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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

1973-11-16, Assad, Ortona
Diplomacy

DATE: November 16, 1973

SUBJECT: Contacts with Syria

PARTICIPANTS:

H. E. Egidio ORTONA, Ambassador of Italy
 Giancarlo CARRARA-CAGNI, Counselor, Embassy of Italy
 Rodger P. Davies, Deputy Assistant Secretary, NEA
 Charles K. Johnson, EUR/WE
 David A. Korn, NEA/ARN

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Ambassador Ortona said he appreciated being received on such short notice but he was under instructions from Rome to deliver a message urgently concerning Syria. Mr. Sisco's talks in Rome were very satisfactory. It was agreed during Mr. Sisco's visit that if Rome had any thoughts or suggestions on how to proceed in the Middle East negotiations, it should make them known to the United States. That is what Rome wanted to do now in regard to Syria, having in mind Italy's role as protecting power for U. S. interests in Syria.

Syria is experiencing a moment of frustration, Ambassador Ortona said. President Asad is inclined toward moderation but there are various forces at work which could prevent Asad from cooperating in the peace effort; the Army, the radicals and others seem to be unhappy with the cease-fire and to favor more fighting. Asad wants to do what Sadat did but is torn between various segments of Syrian society.

The important thing, Ambassador Ortona said, is that the Arab countries will hold a summit meeting on November 26. Italy is concerned that this could push Asad into the camp of the radicals. Ambassador Ortona said he was instructed by Rome to suggest that the State Department do something before November 26

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-2-

to intensify the dialogue with Syria, so as to prevent Syria's taking a radical position in the November 26 meeting. Italy is ready to give any assistance the United States desires, Ambassador Ortona said, and the Italians have reason to believe that an intensification of the dialogue between Syria and the U.S. would be welcomed by Asad. Ambassador Ortona then gave Mr. Davies a paper entitled "talking points" which he said included the substance of his instructions (attached).

Mr. Davies said that as Mr. Sisco had said in Rome we have indicated to the Syrians that we are ready to have a continuing dialogue. Secretary Kissinger has met with the Syrian Vice Foreign Minister and we have been in contact with the Syrians through their UN Mission in New York. We are aware of the Syrians' ability to play a spoiling role and understand the need to keep a dialogue with Syria going and to develop something better than the contact we have in New York. We are also very much aware of the danger that the Arabs could talk themselves into an intransigent position in Algiers, as they did in Khartoum in 1967.

Ambassador Ortona said all Italy wanted to do was to bring its concern over the possible impact on Syria of the November 26 meeting and to offer its services to the United States in intensifying the dialogue with Syria. Mr. Davies expressed appreciation and said we are grateful for the helpful role Italy has played in Syria. For its part the United States has always been anxious to have better relations with Syria. We think that diplomatic relations should exist between all states, regardless of differences of the opinion there might be between them.

Ambassador Ortona suggested that the Italians might just pass along to the Syrians the idea that the U.S. would be ready to have diplomatic relations. Mr. Davies said he personally thought the USG would welcome diplomatic relations with Syria, though of course a formal decision on this would have to be made at a higher level.

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TALKING POINT

1. The Syrian Government has painfully accepted the cease-fire, facing considerable opposition from political exponents, from public opinion and from within its own Armed Forces. Nevertheless, Syria might eventually take part in the Peace Conference, agreeing beforehand to implement the cease-fire in the Golan Heights. But for the time being both sides are actively engaged in establishing fortifications whilst a continuous flow of weapons is being sent by Syria to the present lines. Moreover, one must not underestimate pressures of an extremist nature that the Damascus Government may encounter from some Arab Governments, all the more so since some representatives have recently visited Damascus.
2. Under these conditions the prospects for an inter-Arab summit meeting in Algiers on November 26 cannot but give rise to certain preoccupations. The delusion and isolation felt by Syria may combine with extremist ideas of numerous other Arab countries, reducing the possibilities of the efforts made by those countries which Damascus still considers well-disposed towards reasonable negotiations.
3. It is certain that if the contacts already established with Syria could be intensified, this might lead her to an agreement to implement the cease-fire through the disengagement of the conflicting parties and intervention from the U.N. Emergency Force. As was the case with the agreement on the Canal, this might lay the path for the gradual solution of the problem of Israeli prisoners of war

in Syria. Were this to happen before the 26th of this month, Assad would find himself in Algiers in a position very similar to Sadat's: otherwise he might be conditioned by radical and extremist forces.

4. For our part, given Italy's special position in protecting American interests in Syria, we are willing to facilitate a dialogue with Damascus, in the belief that Syria would not be insensible to an American move which would give her the feeling of not being so isolated at this time. Nor do we think, on the strength of some information which has reached the Italian Government, that she would be contrary to agreeing upon an armistice on the Golan Heights similar to the one which is under way in the Canal Zone.