

**Master of the Game: Henry Kissinger and the Art of Middle East Diplomacy**

Martin Indyk. (Alfred A. Knopf, 2021), 672 pages, appendices, endnotes, index.

**Reviewed by Alan Fisher**

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The last five US administrations each made high-profile efforts at peacemaking in the Middle East, from George H. W. Bush's convening of the Madrid Conference to Donald Trump's Abraham Accords. Despite the achievement of some dramatic and seemingly paradigm-shifting moments—such as the efforts at Israeli-Palestinian peace during the Clinton administration—there have been no results with the same endurance or impact as the agreements negotiated by Henry Kissinger after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War. At that time, Arabs and Israelis had been plunged into war four times over 25 years. The Soviet Union's involvement in the region—backing radical Arab governments pushing war with Israel—had created another arena for superpower rivalry and the risk of superpower confrontation.

Today, when Russia has returned to the region to play a role contrary to US interests, and radicalism and fundamentalism have sharpened divisions and reignited conflict, it is worth revisiting how Kissinger took advantage of circumstances to “create a new regional order in the Middle East that sidelined the Soviet Union in the midst of the Cold War and stabilized a turbulent region.” (17)

In *Master of the Game*, Martin Indyk presents a detailed and fascinating history of Kissinger's Middle East diplomacy during that period. Indyk weaves together a narrative based on a review of contemporaneous documents from US and Israeli archives, personal papers, official transcripts, memoirs—both published and unpublished—and personal interviews with Kissinger. The result is a compelling and authoritative account of a time when the United States brought warring sides together to make agreements that have endured for almost half a century. Appendices contain the texts of the formal agreements as well as side agreements between the United States and the parties.

The book details Kissinger's role in the US response to the Egypt-Israel clashes in the period after the Six-Day War in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Black September uprising in Jordan in 1970, and Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat's break with the Soviet Union,

outreach to the United States, and subsequent decision with Syria to go to war against Israel in 1973. The core of the text discusses the US response to the October war and Kissinger's subsequent “shuttle diplomacy,” which resulted in Egyptian-Israeli agreements to disengage in the Sinai in 1974–75, an Israeli-Syrian agreement to disengage in the Golan Heights in 1974, and ultimately (under the Carter administration) a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979.

At the height of his shuttle diplomacy from October 1973 until Nixon resigned in August 1974, Kissinger made six trips to the Middle East, visited 28 countries, and traveled some 314,000 kilometers. (570) Indyk makes note of behind-the-scenes maneuvering and personality clashes in Washington with the backdrop of the Watergate scandals, as well as the role played by intelligence, from mistaken assessments of Egyptian intentions and capability to make war to the use of a CIA station chief to facilitate back-channel discussions.

Kissinger's goal, Indyk asserts, was to create a system in which the key states in the region, supported and led by the United States, would share a sense of legitimacy and a balance of power that would encourage stability and make the constant resort to war unappealing. In Kissinger's view, this could only be accomplished in incremental steps, whose completion would allow implacable foes to gain confidence and trust. Indyk relates that Kissinger, growing up in Germany during the rise of Nazi power, learned the lesson that without a sustainable and stable order, peace plans are easily held hostage by those willing to resort to war and can lead to appeasement. In Indyk's view, Kissinger's approach merits revisiting today because after repeatedly trying and failing to reach comprehensive end-of-conflict agreements, “it is time for US policymakers to return to Kissinger's step-by-step approach as part of a broader strategy for building a new American-supported Middle Eastern order.” (570)

*Master of the Game* flags weaknesses in Kissinger's approach, including his focus on “key” states, which was based on his post-World War II conception of military

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power and influence. Thus, Kissinger focused on Egypt, as the essential Arab power necessary for a military threat to Israel, and Syria, as the radical Arab power with the most leverage to block Egypt from making a deal.

Kissinger did not give much consideration to the Palestinian issue or the possibility of bringing US ally Jordan along for an agreement that involved the Palestinians, which even he recognized at the time was the only alternative to the ascendancy of the more radical non-state actor, the PLO. “To this day, [Kissinger’s] decision does not sit comfortably with him. By summer of 1975 Kissinger was admitting to [Israeli Ambassador to the US Simcha] Dinitz that they had made ‘a big mistake’ by not trying for an interim agreement with Jordan.” (444)

Other missteps include Kissinger’s pre-October War devotion to the regional status quo, which resulted in his not recognizing opportunities to avoid the war, and his failure to recognize strategic opportunities for broader agreements the Israelis, Egyptians, and Syrians might have been willing to pursue had he not been so focused on even smaller steps. In the pursuit of his goals, Kissinger was willing to mislead allies as well as adversaries, and in one instance his willingness to manipulate the situation—by encouraging the Israelis to continue to press for territorial gains after all the parties had agreed to a cease-fire arranged by the United States and Soviet Union—resulted in Soviet moves and US reactions that threatened a superpower clash.

The book relies heavily on US and Israeli documents. Indyk explains that Arab archives for the period “are not accessible, if they exist at all,” therefore the perspectives of Kissinger’s Arab interlocutors are mostly drawn from “the public record and personal biographies.” (596) So while Kissinger stated he “had never seen so effective an example of crisis management” (76) as the US and Israeli responses to the Black September episode in Jordan, others have pointed out that despite US military moves to signal support for the king, and Israeli threats of intervention—which no doubt influenced both Syria’s Soviet sponsors and the then air force chief and soon-to-be Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad, who declined to provide air cover to the Syrian armored brigades sent to support the PLO—a more important and less visible role in resolving the situation may have been played by Jordanian intelligence.<sup>a</sup>

Despite such errors, Indyk lauds Kissinger’s achievement of disengagement agreements between Egypt and Israel that set the conditions for an eventual peace treaty, and a disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria that has not had a significant breach by either side for almost 50 years. “Kissinger’s diplomacy had succeeded in creating a more or less stable regional Middle Eastern order. It had taken three years of constant exertion to build; its maintenance would require continued efforts to move the peace process forward.” (551)

Indyk further observes that Kissinger’s success was made possible by Sadat. It was Sadat’s vision and strategic acuity in launching a war with limited objectives and then pivoting to diplomacy, and mostly by turning away from the Soviet Union and toward the United States, that gave Kissinger the scope and incentive to push for an agreement. Indyk quotes Kissinger’s response to President Ford’s observation that the October War had been helpful in creating the conditions for an Egypt-Israel agreement: “We couldn’t have done better if we had set the scenario.” (111) In many ways, it was Sadat rather than the United States who was the indispensable actor.

Indyk, a former assistant secretary of state for the Near East and two-time ambassador to Israel in the Clinton administration, currently is a distinguished fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations. He served as a principal on the team seeking an Israel-Syria peace deal in the 1990s. Upon leaving government service, Indyk became the founding director of the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. He returned to government during Obama’s second term as US special envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Before *Master of the Game*, Indyk authored a book on his experiences in the Clinton administration—*Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peace Diplomacy in the Middle East* (Simon & Schuster, 2009)—and a review of Obama’s successes and failures in foreign policy during his first term, coauthored with Michael O’Hanlon and Kenneth Lieberthal, *Bending History: Barack Obama’s Foreign Policy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

Indyk sets the goal of taking “the reader into the rooms where [Kissinger] conducted his diplomacy” and providing an accurate and vivid account of what transpired.

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a. Bruce Reidel, “Fifty Years After ‘Black September’ in Jordan,” *Studies in Intelligence* 64, no. 2 (June 2020): 35–40.

He succeeds and goes beyond that by adding insights gained from his own experiences to indicate weaknesses in the peace efforts—including those he took part in—that followed Kissinger. Indyk points out that while Kissinger was able to exploit the sense of urgency felt by Israeli, Egyptian, and even Syrian leaders, the Clinton peace team failed to do so with Asad and Israeli Prime Minister Barak. He compares a time that Kissinger stood up to Asad's negotiating gamesmanship—for which he later received an apology from the Syrian president—to a similar

episode in which Secretary of State Warren Christopher failed to push back on Asad and eventually lost momentum for a deal. He also explains the differences he sees in the agreements brokered by Kissinger and the agreements brokered by the Trump administration and why he believes the former are more in line with US interests. *Master of the Game* is a valuable addition to the bookshelf of those interested in the US role in the Middle East, how we got where we are, and how we might go forward.



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