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The “Peace Plan” Is Defunct

What remains of the Israeli Government’s “peace plan”? The only rational justification for the submission of a plan which indisputably contains far-reaching risks is that its authors, after weighing all the factors, had come to the conclusion, or had been given some clear hint, that this was a plan that would indeed bring peace. The only rational explanation for accepting the risks was that at least the Egyptians are prepared to make peace with Israel on her terms.

It transpires that this explanation is hollow. President Sadat declared in his speech in the Knesset (on 20 November) that he regards Israel’s withdrawal “from all the Arab lands” captured in the 1967 war as a self-understood prelude to negotiations. On territories, he said, there is no room for negotiations. They belong to the Arabs, and “that is that”.

There were those who believed, (and most people did believe) that this was merely an opening statement, dictated by the sanctified rules of negotiation. By now, however, they have seen, through the meetings in Jerusalem and at Ismailia, through the talks — official and unofficial — between the delegations, and following the publication of the details of the far-reaching concessions offered to Sadat before ever negotiations started, how Sadat continues to insist that there is absolutely no question of negotiating over territories, and that Israel must withdraw from them all.

The Egyptians have asserted moreover, in ever ascending tones of anger, that Israel’s refusal to comply is an act of intolerable intransigence.

Sadat added a dramatic dimension to the rejection of the Israeli plan by brusquely withdrawing his delegation from the political commission in Jerusalem; and the unconcealed purpose of his present visit to Washington is to influence the Administration to exert pressure on Israel to accept his peace plan, that is Israel’s withdrawal from all the territories, etc., and recognition of the rights of the Palestinians to self-determination, etc. There are no signs, nor need it be assumed, that he has achieved this purpose. Pressure, as understood by Sadat, will not be exerted. But after his talk with President Carter, Sadat gave renewed incisive and emphatic expression to his unchanging and unyielding demands.

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There were those who believed that the government was certain from the outset that the Arabs could not accept its plan, but calculated that its readiness for such extreme concessions would evoke a friendly public opinion throughout the world, and that the US government would take a firm stand in its support. Indeed the Prime Minister claimed, and reiterated from a variety of forums, that the plan had won praise and support from the heads of the American administration.

The plan, however, was not accorded praise and support as a peace plan. Certainly, President Carter and his assistants rejoiced at its details.

After all, without the unpleasantness and pitfalls of tiresome bargaining, Israel had taken a great step forward towards acceptance of the American point of view. When it became clear, however, that Sadat was not accepting the plan, President Carter did not come out against Sadat's rejection (which would be the logical corollary of US support, for the Israeli plan), nor did he defend the plan. On the contrary: he found the occasion appropriate for repeating the traditional American position that Israel *must withdraw* to the 1949 Armistice lines (with insubstantial modifications) — and even added that it was now time for Israel to be flexible (that is: to add further concessions to those in the “peace plan”).

The proposed “compromise” therefore just does not work. Both the Arabs and the Americans regard the plan only as a first “installment-on account” of a total Israeli withdrawal.

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I was one of those that believed in November, when Sadat announced his intention of coming to Jerusalem, that his decision was the result of the critical state of the Egyptian economy; that the very distressing picture of urban Cairo and the grim economic forecasts submitted to him by foreign experts (and publicized abroad) had driven him, after much heart searching, to the conclusion that Egypt could no longer sustain a policy of perpetual preparation for war, that there was simply no escape for her leaders from a reduction of her investment in the army and in security measures; and that they must concentrate all their energy and their resources on treating the ailing body of the Egyptian people. They must, therefore (so I assumed they reasoned) reach a speedy peace agreement with Israel — and postpone the dream of her elimination to an indefinite future.

Maybe this belief was not mistaken. Had the Israeli government embarked upon negotiations with Egypt in the accepted rational way, it would have begun by ordering a survey of the degree of gravity in Egypt's economic condition, the weight of the circumstances pressing Sadat to abandon his war economy and, hence, the compulsions moving him to make substantive concessions for peace with Israel. Such a rational study develops naturally in the course of negotiations. However, the adversary's intentions can be probed in this way only if the negotiations are opened without prior conditions — meaning, in our case, without prior concessions by Israel.

The Israeli Government, however, acted according to other, completely novel rules. It started by flourishing a plan which promised Sadat, in advance, sovereignty over the whole of Sinai. This Israeli generosity ruled out any possibility of testing Sadat's desire for peace. Instead of having to apply all his energies to opening the gate, Sadat found the gate already open. If previously the thought of the price he might have to pay for peace had given him sleepless nights, they disappeared at the first contact with Israel. It can be assumed that Sadat concluded that the State of Israel and its people were most intense in their desire to achieve peace with him — and, in doing so, ignore completely the history of Egypt's belligerence towards Israel and forgive Sadat his own past.

Consequently he was not called upon to make any substantive sacrifice. On the contrary: he could continue to insist on the fulfillment of all the demands made on Israel by the coalition of

Arab States. Instead of having to struggle for every inch of territory in Sinai, he was being offered Sinai for almost nothing. He was free, therefore to concentrate his main effort on the struggle for “the rights of the Palestinians” and on Israeli surrender of the Golan.

Whether this thesis is correct or whether he would in no case have allowed his economic difficulties to soften his attitude — we shall perhaps never know. His intransigent stand on the “traditional” Arab demands certainly leaves little room for doubt. We must now act on the assumption that, even if Sadat wants peace, the peace that he envisions does not also permit peace for Israel. There is no escape from the assumption that Sadat has not abandoned the Arab purpose of bringing about the liquidation of Israel in stages as an operative target.

The Prime Minister’s words in the Knesset on 23 January indicate that he is alive to this implication of Sadat’s pronouncements and behaviour.

He said in that speech:

The President of Egypt has said that we are expected to withdraw to the lines of 5 June 1967, to come down from the Golan, to abandon Judea, Samaria and Gaza. Let him take note that as he makes these demands on us and adds a Palestinian State in Judea, Samaria and Gaza, we must construe these unacceptable demands as meaning that he does not want peace with Israel but peace without Israel. Nobody will give him that kind of peace.

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In Sadat’s pronouncements since then — and especially at his Press Conference in Washington, which received very wide publicity — there is not the smallest sign that he has changed one jot in his attitude. On the contrary, he continues to present “these demands” confidently and emphatically, even arrogantly. What is more his demands are treated as legitimate. They conform almost completely to the American point of view.

It is clear therefore that there is no scope for the Israeli Government’s peace plan. Even its authors and its original supporters must now recognize the cruel truth that, as a plan with operational significance, it is dead.

True, the proper time for its retraction was when Sadat broke off the negotiations — when he unilaterally ordered his delegation to leave the Political Commission in Jerusalem. Certainly, however, after his clear and abrasive utterances in Washington and the inescapable conclusion that he does not intend (and he is now unable publicly) to give serious consideration to the “peace plan” as it stands — the Israeli government must surely announce its withdrawal. It is the right of the proposer — indeed, as the Prime Minister emphasized, it is his right under international law as well — to withdraw it when the other party to negotiations refuses to accept it. In the combination of circumstances in which we find ourselves this right becomes an obligation.

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If the Government does not now withdraw the peace plan and President Sadat — after having told the world what his demands are — finds it convenient to renew the talks in the Political Commission in Jerusalem, the Israeli Government will find itself caught up in a set of negotiations resting on two premises: Egypt accepts the concessions offered by Israel in the peace plan, and these will not be discussed further.

Discussion will centre on further concessions designed to bring Israel nearer still to total withdrawal “from all the territories” and to a formula on the “future of the Palestinians” which Egypt will be able to see as a step forward towards recognition of their “legitimate rights”.

These postulates will be common to Egyptians and Americans alike. It is possible to escape this trap now, immediately, as a logical and dignified response by Israel to Sadat’s intransigence. It is possible to withdraw now in logic and dignity, to cancel the present peace plan and to announce our readiness to open negotiations on a new basis. The new basis will take into account the lessons learnt in recent months. The first of them is that there will be no security for Israel except where there is Israeli sovereignty.