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### **Time to Take Stock**

A lively correspondence has been in progress between Jerusalem and Washington on the function of the United States in the negotiations now starting on the autonomy in Judea, Samaria and Gaza. Israel rejected the Egyptian-American proposal that Washington should be a “full partner” to the agreement. There can be no doubt, however, that the American representatives will play a full part in the negotiations themselves. But they will not sign any agreement that is reached.

Nobody has bothered to explain to the Israeli public how and why the Americans, who cannot be mediators because they have completely identified with the Egyptian attitude, are to be a party to the negotiations.

Indeed, nobody has bothered to explain why these negotiations are being held at all at this point, and what they are expected to achieve. At best, they will be an exercise in futility. In fact they will develop — gradually or more precipitately — into an instrument of pressure on Israel to make speedy and far-reaching concessions in Judea and Samaria over and above what is surrendered in the Camp David agreement.

The Israeli team proposes that the agenda for the talks should concentrate on implementing the immediate relevant clause of the Camp David accord — to lay down “the modalities for establishing the elected self-governing authority in the West Bank and Gaza”. This means that a decision should be reached on the system by which the autonomy council should be elected; on the criteria for the franchise; on the scope of the council’s authority.

Assuming that agreement on these questions can be reached between Israel and Egypt (with American approval), their practical impact will be negligible. Two vital elements to these negotiations are missing. Jordan is not participating as required by the Camp David agreement, nor are any of the Palestine Arabs who could be included in the Jordanian (and the Egyptian) delegation. Moreover, every day brings an indication or pronouncement that (to put it mildly) Jordan does not intend to take part in the talks. As for the various “Palestinians,” they totally denounce the Camp David agreements. In short, therefore, there are neither electors nor candidates in sight for the elections to the autonomy council.

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Why, then, did Israel’s government agree to enter into these negotiations? True, the Israeli negotiators did at first object to any “impossible” timetable for the negotiations. However, precisely as in the case of every other “impossible” demand by Egypt and the US, the Israeli team gave in to the demand that the negotiations had to begin by a given date; and they meekly encased themselves in the strait-jacket of a one-year time limit for concluding the negotiations. What was the purpose of the Egyptians and the Americans? These negotiations, after all, cannot possibly reach the conclusion laid down in the Camp David agreement unless there is at least Jordanian approval and a Palestinian Arab constituency established for the election of the

autonomy council — which is the heart of the autonomy project.

Washington has indeed been making great efforts to induce Jordan and some of the Palestinian Arabs to join in, holding out the assurance that Israel will make the necessary additional concessions as it did in the earlier negotiations. These American efforts have failed — and now, as was obviously foreordained, a campaign of pressure will be mounted on Israel, within the framework of the negotiations and outside them, to “do something,” to make a “gesture of goodwill” that will “enable” Jordan and the Palestine Arabs to join the talks. If the first gesture is not enough, there is always room for more.

The American — like the Egyptian — interest in the negotiations is primarily as a further step towards the realization of their overall purpose; an Israeli withdrawal to the 1949 Armistice Lines. Their own participation is a calculated means of exerting continuous pressure on Israel (as they did successfully throughout 1978), this time to ensure the implementation of Israel’s concessions under the Camp David agreement (first of all the replacement of the military government by the Autonomy Council) and to achieve further, far-reaching concessions beyond anything in the agreement. The declared purpose of the exercise will of course be to offer an inducement to Jordan and the “Palestinians” to agree to talk.

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The Israel Government, therefore, which agreed at Camp David to conduct negotiations with Egypt and Jordan on the ways and means of establishing the autonomy, will find itself engaged — immediately or a little later — in negotiations with Egypt and the US in pursuance of the Arab-American objective of squeezing out her acquiescence in further retreats towards her ultimate withdrawal to the 1949 lines — before the autonomy comes into being. The thrust of those pressures is already known: East Jerusalem to be surrendered to the Arabs, and the suspension of all new Jewish settlement in Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

The prevention of the development of Jewish life in Judea, Samaria and Gaza is a symbol and an outcrop of the central issue: that total expulsion of Israel (and of all Jews) from these areas — as a first step towards eliminating it from the rest of Palestine.

Only last week Jordan’s Minister of Information Adnan Abu Ouda announced (in a radio interview):

“Jordan will not join the peace effort even if Israel stops establishing settlements. This will not alter the situation. Israel must announce its readiness to withdraw from all the Arab territories, dismantle its settlements, recognize the rights of the Palestinians including the right of self-determination and agree to the participation in the talks of all parties including the PLO”.

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At this juncture the Israel government should perform the exercise (for the first time perhaps since it was formed) of standing back for a moment and examining the overall situation in which Israel finds itself, and from which they are launching themselves into the new set of negotiations.

If they face the truth and are honest with themselves they will find the picture and the prospect highly disturbing — not perhaps for the next two or three weeks, while the parties are easing themselves into comfortable postures, but for the future of Israel as it has already been mapped out by their earlier, irresponsible decision and as it is likely to be affected by every detail in the negotiations about to begin.

The Arab demands on Israel remain exactly what they were before December 1977. The latest Jordanian statement is but a reflection of the Arab consensus; Israel must go back to the death-trap of the 1949 Armistice Lines — and there gird itself for the final assault on its life.

American support for the Arab demands has also remained constant. Prime Minister Begin's naive gamble with Sinai did not diminish by one whit the extent of Arab demands; nor did it blunt the American diplomatic thrust. Now, unless Israel, having surrendered Sinai, accepts in full (though, in the circumstances, not all at once) the demands for surrender in Judea, Samaria and Gaza, it will be faced with the same threat of war as existed before 1977 — except that that threat will be compounded by Israel's loss of the territory of Sinai and the priceless strategic assets — both the natural assets and those it built so laboriously and at such great cost in the peninsula.

Sadat not only ensured for his nation the removal of Israel's effective security belt — down to the last grain of sand and the last Jew — which would protect it in a future war, but, despite Begin's protestations, he also in fact achieved (by the addendum to Clause Six of the Peace Treaty) adequate formal legitimization for joining a future all-Arab war against Israel, under whatever pretext may then be available to Egypt.

Nothing has changed fundamentally in this respect. It should not be forgotten that Egypt never "went it alone" in war with Israel, and that in December 1977 Egypt was in no state to go to war at all. Egypt represented a part of the overall Arab threat of war; and that threat, after all the convolutions of Camp David and the peace treaty, remains valid today and until the day the pretext is required.

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That situation, that pretext, will predictably arise out of the developments in Judea, Samaria and Gaza. Even during the autonomy negotiations — over Jerusalem, over dismantling settlements, over an Israeli failure to hand over authority as provided for in the Camp David agreement — that threat will continue to hang over Israel's head. And it will so continue until the last concession has been extracted.

Even more immediately, of course, in the diplomatic situation into which Begin and Dayan have manoeuvred Israel, it will be faced at every clash or crisis in the talks with a universally orchestrated charge of being to blame for the abortion of the autonomy, for hindering the peace process, for endangering the peace itself.

Israel is about to experience, even if in stages, the full impact of the egregious blunders and surrenders of the past 18 months. Behind the bland discussions over this or that item in the agenda of the autonomy talks hovers our greatest and most dangerous crisis since 1948.