

The President's Mideast Gamble

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 9 — President Nixon's trip to the Middle East is meant to symbolize America's sudden emergence as a major influence in the Arab world, but even before his Air Force 707 takes off tomorrow morning, Mr. Nixon's mission has inevitably become caught up in

controversy. Many political observers, viewing the nine-day journey primarily as an attempt to divert attention from the impeachment investigation, have asked aloud both about the value of the trip and the President's motives in making it at this time.

"It doesn't make much sense," Senator Henry M. Jackson, Democrat of Washington, said today. "It is more cosmetic and ceremonial than it will be substance."

By many diplomats and State Department officials, who not passing judgment on Mr. Nixon's impeachment case, have argued strongly that the journey should be taken seriously as a diplomatic mission because it could have far-reaching consequences for American objectives in the Middle East.

The Leading Influence

They believe that through a number of factors, including Secretary of State Kissinger's diplomatic skills, a moderate moderation in Egypt, a Syria and some old-fashioned luck, the United States has emerged from the Arab-Israeli war of last October as the leading foreign influence in the area.

They assert that Mr. Nixon's trip could bolster this growing American prestige or, if he fails to meet expectations that cannot be met or angers the Russians, could in the long run prove detrimental to American interests.

Without question, Mr. Nixon has chosen a particularly sensitive time to make the trip.

The main Arab countries and Israel have just begun, after two Kissinger-inspired disengagement agreements, to rethink their attitudes to each other, and the Soviet Union, once the main ally of the Arabs, finds itself, on the virtual eve of another Nixon trip to Moscow, wondering whether the Americans have not taken advantage of détente to displace it in the area.

These problems are linked to one another: Mr. Nixon—who will be accompanied by Secretary of State Kissinger—must avoid doing anything on this trip that would halt the shaky momentum toward improved Arab-Israeli relations or that would set back Washington's clear gains in the Middle East or unnecessarily upset American relations with Moscow.

Some of Mr. Nixon's critics are arguing that because of these delicate factors he should have waited a few months. They believe that the trip has

Disputed Journey Is Seen by Some as Key Mission

been too hastily arranged and that the President runs the risk of upsetting the favorable trends developed by Mr. Kissinger over the last seven months in his five trips to the area.

The critics have charged in private that the proximity to the Moscow journey, due to begin on June 27, could jeopardize Soviet-American relations if the Kremlin decides that it must take a tougher attitude toward Mr. Nixon to offset the impression of weakness in the Middle East.

Neither Mr. Kissinger nor White House aides will acknowledge that the timing was based on impeachment considerations. Critics such as Senator Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho, see no other explanation.

The view has been prevalent in Washington for some time that Mr. Nixon instigated the trip to take advantage of Mr. Kissinger's success and virtually forced himself on the Arabs and Israelis. The facts, however, do not support that assumption.

Traveling with Mr. Kissinger since last November in the Middle East, it was impossible not to note the enthusiasm for Mr. Nixon voiced by President Anwar el-Sadat of Egypt and the leaders of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Egyptians openly claim credit for getting the President to the Middle East. In addition, when he learned that Mr. Nixon was coming to the area, President Hafez al-Assad of Syria insisted on this visiting Damascus as well, even though diplomatic relations have not yet been formally renewed.

An Egyptian Invitation

The Egyptians made it clear that they were pressing Mr. Nixon to come to Cairo. The invitation was first extended in January after the Egyptian-Israeli disengagement accord and renewed every month after that.

The Egyptians wanted the visit as a symbol of their new independent foreign policy, which translated into reality means to an end to dependence on the Soviet Union and a movement toward close relations with the United States. The Jordanians and Saudi Arabians, the closest Arab friends of the United States during the years of ostracism, also wanted to celebrate the new relationship.

These demonstrations of friendship for the United States have been based to a large degree on the assumption, which has now been discouraged by Washington, that the United States would somehow bring enough pressure on Israel so that all the occupied Arab lands would be returned. Mr. Nixon will undoubtedly be pressed on his trip to reassure the Arabs that the two disengagement accords did not rep-

resent Israel's last word on a withdrawal.

Mr. Kissinger's Middle East diplomacy was successful because he encouraged the Arabs to think that he would regain for them their lost lands while he kept Israel satisfied that her security was not being endangered.

In Israel, Mr. Nixon will be asked for fresh assurances of continuing American support for her sovereignty and security, something that Mr. Nixon has consistently given. The United States has already agreed to Israel's long-standing request that American military assistance be long-term rather than year to year.

The Israelis and their supporters here will watch with extreme care, of course, the promises Mr. Nixon gives the Arabs. They will be sensitive to any deviation from the standard support for a "just and durable peace" based on Security Council Resolution 242, which was ambiguous enough to satisfy Arabs and Israelis.

Some Middle East specialists believe that overly-optimistic expectations by the Arabs are the main danger to American foreign-policy objectives in the Middle East.

No U.S. Pledges

They fear that the first Israeli troop withdrawals, engineered by Mr. Kissinger, have created the belief in the Arab world that Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger, known as "the magician" in the Arab press, will bring about a complete pullback.

Mr. Kissinger insisted to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Friday that he had made no pledges to the Arabs beyond the commitment to Resolution 242.

He has made it known privately, however, that he expects major Israeli withdrawals on the Sinai front to continue. At some point, however, a final deal will have to be struck and Israel will probably want to keep some of the occupied land.

What happens then?

The Administration hopes that through trips such as Mr. Nixon's and the continuing improvement in Arab-American relations, underscored by the agreement yesterday with Saudi Arabia, a crisis can be avoided.

Mr. Kissinger and Mr. Nixon believe that the trend toward moderation by the Arabs can be accelerated so that when the time comes for a final settlement with Israel they will make some territorial compromises to bring about peace.

If that happens, the American role will again be applauded and Mr. Nixon's visit remembered as a step along the road to a settlement.

But the experts warn, that if in the final stages a settlement eludes the two sides, and fighting erupts again, the United States might be held responsible and Mr. Nixon's trip remembered as part of a cruel hoax.

GIVE A KID A BREAK
THE FRESH AIR FUND.