

23 November 1984

WHITEWASHING THE EGYPTIANS

THE FRIDAY supplement of *The Jerusalem Post* last week carried a lengthy interview about the late President Sadat, his peace treaty with Israel, its implications and its execution. Never once in it is there any mention of Sinai.

That the acquisition of Sinai was the prime (indeed, in the opinion of many, the only) motive in Sadat's agreeing to negotiate a peace treaty is not even hinted at. Nor – inevitably – is the fact that Sadat took his dramatic decision in November 1977 to come to Jerusalem only *after* he had been assured, in September, that it would be good to make peace with Israel. Like Sinai, Begin is not mentioned.

The propounder of this history is not one of Sadat's ministers or biographers but Professor Shimon Shamir, who until recently headed the Israel Academic Centre in Cairo. He proceeds in the interview to give a balanced appraisal of the reasons why the peace treaty is not working as a peace treaty should.

THE IMPRESSION he conveys is that both sides are to blame. This does not present any great difficulty to Prof. Shamir. He simply omits to mention that Egypt has not implemented any of the scores of specific agreements deriving from the treaty, or that she bars the way to trade, and to tourism from her side; or that (except for that small Israeli cultural centre) no cultural relations have been allowed to develop between the two peoples; or that she has supported resolutions at the UN which conflict with the Camp David agreement. Etcetera.

Presumably unable to ignore completely the unabated vicious propaganda against Israel in the Egyptian media, he chides the Egyptians for not eliminating what he calls "the vocabulary of conflict." He does not mention that that "vocabulary" is specifically prohibited by the peace treaty.

On the other hand he does not mention any breaches of the peace treaty by Israel. (This is easy: there have been no breaches.) Instead he seeks excuses for Egyptian coolness towards the treaty in Israeli "behaviour."

"One of the tragedies of the present situation," he writes, "is that the seven years of the peace process are also the seven years during which some of the most negative aspects of Israeli society and behaviour emerged – years in which he had Jewish terrorism, racism, and certain aspects of Israeli political behaviour that could accurately be termed expansionism."

This pronouncement can accurately be termed twaddle. Even if it were factually true, what has it to do with the peace treaty, which is a legal document, laying down specific obligations? It is, moreover, an insult to the intelligence.

Assuming (as Shamir seems to) the validity of the Egyptian claim that the State of Israel is accountable to Cairo for its "behaviour" in various fields quite unrelated to the treaty, and that a treaty with Israel may be violated and Israel punished for unseemly "behaviour," how, even then, can Israeli operations against the PLO in Lebanon in 1982 have prevented Egypt's fulfillment of the treaty, and justified its violation, *three and two years earlier?*

How does “Jewish terror” (not directed against Egypt) in 1984 justify Nazi-style propaganda in Egypt in 1979 or 1981? Or an Egyptian plan, announced in April 1982 by (now Foreign Minister) Maguid, whose consummation would mean the elimination of Israel by stages?

THIS KIND of whitewashing and justifying the Egyptians is not new. Those who were responsible for the peace treaty, or who supported it, are doing it repeatedly. They persist in promoting the myth that all Sadat (and Egypt) wanted was peace with Israel and that wresting every square inch of Sinai from Israel, and making it *judenrein*, was no more than Egypt was entitled to – in spite of her repeated use of Sinai in the past as a base for her attempts to put an end to Israel’s existence. The considerable evidence exposing the myth – they have dismissed by perfunctory mention, or glossed over, or simply suppressed.

Professor Shamir, however, goes strangely further in his report, providing a weird sample of his scientific method. He brings back to mind, perhaps unwittingly, the recent history of the Jews of Egypt, a history no less gruesome than that of the Jews in other Arab lands.

There is in Egypt today no more than a pitiful remnant of a once proud and flourishing Jewish community. The vast majority fled the country, or were deported, following two periods of terror, of economic pressure and discrimination, of violence – in and after 1948, again after 1954 (with the rise of Nasser). There were some 85,000 Jews in Egypt in 1948. By 1960 80 per cent had fled; and most of the rest left in the following years. (Israel absorbed about 50,000.) They left most of their property behind.

A conference of World Jewish Organizations in January 1957 described how Jews were encouraged to leave Egypt:

“Large numbers of Jews of all nationalities have either been served with orders of expulsion, or were subjected to ruthless intimidation to compel them to apply for permission to depart. Hundreds who have reached lands of refuge have testified that they were taken in shackles from prison and concentration camps to board ships.

“In order to ensure that this deliberate creation of a new refugee problem should not evoke protests from international public opinion, documents proving expulsion were taken away from expellees before departure. Furthermore, they were compelled to sign statements certifying that they left voluntarily. The victims of this barbaric process were deprived of their possessions.”

As to those possessions, *The Jerusalem Post* reported on 13 August 1971:

“A convention of former Egyptian Jews held in Paris in July 1971 recommended that legal suits for compensation be filed by all those who had been incarcerated and deported because of the Egyptian-Israeli wars of 1948, 1956 and 1967. The estimated claims for personal compensation, for confiscated communal property and for religious articles, amount to \$1,000 million.”

Professor Shamir, evidently trying to impress us with the positive attitude of the “average Egyptian” to the peace with Israel, blandly tells his interviewer – with evident gratification – that “from people in the street you would hear comments like: ‘We have been living with Jews in this country for many generations and we can do the same with neighbouring states.’” He goes on to say “that the Egyptian Jew has left an extremely positive impression among his Moslem neighbours.”

What Jews did Shamir think these “people in the street” were talking about? The Jews, as they were fleeing in 1948? Or those, as they were being deported, in 1954? Or the remnant that remained after the agony of 1967?

EGYPT, regrettably, is but one sector of Israeli reality in which some “experts” and leaders have forgotten Jewish history, obscured elementary truths and, wittingly or unwittingly, misdirected their people.

In the area central and most immediate to Israel’s concerns – the future to her stance in Western Palestine – they mute the fact that Palestine is the homeland of the Jewish people and of no other nation on earth, even if there is an Arab minority living and prospering in it. They treat the Jewish national relationship to its homeland as though it must be subordinated to the Arab appetite for more territory; and they help to promote the myth of a “Palestinian nation” separate from the Palestinian nation across Jordan.

They pretend, and propagate the idea, that a “territorial compromise” is feasible – when they know that the unchanging purpose of the Arab nation is to eliminate the “infidel,” “alien” Jewish independence from the heart of the Arab and Moslem world.

Again and again we have to return to this debate. It may, however, be appropriate here to go back, briefly, to Egypt whence, some years ago, came a succinct pointer to the roots of the “Palestinian problem.”

Al Musswar, the prestigious Egyptian weekly, admitted in December 1968:

“The masses of the Palestinian people are only the advance-guard of the Arab nation . . . a plan for rousing world opinion in stages, as it would not be able to understand or accept a war by 100 million Arabs against a small state.”

See Letter to the Editor on the following page

Readers Letters – 6 January 1985

EGYPT, ISRAEL AND THE PEACE

To the Editor of The Jerusalem Post

Sir, – Shmuel Katz's article (November 23), criticizing my statements on Israeli-Egyptian relations in an interview with David Bernstein (November 16) was brought to my attention only recently. I have no intention, after the elapse of several weeks, to engage in a point-counterpoint debate with Mr. Katz, and would leave it to the readers to decide whose arguments are what he calls "an insult to the intelligence." Nor do I share with Mr. Katz sufficient premises that could serve as a common ground for a serious discussion: as I understand from his article, he regards the existence of a Palestinian national entity in the West Bank as an unfounded "myth"; he is vehemently opposed to the peace agreement with Egypt (presumably preferring the belligerency that had existed before); and he even disbelieves that the emergence of terrorism fascism in our society, in recent years, is "factually true."

Nevertheless, since the state of Israeli-Egyptian relations is nowadays an increasingly topical question, I wish to correct Mr. Katz on one point that I believe is essential to this issue. Peace between Israel and Egypt was not merely an exchange of Sinai for normalization – as he depicts it. In addition to the Begin-Sadat proclamation of "no more war," it also included a pledge to restore the legitimate rights of the Palestinians and advance them towards full autonomy – an element that Mr. Katz completely ignores, and for obvious reasons. At the risk of stating the obvious, I would like to remind him that the government that made this commitment had no intention of ever honouring it and indeed proceeded immediately to do almost everything possible to prevent its materialization.

The anger of the Egyptians about actions of Israelis that contradict the essence of the peace agreement is no less genuine than our anger about those of the Egyptians. Recognizing it is the just requirement for moving towards the improvement of relations. To call this recognition "whitewashing the Egyptians" is absurd – no less than calling my repeated criticism of the Egyptian "cold peace" an attempt to "whitewash the Israelis."

But the categorical denunciations, rather than search for rapprochement, is the name of Mr. Katz's game. Instead of telling us how, in his opinion, we can establish peaceful relations with the Arabs – which, in the long run, is the most crucial existential question facing us – he engages in exposing villains, not only in the Arab world, but also in Israel: "Those who are responsible for the peace treaty or who supported it," those who "mute the fact that Palestine is the homeland of the Jewish people and no other nation on earth," those who "propagate the idea of a territorial compromise," and, of course, those who "whitewash the Egyptians."

It is perhaps not a great disgrace to be given a small niche in Mr. Katz's pantheon of demons.

SHIMON SHAMIR

Geneva.

See Shmuel Katz's rebuttal below

Readers Letters – 27 January 1985

EGYPT, ISRAEL AND THE PEACE

To the Editor of The Jerusalem Post

Sir, – Professor Shimon Shamir comforts himself in his letter of January 8 that “it is perhaps not a great disgrace to be given a small niche in Mr. Katz’s pantheon of demons.” It is – if I may borrow from Shalom Aleichem – also no great honour.

It is no great virtue for a scholar to make highly questionable statements in an interview and then, when challenged, to take refuge in abuse of his critic. In my article I dealt with Mr. Shamir’s report; and I and all your readers are entitled to hold Mr. Shamir accountable for his statements. If he wants to have a discussion on *my* version of Egypt’s behaviour and my views on the Peace Treaty (and on Israel’s behaviour), I am prepared to debate with him on any forum in the country under parliamentary rules.

Professor Shamir retailed Egyptian charges against Israel as justifying Egypt’s non-fulfillment and indeed violation of the Peace treaty and I pointed out that the sequence of events demonstrated *ab initio* that those charges are false. To this understandably, the calendar not being susceptible to change, he has no reply.

He does not like the charge that he is whitewashing the Egyptians. Maybe he has a better term, for example, for his benevolent description of the unrelenting vicious campaign of Egyptian propaganda against Israel ever since the Peace Treaty. He called it “the vocabulary of conflict.” Or the stunning revelation that average Egyptians had told him that “the Egyptian Jew has left an extremely positive impression on his Moslem neighbours.” Having had the shocking implications of this statement pointed out to him, he does not even have the decency to apologise for gratefully swallowing, and then disseminating, this mockery of the once flourishing Jewish community of Egypt, persecuted, robbed and driven out in our own time, between 1948 and 1967.

SHMUEL KATZ

Tel Aviv.