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with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 168 · THURSDAY 30 NOVEMBER 2023 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · FOREIGN POLICY

THE WRONG KIND OF GENIUS

Henry Kissinger is dead. The professor calls him a wicked genius — and finds Qatar's quiet mediation more genius still.

Session 168 · Thursday 30 November 2023

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Session 168 — the year's last broadcast, on power without mercy.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

The Wrong Kind Of Genius

Henry Kissinger is dead, and Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi refuses to eulogize him. The year's final broadcast sets his legacy against Qatar's quieter, more effective diplomacy in Gaza.

The last session of 2023 opens on breaking news: the death of Henry Kissinger. Prof. Akinyemi is unsparing — a scholar of talent placed entirely at the service of power, on his account, responsible for the Christmas bombing of Vietnam mid-negotiation and a remark about Soviet Jews he says he heard firsthand on the Nixon tapes. **The same broadcast turns, by contrast, to Qatar's Emir brokering a Gaza hostage exchange — proof, in the Professor's telling, of what diplomacy conducted by people who actually hold power can achieve.**

An archive edition, recorded 30 November 2023, the year's final broadcast, in the same week Henry Kissinger's death was announced and a Qatar-brokered Gaza hostage exchange was underway. Events and figures are described as they stood that week. This is a solo-format episode — moderator and Prof. Akinyemi only, no panel.

01 · HENRY KISSINGER IS DEAD. THE PROFESSOR WON'T JOIN THE TRIBUTES.

The session opens on the news of Kissinger's death, and Prof. Akinyemi declines the usual courtesy of speaking well of the dead. His verdict: Kissinger was among the most gifted scholars ever to place that talent entirely at the disposal of power, rather than at the disposal of anything good that power could do. Access to power and proximity to the nuclear button, he argues, gets mistaken for genius simply because the person holding it gets his way — by his account, no different in kind from what history would call Hitler a genius for, had the Second World War gone the other way.

He recalls, on Christmas Day, the United States bombing Vietnam around the clock while Kissinger was still negotiating a peace treaty with Hanoi, and bombing Cambodia on his advice besides. He also describes listening to Nixon White House tape recordings himself, and says they show Kissinger — not Nixon — as the one pushing for the harsher use of power behind closed doors, even while briefing the press that he was the moderating influence. A separate, deeply unsettling recollection concerns a Soviet Jewish emigration request, which the Professor attributes to Kissinger dismissing on tape as no American concern, whatever the Soviet Union did with those it refused to let leave — an account offered as the Professor's own recollection of a historical recording, not a verified transcript.

“Anyone who had access to power, whose finger was near the nuclear button, gets regarded as a genius because he has his way — by bombing everybody who gets in it.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

WEIGHING A LEGACY

KISSINGER, PER THE PROFESSOR'S OWN ACCOUNT

The case for

Credited with brokering Arab-Israeli disengagement pacts after 1973.
Threatened the Soviet Union directly to protect Israel's resupply.

Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for Middle East shuttle diplomacy.

VS

The verdict against

Ordered Christmas Day bombing of Vietnam mid-negotiation, on his account.
Advised bombing Cambodia while peace talks with Hanoi continued.
On tape, he recalls, it was Kissinger pushing Nixon toward harsher power — not the reverse.

Session 168 • The Wrong Kind Of Genius

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The case made for Kissinger, and the Professor's verdict against it — drawn from his own account of the record, not a ranked score.

02 • QATAR'S QUIET MASTERY: DIPLOMACY AT ITS BEST

Asked what made Qatar uniquely able to broker a Gaza hostage exchange when other states with hostages of their own could not, the Professor calls it diplomacy in its purest form — the kind practiced by an actual sovereign rather than by committee. He credits the Emir's advisors, but is blunt that once the Emir decided a course of action, that was the end of the internal debate, a contrast he draws deliberately with what happens once lawyers and leaked cables start shaping what diplomats can do.

On his account, the Emir persuaded the United States that hosting one of its largest regional naval bases would not read as selling out the Arab cause, persuaded other Arab states of the same thing, and separately persuaded Hamas's leadership that an office in Doha did not mean being sold out either — building, over years, the mutual confidence that let Qatar mediate now without any side questioning its motives.

03 • TWO IDEAS OF HIS OWN THAT WERE ONCE CALLED TREASON

Prof. Akinyemi turns to his own record in the corridors of power, offering two proposals he says were denounced at the time as selling out African interests, and quietly adopted later. As Director-General, he proposed a Nigeria-Brazil-Angola naval alliance to secure the South Atlantic — not to confront the Soviet Union or the United States, but to keep both out by mutual understanding. He was, on his account, accused by Nigerian socialists of being an American agent and of selling out

Angola, and had to absorb the blame alone once the idea drew controversy, even though the military government had privately cleared it in advance.

As a minister, he proposed a narrower diplomatic back-channel with apartheid South Africa: formally cutting off relations while quietly designating one Nigerian embassy through which urgent messages could still pass. Leaked to the press, it drew the identical accusation of selling out — this time on South Africa rather than Angola. Both proposals, he says, were implemented after he left office, without anyone remembering who had first proposed them or why they had been so controversial.

“If Kissinger had been in Nigeria, where the socialists were more socialist than the socialists themselves, he would never have been allowed to use power at all.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • A MUSLIM DELEGATION TO IRAN, AND THE ART OF CHOOSING THE RIGHT MESSENGER

The conversation turns to Thailand's success negotiating, through Iran, the release of Thai hostages held by Hamas — the largest non-Israeli group taken. The Professor's reading is that Thailand, a Buddhist-majority country, deliberately sent a delegation made up of its Muslim minority rather than its foreign minister, on the calculation that Hamas would recognize them as fellow Muslims rather than as politicians. He contrasts this with governments that insist on sending whichever minister holds the title, regardless of whether that minister actually has any standing with the other side.

He connects this directly to an idea raised on the program two weeks earlier: that Nigeria could similarly deploy Muslim traditional rulers toward its northern neighbors and Southern traditional rulers toward southern Africa, Brazil, Cuba and the West Indies — matching the messenger to the audience rather than sending whoever happens to hold the job.

05 • RWANDA-STYLE DEPORTATION DEALS, AND WHAT AFRICA OWES ITSELF

Asked about the UK's new Home Secretary expressing hope of signing several more Rwanda-style migrant deportation deals, with Germany reportedly eyeing something similar, the Professor calls the prospect of Africa becoming a dumping ground for other regions' unwanted migrants a fresh version of an old bargain — being paid to take in people other governments would rather not house themselves. He notes the presidents willing to accept such arrangements often do so to reshape their own domestic electorates along ethnic lines, a strategy he calls dangerous on its own terms before any diplomatic cost is even counted.

He widens this into a broader argument about African agency in institutions like the African Union: the continent, on his account, has to leave behind an era in which every member state pretended to equal standing regardless of actual capability, and instead recognize — as NATO does among its own members — that real diplomatic weight tracks the forces and resources a state can actually put into the field, pointing to Mali's success driving jihadist forces back where French forces had not as evidence capability, not equality, decides outcomes.

06 • INDIA, AN ASSASSINATION PLOT, AND A RECKONING THE PROFESSOR CALLS OVERDUE

On the US accusation that an Indian government official plotted to assassinate a Sikh separatist on American soil, the Professor is characteristically blunt: assassination as an instrument of diplomacy did not begin with India, and he ties the story back to the Kissinger conversation that opened the broadcast. He declines, as a former exile from military rule himself, to defend assassination as a legitimate tool of statecraft, but is equally clear that it has never really stopped being used — India's exposure, on his reading, is less a moral failure unique to India than an operation that got caught.

07 · THE YEAR'S LAST BROADCAST — AND A POSTSCRIPT ON THE SAHEL

The moderator closes by noting the session count itself — 168 broadcasts, enough, the Professor jokes, that he ought to be issued some kind of certificate — before the two exchange season's-end thanks. But the broadcast does not quite end there: a brief unscripted postscript follows on Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger's move to establish a new Sahel currency backed by Russia, China and Turkey, positioned against ECOWAS's long-stalled Eco. A French minister's visit to Nigeria — the fifth this year, on the moderator's count — is raised alongside concern that Nigeria could be perceived as fronting for French efforts to destabilize Niger's government ahead of a symbolically charged date in January. The Professor cautions against Nigeria being used as an instrument of that destabilization, closing the year on a note of vigilance rather than celebration.

THREADS TO PULL

- If proximity to power is what gets a strategist called a genius regardless of how that power is used, how much of any diplomat's reputation — including the ones this program treats kindly — survives that same test?
- Qatar's mediating power rests on being an actual sovereign able to act without internal debate once a decision is made — does that mean effective mediation and democratic accountability are genuinely in tension, as the Professor argues?
- Both of the Professor's own proposals were denounced as treasonous and later quietly adopted — what does that pattern suggest about who bears the political risk of unpopular but eventually vindicated diplomacy?
- If matching the messenger to the audience (Thailand's Muslim delegation, Nigeria's proposed traditional rulers) works better than formal diplomatic titles, why do so few foreign ministries formalize it as a standing practice rather than an improvisation?
- Should the African Union's own legitimacy be judged by whether its leadership commands the same recognition NATO's leading members do — and if capability should determine standing, what happens to the continent's smaller states?

Watch Session 168 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

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Broadcast contributions are quoted with attribution, as announced on air. The Professor's recollection of historical recordings and past private conversations is presented as his own account and has not been independently verified against a primary transcript.