

SECRET (XGDS)
1974-1-20, Assad, Kissinger, Khaddam⁸⁻

Kissinger:

We are on a good road on our bilateral relations. With regard to the process with Israel, you are sophisticated enough to know that you will not get everything you want. But we should start the process, because wherever we put the disengagement line it will not be permanent.

Khaddam:

If the disengagement line becomes the final line, there will not be peace. Tension will remain.

Kissinger:

I agree.

Khaddam:

Undoubtedly your efforts are appreciated outside this area.

Kissinger:

We have had a very good reaction from outside the area. The atmosphere in the US enables us to move forward.

Khaddam:

That is true. Also, a positive step in our bilateral relations is useful.

Kissinger:

It is essential. My visit to Israel will create the impression in Israel that something must be done for Syria too.

Khaddam:

I hope your next visit to Syria will be longer. It is not reasonable that you should come to Damascus and only know the airport road.

Kissinger:

I understand that Sadat only got as far as the airport--not even on the road--yesterday. He seems to me to be a friend of Syria.

Khaddam:

His father was a Syrian; his mother, a Sudanese.

Kissinger:

How did he become Egyptian, then?

Khaddam:

His father was a Syrian who lived in Egypt. There are many businessmen in Egypt who are of Syrian origin.

Kissinger:

Your visit is a good omen. This rain is a good thing for us.

It will produce good crops.

Khaddam:

Inshallah.

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Kissinger:

When you come to the US you will always be welcome. You might want to come during these talks for an exchange. You would be very welcome in Washington.

Khaddam:

I would be very pleased whenever there is an opportunity to visit Washington. I am pleased to have your friendship.

Kissinger:

That you have.

Khaddam:

True, we have only had two meetings. We hope to see you many times.

Kissinger:

I hope this is the beginning of a constantly improving relationship. How many diplomats will you be sending to Washington?

Khaddam:

Three. You are free to send more. As long as the process has started, there is no limit. We chose Dr. Kabbani because he is now of Minister-Counsellor rank and we are certain he can promote good relations.

Kissinger:

Is it often this cold in Damascus?

Khaddam:

Often in the winter it is this way. Two days ago we had snow in Damascus.

Kissinger:

Would you like to come aboard our aircraft. It will only take a couple of minutes. We will show you how we can communicate with Washington.

Khaddam:

Directly?

Kissinger:

In two minutes.

Khaddam:

Where will we make our statement to the press? In the waiting room?

Yes, since it is raining so hard. How are your relations with the press?

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Kissinger:

I know how to handle them. I have no illusions. Basically, our press is hostile, but I have had very good relations with them. I don't let them trigger me into battles I am not ready to fight.

Khaddam:

That is good. In the US the press plays a very important role in the daily life of the people, doesn't it?

Kissinger:

It is important to the people who make policy because they can influence public opinion.

Khaddam:

How long a flight is it to Jerusalem? A half hour?

Kissinger:

Forty-five minutes.

Let me review what I am going to say to the press just so it will not embarrass you.

I will express my thanks for your hospitality. I will say that I talked with President Asad for over four hours. We reviewed both bilateral relations and above all the prospects for peace in the Middle East. With respect to the Middle East, we discussed disengagement as well as a lasting settlement, which must be our ultimate goal and to which the US has promised to give support. The talks were very useful, very constructive and in my judgment contributed to Syrian-US relations and to peace in the Middle East. President Asad gave me his ideas on the problem of disengagement as well as on the problem of a lasting peace, and we will study them carefully as we continue our efforts.

Do you want to say a word or two?

Khaddam:

If asked, I will say I have nothing to add. Which means I support what you have said.

Kissinger:

I don't want to answer any questions.

Khaddam:

It is up to you. Newsmen like to know everything--even what you ate.

Kissinger:

The airport is some distance from town.

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Khaddam:

It is better that way. It takes into account the growth of the city. It is quieter. The problem with the previous airport was that the city grew out around it.

Kissinger:

We have that same problem with a number of our airports.

Khaddam:

Mrs. Bourguiba has been here.

Kissinger:

I have, incidently, no objection if President Asad wants to inform President Boumediene.

Khaddam:

He may possibly wish to do that.

Kissinger:

Boumediene regards Asad highly.

Khaddam:

They are in almost daily contact.

Kissinger:

Of course, you are free to discuss anything with President Sadat.

Khaddam:

This year the Soviets are not taking American wheat?

Kissinger:

Right. This was arranged to keep our prices down.

Khaddam:

Were they buying for local consumption or reselling?

Kissinger:

What do you think? They bought it from private traders, and the government did not understand what was going on until it was too late.

Khaddam:

Prices soared. In normal cases, Syria exports grain, particularly hard wheat. We depend on rainfall. After we complete some land reclamation projects, things will improve.

Kissinger:

How are you going about the reclamation?

Khaddam:

We contract with foreign firms and assign them each certain blocks of land to work on.

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Kissinger:

I would like to make a comment about the USSR. We are not trying to push them out of the Middle East. The reason we are more active in negotiations is because we have better relations. If we bring peace to the Middle East, that will not hurt the USSR. My impression is that Syria and Egypt will each pursue its own interest. The Soviets should not feel that your talking with the US makes you any more dependent on the US than arms purchases makes you dependent on the Soviet Union. This is not a job for which one gets much gratitude.

Khaddam:

The matter is not looked at through the eyes of the big powers. We see the matters through the eyes of our own interests. It is not important that either recognize each others interests. It is important that the big powers recognize the interests of the local nations.

Kissinger:

Exactly.

Khaddam:

The influence of any big power is connected with the methods it uses. Small nations are more sensitive.

Kissinger:

Big powers should not treat them as playthings. Gratitude for things already accomplished is not a basis for a foreign policy. We can see that in Europe.

[At this point, the car arrived at the airport. The Secretary and Foreign Minister walked through heavy rain into the VIP lounge where they met with the press. Following that meeting, the Secretary took the Foreign Minister aboard his aircraft for a brief tour.]

Harold H. Saunders

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