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Sadat's Next Task

The administrative changes in Judea, Samaria and Gaza announced by Defence Minister Sharon have little to do with the essence of the autonomy plan enshrined in the Camp David agreement. There it is laid down that a self-governing authority must be elected by the inhabitants. This obviously can only be achieved if elections are in fact held; to that end there must be voters and candidates. These will not be born out of cosmetic administrative arrangements in the Israeli authority.

The first step required by Camp David is an accord between Israel, Egypt and Jordan on the "modalities" of the election and on the "powers and responsibilities of the self-governing authority." With Jordan not cooperating, Egypt and Israel agreed to proceed without her; that is what they have been doing since May 1979, except that for 17 of these 28 months they have not been doing it at all.

The logic behind the freeze is simple. At the outset of the negotiations Egypt, acting as uninvited spokesman for the Palestinian Arabs, pressed for concessions by Israel over and above the Camp David agreement on the ground that this way is the way to "win their confidence" and get them to embrace the autonomy plan. The Israel government declined to make the substantive concessions required: the inclusion of east Jerusalem in the Arab autonomy territory and the suspension of settlement activities.

On the other hand, the government, whose negotiators at Camp David had lightly agreed that the Arab self-governing authority would replace (a plain English word meaning "replace") the Israeli military government, did try to mitigate the disaster. Dr. Burg and his colleagues at the autonomy talks put forward proposals whereby an Israeli authority would not in fact be replaced but would continue to function — and control both land and water resources, as well as internal security in the area. The Camp David agreement had laid down specifically how internal security would be a function of the Arab self-governing authority. It said: "A strong local police force will be constituted by the self-governing authority. It will be comprised of inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza. The police will maintain continuing liaison on internal security matters with the designated Israeli, Jordanian and Egyptian officers". The gap was not closed, and Sadat suspended the talks.

Now, in response to new proposals made by the Israeli government, they are being resumed. Instead of Israeli control of the water resources, the suggestion is for joint control, that is, equal authority for the Autonomy authority and the Israeli government. Joint control of internal security is also suggested.

It is not clear how "joint control" in these two spheres will work. The government has, however, proposed joint control in another sphere — over the state lands in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip — and there the implication is very clear indeed: Israeli renunciation of the right to further settlements beyond the Green Line.

Indeed, when the proposal was raised at one of the meetings in Alexandria, the Egyptian ministers (Hassan Kamel Ali and Butros Ghali) made their point immediately. “When you say joint control, you must realize that you will not be able then to put up any new settlements”. The Israeli ministers (Burg and Sharon) were not fazed. They understood the problem, and had indeed a marvelously simple solution for it. There would be no new settlements, they said, except for thickening existing settlements; Israel was now terminating its settlement programme in Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

Having taken note of this explicit historic undertaking, the Egyptians graciously consented to fix a date for the resumption of the talks. Information about these undertakings to the Egyptians was subsequently conveyed to the Americans during the Washington talks, but has been withheld from the public in Israel. When Mr. Sharon this week addressed the central committee of the governing Herut Party, his long discourse contained not a word about the end of *hityashvut*. Thus, the Herut stalwarts will be able to continue boasting about “settling Eretz Yisrael” and delude themselves that their leader has some secret plan for achieving sovereignty over Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

As for the leaders of the Alignment opposition, who have surely been informed by their own contacts in Egypt and America of the proposed act of renunciation — they are refraining from disclosing this information presumably because they wish to be *able* to continue to pretend that they believe that the prime minister intends to “annex” the West Bank.

President Sadat, however, has a much stronger motive for consenting to resume the autonomy talks. He has not the slightest intention of resigning himself to any protracted Israeli control in Judea, Samaria and Gaza. The autonomy plan interested him only as a stepping-stone to his unchanging goal: the ousting of Israel from “all the territories”. He has made no secret of his determination that the Israeli concessions at Camp David shall remain only transitional steps towards the end, and to consequent “Palestinian” (or other Arab) rule. Israeli proposals or counterproposals are important to him only in so far as they contain more concessions. For the rest, they are a waste of time.

The essential value to him of the resumption of the talks is that they conjure up a sense of movement, of “momentum” and may thus engender a tranquil atmosphere in Israel — while, step by step, Israel relinquishes her hold on Sinai. The momentum and the atmosphere are to be maintained for six months, and that will be enough. Then Sinai will be in his hands.

It is highly doubtful whether the autonomy plan will then serve any purpose of his at all. With Sinai in his hands, what use will he have for a transition stage in Judea, Samaria and Gaza before their final status is determined?

It will therefore not be surprising if, soon after 26 April, 1982, Sadat proposes to “my friend Menachem” that as the autonomy plan is a nonstarter anyhow, it is futile to postpone the negotiations on the final disposition of the West Bank.

The Camp David agreement — to which the prime minister is so attached — need not be abandoned. The relevant parts — e.g., ensuring the “legitimate rights and just aspirations of the Palestinian people” — will be retained as a basis for negotiation.

In any case, after the Egyptian festivities in Sinai are over in April, Sadat will be able to devote all his attention and energies to the campaign for Israel’s total withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. He has given ample warning even of this intention. Three months ago his mouthpiece Butros Ghali, at a meeting of foreign ministers of the Organization of African Unity, called for a united front against Israel.

More significantly still, on July 29, 1980, Egypt voted, in flagrant breach of the peace treaty, for a resolution calling on Israel to withdraw immediately from all the “occupied territories” — thus denouncing the Camp David agreement itself.

With Sinai in his hands (and the danger of Israeli reaction thus eliminated); with his exclusive attention now dedicated to Palestine, there will be no great difficulty in his being welcomed once more into the bosom of the Arab States. They have a common declared goal: Israeli withdrawal to the 1949 Armistice lines — an adequate basis for a combined diplomatic campaign. They will be able to call on the European states — already committed to that cause at Venice in June 1980 — for their energetic cooperation; and unless Washington has by then realized the folly of automatic response to Saudi Arabian wishes, they may well enjoy the prospect of American pressure on Israel as well.

In return, then, for Sinai a grievously weakened Israel will be subjected to a “diplomatic” offensive such as it has never experienced before, aimed at forcing her to return to what Eban once described as the “death trap” of the 1949 Armistice Lines. Beyond the diplomatic offensive, there is already a mounting threat of “...or else, war,” reflected in the feverish build-up of armaments by all the Arab states (including, it goes without saying, Egypt).

There is no rational justification, or even any clear warrant in international relations, for Israel to continue the process of surrendering its vital security belt in Sinai. That is the issue to which the government, even at this late hour, should be addressing itself— and not to the futile exercise of winning Sadat’s heart by more concessions in Judea and Samaria. An Israeli presence in Sinai is Tel Aviv’s security belt.