

John F. Kennedy Administration: Letter to Arab Leaders

This telegram outlines the United States' policy and goals for the Middle East, speaking pointedly about a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and discussing the importance of the issue of the [Arab refugees](#).

1971. Deliver following message Nasser from President/2/ advising date and time delivery:/3/

/2/The letter is one of six sent from President Kennedy to Arab leaders on May 11. Letters sent to President Chehab of Lebanon, King Hussein of Jordan, Prime Minister Qassim of Iraq, King Saud of Saudi Arabia, and Imam Ahmed of Yemen contained the same text, except for the fourth and penultimate paragraphs, which were specially adapted for each country. For additional information relating to the letters' origin and authorship, see Document 42. Copies of the individualized texts for the leaders of Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen are attached to a May 5 memorandum from Talbot. See Supplement, the compilation on the Arab-Israeli dispute.

/3/The Embassy in Cairo reported in telegram 1840 that the letter was delivered to the President at 8 p.m. on May 12, Cairo time. (Department of State, Central Files, 611.86B/5-1261)

"May 11, 1961. Dear Mr. President: In recent months the world's attention has been centered on several explosive situations, the outcome of which could spell the difference between freedom and servitude, between peace and war, for many millions of people, ultimately perhaps for all mankind. I know that you have been deeply concerned about these problems, as I have been. However, I am confident that you share with me the conviction that through the dedicated efforts of men of good will everywhere, the storm clouds of the present can be dispersed.

Meanwhile, leaders responsive to the needs and aspirations of their peoples must, in my firm opinion, be alert to every possibility for advancing basic principles of political and economic justice. Thus, while since my inauguration on January 20 I have perforce been largely occupied with the several international crises of immediate concern, I have given considerable thought to other international issues that deserve the careful attention of us all.

My thoughts have often turned to the Middle East, an area which has contributed so much to the religious and cultural heritage of the world today, and whose potential for further rich contributions to civilization is great. As an American I am proud that the concepts of our founding patriots, of [Abraham Lincoln](#), Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, have played so great a part in the emergence of vigorous, independent Arab states, respected as sovereign equals in the international community.

I am proud of the tangible encouragement which has been accorded by our government and people to the aspirations of you and your countrymen in the past, particularly during the critical days of 1956. The United States Government, itself the product of a union of several independent states, was pleased to recognize the formation of the United Arab Republic on February 22, 1958, the birthday anniversary of our own first President, Washington.

In recent weeks I have noted some speculation as to the direction of the policies of the new United States administration with respect to the Middle East. Let me assure you that the concepts inherited from the men mentioned above are part of the very fiber of this nation, and that as its President I intend to uphold them. You will find us at all times and all places active in the struggle for equality of opportunity; for government of the people, by the people and for the people; for freedom from want and fear; and for the application of justice in the settlement of international disputes.

Translating these great precepts into United States policy in the Middle East for the next few years, I want you to know that:

1. The United States will to the best of its ability lend every appropriate assistance to all Middle Eastern states that are determined to control their own destiny, to enhance the prosperity of their people, and to allow their neighbors to pursue the same fundamental aims.
2. The United States remains ever ready to contribute both within and outside the United Nations to the search for solutions to disputes which dissipate the precious energies of the Middle Eastern states and retard the economic progress which all free peoples rightly desire.
3. With a view toward improving the welfare of the people of the Middle East, the United States is prepared to continue to support national development programs which are effectively designed, to make available American commodities under the Food for Peace program, and to encourage educational exchanges designed to facilitate political and economic progress.

While tensions unfortunately have sharpened in certain other areas of the world, the Middle East during the past three years has been relatively tranquil. This has been due largely to statesmanship on the part of the area's leaders who have given priority to constructive programs of economic development. Secretary Rusk and I have been struck by the unanimity of views expressed to us by representatives of the various Middle Eastern states emphasizing that the present relative tranquility be preserved.

Underlying tensions do, however, remain, not the least of which is the unresolved Arab-Israel controversy. I know deep emotions are involved. No easy solution presents itself. The American government and people believe that an honorable and humane settlement can be found and are willing to share in the labors and burdens which so difficult an achievement must entail, if the parties concerned genuinely desire such participation. We are willing to help resolve the tragic Palestine refugee problem on the basis of the principle of repatriation or compensation for properties, to assist in finding an equitable

answer to the question of Jordan River water resources development and to be helpful in making progress on other aspects of this complex problem.

I am pleased that the United Nations General Assembly recently underscored the necessity to implement more rapidly its previous recommendations on the refugee problem. In this connection, I wish to state unequivocally that this Government's position is anchored and will continue to be anchored in the firm bedrock of support for General Assembly recommendations concerning the refugees, and of active, impartial concern that those recommendations be implemented in a way most beneficial to the refugees.

The United States, as a member of the Palestine Conciliation Commission and a nation keenly interested in the long-range advancement of the peoples of the Middle East, takes seriously the task entrusted to the Commission by the United Nations. We are determined to use our influence to assure that the Commission intensify its efforts to promote progress toward a just and peaceful solution. What precise steps the Commission may be able to take are, of course, not yet clear, but I can assure you that there will be no lack of United States interest in seeing that effective action is taken. It is my sincere hope that all the parties directly concerned will cooperate fully with whatever program is undertaken by the Commission so that the best interests and welfare of all the Arab refugees of Palestine may be protected and advanced.

With reference to relations between the United Arab Republic and the United States, I recognize that our views on important problems do not always coincide. At the same time I am pleased that mutually beneficial relations continue to exist in many spheres and that United States assistance in significant quantities has played a role in your own thorough and detailed development program. As you know, I have recently made proposals to the Congress for aiding in the preservation of Nubian monuments.^{/4/} We continue to welcome the hundreds of UAR students who have entered institutions in our country to further their educations. During his recent consultations in Washington, Ambassador Reinhardt told me of the significant progress which the United Arab Republic has already made in establishing an industrial base which will permit increasing prosperity and higher living standards for all your citizens. I am particularly pleased that we have been able in times past to arrange under favorable conditions the sale of substantial quantities of wheat and other commodities to the United Arab Republic since we recognize the importance of an adequately nourished population. It is my earnest hope that such mutually beneficial cooperation can continue.

^{/4/}Reference is to President Kennedy's April 7 letter to the President of the U.S. Senate and Speaker of the House of Representatives recommending that the United States participate in the international campaign initiated by UNESCO to preserve the ancient temples and other monuments in the Nile Valley, the most important of which was Abu Simbel, that were threatened with inundation as a result of the construction of the Aswan High Dam. For text, see Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1961, pp. 248-250. Documentation on this subject is in Department of State, Central Files, 886B.421/4-2461, and Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Country Series, United Arab Republic, Preservation of Egyptian Temples.

I earnestly hope that these views of mine on the Middle East will prove useful to you. Given the long history of friendly relationships between the Arab people and the American people, and the interdependence of all men who wish to remain free, I want to be certain that you and other Arab leaders have no misunderstanding of our attitude towards the Arab people. It continues to be one of sincere friendship. With mutual respect for the other's points of view, mutual and active concern for the betterment of mankind, and mutual striving to eliminate the causes of international tensions, the future will bring even friendlier and more productive relationships between our countries and their freedom-loving people. Sincerely, John F. Kennedy."

White House has no plans publish this text but has no objection should GUAR desire do so./5/

/5/Following Near East press reports indicating that President Kennedy had sent letters to Arab leaders, on May 23 Meyer checked with Talbot and Feldman at the White House. He then informed Israeli Ambassador Harman that letters had been sent and described their general nature. A note on the brief memorandum of conversation reads: "It was felt important that Prime Minister Ben-Gurion who was passing through New York enroute to Canada that evening be accurately aware of the general nature of the letters so that he would not infer they were of some sort of anti-Israel character." (Department of State, Central Files, 786B.00/5-2361)

Bowles

Sources:

Department of State, Central Files, 611.86B/5-1161. Confidential; Priority; Verbatim Text. Drafted by Meyer and Palmer; cleared by Talbot, Cleveland, and Dungan at the White House; and approved by Mau (S/S), who initialed for Bowles.

[The United States Department of State](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jfk-letter-to-arab-leaders)