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By KJ NARA Date 4/10/18

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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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**1974-6-10, Assad, Nixon, Meeting**

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT

FROM:

HENRY A. KISSINGER ~~X~~

SUBJECT:

Your Talks in Syria, June 15-16

Your Objectives

After more than six years with almost no contact, our relationship with President Asad has developed quickly since December. Your meeting will be cordial, and you will find him intelligent, although you may find from time to time that the conversation veers off in unexpected directions. Your objectives are:

- To consolidate our rapidly evolving relationship with top Syrian leaders, especially President Asad.
- To mark and give emphasis to the resumption of formal diplomatic relations between the United States and Syria.
- To reaffirm the U.S. commitment to persist in the effort to achieve peace and thus to increase Asad's confidence in his decision to agree to the Israeli-Syrian disengagement, and to lessen further the Syrian sense of dependence on the USSR.
- To accelerate momentum towards normal economic and commercial relations with Syria.

What President Asad Wants

Of all the countries you visit, you will detect in Syria the most ambivalent attitude towards the United States.

- On the one hand, the Syrian Government has been violently opposed to any peaceful co-existence with Israel and has been consistently distrustful of the United States as the leader of the Western "imperialist"

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world and the closest friend and protector of Israel.

-- On the other hand, the present government has clearly taken a decision to negotiate with Israel through the intermediary of the United States. This involves de facto recognition of Israel and if pursued will lead to formal acceptance of Israel's right to exist-- in short, a major departure from traditional Syrian foreign and domestic policy of the last 25 years.

No government in Damascus can eradicate overnight the emotional residue of its previous policy; thus, distrust of the United States and hatred of Israel remain.

That Asad's Government could make the decision to search for a negotiated peace reflects clearly Asad's own pragmatic approach. This has been evident since he came to power in a 1970 coup as the leader of the military pragmatists amongst the ruling Ba'ath Party, which at that time was led primarily by civilian ideologues and theoreticians. Asad early showed a preference for economic pragmatism; it is now evident he wishes to be just as practical in his approach toward foreign policy.

Such concessions, however, as Asad has now made have not been accomplished easily within the Syrian body politic or without danger to the current government. There are extremists in Syria in positions of strength who simply do not believe that Israel is prepared to offer the necessary concessions to Syria -- or that the United States will require them to do so. This opposition is not now well-organized, and we do not believe Asad to be currently under any threat of being overthrown. It is clear, however, that in accepting a disengagement that included no formal clauses guaranteeing the return of the rest of Golan or restoration of Palestinian rights -- the two key Syrian demands -- Asad has exposed himself to criticism. It is therefore extremely important to him that at every stage of the way his policy appear to his critics -- and his supporters -- to be moving inexorably towards satisfaction of these two demands.

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Specifically, by your presence in Syria, Asad will wish to achieve the following:

- To reaffirm assurances that the recent disengagement is only a first step, to be followed by others.
- To gain agreement on rapid movement in Geneva towards full Israeli evacuation of the rest of the Golan occupied in 1967 and towards a restoration of "Palestinian rights."
- To signal to the USSR that Syria's dependence on it is not total and that they cannot be taken for granted, although Asad will not wish to be so blatant in his rapprochement with us as to risk losing any military or political support from the Soviets.
- To gain a stronger position with Saudi Arabia and the other Arab moderates for both economic and political purposes while minimizing to the extent possible his vulnerability to attacks from Iraq, Libya, or radical Palestinians who are against the peace effort.

U. S. Strategy

Our strategy must be to do what we can to consolidate the U.S.-Syrian relationship and Syria's relationship with moderate Arabs without making any commitments on the next phase of peace negotiations.

During the negotiations on Israeli-Syrian disengagement, President Asad pressed hard for a letter from you assuring him that the United States would press Israel in the next stage of negotiations to withdraw completely from the Golan Heights. He would also like a similar commitment on the Palestinians, realization of their legitimate interests. We cannot give such an assurance because the negotiations are not yet far enough advanced -- and will not be for some time -- to address the issue of a further Israeli pullback on the Golan, which this time would involve abandonment of some Israeli settlements.

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Our line must continue to be (1) that we are committed to continue the negotiating process but (2) that we are not able to commit ourselves on the outcome of that process now since doing so would provoke sharp opposition to the whole negotiation both in Israel and in some U.S. quarters. By the same token, we can say, as we have before, that we recognize that no peace can be durable unless it takes account of the legitimate interests of the Palestinians. But you will want to avoid discussing in detail what this may involve.

Bilateral Issues

Relations between the United States and Syria had deteriorated well before the outbreak of the June, 1967 war. When the war came, the Syrians quickly broke off diplomatic relations, expelled all American officials in Syria, and immediately recalled their officials. No other Arab country -- even Iraq -- was as uncompromising in its conduct towards us. Anti-Americanism, and its twin, anti-imperialism, have thus been prominent features of the Syrian foreign policy landscape for nearly a decade.

The improvement in relations between Damascus and Washington over the past six months, which will shortly culminate (quite possibly during your visit) in the formal re-establishment of diplomatic relations, has been, therefore, for Syrians a most dramatic development, and is of considerable significance in Syria's reorientation away from the more radical Arabs.

The Syrian government, principally President Asad, has committed itself to a policy of liberalization, in both its domestic economic policy as well as in its foreign policy. The two are intergrally related, for Syrians will continue to support Asad's clear and decisive international about-face only if it succeeds at an early date, or failing that, brings with it continued improvements in their economic life. But, without any particular

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tangible benefits as a result of this new approach -- and without total peace -- Asad will be on thin ice.

Thus, the United States has a strong interest in contributing to the economic growth and well-being of Syria. If Asad, who is not a charismatic popular leader in the Nasser vein, can follow a popular internal economic policy, he will be given the time necessary to pursue his considerably more controversial -- but infinitely more important for us -- foreign policy, based for the first time in a generation, on finding a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Our bilateral relationship apart from Arab-Israeli issues, once ambassadors have been exchanged, will almost entirely revolve around economic relations. Already, a surprisingly large number of American companies have indicated an interest in doing business in Syria and, for their part, the Syrians are waiting in genuine anticipation. Outstanding economic issues, however, from ten years ago, currently stand in the way of the resumption of full US government participation in commercial deals with Syria. These problems will have to be satisfactorily resolved, one way or another, before the Export-Import Bank can guarantee credit for American businessmen or before AID can provide additional useful assistance. Presumably, the Syrians will be willing to make satisfactory re-stitution where they are at fault; however, if not, it may be possible to proceed with normal commercial relations once these issues are in negotiation.

In this connection, President Asad has suggested the establishment of a joint Syrian-U.S. economic commission, along the lines of the fledgling arrangements we now have with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Although such an idea may seem premature to us at the current time, we intend to give such suggestions from Asad our full attention in order that ultimately a relationship acceptable to us and beneficial to the

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Syrians might result. The question of economic aid also represents an issue on which, for the same reasons, we will want to be forthcoming.

In general, we will be approaching our bilateral relations in a manner to assure that slow and gradual -- but self-evident -- advantages accrue to Syria as a result of its policy of negotiations, in order that ultimately the Syrian public, as well as would-be opponents to the Asad regime, see more to lose by a return to Syria's former militancy than to gain. The process of peace negotiations is going to be an arduous one. Israel will not give ground easily; nor will Syria. Hopefully, however, at each step, as each crunch comes, each side will see more to be gained by compromise than by war. As our bilateral relations develop, our principal goal will have been attained if Syria continues to pursue negotiations with Israel. Our policy towards Syria in the months ahead will be to lend support to this goal: we will, by and large, therefore, be seeking the cues from them as to how, and how fast, our ties develop.

Points to Avoid

-- It is essential to avoid any commitment on the final borders or the role of the Palestinians in a final settlement. Asad, for instance, will press you hard for a US commitment to insist on Israel's complete withdrawal behind the 1967 borders. It is essential that you neither endorse total Israeli withdrawal nor refuse to endorse it. The best response is that the US understands the Syrian position and is committed to further negotiation in which these points will be addressed.

-- You will not want to speak in Syria at all of your concern over another war in the Middle East that could produce a US-Soviet showdown. Asad must be left with the conviction that the US will not shy away from such a confrontation. One line that has been effective in Syria is that it is not in the Arab interest that Soviet-backed military action

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should lead to such a confrontation. In such a situation, American public opinion will force us to oppose the Soviet thrust by backing Israel. It cannot serve Arab interests to have the US again forced into the Israeli corner.

-- You will not want to speak in Syria of US-Soviet cooperation in bringing peace to the Middle East. The conclusion we want the Syrians to draw is that the US alone is capable of producing movement toward peace.

-- You will want to minimize discussion of when the Geneva talks will resume or when a next step in the negotiations might be taken. In addition to pressing for a commitment on Israeli withdrawal, Asad will have a strong interest in knowing when we see negotiations resuming. Our strategy is to allow time now for assessment of the Israeli-Syrian disengagement and for developing another step with Egypt and perhaps even a first step on the Israel-Jordan front.

#### Your Talking Points

-- I am frank to acknowledge that relations between the United States and Syria have not always been as good as we might have hoped. We have had differences of view on various matters. We regretted the decision of your government in 1967 to break diplomatic relations. But the developments of recent months have been an historic development and are a source of satisfaction to us.

-- I am naturally quite pleased over the prospect of resuming diplomatic relations between our two Governments. Our two Governments have established during recent months, and particularly during the negotiations in May, a solid basis of understanding and confidence which will serve us well in the future.

-- The United States wants also to resume normal economic and commercial relations with Syria.

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We believe this will be to the benefit of both countries. Minor outstanding economic claims left over from a previous era can, we believe, easily be negotiated at appropriate levels in our two Governments, in order that our economic relations be based on the most sound foundation.

-- In addition, the United States will be prepared to consider ways of assisting Syria both in its reconstruction of those areas damaged by war and in various economic development projects. Syrian leaders should realize, however, that our ability to do this depends on the approval of Congress. Therefore, one of our common interests is that the image of Syria in the United States be improved.

-- The United States intends to pursue its efforts to bring about a just and lasting peace in the Middle East until that goal has been reached. We look on the disengagement as an important first in a series of stepping stones to this ultimate objective, which we shall pursue vigorously.

-- The United States appreciates the statesmanlike stance that President Asad has adopted. His contribution to this effort is invaluable.

-- The United States sympathizes with the plight of the Palestinian people. We recognize, as we have often stated, that there can be no permanent and satisfactory peace--which we seek--unless the legitimate interests of the Palestinians are fully considered.

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## BACKGROUND PAPER

SYRIAN POLITICS: THE INTERNAL SYRIAN SCENE

President Asad is a military man, which is entirely in keeping with the history of modern Syria since its independence from France at the end of World War II. The Army, for the past 30 years, has been the principal agent of political change in Syria, ruling directly or in association with political groups such as the Ba'ath Party with whom it has shared rule since the early 1960's. Once well known for the frequency of its military coups, Syria is now no longer the erratic coup-prone cockpit of inter-Arab politics it was in the 1950's and early 1960's.

Indeed, since General Hafiz al-Asad seized control of the government in November 1970, Syria has undergone substantial changes. His regime very early took on a more moderate tone in domestic political and economic matters and moved to end Syria's previous isolation in the Arab world. Asad appears to be guided in making decisions more by his appreciation of what will work to Syria's benefit than by the leftist doctrinaire considerations which animated his predecessors.

Asad came to power not long after Syria intervened militarily in support of Palestinian fedayeen fighting the Jordanian Government -- a move typical of the extremist and adventurous inclinations of the Ba'athist faction that had been in power since 1966. Throughout the mid-60's, the Ba'athist rulers of Syria stirred up tension in the Middle East. It was the Syrians who, prior to the June 1967 War, encouraged Palestinian guerrillas to operate against Israel from Jordan, bringing Israeli reprisals against Jordan, and raising tensions in the months prior to the 1967 War. After the June 1967 War, the Syrian Government refused to participate in Arab Summit conferences, rejected UNSC Resolution 242, created its own force of Palestine guerrillas (called Saiqa) and tried to undermine the Jordanian regime's efforts to control and limit fedayeen activity.

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The Syrian tank move into Jordan in October 1970 did not have the support of the military. Indeed, no air cover was provided, and it is said that President Asad, who was at that time the Syrian Minister of Defense and Commandant of the Air Force, was responsible for keeping Syrian planes from being activated. The result was a fiasco for the Syrians, followed by an internal power struggle in Syria which ended with Asad seizing power in November 1970 in a bloodless coup. Whether or not Asad opposed the incursion into Jordan, he obviously took advantage of its failure to oust his enemies who had followed their doctrinaire militancy to its logical conclusion. In the course of the next six months, Asad completely reconstituted the party leadership and made himself its head. In March 1971, Asad, a village-born member of the minority Alawite Muslim sect, became President of Syria. (The Alawites are a rather obscure sect of Islam, numbering about 700,000, located in the mountains of north central Syria; they have aroused resentment on the part of the Sunni majority because so many Alawites have made their way to senior posts in the Syrian Army.)

Asad's pragmatic policies and decisions to permit some easing of harsh economic and security restrictions in Syria have resulted in increased popular support for the regime, which by Syrian standards has now been in power a long time. Despite the existence of representative and elective branches, as required by the constitution, the real locus of power remains the Ba'ath party regime, dominated by Asad and the military. Asad's regime, like all its immediate predecessors, is characterized by a duality of power whereby the intelligence and security apparatus work independently from the rest of the government bureaucracy at the middle and lower levels. The two are joined only at the top, through the Ba'ath party leadership, which is now effectively controlled by Asad and his military supporters.

The Syrian Army has long been riven with factionalism and this carries with it the possibility that opposition to Asad could grow within the military. An attempt on Asad's life was made during the summer of 1973. Lacking extensive

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information on political attitudes of Syrian officers, however, we cannot gauge with any precision the current strength of opposition to him within the military. Certainly, there are elements within Syria genuinely opposed to the pragmatic course of negotiations which Asad is now pursuing. There are others who see his policy as an issue they can exploit to overthrow him. Obviously, Asad is not unaware of this. A career officer, who came up through the ranks in the Air Force until he ultimately commanded it, he was able to get where he is by a carefully constructed network of well-placed support in key military positions. He continues to employ this system; for example, his brother is the commander of a key security unit. The intensive negotiations on disengagement required to meet Syrian demands show the extent to which Asad is aware he must tread lightly. Asad appears strong enough -- and clever enough -- to remain in power for the foreseeable future, but he will have no alternative but to continue to press vigorously Syrian demands for full Israeli withdrawal from all territories occupied in 1967 and the restoration of the rights of the Palestinians.

Department of State  
June 1974SECRET

BACKGROUND PAPERSYRIAN-SOVIET RELATIONS

The Soviet Union unquestionably remains the major foreign influence in Syria. The USSR has made a substantial investment of money, equipment, and time in the military and economic development of Syria over the past two decades. Since relations between Egypt and the Soviets began to deteriorate in 1971, the Russian commitment to Syria has become even more pronounced; indeed, with the virtual repudiation of the Soviet Union by Egypt's Sadat in recent months, Syria has become, with Iraq, one of the two keystones of Soviet policy in the Middle East.

The Soviet-Syrian relationship is not, however, an easy one. The Syrians are quite jealous of their independence; with the resumption of contacts between Syria and the United States, Soviet apprehension and unease over their Arab ally has become palpable. Foreign Minister Gromyko, for example, who had never visited Damascus until early this year, has been there twice since.

These strains on Syrian-Soviet relations can be traced directly to President Asad. Since his assumption of power, in November 1970, Asad has been less responsive to Soviet interests than his predecessors and more insistent on preserving Syria's independence. He has viewed the Soviets not as ideological companions, but rather as a useful tool to help Syria obtain some of its own economic and foreign policy goals. Thus, in 1972, Syria conspicuously refused to sign a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union, although both Iraq and Egypt had done so--and although, outwardly at any rate, Syria was more in the Soviet camp, in terms of economic and military dependence, than ever before.

Nor has Asad looked with passivity on the Soviet Union's relations with others involved in the Middle East. There have been clear indications of Syrian restiveness over Soviet dealings with the Palestinian liberation movement. It was evident the Brezhnev-Nixon summit conference fed Syrian

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