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"Only When Ready: Why President Assad's Time-frame is a Calendar, not a Clock"

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John Foster Dulles visited Damascus in 1950. The next U.S. Secretary of State to travel there was Henry Kissinger. The date was December 15, 1973.

Over the next six months, Secretary Kissinger -- who doubled as President Richard Nixon's national security adviser -- would visit Damascus dozens of times, doggedly trying to convince Syrian President Hafez al-Assad to sign a military disengagement agreement with Israel. Over the next quarter-century, other U.S. Secretaries of State would make similar visits to Assad's presidential office, sitting for endless hours, using frankness and charm, offering promises and possibilities, and experiencing what Kissinger would begin to understand but not fully comprehend during that visit -- Assad's methods, style, and substance.

Assad listens attentively and responds meticulously. A long discussion with Assad does not necessarily mean his consent. Only carefully does he make political choices about the Arab-Israeli conflict. His strong preference is to employ a calendar - not a clock. When necessary - but not always necessarily - Assad is prepared and willing to swim against the current political tide. Assad has an ability to hunker down. Stamina and time are his allies. He always seeks clarity and carefully defines nuances on issues and attitudes affecting Syria, initiating action or accepting a diplomatic option only when Syrian national interests are either preserved or enhanced. He will use regional and international political change to his advantage, but he will not be stampeded into making a decision because of it. His basic principle is that what he perceives to be Arab land and Arab rights cannot be compromised for the sake of doing a deal. In negotiations, he understands the difference between procedure and substance, and therefore will not allow procedural modalities to deflect from substantive objectives. Profound anger overcomes him when other Arab leaders take actions which adversely influence either Syrian policy options or a unified Arab stance against Israel. And, with few exceptions, he mistrusts American diplomats because he knows that they want Syrian political choices to foster first and foremost American policy preferences which he

sees as blindly defending Israeli objectives.

It was the immediate aftermath of the October 1973 war; Cairo and Damascus had found Israel's continued control and occupation of Egyptian Sinai and the Syrian Golan Heights commonly intolerable.

So committed was Assad to the liberation of Arab land that, according to Israeli military estimates which were gleaned after the October war, Assad was apparently prepared for an all-out war, "including, if necessary, the evacuation of Damascus."¹ The loss of the Golan Heights in the June 1967 war was absolutely untenable to Syria, particularly to Assad. It was a condition which had to be reversed. After Assad became president in 1970, he made it a top priority for his regime to eradicate the dishonor suffered in June 1967. All available resources in Syria were to be mobilized for the liberation of the occupied territories. The Syrian military needed to be rebuilt from its shattering loss in 1967; Soviet arms were required and obtained. Assad saw himself and his regime as the public defender for Arab national interests. Like Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat, Assad had a passion to restore his territory to Arab sovereignty.

With maximum secrecy, Sadat and Assad collectively conspired to attack Israel on October 6, 1973. The avowed purpose was to dislodge Israel from those territories and enter into some diplomatic process that would force the Israelis to withdraw from all territories taken in the June 1967 war. When Sadat and Assad met with King Hussein in Cairo three weeks before the war, they intimated to him that a war with Israel was in the offing, but they apparently did not share with the Jordanian monarch the exact date of the proposed attack. At the time, acrimonious tones typified Egyptian and Syrian relations with Amman, since Jordan cracked down on Palestinians in the 1970-71 civil war, and King Hussein had offered his 1972 "United Kingdom" plan by which Jordan was poised to speak for the Palestinians and take control of any West Bank territories that Israel might relinquish. Hussein's plan, conceived independently from Damascus, was precisely the kind of separate Arab action on the Arab-Israeli front which angered Assad.

Neither Assad, Hussein nor Kissinger was privy to Sadat's real objectives for going to war in 1973. Though initial plans included the liberation of all of Sinai through war, Sadat was prepared to take only a small slice of the Sinai through military force and then turn to the United States to obtain the rest of Sinai via American-directed diplomacy. According to General Al-Gamasy, the Egyptian chief of staff during the 1973 war, "Sadat mistrusted Assad."²

According to the recollections of Hafez Ismail, Sadat's national

security adviser, and Ziad Rifa'i, then an adviser to King Hussein, Sadat had Syrian President Assad believing that Egypt would prosecute an all-out war against Israel to liberate all of Sinai.³ According to Rifa'i, "Sadat and Assad swore an oath on the Koran, that both would go on fighting until they liberated all the occupied territories, or until Cairo and Damascus were occupied."⁴

In a meeting between Assad and Mahmoud Riad - then secretary general of the Arab League - on November 12, 1973, Assad remarked, "The agreement between Sadat and myself before the war laid out that Egypt should occupy the Sinai passes and not stop ten kilometers east of the [Suez] canal."⁵ According to then-Syrian Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam, "For Syria, it was a war of liberation, not a war of movement. The objectives of the war were to liberate Golan and Sinai. The Syrian forces advanced according to that plan. The Egyptian forces, however, just passed the canal and stopped."⁶

Assad also did not think that Sadat, after going to war in tandem with Syria, would start a diplomatic offensive without Damascus. But during the 1973 war, Assad received misinformation from his Egyptian ally about the degree and absence of military progress on the Sinai front. Recalling Israel's counteroffensive - or what was termed Israel's "breakthrough" - which finally encircled the Egyptian Third Army and put enormous pressure on Sadat to accept a ceasefire, Khaddam said, "When there was the [Israeli] breakthrough, we were really given incorrect information [by the Egyptians]. This really caused a bitter heart."⁷ Only after the war commenced did Assad begin to realize the dimensions of Sadat's turn toward Washington and away from unified Arab action.

On October 21, 1973, Sadat cabled Assad, telling him that Egypt was prepared to accept "a ceasefire in place" subject to a U.S. and Soviet guarantee of an unspecified Israeli withdrawal and the "convening of the peace conference under United Nations auspices to achieve an overall settlement." Assad did not want to accept a cease-fire until Israel evacuated at least those parts of the Golan Heights occupied in the October war.⁸

Hence, when Assad learned that military separation-of-forces discussions, held between Israel and Egypt in late October 1973 (known as the Kilometer 101 Talks), not only touched on military topics but included discussion of political issues, and -- by November 11 -- outlined an Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement, Assad was annoyed, if not downright enraged. Assad believed that Syria and Egypt had entered the war together in order to liberate both Golan and Sinai and that Sadat had failed to carry out his part of the bargain. Assad also thought that

Damascus and Cairo should have ended the war together, not independent of the other's military condition. Furthermore, he felt that diplomacy was a march to be done in tandem, that separate and bilateral arrangements with Israel were never remotely considered as part of the pre-war collaborative planning. At the same time, Assad understood Sadat's move toward the Americans to mean that Damascus would be the beneficiary of renewed Soviet attention and continued military assistance from Moscow.

Assad vigorously asserted some of these opinions to Sadat when they met in Kuwait on November 1 and again in Cairo on November 24 (when both leaders were on their way to the Algiers Arab Summit meeting).⁹ From Syrian-Egyptian discussions held through foreign ministry channels and from visits of envoys to each other's capital, Assad remained well-informed about Sadat's inclination to deal independently of Syria. When Sadat told him that these apprehensions were unfounded, Assad was not persuaded. Assad's deep antagonism toward Sadat's separate diplomacy with Israel was severe and constant. With Sadat venturing along his own diplomatic path, the Syrians were, according to Khaddam, "outraged." "We felt bitterness," he continued. "This kind of action by Sadat was just treason." ¹⁰

Sadat had used Assad; Egypt had trumped Syria. Before, during and after the October war, Sadat and his generals deliberately misinformed or failed to inform Assad of Egypt's actions and intentions. Assad was not in control of the political landscape. The preconditioned hostile Syrian-Egyptian atmosphere hovered above Kissinger's visit to Damascus.

And how much did Kissinger or his advisers know about the deep rift between Sadat and Assad? Apparently, very little. Their lack of appreciation for the depth of animosity between Cairo and Damascus -- or even the intricacies of inter-Arab jealousies and politics in general -- may be partially explained by the absence of American diplomats in Damascus in the aftermath of the June 1967 war, when Syria and a host of other Arab states, including Egypt, severed diplomatic relations with Washington.

Washington was also conceptually mesmerized with Egypt. It was a preoccupied concentration on Egypt as the most important Arab state. While Nasser dominated Egyptian and Arab politics in the 1950s and 1960s, Washington paid him and Cairo more attention than it did other Arab capitals. When Kissinger arrived in Damascus, he was still predisposed -- from his pre-October war attitudes -- to concentrate on Egypt. This was greatly reinforced by his meeting with Sadat on November 7 in Cairo. At that meeting, they agreed on step-by-step

diplomacy as the favored method of negotiations, with agreements to be reached and implemented in phases. The goal of removing the recently imposed Arab oil embargo against Washington was an incentive for Kissinger's prompt achievement of a disengagement agreement; Sadat had intimated to Kissinger that he could persuade Arab oil producers to lift it, if there were an Israeli disengagement from Arab (read Egyptian) territories.

For Washington, the focus was Egypt. The United States had an unprecedented opportunity in moving Arab-Israeli diplomacy forwards: it had an Arab partner willing to negotiate through it with Israel. Moreover, it was an Arab state willing to diminish Soviet influence in the Middle East, a much sought-after objective of the Nixon administration. And it was the Israelis who had Sadat's Third Army literally gasping for blood, blankets, and food. Israel's potential destruction of the Third Army would have made Sadat's rule difficult if not precarious. Kissinger's immediate priority, when the war ended, was to devote urgent attention to the Sinai front. According to then Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Sisco, "The focus was predominately on Egypt."¹¹

By comparison, no such delicate state of affairs existed on the Golan Heights. And for several years prior to the October war, Israeli politicians had received various secret proposals from Sadat about a negotiated settlement. All of them required a commitment of full Israeli withdrawal, which Israel was unwilling to undertake. Though Sadat's overtures were rejected, Israeli leaders understood that Sadat was not excluding a negotiated arrangement. The October war did not change Israel's long-term strategic priority of removing Egypt from the Arab war coalition arrayed against her. And Israel had increased flexibility in reaching an agreement over Sinai because the Golan Heights offered greater potential difficulties due to topography and proximity.

So when Kissinger saw Assad on December 15, 1973, American, Egyptian and Israeli objectives had easily established Kissinger's priorities. He had only a passing interest in, or understanding of, Assad's aspirations. If Kissinger realized the resentment which Assad held for Sadat, it was not apparent in the American's remarks to Assad.¹² Though Kissinger acknowledged that the Soviets had resupplied Syria with weapons during the recent war, Kissinger did not understand the degree to which Assad faulted the United States for Syria's lesser military position when the United Nations passed its cease-fire resolutions on October 22 and 23, 1973. Moreover, Kissinger arrived in Damascus under a heady steam of personal self-confidence. His own self-esteem was unbounded because of his recent conclusion of the Vietnam talks¹³ and because his powers were virtually unlimited, as President Nixon battled furiously to forestall the Watergate cancer enveloping his

Presidency. Secretary Kissinger possessed the personal drive and unique opportunity to diminish Soviet influence in the Middle East, and he relished it.

Before Kissinger arrived in Damascus, he believed that Assad would attend the proposed international peace conference. He had heard this separately through the Soviets and diplomatic cable traffic from Cairo. Washington was certain that Egypt would go to a conference without Syrian participation, though the Syrian presence was preferred.¹⁴ He went to Damascus with the knowledge that an international conference would be convened. The questions to be answered for Kissinger were primarily procedural: the timing of the conference, the content and manner in which the letters of invitation to the conference would be sent, and could/would Assad provide "Arab cover" for the pre-negotiated Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement. At the outset of their conversation on December 15, 1973, Kissinger was surprised to learn that Syria's willingness to attend the conference would depend on the outcome of their discussions because Assad did not know "what the conference will be and what it will achieve." Assad admitted that "we are not dreaming about going to the conference."¹⁵ As a consequence, he informed Kissinger that no preparations were even made to form a Syrian delegation. By contrast, the Israelis, Jordanians and Egyptians were already engaged in extensive arrangements to prepare for and attend the Geneva conference.

Kissinger and Assad talked past each other. Kissinger's focus was on convening the Geneva conference; Assad wanted to speak about Israel's "aggression" and how it would be reversed in general and what the United States was prepared to do about it in particular. Kissinger willingly informed the Syrian president that "the peace conference provides [a] legal front within which negotiating activity can go on." Kissinger said real solutions "will occur outside the conference We can use the conference to provide scenery and framework. The conference is a mechanism for moving from war to peace. We will attempt to get separation of forces in the first phase," meaning some Israeli withdrawal. "This would be followed by another stage of withdrawal and discussions on security, borders, Jerusalem, and the fate of the Palestinians." ¹⁶

On the Palestinians, Kissinger said, "I recognize that the Palestine movement [sic] needs to be discussed, but not in the first phase. You have seen the letter to the [UN] Secretary General we [sic] intend to send to the participants. Our problem is that the Israelis don't want reference to the Palestinians in that letter, particularly because of their [upcoming parliamentary] 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 There are so many Palestinian groups, we don't know who to deal with. You might advise us as to which might be the authentic group. Sadat is willing to have invitations go without any specific mention of the Palestinians."17

Though Kissinger wanted Assad to assent to the contents of the letter of invitation which would omit mention of the Palestinians, he knew that it would not be easy to convince Assad to accept the Palestinians' absence. He told Assad directly, "Everybody says that, of all the Arabs, you Syrians are the most impossible to deal with." 18

While listening to Kissinger, Assad knew from other sources that there already was an agreed upon, but not signed, separation-of-forces agreement negotiated by Egyptian General al-Gamasy and Israeli General Yariv at Kilometer 101. (These talks commenced in the Egyptian desert in late October 1973, 101 kilometers from Cairo.) Assad knew that the proposed conference would not yield him territory but only serve Sadat's interests. Confirmation of this point came to Assad's listening ear, when he heard early in his conversation from Kissinger that so far there "is no agreement on substance on any issue." But later in the conversation, Kissinger told him that there had been prolonged and detailed disengagement discussions already between the Israelis and Egyptians, including those at Kilometer 101. When Assad told Kissinger that he wanted the Israelis to withdraw beyond the new areas they occupied during the October war, Kissinger acknowledged that he had not yet discussed a Golan withdrawal with the Israelis.

In responding to what the United States was prepared to do for Syria, Kissinger said that diplomatic interest sections and direct communications should be established. The Secretary acknowledged that "there are strong domestic pressures in the U.S. in favor of support of Israel. We have to manage our domestic situation in order to be helpful." "Don't put us in a position," continued Kissinger, "where we have to take final positions, when what is required is first steps."19 Naturally, Assad was not pleased that Kissinger was only making a general commitment to secure a phased Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, especially when he said that getting "Israel to withdraw from something ... was more important than any legal interpretation of [UN Security Council Resolution] 242."20 Kissinger just did not understand that Syria's acceptance of 242 and Assad's willingness to negotiate with Israel were centrally predicated on the legal interpretation of 242.

Assad made his positions clear: "We are against Zionism as an expansionist move, but we are not against Jews or the Jewish religion

no leaders of a regime can give up sovereignty. We cannot compromise one inch of territory. It should all be restored 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. Modern weapons show that there are no real secure borders. This theory is invalid.

"We need a just peace. We are serious. We want to build our own country. 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 problems We believe that the U.S. is a major factor to check the aggressive Israeli spirit. I believe that when the U.S. tells Israel to go back, it will do so without hesitation. Are we to go to a peace conference for implementation of the points that we cannot give up one inch of territory and that there can't be a solution without the peoples of Palestine?"²¹

Apparently, Kissinger was correctly informed by Sadat that a Syrian-Israeli disengagement should be discussed with Assad. Kissinger was also correctly informed by Sadat that the conference would be a framework. But what Sadat failed to convey -- or convey firmly enough -- to Kissinger was that the question of an Israeli-Syrian disengagement had to be settled in advance. Assad told Kissinger directly that "the conference should only be a framework ... that the question of disengagement must be settled beforehand. If we go to a conference without deciding things [in advance] our losses would be very great." To which Kissinger replied, "I did not know a prior disengagement agreement was a condition of your attendance at Geneva. I came here under a misapprehension. I did not think that your attendance [at the conference] was conditional on anything."²²

Why would Sadat not inform Kissinger that Assad too wanted an agreement prior to the convocation of a conference? Sadat was consistent in his policy preference of putting Egypt, and therefore himself, first.

Why did Sadat not include King Hussein in the planning of the October war? Jordanian participation in the war would have entailed Jordan's participation in the diplomatic aftermath, and that would only have put obstacles in the path of Sadat's aim: a U.S. focus on Egypt alone and the return of Sinai first and foremost.

Why did Sadat not tell Assad about his intention of not trying to take all of Sinai but of then harnessing American diplomacy? Sadat wanted to promote Egypt in Washington's eyes; he wanted Kissinger to focus on Cairo. Sadat knew that Kissinger could be easily persuaded

because Sadat could directly help Washington reduce Soviet influence in the Middle East.

Why did Sadat not forcefully insist on Palestinian representation at a Geneva conference? Sadat knew that there would not be any conference because the Israelis would not attend a conference with Palestinian and -- in this case -- PLO participation. Moreover, no conference meant no international umbrella or Arab cover for Sadat's need to save his surrounded Third Army.

It is, therefore, not surprising that -- at the end of their conversation -- Assad told Kissinger, "Anything you agree with Egypt on a text of a letter [of invitation] is all right with us." Assad had no intention of going to a conference that would suit only Egypt's needs. So why should he care about the contents of the letter of invitation? None of the prearranged diplomacy was aimed at meeting Syrian interests as Assad defined them.

From their exchange of views on December 15, 1973, Assad evaluated -- through Kissinger's eyes -- the state of diplomatic affairs at that moment. To Assad, Kissinger was a man with a mission and a man in a hurry. When Kissinger told him that "there can be no settlement you don't agree to and we will not force you," Assad understood that whether the conference was convened or not, whether it reached an Egyptian-Israeli understanding or not, Kissinger would have to return to Damascus at some point to negotiate ultimately a Syrian-Israeli agreement. Assad understood how intent Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir was on having Israel's POWs returned; Assad knew that Kissinger would have to return to Damascus, but the next time at Assad's diplomatic speed. Assad saw himself and Syria as the "Mecca" of Arab nationalism. To what degree Assad's decision not to attend the Geneva conference was due to internal Syrian domestic pressures remains open to question.²³

Assad may have been angry at U.S. policy favoring Israel, but it seems his greatest irritation was still to be saved for Sadat. Realizing the degree to which Sadat was abandoning him, the Syrian president needed to evaluate closely how that reality manifested itself and how it would influence his relations with the Soviet Union, other Arab states, and the Palestinians. At that moment, for Assad, these issues were much more imperative and required greater clarification. Attending the Geneva Middle East peace conference was less important for him at the time.

Out of the December 1973 Geneva conference, the first Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement was signed in January 1974. During the next five months, Kissinger and other U.S. officials returned to Damascus dozens of times until the Syrian-Israeli disengagement

agreement was signed in May 1974. In the interim, the Arab oil embargo was lifted. Assad negotiated at his own pace. He made no political concessions to the Israelis, enhanced Syria's national well-being vis-a-vis increased Soviet assistance, and witnessed for the next five years Sadat's drift to the American orbit and an Egyptian peace treaty with Israel. Though Assad tried many times to thwart Egypt's increasing acceptance of Israel, Assad took his time to see how the shifts in regional politics and international affairs affected Syria. He operated according to his own clock, not someone else's calendar; more than two decades later Assad retains his priorities and keeps time the same way.

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NOTES

1 Author's interview with General Ariyeh Shalev, Head of Estimates Branch, Israeli Military Intelligence, Israel Defense Forces, 1967 - 1974, August 13, 1992, Ramat Aviv, Israel.

2 Author's interview with General Abd al-Ghani al-Gamasy, November 10, 1992, Heliopolis, Egypt.

3 Author's interviews with Hafez Ismail, January 7, 1993, Cairo, Egypt; Abd al-Ghani, al-Gamasy, November 10, 1992, Heliopolis, Egypt; and Ziad Rifa'i, January 9, 1993, Amman, Jordan.

4 Author's interview with Ziad Rifa'i, January 9, 1993, Amman, Jordan.

5 Mahmoud Riad, *The Struggle for Peace in the Middle East*, (London: Quartet Books, 1981): 258; this point was emphatically confirmed in the author's interview with Abd al-Halim Khaddam, July 18, 1993, Damascus, Syria.

6 Author's interview with Abd al-Halim Khaddam, July 18, 1993, Damascus, Syria. Khaddam, after serving as foreign minister, became vice president of the Syrian Arab Republic.

7 Author's interview with Abd al-Halim Khaddam, July 18, 1993, Damascus, Syria.

8 Interview with Ariyeh Shalev, August 13, 1992, Ramat Aviv, Israel.

9 Author's interview with Abd al-Halim Kbaddam, July 18, 1993, Damascus, Syria. See also Patrick Seale, *Assad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988): 226-227.

10 Interview with Abd al-Halim Khaddam, July 18, 1993, Damascus, Syria.

11 Interview with former Assistant Secretary of State, Dr. Joseph Sisco, Washington, D.C., February 27, 1992. Sisco was Kissinger's principal adviser on Middle Eastern affairs during and after the October 1973 war.

12 Author's interview with David Korn, October 29, 1992, Washington, D.C. A career foreign service officer, Korn was the State Department official who made the logistical preparations for Kissinger's visit to Damascus in December 1973.

13 Ibid.

14 United States State Department, "Memorandum of Conversation, S/S-7400659, Participants: President Assad of Syria, Foreign Minister Khaddam of Syria, Secretary Kissinger, Assistant Secretary Sisco, interpreter (Syrian), December 15, 1973."

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Interview with Ambassador Hermann F. Eilts, April 11, 1991. Eilts was the newly appointed U.S. Ambassador to Egypt at the time. He was told in December 1973 that one of the reasons for Assad deciding not to attend the Geneva Conference was because of pressure he was facing

from within his own ruling Ba'ath Party.