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By NARA Date 4/10/88

WASHINGTON

SECRET/NODIS**774-9-15, Assad, Kissinger, Shihabi**MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION**PARTICIPANTS:**

Brigadier Hikmat al-Shihabi, Syrian Army,
Chief of Staff for Intelligence
Dr. Sabah Kabbani, Chief of Syrian Interests
Section

Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, Secretary of State
Joseph J. Sisco, Under Secretary of State for
Political Affairs
Ellsworth Bunker, Ambassador at Large
Alfred L. Atherton, Jr., Assistant Secretary-
Designate for Near Eastern and South Asian
Affairs

Harold S. Saunders, NSC Senior Staff
Camille Nowfel, Interpreter
Peter W. Rodman, NSC Staff *PWR*

TIME AND DATE:

Saturday, April 13, 1974
10:40 a.m. - 12:23 p.m.

PLACE:

The Secretary's Office
Department of State

[Photographers were admitted briefly as Secretary Kissinger greeted Brigadier Shihabi in his office.]

[After the photographers departed, the Secretary introduced the members of the American side. The reasons for the large number, he said, were two: First, his own colleagues did not fully trust him. Second, decisions in this conversation would be taken by majority vote. "I'll probably lose," he added.]

Secretary Kissinger: What I thought we should do is review the evolution of where we are with the Israelis, and where we should go, with great precision.

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Brigadier Shinnabe

Secretary Kissinger: There are a number of things to keep in mind about the Israelis. In the Arab world I know there is the view that the Israelis are terribly clever and everything is thought out. Our experience with the Israelis is that it is a very divided government, with about ten Cabinet members who think they should be Prime Minister. In fact Israel is one of the few countries in the world where you insult a man by offering him a Cabinet position -- because he usually thinks he is entitled to more. It is the opposite of the State Department, where all my State Department friends know I am unqualified for the Foreign Service and the only way I could get a job in this building is as Secretary of State. [Laughter]

What this means is that on almost any issue in Israel it is almost impossible to have a rational debate on the overall strategy. The more general your idea is, the more you unite all the factions against it. Secondly -- I want to give you an explanation of our strategy, then we can get into specifics -- it is no secret that there are pressure groups in this country who work together with the Israelis. What we have to prevent is a coalescence of all these forces.

Therefore our strategy with these negotiations is to move one step at a time. We ask the Israelis to make one decision; then we ask them to make another decision; then we move them step by step towards the objective.

Let me explain the Egyptian case, as I began to do yesterday. We had no contact with the Syrians at all at that time. We asked Israel to discuss with us the October 22 line. They absolutely refused, and I received on one weekend thirty phone calls from Members of Congress who -- at that time they said we were doing it with the Russians. And also a newspaper campaign started. So I decided not to fight that issue right away, and to get myself organized first. By the end of November they were willing to discuss disengagement. By mid-December they had willing to leave the West Bank of the Canal -- you remember they had a bridgehead -- but only if all the territory they left were turned over to the UN. We rejected that. Then they said half the territory could go to Egypt. As late as when I went to Aswan the first time, they said they were willing to give Egypt two-thirds of the territory on the West Bank but they had to have the bridgehead across the Canal.

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So it was not until the last three days of the negotiation that we got them to go back to where they did.

It is the same with Syria. This you have to understand.

Brigadier Shihabi: As you have pointed out, Mr. Secretary, moving forward towards the objective step by step may be the best way.

Secretary Kissinger: I will show you the latest proposal; I will first explain their first proposal.

Brigadier Shihabi: I would like to point out that time is of the essence in this respect.

Secretary Kissinger: I agree with you. And our intention is that I plan to come to the Middle East during the last days of April. I will fix a date after you have left. Then within a week . . . I hope on my next trip to come to a final settlement. By May 10th. Maybe earlier. At any rate, when I go to the Middle East, I hope we will come to a conclusion. And I would travel back and forth between Damascus and Israel for as long as is necessary. Unless President Asad wants to meet in Palmyra.

Brigadier Shihabi: Any place you would like to meet, we would be pleased to arrange for you, Mr. Secretary.

What I wanted to point out with respect to time is, if we keep the situation as frozen as it has been, we are likely to bring about that what has been achieved might be misconstrued in a way jeopardizing to all that has been achieved.

Secretary Kissinger: But in two weeks? I plan to leave two weeks from today or tomorrow.

Brigadier Shihabi: This is good, Mr. Secretary. But I wanted to point it out because of the importance of time.

Secretary Kissinger: We need two weeks. I would like to have the situation prepared once I am out there. I do not want them to have me sitting in Jerusalem looking impotent. We will leave during the weekend two

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weeks from now. And I will go certainly to Israel before Damascus, to get their [proposals].

I will of course keep you closely informed. Also I will keep you informed of any conversations we have with anybody bearing on this subject. And we will not discuss anything with any Arab country that you do not know about -- concerning Syria. Because it is not in our interest to create any misunderstandings in the Arab world.

Let me explain where we were in the Israeli position.

When I was in Israel -- when was it? -- in the first part of March, their proposal was that they would give up half of the salient, and the other half was to be put under the United Nations. And that no civilians could return into the area. So we did not even present this to President Asad, because I did not want to insult him.

We then said that, one, whatever territory they withdraw from, the civilians should return. So that is a condition as far as we are concerned, and I assume it is a condition as far as you are concerned.

Second, we could not ask you to accept restrictions on your side that they would not accept on their side. In other words, there had to be an equitable arrangement.

Thirdly, we told them they had to make a much more substantial withdrawal than just part of the salient.

Then they sent Dayan over here, and presented a plan that accepted two of our proposals. So I am just showing you there is progress. One, they agreed that civilians can return to whatever area they withdrew from, and Syrian civil administration can return. And second, the restrictions on their side of the line would be the same as on your side. And they gave us a line further back than the first one. In fact, it is almost the October 6 line, not exactly. I will show it to you in a minute.

I then had a private talk with Dayan -- what I say, you know, should go only to the President, because it would be very unfortunate if it got into the newspapers -- and I told him in my judgment it was impossible for

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President Asad to settle for the October 6 line, and there had to be some change beyond the October 6 line. And I told him we would be quite sympathetic to this point of view, but others, like Rabin, are opposed.

So after I returned I wrote a letter to the Prime Minister in which I made this point very strongly. And she replied and did not reject it. She did not accept it either. But they know that when I go out there I am not going to accept this line.

We have to move these things [the line] further over. But the civilians returning, Syrian civil administration, and symmetrical restrictions -- that we have achieved.

You know the problem for them is very difficult. Because for them the Golan is a much more emotional issue than the Sinai. So maybe if I get blown up in the Middle East, it will be in Jerusalem, not in Damascus. [Laughter]

Brigadier Shihabi: We are aware of the fact that security measures have to be

Secretary Kissinger: I meant it as a joke.

Brigadier Shihabi: You may not be concerned about your safety as a person, but in view of your importance to the world at large, every measure will be taken.

Secretary Kissinger: I will have a difficult time. Because the person whom we relied on, Dayan, has been severely weakened. And the Prime Minister -- she is not very imaginative, but once she makes up her mind, she can be quite courageous -- has also been weakened. Eban has no influence. Allon lives in a settlement near the Syrian border, so he is . . . not very fond of Syria. [They smile.] I want to be realistic. The Chief of Staff, who was very helpful on the Egyptian side, has just been dismissed.

But that is my problem. I am determined to produce a settlement. I have always told your President that I do not think I can achieve the line he proposed. But I will achieve the maximum line that is possible. And

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it will have to be beyond the October 6 line. And it has to include Quneitra.

So let me show you what they have given us. You should not get too upset [laughter] because

[They get up and go over to the table to examine the Israeli map brought by Dayan on March 29. Tab A]

They did not tell me I could pass this over to you, so we will just use it for discussion.

[Pointing out on the map:] This is the October 6 line. They want to make this the UN zone. Civilians can return up to this line [including the UN zone] and Syrian civil administration can be introduced here.

Then they accepted the same basic principle as with the Egyptians, that is, various zones, with limited forces. For example, in this zone there will be two infantry battalions, 60 tanks, and 3,000 men. And the same here [on the opposite side]. In this zone -- which is the same distance on both sides -- there can be that many [indicates numbers in table at the bottom of the map].

I told them these forces seemed very large to me for up there. They told me they were prepared to negotiate. They do not insist on these figures. At any rate, they accept the principle that the figures should be the same on both sides.

As I said, this zone will have to be moved here, and that, of course, would move the separation zones over here [westward]. What they did here [in the southern sector] is to take the old demilitarized zone; they want to put the UN into the old demilitarized zone, but Syrian civil administration.

I have the impression that President Asad would not accept this -- or am I wrong? [Laughter]

I am not even going to present this.

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Brigadier Shihabi: I believe it would be preferable not to present this to him.

Secretary Kissinger: I won't present it to him. The thing to remember about this is not whether it is acceptable -- it is not acceptable -- but that it is the first proposal that one can even discuss, in terms of ideas, for example, the symmetry of limitations. Now the problem is to move the line over here [to the west]. Then the size of forces, and so forth, we should discuss later.

President Asad told me he agreed to the idea that forces should be limited on both sides of the line. Or did I misunderstand him?

Brigadier Shihabi: In principle, the question is discussable and negotiable, and some settlement along these lines can be reached.

Secretary Kissinger: I agree. I think these figures are ridiculous. But it is up to you. I personally do not think they need one infantry division and one armor division in this zone. And I said this to Dayan, and I had the impression that he is prepared to lower this.

Your problem is that you scared them so much on October 6 that they are no longer so self-confident. [Laughter].

In that week -- it was my first week here -- the intelligence people in the State Department, the Sunday before October 6, told me about your deployment of tanks. To me the deployment of your tanks looked like you were getting ready to attack. So I asked the Israelis, and they said, "Impossible. The Syrians can never attack. It is impossible." I asked them three more times that week, and each time they told me it could not happen.

So that was quite a shocking event. This is their present concept, but I will not present this concept in Damascus.

Brigadier Shihabi: As much as this plan will not be presented, I see no need to go into a detailed discussion of it. But my first impression is that it does not represent a real disengagement between the forces of both sides. It does not indicate a desire on the other side for real withdrawal and consequently a real move in the direction of peace.

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In addition, this plan seems to impose a relinquishing of sovereignty over more areas of our own territory. The defense of Damascus would be weakened. [He points to the limitation line farthest to the east.]

Secretary Kissinger: This line has to do with missiles. This line [the other] refers to forces.

Brigadier Shihabi: A plan like this can by no manner or means be acceptable. And you are right, Mr. Secretary, it would be pointless to present it to the Syrian Government.

Secretary Kissinger: I understand the line is unacceptable too.

Brigadier Shihabi: Yes, it is not acceptable in any respect -- because it is not disengagement, it is relinquishing sovereignty and it is not a real move to peace.

Secretary Kissinger: But there are two problems -- one is the line and the other is these zones.

Brigadier Shihabi: Also, the lines are very far from being acceptable.

Secretary Kissinger: What I want to understand is this concept -- even if the lines are moved over here -- of limited armament like on the Egyptian side -- whether that concept is acceptable.

Brigadier Shihabi: Yes, the concept of defining areas on both sides equal in size and limiting the numbers of forces in these parallel areas is acceptable.

Secretary Kissinger: It is acceptable.

Brigadier Shihabi: It is acceptable in so far as negotiating this point is concerned.

Secretary Kissinger: Yes, we are not talking about numbers. And this concept of two zones, with light and limited forces, on the Egyptian model?

Brigadier Shihabi: It would be better, rather than two zones, [to have] one zone, in which there would be a reduction of forces on the two sides.

Secretary Kissinger: I would have to discuss this with the Israelis. They think more along the Egyptian lines. You think more in terms of one zone.

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Brigadier Shihabi: Yes.

Secretary Kissinger: The next question is what is your view about a UN force? With the understanding that Syria would administer the civil administration in that area. It would be Syrian sovereignty but a UN force.

Brigadier Shihabi: As you realize, Mr. Secretary, the best guarantee of peace is to have a real desire and move in the direction of peace.

Secretary Kissinger: Right.

Brigadier Shihabi: The Golan area differs in many respects from the Sinai area.

[Everyone is seated.]

Secretary Kissinger: I don't think looking at the map will improve his disposition. [Laughter]

Brigadier Shihabi: It differs in terms of terrain. And Golan is a populated area. There are 273 populated towns there. The population is between 170,000 and 180,000. It is small in terms of area. All these factors make it necessary to look at it differently from the Sinai with regard to the presence of an international force. In our estimate, the presence of UN observers would be more appropriate as far as the Golan is concerned.

Secretary Kissinger: It would ease matters greatly if we could have a UN force there. But it need not be extremely large.

[To Sisco:] Have we ever made an estimate of what is needed? There are 8,000 people in the Sinai, but that is a much longer line.

Under Secretary Sisco: No, we have not.

Brigadier Shihabi: In our opinion, Mr. Secretary, as long as either of the parties does not have a desire for peace, the presence of any emergency force, whatever the size, is useless.

Secretary Kissinger: I agree that if either side wants to go to war, it can go to war.

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Brigadier Shihabi: The nature of the area, the fact it is populated, and third, the fact that the Syrian people are raised in such a way that they are not willing to have a foreign force on their territory, make them unwilling to accept a foreign force there. Our view is that our desire for peace is the best guarantee, and the presence of an international force would, I believe, in our country create a complication that would be unnecessary. As far as observers are concerned, we might increase their numbers, increase their effectiveness.

Secretary Kissinger: Everything is a problem, believe me. I have negotiated with the Israelis. At one point they had a five-hour Cabinet meeting over thirty guns. And you are not exactly easy to deal with, either. [They smile.] You did not survive for 2,000 years with various foreign pressures on you, by being easy to get along with. [Laughter]

But I respect a fierce sense of independence. That is a good guarantee of stability in the long term. [Shihabi nods yes.] Because countries that have a strong sense of independence towards one side have it towards everybody.

Honestly, I have to tell you, I used to think of Syria as a Soviet satellite. [Laughter] I am serious. I don't think you are good satellite material.

Brigadier Shihabi: As I pointed out last night, it has always been our desire that our relations with all peoples, particularly with the big nations, the United States and the Soviet Union, should be based on friendship and mutual respect. During the period when we had no bilateral relations between us, we always felt that was an abnormal situation. During the period when we had relations with the Soviet Union, and there were people who were not really aware of the situation as it was in Syria, we sought to make it known to everyone that Syria was very concerned about its sovereignty and self-respect. It is no secret to you, Mr. Secretary, and to your colleagues who are aware of what was going on, it was a period when we were under a great deal of pressure. But in spite of all the pressure and all the difficulties we have had, we have never lost sight of our independence and our sovereignty. Just as fiercely and strongly as we resisted such alliances as the Baghdad Pact, we just as strongly resisted the creation of other pacts.

Secretary Kissinger: I am aware of this. We recognize Syria is conducting its own policy. We also recognize that it is no accident that

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Damascus has through so many centuries been the center of Arab nationalism, and that is not without its meaning to us. And basically, the only long-term basis for a long-term relationship is with people who have their own self-respect. They are more difficult to deal with, but they are more reliable.

Our own view on the Syrian-American relationship is that if we now succeed in this disengagement, we are prepared, at whatever pace you wish to set, to accelerate normalization of our relationship. And I frankly believe it will help the further evolution of the peace efforts if in the American mind the view of Syria is improved as a country with which we have better relations.

Brigadier Shihabi: On the basis of my personal desire, as well as on my experience and knowledge, there is such a desire on the part of our Government at all levels.

Secretary Kissinger: President Asad has said this to me.

Brigadier Shihabi: There is a real desire to further relations between us, to further cooperation between our two countries. As far as a desire to accelerate this is concerned, I am going to convey what you just said to the President.

Secretary Kissinger: We won't press you; we just want you to know we are prepared to accept whatever initiative you wish to make.

Brigadier Shihabi: We appreciate your position in this respect, Mr. Secretary. But as you appreciate, any move in this direction would have to be the outcome of the evolution of a new set of circumstances that our people could understand as appropriate.

Secretary Kissinger: We understand you have your domestic necessities. We just want you to know we are willing. We also want you to know we have no special favorites among the Arab countries, and we are prepared to do with any Arab country what we are prepared to do with any other. So President Asad can assume, observing what we do with other Arab countries, that the same is true in principle with Syria. And you will see we will be improving our economic relations with Egypt over the next few months, and we are prepared, whenever you are ready, to do

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the same with you -- but you determine the pace -- and be helpful in your economic development. Because in the long term, that is where the hope of the area resides, to fulfill the aspirations of your people. My colleagues told me of the very interesting talk you had last night of the possibilities of the economic development of Syria. Once peace is achieved in the area, there are really good projects.

Brigadier Shihabi: This is very true.

Secretary Kissinger: Now, I am having lunch with Gromyko. I just want to tell you what I am telling him -- with your approval. Actually it is social; his wife will be there, and my wife, so not much business will be done. But social conversation is not a Soviet specialty. [Laughter] So we will probably get to business eventually.

I will say I presented certain Israeli ideas, which we do not support. And that I will continue efforts with Israel to produce a line more in keeping with Syrian necessities. I will not discuss the problem of limited armaments or the problem of the return of the Syrian population. I don't object to your saying this to them if you want to. But I, if you agree, would like to know what you tell them, because I would like to tell them more or less the same thing.

You have not been in contact with them here.

Brigadier Shihabi: There has been no such contact and I have no intention to make any such contact. Inasmuch as you have pointed out you do not support the Israeli plan which has been presented, and you will not present it to President Asad on your visit to Syria, therefore I feel there is no need to enter into a detailed discussion of this subject with the Soviets.

Secretary Kissinger: My idea, though, if you agree, is to leave the idea that we are making some progress, so they do not start a propaganda campaign. [Shihabi nods agreement.]

Let me give you an honest judgment of what the progress is -- this is for you, not for the Soviets. The progress is return of the Syrian civil administration and population. Second, that Syrian forces can return to the areas vacated, except perhaps to the demilitarized zone between the two sides. And that Israeli forces will be thinned out in the same propor-

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tion as the Syrian forces. But since there are no Syrian forces now in the areas being vacated, the objective result is an augmentation of your forces and a thinning out of theirs.

So the three components will be: a movement forward of Syrian forces, a withdrawal of Israeli forces, a thinning out of Israeli forces beyond the line of withdrawal, and return of Syrian civilians to the vacated territories. Those are the positive elements that have already been achieved. What has not yet been satisfactorily achieved is the line. And the United States agrees it should be beyond the October 6 line. And we are putting great pressure on the Israeli Government to go along with it.

So this would be where we are now. Therefore what remains to be done when I come to the Middle East is to move the line. And to agree on the disposition of forces. On both sides.

I hope I am not like the man who during the war said the way to deal with the submarine menace is to heat the oceans and boil the submarines to the surface. Someone said, how do you do that? He said: I have given you the idea; the technical execution is up to you. [Laughter]

This is what we have to achieve.

I would not come out if I did not think it could be achieved. What will be necessary when I come out, quite frankly, is this: I do not think extreme flexibility is the characteristic of Syrian negotiators. [Laughter]

Brigadier Shihabi: Thanks for the compliment. [Laughter]

Secretary Kissinger: So we should not let the details stand in the way of the accomplishment. I don't have anything specific in mind.

Brigadier Shihabi: As a result of your contacts with Syrian officials, and particularly with the President, I am sure you are aware of our desire to move objectively in the direction of peace.

Secretary Kissinger: I am a great admirer of your President.

Brigadier Shihabi: Our desire for a just peace is an objective and durable desire. Whatever discussions we have are based on this desire and on our capability of moving in this direction.

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Secretary Kissinger: Let me deal with two other problems, with regard to Soviet relations. President Asad said we should reach an agreement in principle first, and the details could be worked out in the military committee. Frankly, I believe when we work out the principles we will also work out the details. Because it is hard to separate them.

But we can work out a ceremony in which the Soviets can have standing, and so forth.

I think once we have discussed the line and size of forces, there is not much more to negotiate. But I will follow your wishes on this. But it may not be so easy to split this in two parts. You do not have to make a decision now.

Brigadier Shihabi: I will convey this to the President.

Secretary Kissinger: If we reach that point, it will be a happy problem!

Second, as you know, the Soviet Union is eager to have it appear as if there is Soviet participation. I may agree to meet with Gromyko in Geneva on my way to the Middle East. I want you -- I want your President -- to know that this will be a symbolic meeting, done for Soviet self-respect. Nothing will be discussed there beyond what I have told you I will discuss. We will negotiate with President Asad directly, not through another country.

I do not suppose you would object to a meeting in Geneva?

Brigadier Shihabi: I do not think so but in any case I will convey this to the President. But I do not think there is any objection.

Secretary Kissinger: We have informed your President after every meeting and we will be very meticulous about this. And in fact I will send him a letter tonight thanking him for sending you and about some of our discussions. And I hope you will convey to him my warm personal regards, as well as my gratitude for sending you. [Brigadier Shihabi nods yes.]

Will I see you in Damascus?

Brigadier Shihabi: I hope I will have the privilege of seeing you. It has been an honor for me to be sent here as the representative of my Government. I am happy to return to the United States, after a long absence. I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss these things with you.

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