-air missile deployments and training for Egypt; U.S. assessments in 1962–63 anticipated several SA-2 battalions becoming operational in Egypt during **1963**.
11. **Outcome:** Within weeks, Kennedy approved offering **HAWK** to Israel; senior envoy **Myer Feldman** informed Israeli leaders in late **August 1962**. The British were briefed; the UAR was later told of the decision.

**Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Talbot)¹
to the President's Deputy Special Counsel (Feldman)²**

SUBJECT: Considerations Relating to Use of a Presidential Emissary³ to Secure Israel's Cooperation in Implementation of the Johnson Proposals⁴

2. Our resolve on the quid pro quo is firm and remains firm. The deal would have to be (a) Hawks⁵, subject to progress on an Israel–UAR arms limitation⁶, (b) security guarantee—in the form of a specific, unilateral United States reaffirmation of paragraph 3 of the 1950 Tripartite Declaration⁷, (c) assurance of financial help in meeting Israel's contributions to refugee compensation and reintegration⁸, and (d) if absolutely essential, a secretly agreed ceiling on refugee repatriation⁹, in exchange for (a) Ben-Gurion's¹⁰ pledge of cooperation in Johnson's plan⁴, including establishment of procedures for prompt and equitable hearing of compensation claims submitted by returning refugees; and (b) assurances that Israel will drop the direct-negotiations resolution¹¹ this year.

Rationale: We judge Ben-Gurion¹⁰ to be increasingly confident that he will get the Hawk⁵ and perhaps even a security guarantee⁷ regardless of how he helps us at this time. Unless he is convinced we are not bluffing about withholding these if he does not cooperate on the Johnson Plan⁴, he will be the more likely to feel he can risk non-cooperation in, or sabotage of, the refugee plan. Ben-Gurion is a hard bargainer and can be dealt with successfully only on the basis of hard bargaining.

The great advantages, of course, of the Presidential emissary³ approach are: (1) from Israel's point of view (a) it affords a secret shot at the plan before it is ever made public, and (b) Israel gets some very important returns if it cooperates; (2) for the foregoing reasons we have a far better chance of gaining Israel's cooperation than would otherwise be the case. Ben-Gurion has made it clear he favors this kind of ultra-secret personal diplomacy¹² and would give much more weight to the words of a man close to the President; and (3) it is difficult to negotiate a complicated issue by letter.

Notes

1. **Phillips Talbot**—Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (1961–1965).
2. **Myer “Mike” Feldman**—Deputy Special Counsel to President Kennedy; frequently used as a back-channel envoy to Israel in 1962.
3. **“Presidential emissary”**—a trusted personal representative of the President sent for quiet, face-to-face negotiations, outside normal diplomatic channels.

4. **“Johnson Proposals”**—plans advanced in 1961–62 by **Joseph E. Johnson**, Special Representative of the U.N. **Palestine Conciliation Commission (PCC)**, to address the Palestinian refugee problem via limited, phased **repatriation, resettlement, and compensation**, administered by an international mechanism and insulated from direct Arab–Israeli bargaining.
5. **“Hawks”**—the U.S. **MIM-23 HAWK** surface-to-air missile system; Israel sought it to counter low-altitude air attack and as a political signal of U.S. support.
6. **Israel–UAR arms limitation**—a tentative U.S. idea in 1962 to probe **mutual restraint** in Arab–Israeli arms acquisitions, especially in air-defense missiles, with Cairo (the **UAR**) and Jerusalem.
7. **Tripartite Declaration (1950), paragraph 3**—a U.S.–U.K.–French pledge to oppose any violation of Near Eastern frontiers or armistice lines and to take action, within or outside the U.N., against aggression—short of a formal U.S.–Israel defense treaty.
8. **Refugee compensation/reintegration**—financial compensation for 1948 property losses and international support to help refugees either **reintegrate** where they reside or **resettle** elsewhere, a core element of the Johnson Plan.
9. **“Secret ceiling on repatriation”**—a confidential U.S.–Israeli understanding capping the **number** of refugees Israel would accept back, while allowing the plan to speak in terms of individual “choice.”
10. **David Ben-Gurion**—Prime Minister of Israel; favored discreet, high-level channels and leveraged U.S. domestic politics to improve Israel’s bargaining position.
11. **“Direct-negotiations resolution”**—Israel’s recurring push at the **U.N. General Assembly** for Arab–Israeli **direct talks**, opposed by Arab states and seen in Washington as complicating refugee diplomacy; the U.S. sought Israeli forbearance during the Johnson effort.
12. **“Ultra-secret personal diplomacy”**—Ben-Gurion’s preferred mode; in late August 1962 Feldman traveled quietly to Israel to discuss HAWK, refugees, and related understandings, exemplifying this channel.



Myer Feldman and President Kennedy

Myer Feldman Oral History Interview¹

Interviewer: John Stewart²

Date of Interview: July 29, 1967³

Place of Interview: Washington, D.C

STEWART: What about the sale of the Hawk missiles⁴ in 1962 which...

FELDMAN: That was a major matter. That was a really major matter.

STEWART: Do you recall when the discussions really started as to...

FELDMAN: Oh, I'd say the Israelis first asked for sophisticated missiles like the Hawk⁴ before Kennedy took office. They asked for them from Eisenhower. Soon after Kennedy took office they repeated the request and they were given the stock answer⁵ that the United States could not engage in the supply of arms to Israel or to any nation in the Middle East. If they gave it to Israel they'd have to give it to others, so they would not give any weapons, let alone an advanced design weapon like the Hawk⁴ or a weapons system like the Hawk, which was the most sophisticated missile in the world at that time, to Israel. That's about when I became involved, and that was in 1961.

I collected from the Department of Defense and from the State Department all of their answers to the requests of the Israeli government for weapons. And I took them into the President with a little memorandum – I think I still have it – in which I pointed out that we were committed to a balance of arms⁸. If we were committed to a balance of arms and if the Soviet Union was supplying Egypt with SAMMIES⁷ – that's Soviet Air missiles – then the balance didn't exist. It was way over on the side of the Egyptians. The United States could either supply the HAWK⁴, which was better than SAM, or they could look around and see if somebody else would supply an equivalent weapon. Kennedy was impressed by that and said, "Let's see whether there are any equivalent weapons."

So Komer⁶ and I both canvassed the Defense Department to see what they knew of the missiles that other nations had and came to the conclusion that there was no weapon in the world as good as the HAWK⁴. The French had one that was very unreliable, and the English didn't have any⁹. So the only thing, unless they got it from the Russians, the only thing that the Israelis could use was the Hawk⁴. And they had to have the Hawk....

I think this is one of the – I've always believed that this was one of the most important decisions reached by Kennedy during his entire time in office because it could have changed the whole course of the world. He said, "If we're going to give Israel the Hawks⁴" – and he said, "I'm inclined to think that we have to – let's see what we can get from the Israelis." And he said, "The

State Department's been asking a lot from the Israelis that they won't give us." They want to make sure that the Israelis don't make atomic weapons so we don't have the N country problem¹⁰. They want to make sure that they have the right to inspect the reactor at Dimona¹³. They want to make sure that the Israelis will settle the refugee problem (by taking back a large number of them). And they want the Israelis to give up rights of retaliation²² that they're always talking about whenever somebody goes across the border. So let's see what we can do about that."

And I said, "Well, you can't do this by cabling our ambassador there." He said, "No. Why don't you go over there and talk to them?" And that was one of the missions I made, a secret mission I made to Israel, in which I went over under some guise, one of many, and....²³

STEWART: This would have probably have been in the summer of '62?

FELDMAN: Yes, yes, just about then. And discussed with them – well, I said this, I said, "I'm not going to go over there and make a bargain with them because any self-respecting government is going to resent it. I will go over there and tell them they're going to get the Hawk⁴. And say, Now we're giving you the Hawk, something you just didn't ever expect you'd ever get from the United States government and this is going to make your security much, much better. But if you're going to get the Hawk we want you to cooperate with us in some ways." So he agreed that we could do it that way.

So I went over there and my first statement – I met with Ben-Gurion¹² who was the Prime Minister then and Golda Meir¹¹ who was foreign minister – and my first statement was just that. I said, "Now you're going to get the Hawks⁴. The President has decided that we'll give them to you." And of course they were ecstatic. They were to celebrate at that moment. It was the first time they ever heard it. And they really hadn't expected it. They didn't know what they were going to do.

I said, "Now, now that you've come down off the roof, let me tell you what we think you ought to do also." And I went through the various other things that they had said. Well, they were pretty good about Dimona and the atomic reactor. In fact they said that they would join the International Atomic Energy Agency¹³ which permits inspection by international groups providing the Egyptians didn't come to inspect the reactor. And they said they certainly would permit Americans to come in and inspect the reactor and that they weren't going to make any weapons-grade material at the moment so that we didn't have to be concerned about atomic weapons being made then.

On the refugee problem they were much more tougher. They said they couldn't see what solution there might be. They would take a limited number of refugees. And I think I went through this – already discussed the refugees. But they were really amenable to it. I thought that they gave up a

lot, and so did the State Department. I would report back my conversations – these meetings lasted over a period of three days – and I'd cable back to Washington the result of each meeting. And I would get cables back from State, who had an anti-Israel bias, and they said the meetings were going great. They were delighted with the results that were being obtained.

STEWART: Who in State had an anti-Israel bias?

FELDMAN: Oh, they all did, beginning with Phil Talbot [Phillips Talbot]¹⁸ who was the Assistant Secretary for the Middle East. But his wasn't so much an anti-Israel bias as he reflected the bias of people below him. Below him was a fellow named Crawford [William A. Crawford]¹⁷ whose reasoning was that the United States had nothing to gain – and Kennedy was too....

We used to discuss this – his reasoning was the United States had nothing to gain by being pro-Israel; they had everything to gain by being pro-Arab, so why not cultivate the Arabs? Israel can't give them any oil. Israel doesn't control any large territories so that it can't give them any communication or transportation at the crossroads of the world. Israel didn't have large populations. Israel had only one vote in international councils so it couldn't support the United States very much. While the Arabs could give them all that, so why should we....It was a very cold point of view and they had lots of papers that were based on this. They'd send papers to the White House all the time saying our policy ought to be shifted toward the Arabs because the Arabs could do so much for us. Morality apparently didn't play much of a part in their thinking. But anyhow they were pleased with the way the conversations went.

And then I came back and met with the President. The President said, "Well, we've told the Israeli government, now, before it gets out in the press let's see that those people who should know about it, know about it." And we decided that we would have two meetings in the White House. One meeting would be with congressmen and senators who were interested and the other meeting would be with leaders of the Jewish community who would be interested in this.

So I scheduled those two meetings in the White House. I met with them first, with the congressman and senators and with the leaders – I invited, oh, about fifty or sixty leaders of the Jewish community. We met in the Fish Room¹⁴. I made an introductory statement and then told them what I thought was the significance of the decision that I was going to convey. Phil Klutznick¹⁵ I remember was on one of the meetings. After I finished my presentation he said – I think properly he said, "Without this decision of the United States to give Hawks⁴ to Israel I think we would have been faced with war in the Middle East because of the preponderance of Arabs, their power and strength. And there would be no defense against the Arab planes." The Hawk⁴ was the only defense against the supersonic planes²⁰ that the Arabs had." So he was grateful. Then the President came in and spoke for maybe five minutes to the group in which he expressed his feelings about why this was essential and why the decision was in the best interest of the United States.... and I cautioned everybody there to keep it quiet. I said if I read this in the

newspapers I'd be very disappointed in my group of people.

The second meeting was held with maybe twenty, twenty-five congressmen and senators. It was called by **Manny Sellers**¹⁶, the dean of the New York delegation. I went through much the same ritual. At the end of the meeting the President came and again he made the same kind of statement and again this meeting was held in the Fish Room¹⁴ too.

And the conclusion of the meeting again they raised the question, "It's fine to know about this, but how do we take advantage of it? What do we tell our people in our newsletters and newspapers and so on?" I said I thought it was in the best interests of the United States and their constituents and everybody else not to tell anybody, that I was convinced the news would get out as soon as we started training. You see, in selling the Hawks⁴.... you had to have a lead time of about eighteen months¹⁹ as I remember. Now, during those eighteen months the news would get out; but let's let it leak out gradually, let's not have a big announcement. Selling Hawks⁴ is not just a matter of picking something off the shelf and giving it to them. The first thing you have to do is you have to get a battalion to come to the United States to be trained¹⁹ in the weapon and to learn how to, more than operate it, to maintain it is more important. And we planned on having the first Israeli cavalry²⁴ go to Fort Bliss¹⁹ for training in about a month.....

STEWART: What precisely did you hope to gain by letting the news leak out as opposed to making an announcement?

FELDMAN: Well, if you make an announcement you get a series of diatribes on all the Arab radio stations and in all the newspapers; they get up in the United Nations and make speeches about how the United States was giving Israel these advanced weapons. It would have been very uncomfortable for us.

And there are those in the Congress and in the country generally who just don't favor supporting Israel. I could name organization after organization – we'd get a lot of mail and we'd get a lot of opposition and we could just as well do without that. So if we didn't make the announcement and it just gradually leaked there wouldn't be this sudden, mass condemnation of that action.

I think we accomplished several purposes though. Number one, the good purpose that we wouldn't be subjected to these diatribes. Number two, everybody likes to feel that they're in on a secret, and if this group of leaders that came to the White House felt that this was really a secret they would feel privileged and for that reason they would have a warmer feeling about it and they would carry it out that way. And thirdly there was a long time between the time the decision was made and the time the first battery of weapons was sent. And we'd like to keep that as short as possible, between the time of public information and the time the weapons were sent because there again there are influences that would try to change the decision. For all those reasons we didn't want a lot of publicity.

STEWART: Well, I read someplace that Nasser was informed in advance. Now this probably was in advance of the actual delivery but after the...

FELDMAN: **Nasser** was not told about it....²¹ The secret was kept pretty well. I was surprised. I thought that in the following morning I'd see it in the New York Times, but it wasn't. And I went into the President's office about a week later and said, "I told you that my Jews could keep a secret." And he said, "That's right." It was kept quiet.

Notes

1. **Myer "Mike" Feldman** (1914–2007), Deputy Special Counsel to President Kennedy; key White House liaison on Arab–Israeli matters.
2. **John Stewart**, interviewer for the JFK Library's Oral History Program.
3. The interview is part of the **JFK Library Oral History** series; recorded 1967, reflecting Feldman's retrospective account.
4. **HAWK (MIM-23)**, a mobile, medium-range, radar-guided surface-to-air missile; Israel sought it to counter low-altitude air attack and as a political signal of U.S. support.
5. "**Stock answer**": the late-Eisenhower/early-Kennedy posture that the U.S. would avoid becoming a principal supplier of advanced arms in the Arab–Israeli arena.
6. **Robert W. "Bob" Komer**, NSC staffer ("Blowtorch Bob"), a central aide on Middle East issues who later ran Vietnam pacification.
7. "**SAMMIES**" = colloquial for **surface-to-air missiles (SAMs)**; Feldman's reference is to Soviet systems being deployed with Egypt.
8. "**Balance of arms**": the U.S. aim to prevent decisive shifts in the regional military balance, shaping decisions on major transfers.
9. **Non-U.S. alternatives**: France and Britain had SAM programs, but in 1961–62 either were immature, unsuitable, not comparable in role/mobility, or not on offer to Israel; Feldman presents them as non-viable options.
10. "**N-country problem**": contemporary shorthand for **nuclear proliferation**, i.e., more states acquiring nuclear weapons.
11. **Golda Meir**, Israel's foreign minister (1956–66), present at Feldman's meeting.
12. **David Ben-Gurion**, Israel's prime minister, who favored discreet, high-level channels with Washington.
13. **Dimona/IAEA**: Israel was an **IAEA** member; U.S. concern centered on obtaining periodic **U.S.**

scientist visits to Dimona (not full IAEA safeguards) to verify peaceful intent.

14. The **White House “Fish Room”**, a West Wing conference room later renamed the **Roosevelt Room** (1969); often used for off-the-record briefings.
15. **Philip M. Klutznick**, prominent American Jewish leader (later U.S. Secretary of Commerce), present at one of the White House briefings.
16. “**Manny Sellers**” almost certainly refers to **Emanuel “Manny” Celler**, longtime New York congressman and dean of the delegation; the transcript likely misrenders the surname.
17. **William A. Crawford**, senior NEA official at State; a leading internal skeptic of deepening U.S.–Israel military ties.
18. **Phillips Talbot**, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (1961–65).
19. **Training/lead time**: HAWK sales entailed **U.S. training at Fort Bliss (El Paso, Texas)** for Israeli air-defense units and lengthy production/installation timelines, commonly on the order of a year or more.
20. “**Supersonic planes**”: Arab air forces were introducing **MiG-19/-21** fighters in this period, heightening Israeli air-defense anxieties.
21. **Informing Nasser?** Feldman recalls **Cairo was not told**; other U.S. documents from August 1962 indicate an intent to consult the **UAR** discreetly before public disclosure—an example of memoir testimony diverging from paperwork.
22. “**Rights of retaliation**”: a reference to Israel’s doctrine of **reprisal raids** against cross-border attacks, which Washington sought to restrain.
23. **Timing of the mission**: Feldman’s “ultra-secret” trip to Israel occurred in **mid-1962**, aligning with the internal decision to offer HAWK in principle.
24. “**First Israeli cavalry**”: Feldman likely means an **IDF air-defense artillery battalion**; “cavalry” is almost certainly a slip or transcription error.

Robert W. Komer Oral History Interview¹

Interviewer: Dennis J. O'Brien²

Date of Interview: December 22, 1969

Place of Interview: Santa Monica, California

KOMER: Naturally, the State and Defense Departments at the professional level were **Arabists**³. Our strategic and economic interests were emphatically with the Arabs⁴. Only our political interest was with the Israelis, and our political interest was being argued by somebody else. So I regarded it as one thousand percent legitimate that State and Defense, the professionals, tend to be pro-Arab, besides which there are **thirteen Arab countries**⁵ and just one little old Israel. Thirteen ambassadors go out to Arab countries. Do ambassadors learn to speak Hebrew? Hell, no. The Israelis all speak English. They learn to speak Arabic. And they become romantics about the Arabs, who are a very interesting crew, whereas the Israelis will hit you over the head with a meat ax. They hit me over the head many times, and I felt that the best way to handle that was to hit back; I think we had some interesting encounters.

I'm a great admirer of the Israelis, but I was calling them as I saw them in the White House. If I disagreed with Mike Feldman⁶, I was ready to say so, besides which I was encouraged to do it. Just as the State Department is cast in an adversary role, so quite naturally the Bundy State Department Middle Easterner⁷ is cast in the role of being the debater with Mike Feldman or Larry O'Brien⁸. Why? He's got to keep [Jacob K.] Jack Javits⁹ and a whole series of other guys happy on the Hill, and rightly so.

O'BRIEN: Does the sale of Hawk missiles¹⁰ bring this whole issue of continued Israeli...

KOMER: Yes. The sale of Hawk missiles ushered in a new phase¹¹ of our Arab-Israeli policy because of a phenomenon no one had foreseen. Advancing technology plus political change¹² was narrowing down the arms supply sources for Israel. Throughout the late forties and fifties we were able, by providing indirect economic aid subsidies to Israel¹³, to facilitate their getting arms, with our political support, from the French, British, Belgians, Italians, and the Germans¹⁴. The French probably sold more than the Germans did, but Israel got straight aid from [Konrad] Adenauer¹⁵, part of the expiation for the sins of the Nazis.

Then the German aid program began coming to an end¹⁶. The French under (Charles A.) de Gaulle beginning in '58-'59 became very edgy, began a transition¹⁷. And the British were getting more conservative. Besides this you had the advance of technology¹². Nobody else had a good cheap surface-to-air missile like Hawk and the Israelis buy only the most cost-effective things¹⁸. So less and less were the Germans, British and French, even if they wanted to, able to provide

the type of equipment which would match the Russian.

As a result of these two tendencies, we almost inevitably became the targets. The Israelis said, “We can’t get Hawks from anybody else.” We said, “The British have a thing called Bloodhound.” They said, “We’ve looked at Bloodhound militarily. Would you buy it for US forces?” And we said, “Hell, no.”¹⁹

So the Hawks marked the watershed²⁰. Since then, we’ve gone on from Hawks to A-4E’s, tanks, now F-4’s, et cetera²¹.

Notes

1. **Robert W. Komer**—NSC staffer for the Middle East under President Kennedy (later a key Vietnam official). His remit included Arab-Israeli policy and backchannel troubleshooting.
2. **Dennis J. O’Brien**, interviewer for the JFK Library’s oral history program.
3. **“Arabists”**—U.S. career diplomats/analysts focused on the Arab world, often Arabic-speaking and posted in Arab capitals; in Washington shorthand, sometimes (controversially) presumed more sympathetic to Arab perspectives due to professional exposure.
4. **“Strategic and economic interests...with the Arabs”**—a reference to Cold War alignment, bases/ access, and especially oil and transit routes, which made Arab states central to U.S. regional strategy in the 1950s–60s.
5. **“Thirteen Arab countries”**—Komer’s shorthand for the roughly dozen **Arab League** members represented in U.S. diplomacy in the early 1960s; the exact roster fluctuated with admissions/ secessions (e.g., UAR, Kuwait 1961, Algeria 1962).
6. **Myer “Mike” Feldman**—Deputy Special Counsel to JFK and principal White House backchannel to Israel in 1962.
7. **“Bundy...Middle Easterner”**—Komer’s informal way of describing the **NSC/White House staffer** working Middle East issues under **McGeorge Bundy** (National Security Adviser). He is effectively describing his own adversarial role vis-à-vis State/legislative politics; the phrasing blurs White House and State.
8. **Larry O’Brien**—JFK’s congressional liaison and political operative; part of the domestic-politics side of Arab-Israeli decision-making.
9. **Sen. Jacob K. “Jack” Javits (R-NY)**—prominent Senate voice on foreign policy and generally supportive of Israel; a key Hill stakeholder the White House watched closely.
10. **“Sale of Hawk missiles”**—the 1962 U.S. decision in principle to provide **MIM-23 HAWK** surface-to-air missiles to Israel, the first major, direct U.S. arms commitment to Israel.
11. **“New phase”**—Komer’s summary of the shift from encouraging **third-country** suppliers (France,

UK, FRG, etc.) to the **United States** becoming Israel's indispensable source for cutting-edge systems.

12. **Technology + politics**—by the early 1960s, Soviet **SA-2** SAMs and newer fighters (MiG-19/21) raised the bar; simultaneously, European suppliers' political will/capability to equip Israel waned, narrowing alternatives.
13. **“Indirect economic aid subsidies”**—U.S. financial flows (e.g., development assistance, PL-480, credits) plus **German reparations/indeemnities** that increased Israel's hard-currency capacity to buy European arms.
14. **European sources**—Israel's principal pre-1962 suppliers included **France** (Mirage fighters, nuclear cooperation), **UK/Italy/Belgium** (various systems), and **West Germany** (via reparations/arrangements), often with U.S. political cover.
15. **Konrad Adenauer**—West German Chancellor; negotiated the 1952 **Luxembourg Agreement** and related programs providing Israel with funds/commodities and later quiet military assistance—framed here as moral redress.
16. **“German aid...coming to an end”**—reparations and associated programs tapered in the early 1960s; later German military aid became politically sensitive as Bonn normalized ties with Arab states.
17. **“de Gaulle...transition”**—France under **Charles de Gaulle** gradually rebalanced toward the Arab world (while still supplying Israel early on), culminating in a post-1967 **arms embargo**; Komer labels the cooling as beginning circa 1958–59.
18. **“Cost-effective” Israeli procurement culture**—a doctrine stressing performance-per-cost and maintainability; **HAWK**'s mobility/low-altitude coverage suited Israel better than static European SAMs.
19. **Bloodhound**—a British long-range, largely **static** SAM system; technically capable but ill-suited to Israel's mobile, short-warning air-defense concept—and never adopted by U.S. forces.
20. **“Watershed”**—the **HAWK** deal set the precedent for U.S. provision of frontline systems, reshaping the U.S.–Israel defense relationship.
21. **Follow-on systems**—Komer's shorthand for later U.S. transfers: **A-4 Skyhawk (A-4E)** attack aircraft (U.S. sale approved **1966**), U.S.-origin **tanks** (e.g., **M48/M60** via third-party and later direct channels), and **F-4 Phantom II** fighters (approved **1968**; deliveries began **1969**).