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Authority E.O. 12958

RV NARA Date 6-20-02

1974-1-20, Assad Kissinger Meeting

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

SECRET (XGDS)

January 20, 1974

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

PARTICIPANTS:

Hafez Asad, President of Syria
 Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Foreign Minister of Syria
 Syrian Interpreter

Henry A. Kissinger, Secretary of State
 Harold H. Saunders, NSC Staff

DATE AND PLACE: January 20, 1974, in President Asad's office

Secretary Kissinger had met alone with President Asad for some time and then had been joined by Assistant Secretary Sisco. When Mr. Sisco left to go to the Secretary's aircraft to make arrangements for the Secretary's stop in Tel Aviv, Mr. Saunders joined the party for lunch at which the following conversation took place. The second half of the conversation took place in the Secretary's car on the way to the airport accompanied by Foreign Minister Khaddam.

Kissinger:

The next question to consider is what I should tell the press. At the airport, I could make a very general but friendly statement. Then, on the plane, I could tell the reporters who are traveling with me that you have given me some general principles which I want to discuss with the Israelis. If I do that, can I be sure that Prime Minister Khaddam will not contradict me?

Asad:

[With a smile] I will put the brakes on him.

Kissinger:

I had no views on Khaddam before my first trip to Damascus -- except that he would not come to lunch with me at the UN last September.

Khaddam:

I had not arrived in New York yet when you had your lunch.

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DECLAS - Date Impossible to Determine.
 BYAUTH - Dr. Henry A. Kissinger

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Foreign Minister Khaddam was the first high Syrian official to have contact with the Americans since 1967. He first met with Mr. Sisco in 1972. That was the worst period in our relations.

Kissinger:

The last time I was in Israel, I did tell Mrs. Meir that I felt the time had come for Israel to develop a conception of peace. As you know, she has been ill.

Asad:

How old is she?

Kissinger:

Seventy-seven. Any medical student who examines her gets his degree on the spot. She seems to have every disease known to the profession.

Asad:

Didn't her party lose in the election?

Kissinger:

The election results make the problem more difficult. There are other parties which take a harder line than she does. The religious parties insist that every square meter of Palestine was given to Israel by God. Yet she needs those religious parties to form a government.

Asad:

Is there anything I can say to the Israelis about the prisoners of war?

As you know, we received Senator Abourezk. The Senator and his party saw some of the prisoners. Also, there were photographs and names of the prisoners in the photographs published. With regard to the treatment of the prisoners, there is no reason to have any anxiety.

Kissinger:

The Israelis are concerned that many were killed and that you do not have many in your custody.

Asad:

Absolutely none were killed as prisoners. But during the fighting some of the pilots who were shot down were killed when they bailed out. Once a plane is hit it sometimes explodes. Other times pilots bail out and they are killed because they fall in an area where shooting is going on and they are killed accidentally. The bodies of some of these pilots were buried in the presence of the Damascus rabbi and the Red Cross. But none were killed as prisoners.

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Kissinger: Do you still have some pilots alive?

Asad: We have some. They are in good condition. One is calling for trial of Israeli leaders.

Kissinger: I'll bet that he gets very good treatment.

There is a German lady named Glasser. They sent her to protest on the question of prisoners.

Kissinger: What did you do?

Asad: The Nazi treatment of the Jews made her come here. We tried to let her see what Zionist Nazism has done--to show her what Israel has done to some of the Arab people.

Kissinger: Could you give me the number of prisoners or an approximate number of prisoners at some point? For instance, could you say that there are more than 50 or less than 100?

Asad: Once efforts have progressed a little, we will agree with you on giving a suitable number.

Kissinger: There are two bilateral American problems: First there is the case of a young man named Bates who was sentenced for some photographing he did in Syria. If he could be released at some point, it would help in our relationship.

Asad: What is his name?

Kissinger: Jonathan Bates. It would be a very nice gesture. His father is sick. Bates is not a spy. He behaved very imprudently.

Asad: I promise you he will be released.

Kissinger: Can I tell his father?

Asad: Yes. He will be released very quickly.

Kissinger: If you will let me know when he is going to be released, then we can give Syria some credit publicly. This is not essential.

Asad: He will be released within 10 days.

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Kissinger: Can I say this publicly?Asad: Two days before his release we will notify you.Kissinger: We will announce it the day before.

There is another problem. If these talks develop, I may want to send a more senior officer while the talks are going on because it would be more efficient. Would that be acceptable? We would not announce it; we would just send him, at least for the duration of the talks.

Asad: Anybody with your confidence would be acceptable here.Kissinger: For instance, in Cairo we sent Mr. Eilts who has the rank of Ambassador. But we don't have to send someone of that rank here.Asad: We agree. The important thing is that the man is trusted by you.Kissinger: [To Khaddam] I informed your President that you are sending Mr. Kabbani to Washington.Asad: His brother is a poet.

What is happening in the Paracell Islands? To whom do the Islands belong?

Kissinger: I have never studied the question, but I expect to know more about it before the week is out. I suspect that before the week is over they will belong to China. We will not go to war over the Paracell Islands.Asad: There is a very big population in China. They need to eat.Kissinger: They don't need the Paracell Islands to eat.Asad: What do they need?Kissinger: Maybe to the north. Have you ever been to China, Mr. PresidentAsad: No. It would be interesting.SECRET (XGDS)

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Kissinger:

They don't like the country from which you get your weapons.

Our policy is not anti-Soviet; we recognize that the USSR has major interests in the Middle East. We are not combating them.

Asad:

You are about to force them out of the peace negotiations and you are not combating them?

Kissinger:

You should be grateful. Every time I come to Damascus, you get another shipment of tanks.

Asad:

You are going on an errand that might make us not need more tanks. We have asked our Arab brothers who are not on the confrontation line to buy us American weapons.

Kissinger:

What weapons are you interested in?

Asad:

Any kind of weapons--tanks, rockets, anything--just so there will be no more talk about American weapons versus Soviet weapons. The problem should be pictured as Arab against Israel, not as the US versus the USSR. I was told by other Arabs that you would not allow American arms to be defeated by Soviet arms. So, I would propose that we develop a situation where US arms are against US arms.

Kissinger:

[To Khaddam] The President's next move will be to encourage Israel to buy Soviet arms.

Asad:

What is the meaning of the statement that I have read about Admiral Moorer receiving copies of your papers?

Kissinger:

That was a campaign started because I was going to the Middle East.

Asad:

There was some statement that he was concerned about the Scud Missile in the Middle East.

Kissinger:

I am not sure those missiles can hit a country. I am sure they cannot hit a city.

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Asad: A city they can hit.

Kissinger:

Yes, I agree. He is a little suspicious of my policy. But now that I am coming back, they will regret that they started this.

Asad:

An attack is sometimes the best means of defense.

Kissinger:

Unfortunately, that is your Foreign Minister's view too.

Asad:

What about Watergate? What is Watergate?

Kissinger:

The Watergate is an apartment house in a section of Washington called Watergate.

Asad:

It is building?

Kissinger:

It is a general area and a building both.

First, the newspapers said that Moorer had stolen papers from me. The next day they said it was my fault. The argument is that I provoked him by carrying out foreign policies that I did not inform him of. It is true that I tell the military only what the military needs to know.

Asad:

That is true. The military needs to know only the things which concern the military.

Kissinger:

On those issues they are fully informed. But this is not the major problem. It is a major campaign against me and indicates why it is important that we go step by step in the Middle East.

You recognize that I will not be able to control completely what the Israelis tell their press after I leave. But I will strictly respect what we have agreed. At the airport I will say that we had useful and constructive talks about disengagement and about the overall problems of peace.

Asad:

Yes.

Kissinger:

And I will say that we made some progress. On the plane, I will tell the US press that you have given me some constructive ideas which I am conveying to the Israelis. I

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will say that we discussed some ideas about prisoners but that depends on how the situation develops.

Asad:

Okay.

Kissinger:

I feel as if I will never see the US again. I feel like the Flying Dutchman. I came here for three days because the Israelis had never presented a concrete proposition in Geneva--only theories. I said I would come out and not leave until they gave me a plan. I thought that would take three days, and then President Sadat urged me to finish the agreement while I was in the area. That was not my intent originally, and I spent a whole week. I will be flying home tonight after stopping in Israel.

Asad:

Perhaps you will be back in Damascus tomorrow.

Kissinger:

Damascus is dangerous, but Washington is really dangerous.

[At this point, the group left the smaller room where lunch had been served and returned briefly to President Sadat's office. There were a few words exchanged while President Asad and Secretary Kissinger looked at a map on an easel in the office.]

Kissinger:

As I understand it, there will be no heavy equipment in the area being evacuated?

Asad:

A line would be fixed beyond which there would be no tanks.

Kissinger:

Obviously, there will be no answer tonight. I will present this map and ask the Israelis to study it. Then I will ask them to send someone to Washington in ten days. Then I will communicate with you. I will do my best to achieve something consistent with the dignity of your country.

Asad:

Thank you.

[At this point, the Secretary said good-bye to President Asad and he, Foreign Minister Khaddam and Mr. Saunders entered the car to the airport with the Foreign Ministry interpreter. The following conversation took place between the Secretary and the Foreign Minister on the way to the airport.]

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