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Egyptian Intransigence

Why is Israel transferring El-Arish to Egypt precisely now? Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty in which it was laid down, after wearisome negotiations, that Israel's first withdrawal in Sinai would be after nine months. No government spokesman has even tried to explain why the government had to make a further "gesture," and hand back El-Arish months ahead of the timetable. And after Israel made the gesture, we have been treated in the past few weeks to the astonishing picture of an imperious Egypt denying the humble request of Israel for some small favours in the area Israel is surrendering.

Several questions immediately come to mind. When the government agreed to return El-Arish immediately to the Egyptians — entirely as an act of grace — why did it not make it clear that the area of the laundry and the vegetable garden of the Neot Sinai village were not included in the gesture?

The same applies to the rights of the Bardawil fishermen to continue to fish, and the Israeli enterprises in El-Arish.

There is no reason to expect, nor need to wait for, an answer. In their gushing eagerness to satisfy Egyptian whims, Israel's negotiators just did not "realise" that there were any such human problems affecting their own Jewish citizens. They did not think and did not ask.

Just as Defence Minister Ezer Weizman acceded on the spot, unhesitatingly, to a small Egyptian request to be allowed to prospect for oil immediately in the Alma oilfield area, as though it were some private bauble of his own. The rights were long conceded to the American Neptune Company, which has been operating the oilfield (and which, if Mr. Weizman's nonchalant gift to his Egyptian friends were consummated, would no doubt sue Israel for millions of dollars in damages.)

El-Arish provides, in miniature, a reproduction of the historic irresponsibility in the government's actions since the opening of the "peace process". This, after all is how the surrender of Sinai, lock, stock and barrel was conceived. Not one of the problems of Israel's security was seriously considered, nobody in the defence establishment was told of the proposal.

Not one of the complex economic consequences occurred to the minds of the two exclusive sponsors of the scheme. The first step they took was to rush to Sadat to offer at one blow, the complete structure of Israel's vital defences in the south (training and manoeuvre area, airfields, unique naval base).

The spontaneous light-headedness over El-Arish, however, also reflects the equally abysmal failure of the members of the government to grasp the Egyptian motives. Of this El-Arish is also a faithful miniature. The Israeli negotiators were manifestly taken by surprise at the Egyptian refusal of even a grain of consideration for the human problem of the Israeli villagers at Neot Sinai and at Bardawil, and the handful of businessmen in El-Arish.

There was no intelligent reason for surprise. Sadat does not concede an ounce of recognition to Israeli gestures. He does not give a single centimetre, and he will not tolerate a single Jew from Israel in his territory.

What the members of this government do not understand, or do not even try to understand, is that the inconsiderateness of the Egyptians, their harsh intransigence over every last detail, is a reflection of their unrelieved and unchanging purpose towards Israel and the Jewish people.

Anwar Sadat has never recanted his anti-Semitic utterances. Seven years ago, speaking in a Cairo mosque in celebration of the birthday of Mohammed, Sadat described the expulsion of the Jews from the Arabian Peninsula as the Prophet's greatest achievement.

"The Jews are a people of plotters" Sadat said "of deceivers and traitors. They were born to lie and to betray... I promise you that we shall restore them to their previous state. As it is written in the Koran: 'they are fated to be oppressed and downtrodden'". After he had visited Jerusalem, after Israel had made her peace offer, Sadat persisted in his anti-Semitic remarks, and they were published in the weekly journal "October" — a regular fountain of vulgar antisemitism. His lifelong admiration of Hitler, his continued demonstrative pilgrimages to Berchtesgaden — are all of a piece.

Nor, of course, had there been any softening, any refinement, of his demands on Israel. From his public statements since he took office — in 1971, in 1974, his speech in the Knesset in 1977, and down to his latest pronouncements — there emerges an absolute unswerving consistency.

Israel must "restore all the Arab lands" (including eastern Jerusalem), the "rights of the Palestinians" must be restored and the "Palestinian people" given the right of self-determination.

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His indeed is the moderate version of Arab demands. On the eve of the negotiations on the autonomy scheme, those demands assume a more immediate significance. Sadat looks forward to their full and precise fulfillment. On Israel withdrawing behind the 1949 Armistice Lines, he assumes that a Palestinian State (hopefully under Egyptian tutelage) will be established in Judea and Samaria. The campaign for the restoration of the rights of the Palestinians will then be intensified, that is, Israel will now be pressed by the combined Arab world to follow the 1947 partition scheme and thus hand over Jaffa and Lod and Ramla and Western Galilee to the Arabs. Whether achieved by diplomacy or by war, this would involve, or be followed by, the dismemberment of the Jewish State and the restoration of the "unity of the Arab world".

If Sadat does not reasonably expect to preside over the whole of this process — which would necessarily take a number of years — he certainly has good reason to believe that he is achieving for his successors the maximal conditions for the final blow to Israel. In the south, with Israel out of Sinai after three years, those strategic conditions will be within his grasp.

In “*Falastin*” the process will be much more complicated but the Camp David agreements established a reasonable basis for the effective disappearance of Israeli power and control. What more could an Arab statesman demand of himself, what more could the Arab nation demand of him?

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Do not the other Arab leaders realize what Sadat has already done and what he is doing for the Arab nation? Have they not read the Camp David agreement — with its replacement of the Israeli military government by an elected Arab autonomy council, with its five-year term for the autonomy, and the obligation by Israel to negotiate with Egypt and Jordan, as well as with the inhabitants of the “West Bank” in order to reach an agreement on the future sovereignty; and the obligation undertaken, by Israel as well, to take into account the rights (which they know never existed) of the Palestinian people?

Do they not realize that in this one phase, and without any bloodshed, Sadat is achieving for all of them a historic defeat of the Jewish State? Do they not see that the Camp David agreements (of which one part is already in process of consummation) contain the essential seeds for a reversal of the traumatic Arab defeat of 1967? And without giving up the options for the final overthrow of the “Zionist invasion?” Why then have they rejected the peace treaty, why are they proclaiming economic measures against Egypt, filling the air with bellicose sounds of utter hostility?

The answer is close at hand. The Arab leaders certainly do not want a united Arab world to go on record as recognizing the legitimacy of an “intrusive Jewish State in the Arab world”.

But if they are interested in ensuring maximum pragmatic success for Sadat’s efforts, they will be doing precisely what they are doing now. They will organize the fiercest opposition to him and to his actions. They will proclaim a major boycott in trade, in culture, in diplomacy.

If Sadat himself did not actually plan this with his colleagues in the Arab States, they are quite possibly collaborating with him in the execution of the programme. The fiercer and the louder the opposition of the Arab States, the stronger becomes Sadat’s stance in his negotiations with Israel, the more clearly delineated becomes the picture in the West — and especially in the US — of this brave leader, undaunted by the hostility, even the enmity, and the boycott and the threats, of his brother Arabs, fighting the cause of peace and the cause of the poor oppressed Palestinians. Will Israel not then relent? Will she not, at least as a gesture to hard-pressed Sadat, give up her intransigence for example, over Jerusalem?

Precisely because the stakes are so high and the prospective difficulties in negotiation with Israel great, Sadat *needs* the unbridled attacks of the other Arab leaders. Even the boycott should appear as realistic as possible.

(In fact, some of the measures noisily threatened are figments of the imagination. Egyptian trade with the other Arab countries is minimal, and as for oil, she has more than enough of her own.)

Is this scenario not too fanciful? Not at all. Sadat has proved he is a past master at the art of grandiose bluff. In 1972, he heralded Egypt's famous rift with the Soviet Union by expelling the 30,000 Soviet advisers who had been helping build up and train the Egyptian Army. The expulsion was followed by a long period of mutual recrimination, which pervaded Egyptian society at all levels. The war of words went on for fifteen months — until the Yom Kippur War. In fact there had been no rift at all, but a brilliantly conceived and no less brilliantly executed hoax upon the world and especially, of course, on Israel and the US.

In fact, the rift was a smokescreen behind which the Soviets had helped Egypt prepare what became the Yom Kippur War. A detailed account was published in 1974 (in "The Six Hour War" by Abd el-Satar al'Tawila), and subsequently Sadat himself (in a radio interview on October 24, 1975) boasted of his expulsion of the Soviet advisers as "a strategic cover... a splendid strategic distraction for our going to war".

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However, whether there is Egyptian collusion or not in the anti-Egyptian campaign now raging, its helpful impact on Sadat's effort to reduce Israel is beyond question.

Nor is there any doubt of the unity of the Arab purpose, nor of the unusually brilliant leadership of Sadat in the struggle for its achievement.