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From No-Man's Land to "Sacred Soil"

Several days ago Deputy Minister Yoram Aridor told the Knesset that Egyptian sovereignty over Sinai had never been recognized and that some time ago the jurist Peter Elman had prepared a detailed memorandum for the Ministry of Justice showing that there was not, nor had there been, Egyptian sovereignty in Sinai.

That is so. Since the Ottoman Empire surrendered its control over the territory after her defeat in the first World War, no sovereignty has been established over the peninsula. By virtue of their victory in that war the British possessed it and they could determine its future as they saw fit. They could include it in their Protectorate over Egypt, they could include it in the territory of their prospective Mandate over Palestine, they could also proclaim it a separate political unit under their protection. This course was in fact recommended to Prime Minister Lloyd George in 1919 by Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen, the Political Officer in the British Military Administration in Palestine. He argued that the Sinai desert in British hands would serve as an effective buffer area between Egypt when she became independent and the future Jewish State in Palestine.

For reasons of convenience the British continued to maintain Sinai under their administration in Egypt, and appointed a governor for the purpose. Land communications between Egypt and Palestine however were maintained by means of the Palestine Railways. When you travelled from Egypt to Palestine, the border control was at Kantara on the Suez Canal. Even when British rule in Egypt came to an end Egypt never proclaimed sovereignty over the peninsula. The handful of its inhabitants were not granted Egyptian citizenship. Needless to say the Egyptians did not lift a finger to develop and bring life to the desert. The only economic activity in the territory was that of an Italian company which developed the oilfields in the Abu Rodeis area. It is no exaggeration to say, indeed it is a simple fact, that the only use to which the Egyptians put Sinai between 1948 and 1967 was as a base for war on Israel.

When, therefore, President Sadat described Sinai "sacred Egyptian territory" he was, with all due respect to him, talking nonsense even more arrant than the usual nonsense of Arab propaganda. This fact is the key to the determined, uncompromising refusal of Sadat to agree to any Israeli presence in Sinai, not even in the Rafiah salient, even after Israel proposed to return the whole peninsula to Egyptian rule, and to recognize her sovereignty there. The Rafiah salient comprises less than one percent of the total area of Sinai. To Egypt this is a minute strip on the far edge of the desert. For Israel it is a stronghold of great importance in her defence against attack from the south. Sadat knows — and who better than he — how many times Egyptian forces have attacked through this area. He knows — and who better than he — its importance to Israel's security.

If there had not in the past three months been other sufficient indications, then Sadat's angry refusal to make microscopic "concessions" in territory where Egypt has had no sovereignty, which is certainly not "sacred" and which is of no importance to Egyptian security — but which is important for an attack on Israel — are enough to demonstrate that this man does not envisage peace with Israel but (in the words of the Prime Minister) peace without Israel.

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The Alignment Government, after much cogitation and calculation, established Israel's absolutely minimal security requirements in the south. These included "territorial continuity" to Sharm el-Sheikh and retention of the Rafiah area. Flowing from this determined decision they began building two air-bases which assured adequate air space for our planes in the south, and initiated the establishment of a network of agricultural communities in Rafiah salient, and at their centre a new pioneer city: Yamit. "Incidentally" the desert for the first time in thousands of years began to bloom. They laid it down in fact that while Israel would not demand sovereign rights over the whole of Sinai, she would stand firm in any negotiations for peace, on her minimal right, well-established in international law and custom, not to mention equity and justice, to the territorial adjustments indisputably required by her security.

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After the Six Day War all the leaders of Israel swore that Israel would never, never again resign the defence of her borders to United Nations soldiers. No force in the world will prevent the UN from complying with an Egyptian ruler's demand to evacuate Sinai when he finds it convenient or necessary to make such a demand. The grounds for this emphatic vow were unquestionably reinforced by the attitude adopted towards Israel by most of the members of the United Nations, especially in view of the fact that it is impossible to foresee in what circumstances a crisis would occur in the future.

They also swore that Israel could not put its faith in demilitarized zones. Demilitarization becomes a fiction precisely when the aggressor decides that he no longer needs it. Nevertheless the possibility was broached in the period of Alignment government. Finally however it was decided that whatever "arrangements" might be made in a peace treaty for the rest of Sinai, Israel must be sovereign in the territorial strip from the Mediterranean to Sharm es-Sheikh, including the Rafiah salient.

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The decision of the "Likud" government to propose to Egypt on the one hand sovereignty over those areas and on the other hand to insist that they are essential to Israeli security does not lend itself to rational analysis. If Sadat had accepted the proposal the agricultural villages and Yamit town would have become a part of the Egyptian economy, the children born there would be Egyptian citizens by birth, the young men would be liable to Egyptian military service, apart from other consequences and implications.

The practical prospect is however quite different. In 1970 when Egypt and Israel signed a cease-fire and "standstill" agreement, the Egyptians broke the agreement within twelve hours. The SAM 6 missiles were moved 30 kilometres and brought down to the Suez Canal. Who can calculate how many Israeli lives were lost as a result of that breach when the Egyptians attacked on Yom Kippur three years later? (Who, incidentally, does not remember how the Americans declined "to see" the missiles and successfully pressed Israel not to insist on their being moved back in accordance with the cease-fire agreement)? If Sadat had accepted the peace terms offered

him — of sovereignty over all of Sinai but with an Israeli force to guard the settlements — not many days would pass before every Israeli remaining in Sinai—north or south, pilot or farmer — would receive the order from the Egyptian president: “Out!” Maybe Sadat would not wait even 12 hours. To whom would the Israeli Government then appeal? To the United States? To UN Secretary-General Waldheim?

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Sadat is in fact being kind to Israel by rejecting the smart idea of Israeli security in the embrace of Egyptian sovereignty. It is the Israeli Government that should jump at the opportunity promised by that rejection. Even on the strictest formal reading there is no justification for its clinging to its “peace” proposal. The national interest certainly requires its instant abandonment. The blunders already made will no doubt complicate the task of explaining it. Overcoming the difficulties of delayed explanation of a logical and just case, and of the truth about the whole question of Sinai, however, is preferable to the bewilderment and derision and contempt which are our lot today in the world, even among good Jews and among non-Jewish friends, in the face of the contrived “cleverness” of the peace plan. In the circumstances — of Sadat’s insistence that not a single Israeli may remain on a single square centimetre of “Egyptian sacred soil” — the Government should make a bold and courageous statement to the people and to the world at large, that it withdraws its offer.

The Prime Minister, famous for his drafting capacity, can surely compose the appropriate text — and bring reassurance not only to the population at Yamit but to the Jewish people as a whole.