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MUBARAK'S DEBT

PROFESSOR Irving Kristol, writing in the *New York Times* last Sunday, referred to “the West Bank, at Judea and Samaria as most Israelis now call it.” He is manifestly unaware that what he was writing about are two provinces called Judea and Samaria for some three thousand years, and which the Arabs now call “the West Bank.”

He is no doubt honestly unaware that the Arabs' erasure of the names of Judea and Samaria from the map after the Trans-Jordanian occupation in 1948 was designed to obliterate their connection with the Jewish people – much as the Emperor Hadrian, after crushing the Bar-Kochba revolt 1,850 years ago, erased Judea and “created” Palestine.

Mr. Kristol's little inversion of the facts provides a neat illustration of the Arabs' success in turning history completely on its head in furthering their outrageous claims on Palestine. Israel's misfortunes, however, derive in part from the slippage of some Israelis – politicians, spokesmen and media people – into adoption of Arab fabrications.

Sheer ignorance is one source of this phenomenon. Moral cowardice is another. The pseudo-liberal *chic* which demands identification with the nation's antagonists is a third. The story of Sinai encapsulates all these categories.

SOME 25 years ago a jurist in the Ministry of Justice in Jerusalem, Peter Elman, wrote a paper, based on considerable, painstaking research, which showed that Sinai, then controlled by Israel, was not historically Egyptian territory, and had indeed been a no-man's-land.

Placed in the context of contemporary reality, his findings provided significant additional testimony to the case for an Israeli declaration of sovereignty over Sinai.

The facts of modern history are, moreover, well-known. When, after 400 years of occupation, the Ottoman empire collapsed, its Sinai province became the legitimate “property” of the conquering British. For reasons of imperial convenience, they chose to place Sinai under their Egyptian administration; but it was not made part of Egypt.

When Britain relinquished control, Sinai continued to be “administered” territory. It was not annexed by Egypt. Apart from the Italian oil enterprise at Abu Rodeis, the only use to which the Egyptian government put Sinai before 1967 was as a staging ground for attacks on Israel.

Elman's memorandum was not published. It was suppressed by the Foreign Ministry then headed by Abba Eban. Applications by citizens for copies of the paper were turned down. Its facts and conclusions were not to the taste of the Foreign Ministry, and so it exercised its democratic rights by keeping them from public knowledge.

WHILE Israel controlled Sinai after 1967, the Labour government, after much study and deliberation, determined that in future peace negotiations, they would be prepared to relinquish most of Sinai, but that Israel's irreducibly minimal security required the retention of some 3 per cent of the peninsula – a strip from the Mediterranean through Eilat to Sharm-el-Sheikh. They issued a call to young Israelis to settle in the coastal area (where subsequently Yamit was established with 14 satellite villages); they built two major airbases, and planned a third; and a major naval base at Sharm.

When Prime Minister Begin outwitted them by offering Egypt the whole of Sinai, they did indeed voice warnings of the dangers to Israel's security – but voted for his plan. They justifiably belaboured Begin for the betrayal of his principles – and registered their disgust by betraying their own.

After the peace treaty was signed, it soon became evident that the Egyptians were implementing it only in little more than its minimal formal requirements, that its really material provisions were either simply not being fulfilled or were being actively violated. The Labour opposition cooperated loyally with the Likud government in avoiding publication of the facts. The media which by and large, had uncritically gone over board in joy over the peace treaty, lent its own willing silence (with minor exceptions) to this restraint.

In the crucial areas of “cold” warfare – inimical diplomatic action and hostile propaganda – Egypt changed nothing. The image of Israel projected to the Egyptian people has been dominated throughout by anti-Zionist mendacity and vulgar anti-Semitism.

After three years, about 1982, the Egyptians produced “rationalization” for their failure from 1979 onwards to implement the peace treaty – such as the war in Lebanon in 1982, or Israeli policy in Judea and Samaria. A grotesque situation was thus created: in addition to surrendering Sinai, Israel was now required to fulfill further conditions, and indeed to conform to norms of behaviour dictated by Cairo – so as to be granted the privilege of possible Egyptian fulfillment of solemn treaty obligations.

The Labour opposition, far from taking Egypt to task, pounced on the opportunity to blame the government of Israel. They blandly embraced the pretence that Egyptian breaches and violations had begun only in 1982, and implicitly conferred on Egypt the right to default on the treaty for reasons in themselves spurious and in any case irrelevant.

THAT, in brief, is the backdrop to the Taba dispute, its content and its tone. Taba is the new reason for Egypt's failure to implement the treaty of 1979. President Hosni Mubarak will not even talk to Prime Minister Shimon Peres about implementation or anything else.

First the question must be settled of those four dunams of hill-top land on Eilat's doorstep. It must be settled, moreover, the way Mubarak demands, by international arbitration.

Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir (who carries the burden of his predecessor's sinful surrender of Sinai) has pointed out reasonably that the peace treaty provides for the settlement of such disputes in three alternative ways, of which negotiation is the first and arbitration the last. Moreover, he asserts, surely with great reason, that there are a host of serious prior issues which have to be discussed, such as six years of Egyptian non-implementation of the treaty – and that Taba can wait.

The Labour leaders, however, have fallen in with Mubarak's dictate. For weeks now they have been bolstering the Egyptian pretence that Taba is the great obstacle to any discussion; and they have gradually inflated Taba to monstrous proportions: as the key to the future of Israeli-Egyptian relations. Nay – as the key to peace with Jordan, the key to the solution of the dispute with the Arabs.

This childish fantasize is compounded by a singular arrogance towards their Likud partners. Labour Energy Minister Moshe Shahal – an outstanding practitioner of

the arrogance of ignorance – this week even accused Foreign Minister Shamir of “not understanding” the peace treaty.

UNWITTINGLY Mr. Shahal has touched on a crucial weakness in Israeli political thinking and behaviour – notably, but not only, in the Labour Party. Its essential element, discernible over the years, is that Israel must resign itself to the fact that agreements signed with Israel, or relating to Israel, are not necessarily binding on the other party.

The 1949 Armistice agreements with Jordan, Syria and Egypt were violated by all three. Egypt’s obligation in the 1950s to open the Suez Canal to Israeli shipping was not honoured. The cease-fire of 1967 was broken by the war of attrition. The cease-fire of 1969 on the Suez Canal was violated the very day of the signing – a violation for which Israel paid in heavy casualties in the Yom Kippur War four years later. The list is far from complete.

The more crucial significance for Israel, however, lies in the fact that its governments have never called the Arabs to account. Israel utters its protests (as it did in 1969) or does not protest; in either case it lapses into silence, ready to turn the other cheek. Sure enough, the next time around, all is forgotten, and Israel is the one begging for negotiations. That is the pattern which Israel has established in its relations with its neighbours.

By any normal understanding of the peace treaty, Israel should long ago have refused any new negotiations with Egypt until Cairo paid its old debt – implementation of the peace treaty.

Yet the Labour Party leaders interpret the peace treaty in such a way that here they are panting to sit down at table with Mubarak, only too willing to ignore the Egyptian default, and to discuss the new agenda chosen by Mubarak.

TABA is not the key to anything except an enhancement of Egypt’s military offensive capacity, and to Israel’s further discomfiture. The notion that giving up Taba will bring peace even one inch nearer is worthy of the babes in the wood.

The only likely formula for Egyptian fulfillment of the peace treaty is Israel’s agreement to withdraw to the 1949 Armistice lines, including Jerusalem; and then taking in the “refugees” of 1948.

“Taba” itself is not a disaster. It is a signpost.