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DEPARTMENT OF STATE TRP SENSITIVE MIDDLE EAST
S/S-7400659Authority 5012958By D NARA Date 4/10/87 of ConversationDATE: December 15, 1973
TIME: 4:00 - 10:30 p.m.
PLACE: President's Office
Damascus

SUBJECT:

PARTICIPANTS:

President Assad of Syria
Foreign Minister Khaddam of Syria
Secretary Kissinger
Assistant Secretary Sisco
Interpreter (Syrian)

1973-12-15, Assad, Kissinger, Meeting

KISSINGER: This visit is important to peace in the area and our bilateral relations. Thank you for the polite, cordial reception.

ASSAD: Thank you, I am pleased to meet you. This is the first high level contact between our two countries in years.

KISSINGER: I am the first Secretary of State to come in 23 years, since Mr. Dulles.

ASSAD: The U.S. responsible for all this.

KISSINGER: The Foreign Minister pointed this out. (With a smile) The Foreign Minister was courteous, but I do not imply he was not strong in his views. Weakness is not one of the attributes of Syrian character.

ASSAD: We are glad our guests are pleased. Want to make clear the facts we believe in. Our relations can be built soundly by making certain facts clear.

KISSINGER: We must be honest with each other; we must be frank with one another. I'll tell exactly what I think. I'm not a professional diplomat.

NEA:JJSISCO

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ASSAD: I am pleased to meet you. I have heard from other Arab brothers that you are frank. Most recently I have heard from our brother in Egypt.

KISSINGER: I had good talk with Boumedienne.

ASSAD: President Boumedienne recently sent envoy to brief me on your talk.

KISSINGER: I knew Sadat was doing this. I told both of them they were free to tell you what I told them.

ASSAD: That is exactly what Boumedienne's envoy told us.

KISSINGER: We have no desire to divide the Arab people.

ASSAD: We have no interest in division either.

KISSINGER: I have told every Arab leader the same thing, and the Israelis too.

ASSAD: Although this is difficult, it is easier in the long run.

KISSINGER: It is a difficult road to travel. We can do it only if we have confidence in each other.

KISSINGER: How would the President like to proceed? What order?

ASSAD: The main problem is Israeli aggression. If these things you want to know about, anything, I would welcome any questions. If not, let's discuss the aggression. I want to stress our concern over US opinions and its stance. I may have an image of the US, yet direct talk gives clearer picture.

KISSINGER: There may be some bilateral problems, to discuss, but first I will discuss the principle subject. The principle subject is bringing peace and justice to the ME. I gave a lunch for Arab foreign ministers in N. Y. Before the war, I said I recognized conditions under which Arabs were living were intolerable and we have to do something

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KISSINGER CONTINUED: to change them. We would make an effort. American intentions were clear before the war. Nevertheless, war has created objective conditions which make hope possible. President Nixon understands this very well.

ASSAD: Some he does not understand.

KISSINGER: As a former Harvard professor, I tend to confuse complexity with profundity. I never use one when ten words are possible. It is opposite with the President Assad.

ASSAD: I can talk as much if I have the material. Dr. Kissinger has a greater volume of material.

KISSINGER: The truth is that I sometime speak beyond my material. The truth is that without your sacrifices and courage, I would have tried and failed. There would be no chance of a peaceful solution without the Syrian and Egyptian effort on the battle field. As result, objective conditions to make progress toward peace are better than they have been. There is a good possibility to bring peace. I can't be certain, I don't want to mislead you. We will make a major effort. We have succeeded in a number of other fields. Many countries can write the exact conditions they favor. They don't have to implement them. We are the only country that can bring about political progress without war. You are right in pointing out we have supported Israel. That is true. Candidly, there are strong domestic pressures in US in favor of support of Israel. We have to manage our domestic situation if we are to be helpful. Don't put us in a position where we have to take final positions, when what is required are first steps. People say if you can't get Israel to go back to the October 22 positions, you cannot do anything. If I had been stupid, I could have achieved this. That's not a problem. For me to waste capitol, to waste ammunition on this would not make sense, what is a few kilometers? Pressure on Israel must be for a bigger withdrawal. Israeli strategy is to get me to get them to say exactly where Israel is going, then all media and groups will start agitating

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KISSINGER CONTINUED: against me, or they will start a fight on small issues. Next time when I ask for something bigger they could accuse me of being anti-Israeli. That's why there has been no fight over the October 22 positions. We need some time to organize ourselves domestically. We have made progress in organizing ourselves at home. I have spent much of my time, with Congress. The press has also begun to turn. I told Sadat that after January 1 we will begin to show our hand. That promise remains in force. I repeat the same to you, I make the same promise to you.

How do we plan to proceed. First, we must get peace conference opened. Why? A peace conference provides legal front within which negotiating activity can go on. Real solutions will occur outside the conference. We must plan it as you make military campaigns. We must have agreement on a first phase, and then on second phase. We can use the conference to provide scenery and framework. What is first step? We are having difficulty getting the conference opened; but let's get back to substance.

On the Egyptian side, it is to get Israel to withdraw to something. This is significant psychologically; more important than any legal interpretation of 242. Israel should withdraw from the Canal region to the vicinity of the Mitla Pass. This would bring about a great psychological change everywhere in area. I have worked out some principles of a proposal which we hope to get approved after January. I will be glad to tell you, but Sadat may want to tell you.

I believe the same principles should be applied on Syrian side. There should be a first phase withdrawal from Syria. This will be harder since Israelis don't like you at all. That's my concern. I don't want the offensive. We can agree on some ideas on withdrawal. We are prepared to state this is first stage. It should be done during January. Then we should have discussions regarding the next stage. We are determined to make a major contribution to peace. We can discuss now withdrawal negotiations which should take place in January and which the US is prepared to support. Then there can be a discussion on the next phase.

We have a procedural problem with the Israelis, this is their willingness to agree to the US-USSR joint letter to

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KISSINGER CONTINUED: the SYG. Some say they should agree, some say not. It is in their interest to get into a fight with us because it would confuse American public opinion. Israel is not eager to get conference started because it will require sacrifices. For six years they have said they want direct negotiations because they knew you would say no.

We need to do two things; delay the conference until December 21, so I can talk to them, so they can be brought around. I talked to Sadat, and he agreed it makes no difference whether it is the 18th or 21st. What is your view?

ASSAD: Of course, the whole thing depends on general results of our talk today. This is not a new idea, we had it previously.

KISSINGER: Whether you come at all?

ASSAD: Our attitude as a whole our attendance at the conference depends on results of our talk.

KISSINGER: Your life won't be unfulfilled if it does not open on 18th. Is this impression correct? You don't dream about not going to Conference?

ASSAD: We are not dreaming about going to the conference. No measures have been taken as yet, even the delegation has not been formed. We have heard of conference, that's apparent; we do not know what the conference will be, what it will achieve.

When we accepted 338 we had an idea of what conference should be. We are only one of the parties. It is clear that there are many interpretations of the peace conference and 338. They give an ambiguous picture. In addition, it is not clear how US and USSR see the picture. What is the agreement between the US and the USSR?

KISSINGER: The USSR is a close ally of yours. They should help keep you informed. They always tell me what good friends you are. There is no agreement, except the conference. We'd rather make an agreement with you rather than the USSR make it with you.

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KISSINGER CONTINUED: They have made specific proposals and a plan for a peace settlement. I've avoided them. Because if it viable proposal, we can make it directly to the Arabs. Lots of people give us advice. We have to do some work with the Israelis and Soviet Union can't help us there. They have no influence with Israel. There is only one agreement: a conference, and we'll stay in touch with one another. There is no agreement on substance on any issue. If you are told anything else, then it isn't true. I told Boumediene that we do not recognize any sphere of influence in the Middle East. What will happen at the conference will depend on you and us. You can talk to the Soviets, we don't want influence Syrian-USSR relations. We will attempt to get separation of forces in the first phase, meaning some Israel withdrawal. This would be followed by another stage of withdrawal and discussions on security, borders, Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinians. Timing of when these items go on the agenda, we should do intelligently and agree among each other. This is my course. I recognize the Palestine movement has to be discussed, but not in first phase. Once the conference exists for a week, it would probably become impossible to end it. Whoever does so takes on a tremendous responsibility. At this point we should talk about complex issues. That is my idea of conference. The conference is a mechanism for moving from war to peace. Time has come to bring about peace. We've been told by the Soviets, you had agreed to go to conference. We'd assumed you'd be there. I didn't know the question was still open. They told us you told them you are coming.

ASSAD: This has never happened. This does not mean we are not attending. Last thing discussed were some observations; this is not important now.

KISSINGER: We must establish contact between us. If you want an interest section without diplomatic relations, then we can exchange messages directly. This would be useful at this stage.

ASSAD: It is true we have to seek doing things and urging direct contacts between us.

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KISSINGER: Otherwise we flying blind and might urge you to do things without knowing what you thought. Just a few people are enough. It is not satisfactory to tell the Italians what we want to tell you. On peace conference are you saying that since it no hardship for you not come on 18th, it is hardship for you not come on the 21st. Seriously, let us delay to the 21st if it does not make any difference to you.

ASSAD: Sadat has agreed?

KISSINGER. Yes.

ASSAD: Nodded affirmatively and with a big smile on his face.

KISSINGER: You have seen the letter to the SYG we intend to send to the participants. Our problem is Israelis don't want reference to the Palestinians in that letter, particularly because of their elections. Our view is that it would be a mistake to take up the Palestinian question now in the Conference. We recognize the problem cannot be solved without taking into account interests of the Palestinians. We are not opposed in principle to contact with the Palestinians. I already have an arrangement with the Moroccan King. There are so many Palestinian groups, we don't know who to deal with. You might advise us as to which might be an authentic group. We are willing to have contact with Palestinians at a level below me, say Sisco. I want to be in a position at present to say I've had no contact with them. As to any reference to the Palestinian question in the US-USSR letter, there are two ways to settle it. Every one said to me you would get angry if I raised the Palestine question with you. The Russians say they are afraid to raise it with you. I'll take my chances. I rely on Arab hospitality.

As to the sentence on Palestinian representation in the US-USSR letter, one way to avoid it is to say "the question of other participation will be decided at first stage of conference." I've told you our view of the Palestinian issue, and I will be glad to give you a note as to our view on that sentence. It is just a way to avoid a big fight for nothing so the conference can get started. You are free to tell them what I have said re Palestinians, but you must promise it will not be made public. Sadat is

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willing to have invitation go without any specific mention of the Palestinians. There was another idea which is bigger departure than this which Sadat accepted. This would be for the US-USSR to send out a simple invitation without any legalistic formulae. We have a text. This Sadat has agreed to, but the Russians didn't want to put it to you. You see everybody says that of all the Arabs, you Syrians are the most impossible to deal with. I will send you a letter of apology.

ASSAD: If US policy toward the Arabs and the Syrians is based on wrong intelligence reports, it backs up my view you are responsible for the break in relations.

KISSINGER: That's true. In September, intelligence reports described your military disposition as defensive. I called the Israeli Ambassador and asked if Syria was going to attack. He said impossible, not a chance. I didn't believe it. So I asked our own intelligence people. They said not a chance. Three times hard intelligence reports rejected the possibility. Since then, our intelligence predicts attacks every day. Does this happen in Syria too?

ASSAD: It is a mistake in estimating the situation. Perhaps someone sympathetic to Arabs.

KISSINGER: I don't hardly listen to the experts. If you can accept the first alternative, I don't have to bother you on the second alternative. Sadat has accepted the second alternative. I have not discussed the question of other participants with Sadat. Israelis would have to accept it.

ASSAD: During my meeting with Sadat I saw a text which said "question of the Palestinians" would be raised at first stage. There were two texts; the Conference would discuss the "question of Palestinians", the other text would decide matter at first phase.

KISSINGER: President Asad agreed to "question of"

ASSAD: Yes

KISSINGER: I appreciated it. This is new suggestion to avoid meaningless fight. Whether the Palestinians will be invited cannot be decided by a few words. If Israeli propaganda machine starts

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in US, Israelis will say terrorists are begging given recognition. I am willing for Sisco meet secretly with Palestinians. We are not trying to avoid problem, you could arrange a meeting if you wanted. Sentence would say "question of other participation," implies Palestinian representation.

ASSAD: Is it my turn to speak?

KISSINGER: Please express your views.

ASSAD: I welcome you Dr. Kissinger. I am pleased to be meeting with you. This will give each of us an opportunity to understand the other side correctly. It is important that this understanding be accurate. The meeting should be frank and clear and should help us with clear ideas. This is what we seek from this meeting.

As a professor you have spoken for fifty minutes. The President was an officer and officers are brief. As a military man, I take the place of politicians; professors take the place of politicians. (Kissinger interjected most professors cannot replace politicians.)

ASSAD: I recall a report of your talk with the Arabs in New York, you made the point that your country cannot seek miracles. Miracles require prophets. I do not have any illusions about miracles or facts being interpreted as illusions. Facts should be named as facts and stressed as facts, despite difficulties. Facts are one thing; miracles are another.

I want to make the following points:

First, we are not or never have been against the people of the United States. I have said this many times and in many places. There is much convincing evidence that we have to be against U.S. policy because it is against Syrian interests and Syrian just aspirations. Had it not been for U.S. assistance in support of Israel, Israel could not remain in occupation and force out the Palestinians from their lands since 1948 but we are not against the United States as a country or a people.

Secondly, our policy is decided in light of our national interests. We want to build our line in a completely independent way. Syria is non-aligned. It is an effective member of the non-aligned group and a member of the Bureau. It cannot be diverted, because it has deep convictions.

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KISSINGER: We will not always agree on policy. We believe Israel should survive. This is not the Syrian objective. Our interest is that we want Middle Eastern countries to be independent and with strong leadership which reflects the authentic will of the people. We prefer to deal with strong leaders. We are interested in national independence. We like to think you don't follow any other's line. What you have said is philosophically acceptable to us.

ASSAD: We find our policy reflects the hopes and aspirations of our own people. They support it. Otherwise we could not face a number of difficulties. What you say is important and useful. (He stressed this twice.)

Third, we in this area want to realize a just peace. We are serious. We want to build our own country. We need a just peace.

Fourth, there can be no peace with justice unless the Arab Palestinian question is settled. The Arab people of Palestine were driven out by force and are now living in camps. How can there be peace without settling their problem?

We believe the U.S. is the major factor to check the aggressive Israeli spirit. Simultaneously, the U.S. is also a major factor in encouraging the aggressive spirit. When we discuss the question of Israel or our fight against them, it is not out of hatred of Jews. I have said this often. This is an area of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. They have lived together for a very long time. We do not deny Israel by maltreating Jews. The Zionist movement by their attitudes has affected their lives in countries they live. Nevertheless, we view the citizens as citizens of Islam. Even when the Jews had their normal life in our country, Israel tried to force them to take action contrary to their interests. For example, the two and one-half year campaign regarding the Syrian Jews is untrue. The biggest store in Syria is owned by a Jew. The most famous pediatrician was a Jewish doctor and most of his patients were Moslems.

KISSINGER: There is no question that the Jews have lived together with the Moslems in peace for a long time. I agree.

ASSAD: We recently seized spies for Israel, one Jew, one Moslem. We have full evidence against them. About a year and one-half ago,

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there were certain questions regarding some Jews accused of taking money out of the country. Many citizens in our country were condemned under this law. But two Jewish women were given special amnesty because of their Jewish faith. We are against Zionism as an expansionist move but we are not against Jews or the Jewish religion.

The next point I want to make is that no leaders of a regime can give up any sovereignty. We cannot compromise one inch of territory. It should all be restored. Within the framework of these points, Israel does not want peace and cannot realize her dream without the U.S. Israel talks about secure borders. The invalidity of this theory is obvious. Are there secure borders in these important times? Modern weapons show there are no real secure borders. This theory is invalid.

If we are to suppose there are such secure borders, history shows we are in the need of secure borders if any one. Why should secure borders be at the expense of Syria. Let secure borders be at Galilee if any where. Under what logic should secure borders be at the expense of the population of Golan. Why should the line of danger be closer to Damascus than Tel Aviv? The distance from the '67 border to Damascus is 80 kilometers; the distance from the '67 border to Tel Aviv is 135 kilometers. So why should they want secure borders. If the idea behind it is to keep danger away from both capitals, why not?

KISSINGER: You will be in trouble if they move their capital to Haifa.

ASSAD: In that case we will move our capital to Koneitra. As to Egypt, we have to take into account its rate of population and that it will soon be 50 million.

KISSINGER: I am not condemning it. I made a joke.

ASSAD: Some people may answer that these are the realities that Israel occupies the territory and has force. Of course, in this context we can only take lessons from history. We are also guided by the objective analysis of the past and the future. We conclude that the future is not for the logic of Israel. Israel today is in the Golan Heights. Maybe some day we will be somewhere beyond Golan. Israel would be in another place if it had not been for the U.S. in this recent war. Israel has made penetrations and pockets, but they have not gained any military advantage.

KISSINGER. I agree.

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