

September 1, 1978

U.S. – Egypt Teamwork

The issue that will dominate the Camp David meeting is very simple. It has been stated by the Egyptian and by the Americans clearly and repeatedly. Nothing that has happened or that President Sadat has said in the past nine months has suggested a change in Egypt's demands on Israel.

In November, Mr. Sadat (having been promised Sinai before coming to Jerusalem) told the Knesset in emphatic terms that he had no intention of negotiating over "Arab territory"; not an inch of it would be surrendered. In the following months he did not alter his stand by one iota. Indeed he reacted in demonstrative anger to the small reservations in the Israeli Government's "peace plan" for Sinai — that Yamit and the villages in the Rafiah approaches, and the three airfields (comprising altogether some 2% of Sinai) should remain in existence though under Egyptian sovereignty. He even described Sinai as "sacred Arab territory", an absurdity more crass even than the ascription of "Arab sanctity" to Palestine. The official Egyptian "peace plan" is only a sharp restatement of the Arab demand for Israel's withdrawal to the 1949 Armistice lines.

With this demand the US Government is in almost complete agreement. Its one deviation from the absolute Arab territorial demands is that it is prepared to propose minor modifications (measured in metres) of the 1949 lines. This fig-leaf fails to conceal Washington's naked endorsement of the Arab purpose.

It is Washington's close identification with the Arab demands that moves Mr. Sadat to insist that the US become a "full partner" in negotiations with Israel; more bluntly, that the US twist Israel's arm until she complies with Arab demands.

American co-ordination with Egypt has indeed been the salient characteristic of the developments of the past nine months. Sadat (remember always, with Sinai more or less "in the bag") broke off direct talks with Israel when they had been no more than formally opened, and has to this day not resumed them. From the beginning he has insisted that Israel first comply with his prior conditions: before negotiations can start Israel must agree to withdraw from "all the territories". At this point, the US set in motion a major effort of pressure on Israel to find a formula that would persuade Sadat to resume negotiations. The various meetings of US diplomats with Israeli leaders this year have been aimed at obtaining some form of undertaking that will satisfy Sadat in advance that Judea and Samaria and Gaza are to be evacuated and handed over to the Arabs.

The tactic of the US diplomats has been of a professionally high order. They insist that they will not propose a plan of their own. They do not have to. So far, in order to achieve a breakthrough towards the Arab demands, they have simply used as a basis the Israeli "peace plan" — to which the Government continues to cling.

The peace plan contains concessions objectively dangerous to Israel's security. The threat from a Sinai in Egyptian hands is starkly evident. In the months since the plan was promulgated that threat has been compounded by the accumulating evidence of a major Saudi military build-up, buttressed by US arms, personnel and somewhat clumsy misinformation about its real purpose.

Some of Israel's best-known military experts, including Professor Yuval Ne'eman, Aluf Dan Tolkowsky and Aluf Benjamin Peled felt impelled recently to urge upon the Prime Minister reconsideration of the "peace plan" in the light of the mounting danger in the south, and the vital importance of Israel's presence in Sinai to her essential security, indeed to the rational operability of the IDF. As for the autonomy plan for Judea, Samaria and Gaza, with its recognition, in addition, of the existence of Arab claims to sovereignty and its even more astonishing provision for the return of Arab refugees — this is a prescription for ultimate Arab rule in these areas. The only possible rational explanation for producing such a plan could be the certainty that the Arabs would sign an instant peace treaty.

From the rejection of the plan and Sadat's reiterated refusal to accept anything but Israel's complete capitulation, the only rational and safe conclusion that could be drawn was that the Arabs have remained faithful to their purpose: to reduce Israel to a state where her annihilation could become feasible; peace, to be sure, but peace without Israel.

The "peace plan" in all rationality should have been withdrawn. As the Government, however, clings to it as its declared policy, Washington has quite legitimately turned to it and used it as the most effective instrument for pressure on its authors.

American persuasion has been directed at two clauses in the plan. The final clause originally provided for Israeli review of the plan after five years. But soon both the Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister conceded in public statements that the "review" would be in the form of discussion with the other parties. The plan thus ended its career as a peace plan and became an interim five-year project.

To achieve a change of the other crucial clause was more difficult. Washington's logic was strong. Once Israel admitted the existence of other — Arab — claims to sovereignty in Judea, Samaria and Gaza, it could not insist that the question of sovereignty remain "open". The other claimants had a right to insist on stating their claims, that the question should be "closed", and that the sovereignty of the areas be established. (The Arabs do not recognize that Israel has any claims at all).

This was the thrust of the "question" put by Washington to the Israeli Government in June. At that time, the Government returned a negative answer; but the Americans did not despair. A month later the US Secretary of State initiated a meeting with the Foreign Ministers of Israel and Egypt, at Leeds Castle in England. There, in contradiction of the Government's declared attitude, Mr. Dayan gave (in his own name) the undertaking that Washington so badly wanted. The Government then reversed itself — and committed Israel to the principle that after five years, Judea, Samaria and Gaza could become sovereign territory and that the sovereign *might* be Arab.

This was “major progress” indeed, and this time Israel was praised in the United States for its flexibility. In consequence of the “Leeds concession,” and now given President Carter’s public assurance that the US would henceforth be a “full partner” in negotiations, Mr. Sadat agreed, not indeed to direct negotiations with Israel, but to a three-cornered meeting.

There at Camp David, the American and Egyptian teams will exert what they hope will be the decisive squeeze on Israel.