

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

MEMCON

MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telephone Conversation with President Hafiz al-Assad of Syria (U)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
President Hafiz al-Assad
Notetaker: David Welch
Interpreter: Shukran Kamal

DATE, TIME AND PLACE: April 23, 1990, 1:31 - 1:59 p.m.
The Oval Office

President Bush initiated the call.

The President: Mr. President, I'm George Bush. How are you?
(U)

President Assad: Greetings to you, Mr. President. Thank you very much. How are you? (U)

President Bush: Mr. President, let me say first of all that I am pleased to have this opportunity to talk to you personally. You're very kind to take my call, and I hope that in the future you will not hesitate to call me if there is something you would like to discuss. (U)

President Assad: Thank you. I'm very happy to talk with you. I will speak to you in the future if there are matters that would be helped if we were to talk together. (U)

President Bush: It is good that our first conversation comes at a moment of joy for Robert Polhill and his family. Mr. President, I want you to know how sincerely thankful I am for your personal efforts for the release of Mr. Polhill. I know that this could not have been accomplished without Syria, and I am grateful. I have said this publicly. In my public remarks, I have also signalled my appreciation of Iran's role, although I am not sure I fully understand what that was. But if they did play a helpful role, then I'm grateful. (U)

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President Bush: In my last letter to you, I wrote of the importance of the hostages to me and to my country. I just know that you took my words seriously, as demonstrated by recent events. I realize that you have the other innocent Western hostages on your mind, so I think you will understand that my thoughts have now turned to them. I would like to close this sad chapter. With mutual respect and cooperation, I think you and I can work together to do this. I have said that goodwill begets goodwill, and I mean it. As I hope was clear in my messages to you, I truly believe in the possibility of better U.S.-Syrian relations. I wanted you to hear that directly from me. I am willing to work toward this goal, with fairness and objectivity on my part. Your recent role in the release of Polhill has increased the chances for success; I believe that the chances are brighter now. And now, sir, I would be delighted to hear from you. (S)

President Assad: I share your pleasure about the release of the western hostage yesterday. I was very happy that we were able to make a contribution to this noble, humanitarian effort. Syrian officials and citizens were following all the events on the television news, regarding Polhill and his release. We appreciate the importance of the hostages question and their situation -- including Polhill but also the others. We want this situation to end. We undoubtedly realize and we hope that you recall the efforts we made in the past to obtain the release of other hostages. (U)

President Bush: I do indeed, and with gratitude. (U)

President Assad: In every instance, we felt happy to offer our assistance. Of course, I read with care your letter. The letter strengthened the impression I had of the importance of the hostage question, not just to you but to the U.S. people and to the world. I agree that we must work together to get this matter to the best resolution. I also want to affirm that with regard to your comment on Iran, Iran played a very important role and we cooperated closely with Iran. Iran and Syria have been looking into the matter for some time. We sensed on their part earnestness and sincerity regarding this matter. An agreement between us was necessary to achieve successfully the result that was achieved. I wanted to make this clear to you, Mr. President, so that the picture would be clear to all of us at this time. I repeat that we will work with you to alleviate the pain of the families and to relieve it altogether. (S)

President Bush: I'm convinced that a new day is possible -- at least from the American standpoint -- with Iran if all the hostages are out. We can then open a new book and turn a fresh leaf. But we must get them out. I have said that goodwill

begets goodwill, and I was serious when I said that, but I cannot operate on a piecemeal basis. I cannot relax as long as one American is held. When no Americans are held, then relations will be instantly improved. You can pass this on through your Foreign Minister or others. (Ø)

President Assad: That's true. Our conversation between us now is an important conversation. It will help all the parties, especially Iran. I have my impression and I know that you are serious when you speak to me about these matters. The spirit and atmosphere of this conversation will help us and those who will be working with us in achieving what we want to achieve. This matter requires patience, persistence and wisdom. We all must have these three requirements, but the most important thing is that we should persevere. (Ø)

President Bush: We appreciate the cooperation of your Foreign Minister, Mr. Shara', who personally helped and was very cooperative with our Ambassador. I hope you will convey my respects and gratitude to him. I know Secretary Baker sent him a message. If you don't mind, please tell him I noted his role and I'm grateful. (U)

President Assad: Thank you. The Foreign Minister informed me this morning that Secretary Baker had called him last night. Actually, the Foreign Minister was very delighted with the release of Polhill. There is no doubt that he has the enthusiasm to continue his efforts in this matter. (U)

President Bush: Thank you for the time that you gave to Senator Dole and his colleagues. They gave me a debriefing of their visit and their meeting with you, and I thank you for seeing them. (U)

President Assad: Thank you. Senator Dole left a good impression in Syria. The impressions and good feelings he left were different than the impressions and feelings left by other U.S. official visitors. I hope that his views are not far from your views. (U)

President Bush: He's a good man. He knows you have an important role to play in the quest for an overall peace in the Middle East and Dole made that clear to me after he met with you. (U)

President Assad: I'm certain that Senator Dole conveyed the spirit of our talk. We agreed regarding the importance of peace in the area. We also agreed on the interest of all parties inside and outside the area to reach a comprehensive peace settlement. Peace cannot be complete unless it is comprehensive, and there will be no stability without comprehensive peace. (U)

President Bush: I understand. I wish you well, Mr. President, and I have great gratitude to you for the significant role you played in freeing this man. If you have any ideas on how to get the others out, I would welcome hearing from you directly or through Ambassador Djerejian, my able Ambassador in whom I have full confidence. (S)

President Assad: God willing. Thank you. I hope we will talk again in the future and I hope that we will achieve more success in the future. (U)

President Bush: Thanks. I would like to wish you and the Syrian people a blessed 'Id holiday. (U)

President Assad: If necessary, we will continue our communications through the channels you have suggested. I wish you good health. Good-bye. (U)