

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506

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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: President's Meeting with President Hafez Assad of Syria (U)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Ambassador Djerejian
Government Sununu
General Scowcroft
Richard Haass
P. Wolfowitz
Shuckran Kamal, Interpreter

President Assad
Mr. Farouk Sharaa, Foreign Minister
Mr. Walid Mualen, Syrian Ambassador to the U.S.
Dr. Abdal-Raouf Al-Kasm, Member, Regional
Commandment of Baath Party
Mr. Wahib Fadel, Minister of Presidential Affairs
Mr. Yousef Shakour, Vice Minister, Foreign Affairs
Adnan Barnieh, Interpreter

DATE, TIME November 23, 1990; 7:20 - 9:25 p.m.
AND PLACE: Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza, Geneva, Switzerland

President Bush: I don't know everything about you, but I do know something. I know you like a frank and direct full exchange. I'm the same way. What I propose is that I go through my notes, try to keep it short, and then turn the floor over to you for anything you want to say. I apologize for the brevity of the meeting, but I'm going on to Mexico after our return to Washington. I would like to suggest that the last 30 minutes of our meeting we have a private discussion. (P)

The very fact of this meeting is important. In my first letter to you, I mentioned that we could go down the path of better relations, but that only results would move us forward. It is, therefore, important to review where we are and what we can do in the period ahead. (P)

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First, you must know, and I want to convince you, that we do not seek to harm Syrian national interests, and we have to tell you that I regret the anti U.S. media campaign in Syria that came out at the end of October. If my interpretation is wrong, please tell me. The first agenda item I have, and I have four items, is on the Gulf. I know you agree with us that Saddam Hussein has to leave Kuwait unconditionally, unrewarded, and that partial solutions are no solutions at all. Sanctions are working. I would be very interested in knowing your views on their effectiveness. There is no evidence that sanctions will cause him to turn 180 degrees and change course and get out. I am concerned about his CW, BW and nuclear capabilities. We will have in place very soon a credible superb military option-- massive air power against which he could not stand for ten minutes, and we will have the best tank force that exists. These are our best forces, not some second rate reserves. I do not want to use that force. I do not want to kill one Iraqi child. But I am more determined than ever that Saddam Hussein must go out, and I hope it is peaceful. If not, force will be used. We are taking steps to add new troops, and we are talking about 400,000. (S)

President Assad: Now in place? (U)

President Bush: We have 250,000 now and our air power already out-numbers him now. We are going to the UN Security Council for another resolution. The Soviets will be with us, the Chinese also, or will abstain, and the rest will also be with us. I think it is a good move; as the text unfolds, I would welcome and hope you could support it as it would be a strong signal for the man to leave peacefully. (S)

They asked me today what this meeting was about in Mubarak's palace. I tried to make clear that Syria is an important member of this coalition. This is something I value and respect. Again, I would like to have your views on sanctions and if Saddam Hussein **withdraws** because, in my view, a return to the status quo ante is **unacceptable**. I believe it is essential that there be a capable, **visible**, credible Arab force against Saddam Hussein, and there is. The defense of Saudi Arabia this minute is guaranteed, as is the sanctity of the Saudi borders. I understand that everyone does not want to put people into battle. I was in World War II. I know the feeling. But it is important to the coalition to be together if we have to use force. I know that causes you some problems. But I would like to ask you for clarification because of your statement about the your forces not moving out of Saudi Arabia. It's up to you; we can discuss it privately or here. (S)

Let me turn to the Arab-Israeli peace process. The main thing is that we have tried to move the peace process forward, and we will continue to try to move the peace process forward. We've not lost any interest. As you know, we have had differences with the Israelis and the Palestinians on this. We tried to avoid linkage of the two questions. But I am always optimistic, and I hope that our cooperation in the Gulf will help us to move to make progress toward a lasting settlement based on UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338. That's one of the reasons I'm being so hard on the Gulf. (P)

On terrorism, I am very grateful for your sincere efforts to get the hostages out. They are on my mind, my heart, my soul, and in our evening prayers. We still say our prayers in the Bush family. I know how sensitive the subject of terrorism is with you. You know our laws. I want you to know it is not just a bureaucratic concern. It starts with me and Jim Baker. Having said that, I appreciate the open discussions we have had with you. We do believe that groups involved in terrorist acts remain in Syria and in Lebanon, and some terrorists plan to attack U.S. interests. We owe you a concrete proposal, and Jim Baker will get back to you on this. The ball is in our court, and I recognize this. (P)

On Lebanon, I am a bit more optimistic now. The Taif Agreement continues to be the best bet. There is one matter on Lebanon I would like to talk to you privately on. (P)

President Assad: Good. (U)

President Bush: Let me turn to human rights. I want to express my continuing concern over the Syrian Jewish community. Our Ambassador has reported to me on the progress that has taken place, and I want to acknowledge that we do favor unconditional freedom to emigrate. But if you cannot do that, we would like to see families reunited. (P)

Let me end on a positive note. I hope this proves to be the first of many meetings. Out of this trouble in the Gulf, when I talk about the new world order, part of it can be a vastly improved U.S.-Syrian relationship and a resolution of the longstanding Palestinian problem. I pledge that once we get the Saddam Hussein problem behind us, we will work on the other problems. I pledge that. That is the end of my speech. I apologize for having taken so long. (P)

President Assad: Thanks very much. I appreciate the time is limited. Your trip has been a long one. You have passed through many different climates, both natural and political, and you still have Mexico ahead of you. I may not be as brief in form as you have been, but will try to do so in my own way. Let me begin by saying that the first time I met Henry Kissinger, after the October 1973 War, we agreed to have a tour d'horizon. He began speaking, and when he finished he said, "I have digressed." And when he looked at this watch, he said, "My problem is I am a professor, and I apologize." When I began, I said that he hadn't spoken as long as a professor, he had been very brief. I have been a military official, and normally a military man tends toward brevity, and each rule has an exception, "as you are an exception, I am too." (P)

President Bush: How many hours did you give him? (U)

President Assad: We spent many long hours, especially during his shuttle diplomacy. (U)

I would like to say that U.S.-Syrian relations have made forward strides. I have reviewed this evolution with U.S. officials. There is a good mutual understanding on Lebanon. Concerning the Arab-Israeli peace process, during the Reagan Administration Secretary Shultz began efforts and put down some ideas. We did not agree with the plan put forward, but I received him. I told Shultz that it contained some good ideas, but it would take time to make further progress, especially since no one can guarantee that future U.S. administrations would commit themselves to this plan, but we saw it as a step forward. Now we are tackling the invasion of Kuwait, and there are several points that are not minor ones, as we have communicated to Ambassador Djerejian. There are things that have regrettable implications. We had more serious differences with the previous administration than now. In spite of those differences we did achieve some progress, some of which has been lost now. Shultz himself, who had a hardline position on Lebanon and who sponsored the May 17, 1983 Agreement, concluded that Syria aborted this Agreement. He is correct, because it had to do with the national interest of Syria. Shultz felt that Syria inflicted a certain personal harm on him. Despite that, he came to Syria twice and discussed important issues with the Syrian government. These discussions on Lebanon began with him, and the former Administration took stands in favor of Lebanon at that time. They adopted a clear-cut position. Shultz got on to political reforms in Lebanon, and got together with Amin Gemayel on this reform package. Had he succeeded, we would have saved Lebanon from many sacrifices, especially given the recent hostilities. The Lebanese launched a new type of war against one another. (P)

We also discussed terrorism with the former administration. It initiated a campaign against us, and it took additional measures after 1986, following UK sanctions, which the Europeans adopted under pressure from the British. We could have continued dealing on these issues. We in Syria co-exist with these charges of terrorism. (S)

We have been surprised that in recent months there are those who are exploiting the Gulf crisis for more dangerous ends. Our position on the Gulf crisis is very clear. Syria has not shifted its position. From the first hours, I contacted King Fahd and President Mubarak, and we supported resolutions at the Islamic conference and the Arab League which are well known. Had Syria not wanted these resolutions to pass in Arab fora, they would not have passed. I doubt if any of my Arab brethren could contradict me on this point. If they do, may god forgive them. (S)

Concerning Israel, we know the U.S. backs Israel. We have no illusion that the U.S. will stop backing Israel. But regardless of the state of our relations, we would call on the U.S. as superpower and UNSC permanent representative to live up to its ideals. Israel knows it is the strongest country in the region owing to its arms and technology. Also we have determined that Israel is exploiting the present situation to obtain more military and financial assistance. Under the pretext it is doing so to protect itself from an imminent Iraqi aggression. Saudi Arabia has received aid, but it is not parallel to what Israel has received. All of this relates to Syria's destiny, not a small thing. (S)

President Bush: May I ask one question? Do you worry that this adds up to an attack on Syria? (S)

President Assad: This is axiomatic. Who will be Israel's target? Israel wants to expand. It occupies Palestinian territory, Lebanon, and, in the past, Sinai. Israel believes it is entitled territory. It is preparing itself for more expansion. Their conviction in this regard is consistent. There is no Arab who does not share this perception. In general, the Arab masses know Israel wants to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates. I have spoken often about this. Once I mentioned this to Richard Murphy when we were discussing the peace process. He told me that the idea of expansion is that of Begin and Shamir but not of Peres. He said that there is a real difference of opinion within Israel. I asked Murphy if he would be willing to state publicly that Peres and the Labor party do not work for the expansion on Israel. Murphy said, "Don't quote me." What is

important, and what I am trying to say, is that the Israeli ambition is to expand. Here is where the responsibility of the United States comes in. Israel cannot expand further unless it is assisted, principally from the U.S. It is, therefore, quite natural that we have concerns. Israel has land and wants more, especially when the Arabs, including Syria, are seeking peace. This is no secret. For years we have been seeking a settlement under 242 and 338. Israel hears this in the public media; we talk peace and it seeks to expand. I should say very frankly that we have information that the U.S. is providing this huge support for Israel in the midst of the Gulf crisis, and at the same time there are efforts being made to reduce assistance to Syria. I don't mean U.S. Assistance, but from others. (S)

It is true that the Gulf crisis is very important but no matter how significant it is, it is less dangerous to us than the Israelis coming and occupying our land. Concomitantly, the U.S. signals others to keep assistance from us, and the U.S. Ambassador or Charge deliver demarches on human rights or terrorism attributed to Syria. This is all done to a point that we have the feeling that we should do away with our intelligence services and rely only on U.S. intelligence. We get information from you before we even get it from our own sources. We are an open country. Any Arab can travel and come to Syria without a visa. He can stay in Syria and even enlist in the military. Syria is an independent state. Is it reasonable to receive messages from friendly or unfriendly countries that we must expel so-and-so because he is a terrorist? This is not really acceptable. This does not mean Syria supports terrorists or terrorism. (S)

We know you have a different impression. There was a long conversation on this with Secretary Baker. Without doubt, if we cannot obtain a convergence of views on this issue, we will never come to a solution. There are people in the U.S. who imagine that any action that harms Israel is a terrorist action. Give us the proof, and I have said so publicly in the U.S. press, and when we have convincing evidence, we will take action. But unless we ourselves are convinced, we will not take action. (S)

I want to assure you, those persons in Syria are remote from these activities. I am astonished at the information the U.S. Government has gathered and disseminated to us. Are these U.S. services really convinced of the information they have? From my own point of view, I told Secretary Baker that terrorism is a

crime and a terrorist is a criminal, but there is a fine line between a terrorist and a militant who is struggling for his homeland. If we judge by the way the U.S. accuses people, then no one through the ages would be exempt from the charge of sponsoring terrorism. Throughout history most nations have been colonized and they have struggled against their colonizers. Is this terrorism? No. Therefore, whenever we receive convincing evidence, we will bring the individuals to justice; not for the sake of the United States, but for our own principles because of our own values. We are opposed to terrorism, but struggles inside the occupied territories are not terrorism. Certain actions in Europe, outside the Occupied Territories, are not part of the liberation struggle. But how can we stop the Palestinians from being militant against their occupiers in their own land?

(S)

Let's take Ahmad Jibril. He is a Palestinian from Syria. We can say he has lived his whole life in Syria. We have contacts with him through our people. He came to Syria when he was 10 years old. Now we have our own security apparatus. It is assumed that we have much information on them. We have interrogated them at the political level many times, and Jibril himself stated he is prepared to come to a neutral site, like Switzerland, to be investigated. Our security apparatus and our political contacts have not uncovered any information that he is involved in the Pan Am 103 incident. There is no proof. How can we investigate him? I told Secretary Baker that this group is the most militant anti-Israeli commando group in existence, which has conducted suicide raids against Israel. Whether or not one agrees with them, this has been his role. This group concentrates upon the struggle within the Occupied Territories. It has adopted a position against the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait because the invasion undermines the organization's political position against Israel.

(S)

President Bush: We owe you the facts. That case is being worked. It may well prove to be that he did not do this. And when we talk about terrorism, let's try to define it. I can't see blowing up a school bus or shooting a man in a wheelchair and throwing him overboard or shooting american citizens on planes as anything else but terrorism. We need to define it. I'd like to work with you and be focused. (S)

President Assad: Exactly. This is what we want. This group we are referring to has nothing to do with the types of incidents you have mentioned. (S)

President Bush: I understand. I'm worried we may be passing in the dark over definitions. (S)

President Assad: What is most important is that we arrive at a common definition. But we need to uphold the principle of innocence before being proven guilty. (Ø)

President Bush: This is our system. (U)

President Assad: But Jibril has been judged before he has been tried. There are other problems we face, and I agree, when we can agree on a definition, we can resolve this issue. We are telling our Arab colleagues that events are proceeding in a dangerous manner. Harm will be inflicted on Syria. Israel's ambitions are worrisome. If our preoccupation keeps revolving around human rights and terrorism, where are we going when more dangerous issues face us? This is the reason for the press campaign against the U.S. Do you think we do not want good relations with the U.S.? (Ø)

President Bush: I don't think you know our heartbeats, a result of the absence of high level relations. (Ø)

President Assad: There could be a loophole. (U)

President Bush: To be honest, I think you think we would acquiesce in Israel taking over some parts of Syria. The Israelis were attacked and took territory. We want to see a resolution of the Golan based on 242. That is the U.S. position. We don't want to see Israel expand. (Ø)

President Assad: You have expressed that position in a message to me, and there was a previous confirmation during the Reagan Administration. I want to confirm to you that Syria wants peace. But we want a just peace. We are not running to wage war. But I want to emphasize that I am not worried about the future because we feel we are on the right side. We are an ancient and deep-rooted nation. No Israeli occupation can be everlasting. Peace is in Israel's interest. No people more than the Israelis themselves can benefit from peace in the region. We do not want peace as a favor to Israel. Israel will benefit the greatest. Through Israel is superior technologically, future generations will proclaim their rights. The road to war is not in Israel's interest, and the Arabs are not benefitting from the suffering. (Ø)

President Bush: We need to get a peace settlement. (U)

President Assad: The Israeli arsenal includes nuclear, CW and BW weapons. Despite all of that, the road Israel is taking will lead to disaster and more millions will suffer. The road to war

is wrong. Peace is the only way. It is naive for the Israelis to think that Syria or other Arab countries can give up an inch of their territory. Therefore, we underline the wording, a "just" peace. Anything else is capitulation. For that reason, and despite points of agreement, U.S.-Syrian relations are going backwards now. There is too much talk about terrorism without proof, and putting pressure on others concerning assistance to Syria. Then there is the assistance to Israel that can hinder the peace process. These trends diminished in the recent past and seem to have re-emerged. (S)

President Bush: I wouldn't be sitting here if I thought things were going backwards. I think they are better and the potential is better, especially given what we are doing in the Gulf. (S)

President Assad: I am very glad that you believe this. (U)

President Bush: Even though you don't believe it (jokingly)! (Assad laughed.) I am worried about the time. I see how you and Henry Kissinger could talk forever. (U)

President Assad: But these negative factors are related to the lack of communication. I know we can bridge the gap at this meeting, but there are conspicuous aspects of our bilateral relations which need to be raised. (S)

Concerning Lebanon, we both support Taif. We have made forward movement in Lebanon. We know that sometimes the U.S. wanted things done, but conditions prevented it. The U.S. was not fond of Michel Aoun. Despite that, it did not encourage actions against him. Aoun stepped down with minimal losses. (S)

Foreign Minister Shara': President Bush himself has said that Aoun had to step aside. (S)

President Assad: When the Gulf crisis started, Aoun pinned his hopes on it. He is now gone. We should not waste time on it. We have assisted the legitimate government by helping oust Aoun, and we have sacrificed much in this respect. We are now working on greater Beirut. Some groups are trying to blackmail the legitimate authorities, but we think we can find political solutions to these problems. The U.S. talks about the Taif accord and your support for it. At the same time, some U.S. statements contradict the Taif accord. When you say foreign forces have to get out, then you name Syria. When Syria gets out, Taif dies. Syria has obligations under the Taif accord. One page of the accord refers to Syria but not as a foreign force in Lebanon. The most important task is to implement Taif. (S)

President Bush: I thought the Taif accord called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces. (Ø)

President Assad: No, if you read it closely, you will see that it does not. But it may lead to that. But it is evident that the Arabs cannot equate the Syrian presence in Lebanon with that of Israel. The relations between the Lebanese and the Syrians are relations of kinship, there are joint families. The Syrians and Lebanese are like neighboring states in the U.S. We have confirmed from the very beginning that our entry into Lebanon was at the Lebanese government's request. We want an independent and Sovereign Lebanon. (Ø)

Concerning the Syrian Jewish community, a half million Syrians are displaced from the Golan and from their homes. When we can achieve the human rights of the Syrians in Israel and our displaced people are returned, we can discuss the emigration of Syrian Jews. You are about to say that it is not required that these Jews go to Israel, but to the U.S. No one can provide soldiers to the enemy. But give me legal guarantees they will not go to Israel, and I will give you a different answer. But you can't do this. (Ø)

President Bush: It is in the human rights basket under the Helsinki Final Act that we are talking about. If you can do this, you will make many friends around the world. Do not think that Syria is being singled out. We have made representations to the Soviets, the Ethiopians, and many others. We think we are backed by International Covenant and law. That's the reason. (Ø)

President Assad: Our case is different from that of the Soviets. There is not state of war between the Soviet Union and Israel. Israel does not occupy any part of the Soviet Union. Israel occupies our territory. Israel has displaced a half million Syrians from their homes. Why is it requested to reunite Syrian Jews when other Syrians are not being reunited? I am for the Helsinki process, but only if it is applied simultaneously to Israel and Syrians so that Syrians also can return home. (Ø)

President Bush: That's why we need to get a peace settlement. (Ø)

President Assad: Peace will give rights to all parties and end the human suffering. (Ø)

Concerning the Gulf, there are the Arab League resolutions. They are very clear. They are similar to the United Nations Security Council resolutions. Without even prior understandings with the Saudis and others, we sent troops to Saudi Arabia and told them there was no ceiling. We told them we can send more if you need

more. Later on, I discussed this further with President Mubarak and King Fahd and the role the Egyptian and Syrian forces must play. In fact, up to now, our decision is that these forces are meant to defend Saudi Arabia. The Egyptians may increase the number of forces. I have not discussed this specifically, but Mubarak has stated he has the capability to increase. We also can increase. I don't know if Mubarak has another position. There can be some tasks performed when the Kuwaitis return to Kuwait. For example, they (i.e., Egyptian and Syrian military forces in the Gulf) can be used as a peacekeeping force. We can do this, and I discussed this with Mubarak. (S)

President Bush: Let me ask you a hypothetical question. Suppose it is necessary to send forces across Kuwait to finish off their (Iraqi) armor. Should it be just American boys to kick this aggressor out? Can we not all do this together, with UK and Arab forces? (S)

President Assad: In actual fact, we have not yet discussed this in Syria or with Egypt. We have had consecutive meetings, but this topic has not been raised. We have talked about security in the region for the future. The issue does not end with the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait. But concerning how the military offensive will be conducted, we have not discussed this. (S)

President Bush: The international press will try to drive a big wedge between the United States and Syria on this question. To the degree that you can be flexible and say that has not been finalized yet would be very helpful. For two reasons: it send a much stronger message to Saddam Hussein, and, secondly, it is extraordinarily helpful in the U.S. that people feel we are not in this alone. You can put it that you need to talk to Mubarak and others about it. That is helpful. (S)

President Assad: Yes. In any case, Iraq does not know precisely what our position is on this issue. Though we say our forces are in Saudi Arabia in a defensive posture, I think Iraq has a different view. I keep emphasizing that we Arabs cannot admit or tolerate the perpetuation of Iraqi occupation. Partial solutions are rejected. There can be no reward for invasion. Kuwait must be restored in terms of both its land and government. When we Arabs say that we will not let invasion achieve its objectives, our position is clear to the Iraqis and other and in the U.S. (S)

President Bush: No, in the U.S. it is interpreted differently -- that they want us to do their dirty work for them. But we'll just leave it there. (S)

President Assad: This is the problem we suffer from. We are not understood in the U.S. (Ø)

President Bush: The problem in the U.S. was the Syrian statement that "our forces are there to defend Saudi Arabia alone." I raised the same question with President Mubarak. He said no Egyptian will go into Iraq. I said I don't want American boys in Iraq, and if military action is to be successful, someone has to take care of the Republican Guards. We had a good discussion, and I feel good about it. You can talk to Mubarak about it. He discussed it privately, and I do not want to elaborate further. (Ø)

President Assad: You have frank discussions with Mubarak. (Ø)

President Bush: Yes, but I need to have private time with you now. (Ø)

-- End of Conversation --

(At this point, the larger meeting adjourned, and the two Presidents met alone.)