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THE BLIND SIDE TO TABA

THE EGYPTIAN government has not returned its ambassador to Tel Aviv. Nor has it acted to implement any other clause of the peace treaty signed seven years ago. It has also shown no sign that it sees any violation of the peace treaty in the incessant propaganda against Israel in the Egyptian media, even in the Nazi-style demonization that has created the climate for such barbarities as Ras Burka. It has not, after three months, even delivered its “report” on that crime.

Indeed Egypt has had no serious word to say to Israel for many a month except the pronouncement that the most urgent problem in the world is the future of Taba.

The Israeli government did not inform Cairo, calmly but firmly – as any self-respecting government would have done – that there could be no negotiations over Taba until Egypt implemented the peace treaty signed and sealed seven years ago.

Instead Prime Minister Peres and his half of the government have throughout been prepared to accept the Egyptian demand. They initiated the feverish debate in government and country on the proposition that Israel must agree to arbitration on Taba even in the present state of wholesale disregard by Egypt of her existing obligations.

They thereby have promoted the Arab principle that once Israel has fulfilled its obligations under any agreement or treaty with an Arab state (as Israel did in handing over Sinai), the Arab state involved may feel free not to fulfill, and even to actively violate, that agreement or treaty (as Egypt has done) in the certainty that it will not be treated as a defaulter.

NOW, in its unanimous decision between Sunday dusk and Monday’s dawn, the government has given *de facto* legitimization to Egypt’s unilateral violation of the peace treaty. Clause 10 of the resolution states in unambiguous terms:

“The commitment on the ‘basket deal’ (improvement of relations and the arbitration process) constitutes a single entity. The implementation of each part of this commitment is connected to the implementation of the whole.”

If, for example, Israel were to fail to fulfill its part in the “arbitration process” over Taba, Egypt may equally ignore its obligations under this new agreement and continue, by mutual consent, to violate the peace treaty.

Peres has thus achieved a major downgrading of Egypt’s obligations by making them contingent on the fulfillment of an additional condition by Israel: arbitration on Taba.

For this farcical convolution, Yitzhak Shamir and his component of the government have their share of the blame. When the debate first erupted, they took the politically, morally and tactically correct position that no fresh substantive negotiations with Egypt would be acceptable until Cairo implemented the peace treaty.

That was the time to insist that Israel put an end to its habit of flabby resignation to violations of agreements – by Egypt in particular. Far, however, from trying to educate public opinion in a policy of common sense-with-dignity, Shamir and his colleagues soon

succumbed to the pressures of Peres's defeatist propaganda and agreed to negotiate with Egypt.

Thereafter the quarrel between Peres and Shamir was no longer over essentials but over the order of the agenda. Thereafter, for Shamir too, fulfillment of the peace treaty by Egypt was no longer an unequivocal demand on a defaulting debtor, but a subject for negotiation on equal terms with a client in good standing.

THE EQUATION of Israel with Egypt is given particularly grotesque expression in three of the clauses of the resolution. Two of them merely repeat paragraphs in the peace treaty consistently violated by Egypt. "The two states," says Clause 13, "will prevent terrorist presence or activity from each country against the other and against its citizens." On the very day of the decision Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin had to "remind" Cairo of that very obligation under the peace treaty – following the revelation that arms and ammunition were being smuggled from Egypt into Israel and that there had been a visit to Egypt by the commander of the Palestine Liberation Organization's elite Force 17. He did not mention the ongoing violation of this clause by the existence of PLO offices in Egypt.

Moreover, Rabin knows perfectly well about the unbroken collaboration between Egypt and the PLO. Not only is President Hosni Mubarak the chief political sponsor of Yasser Arafat, but in the very lie that he told about his attempt to smuggle the Achille Lauro hijackers to safety, he revealed his practical sympathy for the terrorists' aims against Israel. He claimed that he did not know that they were murderers. But he did know that they were hijackers and that their object was to land in Ashdod and sow death and terror in its streets. That, to Mubarak, was a manifestly legitimate objective. Our government has never even mentioned this little matter to Mubarak.

If Egypt's record on terror has proved to be immune to criticism, it is hard to understand our government's evident belief that a parrot-like repetition of the peace treaty's clause will now serve even as a hint to them to mend their ways.

The underlying truth, of course, is that Egypt has never forsworn the Rabat pledge of 1974 to give all possible aid to the PLO.

MOST CHILLING are the two clauses in the new resolution that relate to Ras Burka. It was reprehensible even to contemplate tranquil talks with Egypt after Ras Burka. Instead of an infantile request for an inquiry, Mubarak should have been confronted at once, and in public, with the assertion that the behaviour of the men – who are ultimately under his command – was not accidental but a logical consequence of the unbridled hate campaign in the Egyptian media against Israel, its citizens, and Jews in general. Its elimination was an obligation Israel should have insisted be undertaken at once.

Mubarak's subsequent brushing off of Ras Burka as a minor incident, the widespread martyrization of the convicted murderer and the Egyptian government's pretence that he was the only guilty person, should surely have impressed upon the Israeli government the fact that here was a major issue over which Cairo should be subjected to unrelenting pressure: to honour the peace treaty by a drastic revision of policy on public information. Taba could wait.

Instead, our government, seconded by the press, did everything possible to remove Ras Burka from the public mind. Mubarak, who kept thus in good humour,

succeeded even in withholding a “report” on Ras Burka until he had been assured of Israel’s absolute compliance with his *diktat*: arbitration over Taba.

The Israeli government has improved even on Mubarak. T injury by Egypt, it has itself added insult – to the people of Israel and in particular to the families of the Ras Burka victims. Having failed to demand action from Cairo, having failed even to squeeze out a “report” from Mubarak, it has formalized its shame by dragging in a clause in the resolution saying that “Egypt will submit a report on Ras Burka” and that the “question of reparations for the families will be discussed.”

There is therefore no need for further public concern over what happened at Ras Burka and why. One day the Egyptians will write a letter about what happened at Ras Burka, a discussion will take place as to whether the families should receive “compensation” – and thus the case of the slaughter at Ras Burka will be closed.

The one clause in which Ras Burka *should* have appeared as an unequivocal demand on Egypt to prohibit hate propaganda can in its present form serve only to bolster the pretence that Egypt’s bloodied slate is clean. The clause merely repeats the peace treaty’s “prohibition” on both sides. It will bear the same fruit.

TABA ITSELF is no doubt of limited importance. It has, however, provided Mubarak with a significant victory, diplomatic and psychological. He has shown once more how easy it is to play on the self-deception of Israeli leaders, how readily they pay for the same goods over and over again, how they can be lured toward the objectives of their enemies.

Such Arab victories do not bring peace any nearer. They merely encourage the Arab dream of Israel’s piecemeal elimination.