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BREAKING TABOOS

Neither Egypt nor Israel is seeking a separate peace agreement, but it may come to that in the end, Muhammad Sid-Ahmad (above), one of Egypt's most prominent leftists, told *Mark Bruzonsky* and *Judith Kipper* during a discussion in Cairo. Sid-Ahmad, author of *After the Guns Fall Silent*, analyses the role of the superpowers and Saudi Arabia, the position of the Palestinians and the aims of the left in Egypt (photos by *Mark Bruzonsky*)

□ What's changed now that Sadat has gone to Israel and Israelis have come to Egypt?

○ Before Sadat's trip, all parties to the negotiation process were subjects to the negotiations with the exception of the Palestinians, who were the object of the negotiations. Since Sadat's trip, the subjects to the negotiations have become Egypt and Israel. Whatever Egypt and Israel decide the others have just to follow — that's making them objects.

But Egypt is a subject only to the extent it becomes an Israeli object. Egypt will have bargaining power to the extent that this bargaining power is bargaining power for Israel.

Egypt wants its occupied territory returned. Israel would have an interest in restoring this territory in so far as restoring it or not is a way to manipulate other recal-

what could finish up by being objectively a separate agreement, and what, in the intention of the parties, is not. I think the intention of both parties is still not a separate agreement.

□ The Israelis are not pushing for a separate agreement?

○ Of course if they can get a separate agreement, that's useful, but it would also be useful to use Sadat to go beyond the separate agreement. If what has occurred with Egypt now could be used in order to obtain something more than an agreement only with Egypt, all the better.

□ What would be the something more?

○ An arrangement with Syria, too. An acceptance throughout the Arab world of some arrangement of the Palestinian problem.

□ You contemplate this on the basis of what the Israelis are offering?

actual negotiating process, and that Begin has a stand on this and Sadat has a different one.

Carter's position has been interpreted by both parties as being on one side.

□ What do you suspect the American motivation to be in finally taking such a stand?

○ One possible interpretation is that the Americans believe the only issue which can be solved in the foreseeable future is between Egypt and Israel. Another possibility is to think beyond Egypt and Israel; the US is very keen on other parties coming into the process. But both Carter and Brzezinski have, in one way or another, said farewell to the PLO. Now this extends beyond the PLO into the Palestinian problem in general.

□ But the "homeland" concept was "the American Balfour Declaration" according to Brzezinski.

○ It could have been, but not necessarily. If a "homeland" is interpreted in terms of Begin's proposals it is not, and it carried that possible interpretation from the very beginning. He never said "Palestinian state". He never said "self-determination". He did make some progress by saying "Palestinian rights" in the US-USSR joint statement.

□ Carter also said that the "PLO represents a substantial part of the Palestinians", and he privately said, through his National Security Adviser, that the US had made a Balfour Declaration for the Palestinians. So, doesn't it seem to you that there's been an abrupt shift?

○ It is obvious that if he was once moving in one direction towards the Palestinians he's now moving away from what are considered by the Arab parties to be the relevant Palestinian representatives.

□ Wouldn't a good interpretation of why he acted in this way be that he was formerly seriously pursuing a comprehensive settlement, but that, in light of what Sadat has done and what Begin has told him, he's no longer doing so?

○ I wouldn't want to be that categorical. I do not think the US would so easily reduce the issue of a Middle East settlement to an Egyptian-Israeli affair. It's too costly. I have another reading of the situation.

Two years ago when I wrote *After The Guns Fall Silent* I predicted a breakthrough towards a completely different pattern in terms of the impact of international detente and its new rules on the Middle East. Since then an issue has come up which is very important.

There are social and economic problems which have changed the whole mechanism of the Middle East issue. Specifically, there is a new, vested interest in stabilising structures that has acquired a central importance. This is linked to the oil and to the

"There is something new about Carter's recent declarations. For the first time . . . he is taking a stand on substance."

citant parties. This is the formula by which Egypt's bargaining power becomes Israel's bargaining power.

To use Carter's expression, there are three basic ingredients for a breakthrough towards peace. In order of importance for the Arab side they are recovery of the occupied territories, the Palestinian problem and normalisation of relations.

For Egypt, before the Jerusalem trip, the issue of normalisation was to come five years after a settlement. Since the trip, the issue has come before a settlement in a certain way. A process has been initiated that gives the promise and the assurance of future normalisation without the other things.

□ Everything you have said implies that the new agenda is on how to reach an accommodation between two countries and not how to reach an overall settlement.

○ No, not necessarily. It might boil down to that. One should distinguish between

○ No, what has been offered up till now does not promise that at all. I doubt whether it even promises an agreement with Egypt.

□ How do you interpret the recent policies of the American Government? Is the US still pushing for a comprehensive settlement or has it resigned itself to a bilateral Israel-Egypt agreement?

○ There is something new about Carter's recent declarations. For the first time it is very obvious that he is taking a stand on substance. Up till now he has tried, as far as possible, not to be precise concerning issues of substance. He has been saying only that what the parties agree upon we agree upon, and that the US can help specifically on procedure.

Now for the first time, on the issue of the Palestinian state, he is taking a stand on substance. It is not that he hasn't said similar things before, but that it is said at this moment, when the issue is basic to the

new petrodollar wealth which has created parties who seek stabilisation and for whom there are two forms of destabilisation that they would like to avoid — continuation of “no peace”, and peace on Israel’s terms. But these two things, though feared, are not issues of immediate urgency for them. They are a danger in the long run.

For Egypt the issue is different for two reasons — the staggering economic situation, which cannot continue indefinitely, and the fact that Egypt can decide on peace or war. Egypt is in a position to go further than the others would dare to. In a certain way, what Sadat has done is taking the new situation to some logical conclusion.

Of course, I would say it is a “right-wing” peace, a conservative peace. It is a peace for stabilisation of oil privileges. It is peace that is motivated by conservative interests. It is peace that is provoked more by class and social issues than by national requirements.

□ If this is the kind of peace, why are the Saudis so reluctantly supporting Sadat?

○ The Saudis are not ready to go as far as Sadat. For them, the issue is not that simple. The new economic situation could propel them in this direction, but there are also ideological considerations. You cannot change the ideological outlook that Zionists are our worst enemies and suddenly, because you want stabilisation of your profits from oil, forget that.

To the extent that this new factor has come in — this new social and class incentive — it has deranged the previous set-up, not only in Egypt.

Egypt is not the key oil country, it’s not the key rich country, it’s not the country the US is most interested in. Oil is a global strategic issue. It goes beyond the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The West is interested in stabilisation of oil flow. The rich Arab oil countries are interested in stabilisation of oil profits. Both are for a certain form of stabilisation.

□ What do the Saudis want now that Sadat’s initiative has fundamentally changed the status quo?

○ The Saudis are for stabilisation, and Sadat’s going too far with Israel could be a destabilising factor. Moreover, if they stand too much with Sadat it could provoke other forms of destabilisation that could threaten them with the rejectionists of the Arab world.

So, they are between two fires. They want unanimity of the Arab world. They want to get the parties together. They do not like a rift in the Arab camp. But the basic issue in both cases, the motivating factor, is not Arab rights, but stabilisation of oil profits.

□ What role do you see for the superpowers?

○ The superpowers already had a position before this began. The Soviet-American joint statement (in October) was a sign of superpower policy. Kissinger might, in a certain way, be closer to the logic of things now — it’s a different category of “step-by-step”. The Soviets are ousted, but Carter had to come to understand — not only for global reasons but also for regional reasons — that it was better to have the Soviets in on the negotiating process than to run the risk of having them liberated from all commitments.

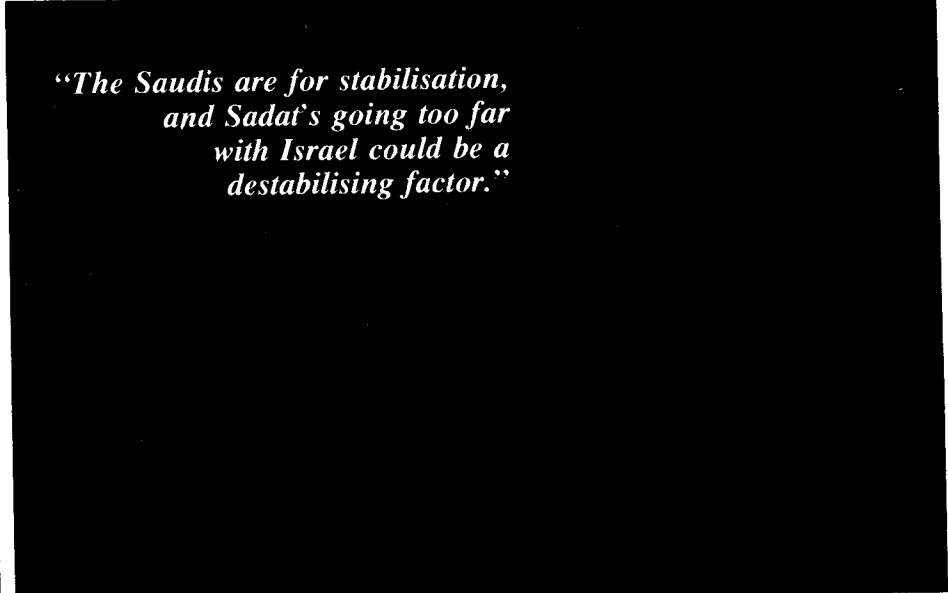
The whole logic of Geneva was to build a system of mutual commitments between the various parties. This was the logic of the unified Arab delegation including the Palestinians. The aim was to try and solve the maximum procedural problems beforehand. That was the American stand, not only because of a certain increase in

Geneva has receded almost beyond view, what role do you see for the Soviet Union?

○ I don’t think the Soviet Union has given up on (UN Security Council Resolution) 242. The Soviet Union is not in the position of the most radical rejectionists. It is not in the position of Iraq. One of Assad’s arguments in Tripoli — when he was pressured to follow Iraq — was: “You see, if I have not openly accepted 242, I have openly accepted 338. And because of 338 I got my disengagement on the Golan and help from the Soviet Union. I can’t afford not to get help from the Soviet Union unless you, Iraq, are ready to replace it.”

But, at the same time, the Soviet Union will stand very staunchly on the side of the Arabs and denounce Sadat on the grounds that he has broken Arab solidarity which is a basic card in negotiations with Israel.

□ You are one of the most prominent



“The Saudis are for stabilisation, and Sadat’s going too far with Israel could be a destabilising factor.”

dealings with the Soviet Union but also for regional considerations. To the extent that Geneva seemed to be a receding reality, the Americans sought to bind everybody more by commitments.

What Sadat did was just the opposite. He made an arrangement, he came to a certain mode of mutual dealing with Israel going beyond anything expected, but at the same time he freed all other parties of their previous commitments.

□ But now there is a clear split in the Arab world between Soviet clients and American clients . . .

○ Yes. Detente has produced two formulas — one that was desired and one where things got out of hand. The one that was desired is what happened in Europe. The one that got out of hand is what happened in Africa, and the Middle East has adopted the African model.

□ Now that the Soviets have been freed from the binding process you spoke of, and

members of the leftist party here. What was the initial reaction of the left to Sadat’s initiative and what has been the reaction as negotiations have gone forward?

○ Initially the reaction was hostile — not because the left is opposed to a peaceful settlement; there is no argument about the need for a peaceful settlement — but to produce a peaceful settlement a balance of power is needed between the two parties.

□ How has the left responded to the various steps Sadat has taken?

○ Its critical stand towards the trip has not changed. The left now believes that the small extent of reciprocation by Begin is proof that the party was right.

○ What is the strength, the influence, of your party today?

○ There are two problems: the problem of the Egyptian people and its state of mind today, and the Arab world and its state of mind. The left believes that the euphoria that existed after the Jerusalem visit was

built on issues which are not solid. This state of mind is similar to what happened during the January 1977 riots. In both cases it is an expression of deep dissatisfaction with everyday life and the economic difficulties.

The basic difference is that in January this state of revolt exploded against the President but that this time it was the President who used the state of revolt to get support for his trip by identifying peace with a promise of prosperity and an end to the everyday difficulties. If hopes do not materialise we could have a repetition of the January events.

What does Israel want from Egypt and what does Egypt want from Israel? Israel wants a promise of normal relations, an acknowledgement of its right to exist in the region. Sadat has given these two things. Now Egypt has to get something in return, for the situation is unbalanced. Egypt's bargaining power now depends on Israel.

You objected to the trip because Sadat didn't ask for a good price in advance. What would have been your minimum requirements to make this an acceptable initiative?

That it should be agreed upon by all the concerned Arab parties.

That's impossible. You are effectively saying that Sadat's trip should never have happened.

Not necessarily.

There was no way to get unanimity.

I want to show you how the issue is one of substance and not just procedure. This conflict is something special, not like other conflicts. The fact of dealing directly with Israel is an issue of substance not of procedure. And this is acknowledged by the international community and Resolutions 242 and 338. Point 3 of 242, for instance, is to bring in a representative of the UN as a go-between. Why was there a question of a go-between?

It was 11 years ago that 242 was passed.

Never mind. It's part of the dynamics of the situation. The point of departure was that you have an implanted body that you do not recognise and that the day you go and deal with it you have already played your trump card. What does Israel basically want? What's the trump card that the Arabs have with Israel? It's recognition. What else do they have?

They have no other card. In the power-balance Israel is militarily superior. By war the Arabs have never been able to achieve anything. The trump card is normalisation. This is the maximum they can give, and at least a promise of this was given away by Sadat.

Why not say it clearly? You on the left are unequivocally against the strategy being followed by Sadat and after achieving Arab unanimity would you have

"The PLO is the only Arab party for which dealing with Israel is an asset and not a liability."

approved of it.

This is not correct logic; it is formalistic and simplistic. I said there are serious changes in the region, and there is a certain logic in Sadat's initiative. I didn't say that his trip was an abnormality, an accident.

In my book *After The Guns Fall Silent* I talked of detente, which is very important. Detente is arms. You cannot arm beyond a certain level because of detente. The Russians would not give arms which would threaten detente and even the Americans take detente into consideration in giving arms to Israel.

What do you mean by unanimity? There has never been unanimity. What is needed is at least a consensus between the relevant parties, whether you want this or not.

Including the PLO and Syria?

Including the PLO and Syria. The PLO is the only Arab party interested in direct

contacts with Israel, but Israel is not interested in contact with the PLO. The PLO is the only Arab party for which dealing with Israel is an asset and not a liability.

The PLO were never really offered anything by anybody until they were invited to attend the Cairo conference. They turned it down. Where do we go from here?

I don't give much significance to their absence from Cairo. If anything was offered to them I am sure they would not lose the opportunity, but Elissar even required that the name should be removed from the table and the flag removed outside.

Egypt could say to Israel: "For me to meet with you is taboo, but I have done it, and now you sit with an Arab party. It's taboo for you to sit with the PLO, so that should be the reciprocity. You should sit with the PLO."

If this could be done, I believe the PLO would agree. The PLO's failure to come to Cairo should not be seen as an irrevocable decision.

So far the initiative has not produced the reciprocity you spoke of. What results can now be obtained?

There is a chance that he will get something from Israel. But this doesn't mean he has solved the problem, only that he has put it into a different context. It depends on Begin. Sadat wants withdrawal from Sinai. And Israel wants security. It may be possible to replace one mode of security with another.

Egypt has staggering economic problems. Egypt's market is one of the biggest and most interesting in the Middle East, but it is also the most shattered. It has no immunity to foreign invasion, for an open-door policy means readiness to import whatever capital and investments want to come.

Israel could say: "The open-door policy hasn't worked. Now we are ready to help. We don't have money but we could be intermediaries, brokers. And we can be guarantors. But if we are guarantors we must also be sure that the money is put in the right place. This will achieve two things — a boost to the Egyptian economy and security for us. This will give us the opportunity to acquire leverage in Egypt."

One reason withdrawal will be slow is because of the need to negotiate other conditions of security, namely the takeover of key positions in the economy. If they are clever, and I believe they are, they will go so far as to make their presence in key positions of the Egyptian economy coup proof, and this is not impossible. There are many precedents for this sort of thing. The political regime can change, but certain key factors are permanent.

This means an organic link between the Israeli and Egyptian economies which

would be presented to the rest of the Arab world as a model involving Jewish genius and Arab abilities.

This will look like peace with prosperity. But there are loopholes. I mean, other problems may result. Israel will extend its geographical presence inside Egypt not only into Sinai but into a whole social stratum in Egypt which would become Israeli-oriented.

Do you think Sadat will hold back from a separate agreement trying to bring the other Arabs into the process?

○ If Sadat gets something really satisfactory on Sinai then there will be a dilemma. A step towards this might take place at any time, but there would first be an attempt to call an Arab summit. Sadat wants to get enough concessions on the Palestinian issue, not to satisfy the Palestinians or the PLO, but to satisfy a number of Arab countries who will then take care of the Palestinians.

Specifically which Arab countries?

○ Saudi Arabia first. Jordan, of course. Lebanon depends on the decisions of others. There will be an attempt to woo Asad. For a long time the Palestinians have been viewed by many Arab parties — especially since the Lebanese war — as a threat not just to the Israelis. What happened in Lebanon is seen by these new, powerful, conservative Arab regimes as a threat to their stability.

It is most important for these regimes to be offered something for Palestine which they think could result in an acceptable solution. The bargain is that Israel should give something on the Palestinian issue to prevent them from becoming a subversive force in the Arab countries, and the Arabs will guarantee that they will not be a threat to Israel.

Is the PLO in decline?

○ Even if Sadat looks for an alternative leadership to the PLO this would not yet be acceptable to many Arab parties. An attempt has been made since the Riyadh and Cairo summits after the Lebanese war to produce a leadership from within the PLO that would put the interests of these countries before basic Palestinian requirements.

That effort having failed . . .

○ It didn't fail. Something more important came up — Sadat's trip. It didn't fail, it wasn't tested. But this was the Arab stand.

What now?

○ Now the real difficulties begin concerning the PLO and Israel. PLO or no PLO, it is essential to obtain a minimum on Palestine to ensure the support of some relevant Arab parties to oppose the Palestinians' basic demands and be ready to crush them. Given the Syrians were ready to crush the PLO at a previous stage.

What is the minimum?

○ Certainly what is being offered by Israel as "self-rule" is not the minimum.

At what point does the Palestinian issue become really negotiable?

○ Probably it will be somewhere around an institutional link with Jordan.

So, it's the old 1972 King Hussain plan, with two parliaments . . .

○ Yes, if you like. Let's put it this way: a formula where Jordan will be replacing what Israel is now requiring as direct presence in the Palestinian entity.

And is it conceivable that a Begin Government can ever offer this?

○ I don't think so.

So, if that's the minimum and its impossible that Begin will ever offer it where does this leave Sadat?

○

It's the first time I've seen you speechless . . . Are the wars over?

"I don't see that the US is exerting pressure in the right direction. In the past there was certain progress in the American stand."

○ Yes, I think the wars concerning Egypt are over and thus the wars are over in general. There may be an Israeli war, but that's another question.

Either Sadat is in a process where he can reach some agreement or he's going to end up in a position of possibly having to fight a war again, isn't he?

○ No, the logical alternative is something completely different. Why should the Israelis feel pressured to offer historical shifts in their positions when Egypt has ruled itself out of any future wars? That's one major argument of ours, you know. I think that wars are out as long as Sadat has things in hand.

If the present process produces no results, is the war option out?

○ I think there's a general awareness now that the military imbalance is such that no Arab party can contemplate war in the foreseeable future.

So, where is the pressure on Israel?

○ That's precisely why I said that the initiative of the Jerusalem trip is based on such an imbalance of power that it is counterproductive. It will not produce the minimum Arab requirements.

What can the US do to continue to merit Arab confidence?

○ But is the US ready to do anything? I think that there is already a discrepancy between the present negotiating process and what the Americans are interested in. The Americans are interested in a situation that will not be counterproductive for them in the Arab world in general. They are not interested only in an agreement between Egypt and Israel.

They're interested in stability all over the region. They know very well that separate agreement between Egypt and Israel would expose the Arab world to enormous upheavals. So this is an issue on which they would not like to give in.

In Cairo, anti-Palestinian sentiments . . .

○ Yes I have a whole interpretation of this.

Egypt is very frustrated with the Arab world due to the fact that Arabs are identified with the Arab rich who are humiliating Egypt. They are a source of vexation and frustration for Egyptians, not only in their own countries, where Egyptians are treated like second-class citizens, but even in Egypt today, where Egyptians are also treated as second-class citizens compared with Saudis and other rich Arabs.

So, from this point of view, there is a class issue. But what has happened with certain propaganda in our official press during recent years is the confusion of these frustrations with the rich with the frustration of all, including militant Arabs, with the general situation.

Certainly there are justifiable reasons for humiliation and vexation in the Arab world, but against whom should we turn

