

31 January 1986

INSULT FROM CAIRO

A FORTNIGHT AGO lively competition erupted between Labour and Likud spokesmen over the parenthood of the cabinet resolutions on relations with Egypt. The Likud claimed that what had brought about the “package” of resolutions was Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir’s months-long insistence that acceptance of arbitration over Taba could be only one element in an agreement. The Labourite contenders laughed this claim out of court. What was decided, they said, was really no different (except for some cosmetic touches) from Peres’s own proposal. The bottom line was a cabinet decision that was unanimous.

Much more significant was the assertion by Labour spokesmen that the proposals had been accorded prior acceptance by the Egyptians – in the course of the talks conducted for Israel by the director-general of the Prime Minister’s office, Abraham Tamir. Indeed, Peres vigorously demanded a decision be reached without further delay precisely because, so he insisted, there was no need for further “clarification” or discussion with the Egyptians. Everything, that is, had been cleared with them. This, after all, was why Peres had commanded the cabinet to deliberate without a break until a decision was reached – as in a national emergency, or as though they were cardinals choosing a pope. They did then sit a whole winter’s night long.

When the resolutions had been adopted, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak had been given the news for which he had so long been waiting, a tense expectancy pervaded the highest political corridors in Jerusalem. All ears were strained for the outburst of enthusiastic response about to be heard all the way from Cairo.

Now, now, it was whispered, now at last, after 15 months of effort and maneuver, the hour is nigh: Peres will speak to Mubarak, and Mubarak even to Peres. Actually, face to face.

Joyous consequences were to flow from that meeting. It was all laid out. With the dispute over Taba settled to Egypt’s satisfaction the road would be open directly to the “West Bank,” to negotiations with Hussein, yea, to peace with Jordan.

If there are some whose memory is too short and who decline to believe that this naked nonsense was the official “rationale” for policy, let them go back to the newspapers or transcripts of broadcasts during the few months before that marathon cabinet meeting.

THE SCENARIO was an exercise in fatuity from the beginning. Its trumpeters never bothered to explain (even to themselves) how an agreement with Egypt over Taba on Sinai’s border was to be transmuted into negotiations over the future of Eretz Yisrael. Such negotiations, Hussein has laid down, will take place only with PLO participation and in an international framework which must include the USSR. Peres, for his part, has been searching feverishly for a formula that will meet these requirements. He is prepared to meet Palestinian Arabs who have been merely approved by Arafat; and he agrees to an international forum, including, in principle, the Soviet Union. That Taba had any relevance to the endless pursuit of Hussein was, at best, an uninterpreted pipe-dream.

Mubarak, on arriving in Europe this week, made haste to assure the world that negotiations must include the PLO and the Soviets.

NOW THE Taba bubble has burst. There was no happy reception in Cairo. Nobody there showed any sign of ever having heard of an agreement with Israel to combine arbitration over Taba with Egypt's fulfillment of the peace treaty. On the contrary, the only coherent Egyptian response was that various "other problems" had to be solved first. One of the problems mentioned was the "Palestinian people." No less. And for Peres, the most resounding blow of all: the longed-for boon of a meeting with Mubarak was not being considered.

WHAT WAS the reaction in the government to the outrageous behaviour of the Egyptians? Last weekend three of its members, Gad Ya'acobi, Moshe Shahal and Mordecai Gur, who were interviewed on radio, did not even mention it. No doubt they were in a state of such shock that they had developed amnesia, forgot everything they and their leader had said over the months, forgot the report that had been presented to them, forgot why they had sat a whole night, forgot indeed the drama in which they had played a part. There they were, with Egyptian spittle on their – and our – faces, pretending that nothing had happened, until after a few days of silent shame, Ezer Weizman, since 1977 Egypt's loyal friend and advocate at the Israeli court, came to the rescue.

Wiping the spittle off, he begged an invitation to Cairo, to plead with Mubarak. The main purpose of his thus accepting humiliation and contempt on Israel's behalf was evidently to avert the evil decree: that no meeting between Peres and Mubarak was in sight.

Whether Weizman's visit to Cairo, which violated at least the spirit of the cabinet's meeting, was authorized by the government was not made public.

WEIZMAN returned from Cairo empty-handed. He was not promised a meeting for Peres with Mubarak. He was not given an acceptance by Egypt of the terms of the cabinet's resolutions. Nor did the Egyptians promise to fulfill the peace treaty. They had never had any intention of doing so.

He did, however, apparently succeed in another of his endeavours: to convince his Egyptian friends that the Israeli government is prepared to cooperate with the Egyptian government in sweeping the crime of Ras Burka under the carpet.

As Weizman's objective – and that of at least the Labour component of the government – is to prevent the Ras Burka "incident" from "beclouding" relations with Egypt, and as that event recedes into the past under growing layers of evasion and equivocation in Jerusalem, it is essential now to set out all the facts and implications. Especially in the light of the statement made on Tuesday, after Weizman's return from Cairo, by Mohammed Bassiouny, Cairo's diplomatic representative in Tel Aviv.

When the gruesome sequence of events at Ras Burka became known from the testimony of the many witnesses, the government's first dereliction of duty was its failure to declare to Cairo that the explanation for that horror was the poisoning of the minds of Egypt's youth against the people of Israel – by the media, and not a little by their education.

That dereliction was emphasized by Mubarak's initial gut reaction to the multiple murder. It was, he said, a minor matter, the kind of thing that happened every day. The government was, however, not moved. It simply continued to ask for an "inquiry."

Then from Cairo came a promise that an inquiry would indeed be held; and Mubarak's promise that he would send the findings to Peres as soon as possible.

Any Egyptian inquiry would naturally be a farce unless it included a survey of the permissive propaganda pumped for years into the Egyptian people, depicting Israel as evil and its people as sub-human; and unless Cairo initiated steps to put an end to this incitement.

The man who fired the shots was tried and sentenced; and it was clear the Egyptians did not intend holding any inquiry at all. Egypt, it was not said, would send a "report" of the trial, and subsequently this was transmuted into a transcript of the actual proceedings in court.

Approximately at this point the Israeli cabinet, in an attempt to save face, included a demand for a report on Ras Burka as part of its package of resolutions.

ON Weizman's return from Cairo, Bassiouny made an astonishing statement. He was quoted by Israel Radio as saying that relations between Israel and Egypt had deteriorated to a dangerous level. The reason, he said, was the continued criticism in Israel on the Ras Burka case.

So that is it. Relations did not deteriorate over the unbridled anti-Israel and anti-Semitic propaganda (or indeed over Egypt's wholesale violation of the peace treaty). Nor over the brutal murder by an Egyptian of seven unoffending Israelis as an undoubted result of that propaganda, nor when the Egyptian president contemptuously brushed the murder aside as a minor incident. They did not deteriorate because the men guilty of forcibly preventing aid for the five bleeding victims had their action in effect condoned by the Egyptian government.

They deteriorated only because the people of Israel continued to object to the contemptuous cheapening of Jewish blood.

But, Bassiouny said, Weizman's visit to Cairo had averted the "danger." How did he do it?

We do not need Bassiouny to tell us that Weizman accommodated himself to the Egyptian view; and that it was to appease the Egyptians' "anger" that he went to Cairo. He obviously promised Mubarak that if only a transcript of the proceedings at the trial of the one murderer were sent to Peres, Israel would stop bothering Egypt about the deliberate slaughter at Ras Burka.

THIS IS not mere appeasement. This is infamy. Is our nation compelled to tolerate it?