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THE UNDER SECRETARY OF THE NAVY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20380

September 17, 1981

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Subject: Nuclear Powered Warship (NPW) Transits of the Suez Canal

As you directed, I led a team to Cairo for talks on NPW transits from September 5 to 16. Our charter was to narrow the differences between the U.S. and Egypt on technical matters, in the hope that remaining differences, if any, could then be resolved at the political level, and to incorporate our joint views in a report to both governments. The Egyptian team was led by Osama El Baz, Under Secretary in the Foreign Ministry, and included representatives of the Suez Canal Authority, Atomic Energy Establishment, Civil Defense, Ministry of Health and Foreign Ministry. The Ministry of Defense was absent. I met separately with Vice President Mubarak and Defense Minister Abou Ghazala and visited the Suez Canal. The Joint Report (see attachments) is enclosed at Tab A. Details of the discussions are in my reporting cables at Tab B. I have given the full report, with its attachments, to Assistant Secretary West.

We were successful in narrowing the differences on a number of issues, and in expressing the areas of agreement and disagreement in the Joint Report. We failed, however, on the major task of convincing the Egyptian technicians they could safely endorse NPW transits. Our failure was not for want of trying. I had an excellent team, and we provided Egypt with the most comprehensive briefings and discussions on the subject ever given anyone outside the United States Government.

Our entreaties fell on deaf ears. We found minds willing to listen to detailed and assuring evidence of safety and responsibility coupled with cogent argument, but not willing, whatever the evidence, to reach a new conclusion. It is plain that the decision to be unpersuaded was a political decision, and one taken before we arrived. Those Egyptians ostensibly in favor of NPW transits - the Foreign Ministry and MOD - made no effort to help. The MOD boycotted the meetings and Foreign Ministry representatives sat mute. Even El Baz, as chairman representing Mubarak, never pressed the technical departments to reach agreement with us. The technical departments have little incentive, on their own, to endorse NPW transits, and clearly had no intention of assuming responsibility for allowing the transits through the heartland of Egypt. As the Atomic Energy representative put it, "It is a political decision, not a technical one; let the politicians first make the decision and then we can work out the technical details."

The conclusion of our talks was a firm "no" to transits from the technicians. The firmness of the turn-down surprised us; it was uncharacteristic of Egyptians, and also the first time Egypt has flatly rejected a major U.S. request since our new relationship. This rejection certainly came from

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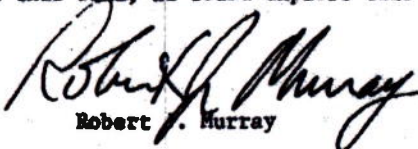
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the political levels, probably from Mubarak, perhaps from Sadat, even though the technical people are bearing the burden of blame. We may speculate why we have been refused; my own thought is that Egypt's internal dissension is now quite sharp, and "the highest levels" do not want to take on another, politically major domestic political liability.

Whatever the reason, given the crisp character of the refusal, we should pause for awhile to let the dust settle, and to try and learn more about Egyptian motives. We should not, in my judgment, rush back to the attack just now. While waiting, we should re-examine the practical importance of these transits, and polish up our strategic arguments for that moment when we sense a proper turn of events, perhaps even encouragement to open the subject anew. I see no possibility of achieving a favorable decision from the bottom up, but we should nonetheless cultivate the Egyptian technical people (we sense consensus is important) and the Navy can be doing this. A personal appeal from the President to Sadat at the right moment might carry the day. It might be possible to ask Abou Ghazala to intervene on our behalf; among other reasons, he is the beneficiary of much assistance from us and might have a practical interest in helping. If Secretary Weinburger visits Egypt this fall, he could explore this with Ghazala.


Robert J. Murray

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Secretary of the Navy
Chief of Naval Operations
Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA)

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