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Approved in S/S-S

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: July 8, 1970

SUBJECT: Middle East

1970-7-8, US, Ambassador

PARTICIPANTS: H. E. Talat al-Choussein, Ambassador of Kuwait
Joseph J. Sisco, Assistant Secretary
Brooks Wrampelmeier, NEA/ARP

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Ambassador al-Choussein said that he had been distressed by the President's remarks on the Middle East in his news conference telecast July 1. The Ambassador personally had been "shocked" by the President's portrayal of the situation in the area. He could not understand how the President could view the situation in this way.

Mr. Sisco sought to put the President's remarks into their total context by reviewing the history of US/Soviet talks on the Middle East over the past 16 months. He pointed out that the USG, in its proposals of October 28 and December 18, felt that it had gone a considerable distance in its discussions with the Soviets. Frankly, there is a feeling that the Soviets have not responded by coming even half way. The USG is understandably concerned by this lack of success. Nevertheless, no doors have closed. Although it is now clear that the Soviet decision to send combat personnel to the UAR was made last January, the USG has been restrained in its public statements regarding the Soviet presence in Egypt despite the increasing involvement of Soviet pilots and missile crews in Egyptian air defense operations. The President in March deferred a decision on Israel's request for additional aircraft and on June 25 the Secretary announced that we were undertaking a new diplomatic initiative. Frankly, however, we believe that the Soviets have now gone beyond simply acting to protect Egyptian cities from Israeli deep penetration air raids. Pursuit by the Soviets of some basic policy interests now appear to be involved. In view of this creeping Soviet involvement in the UAR, the president felt we had no choice but to put on public record the USG's concern that this involvement will likely affect adversely the international balance of forces.

NEA/ARP: BW wrampelmeier: djk
(Drafting Office and Officer)

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Mr. Sisco strongly hoped that the Arabs will not turn down the latest US initiative merely on the basis of their reaction to the President's response to a journalist's question. He added that he was seriously convinced that if the opportunity for progress presented by the latest US diplomatic initiative is lost, all options open to the peoples in the area, as well as to the major powers, will be further restricted. He stressed that the Arabs could not expect a settlement that would restore the status quo ante June 5, 1967 or a solution to the refugee problem that would alter the fundamental character of Israel as a Jewish state. On the other hand, as he had pointed out to Israeli leaders, no Arab leaders could accept a settlement involving substantial territorial concessions. Both sides would have to settle for less than their maximum demands.

Ambassador Choussein replied that, to the best of his knowledge, the US initiative has not yet been turned down by anybody. He hoped that they would not. Nevertheless, he thought that the Arab peoples will misinterpret, and therefore misunderstand, the USG position. In eight years as Ambassador to the United States he had not heard any responsible USG official portray events in the Near East with the words used by the President. He was concerned that people in the area will inevitably see the USG's peace initiative in relation to the picture presented by the President. He assured Mr. Sisco that moderate Arab leaders at least are also concerned about the threat of Soviet penetration into the area. Nevertheless, he argued, it is important that we not allow ourselves to be deterred from one goal (i.e., the search for an Arab/Israeli settlement) by pursuit of another. He admitted that the USG has reason to be frustrated by the Arab reaction to its earlier proposals. He thought, however, that the US and Arab positions are actually closer together than many would believe. Unfortunately, there are also elements who wish to push the US and the Arabs apart. What, he asked, does the US Administration really think?

Mr. Sisco observed that when making this statement, the President probably had under consideration that most of the effort to reach a peace settlement must necessarily be focused on the UAR and Jordan; that is, on those Arab states that have accepted Res. 242 and said that they are prepared to reach with Israel some accommodation whereby all may live-and-let-live in the area. In terms of their declared stance, Syria and most of the Palestinians appear to be outside this picture at the present time. If there is no silent majority among the Palestinians prepared to face up to the necessity of reaching a settlement with Israel, then Mr. Sisco could see no hope for a settlement.

During an ensuing discussion of Palestinian attitudes, the Ambassador remarked that he planned a visit to Kuwait and nearby countries later this month and hoped to meet with several fedayeen leaders, including Yasir Arafat and George Habbash. Indicating that he was thinking out loud, Mr. Sisco asked whether the Ambassador thought it would be useful were the USG to establish some sort of dialogue with the Palestinians. If so, with which ones? Ambassador Choussein agreed to share with Mr. Sisco his impressions of the Palestinian leadership following his return to Washington in August.

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