

WORLDVIEW

EXCURSUS 1

Mark A. Bruzonsky on AFTER SADAT

Those who say it was really Sadat's friends who did him in express the underlying problems of the post-Camp David environment in the Middle East. For Sadat was being gradually destroyed by his own Camp David partners. In their various ways Carter, Begin, and Reagan left him tangling—a victim of their myopia, lack of resolve, and perceptions of their own domestic political situations.

There are abundant signs that Sadat had begun to panic in his last months, aware of his predicament but unable to find a way out. The bullets from Muslim fanatics—who no doubt fancy themselves both Egyptian and Arab patriots—made it a clean kill.

Of course there can be no certainty that had the "peace" process not degenerated into an undisguisable Egyptian-Israeli deal and had Israel not repeatedly violated Arab honor in Baghdad, Beirut, on the West Bank, and, to many in Egypt, on the streets of Cairo, the events of October 6 would not have occurred. But what can be said with some certainty is that American and Israeli policies and attitudes in the wake of the March, 1979, treaty progressively weakened Sadat, forced him to repress broad segments of Egyptian society, cut him off from his natural Arab allies, and thus created a climate conducive to martyrdom and fanaticism.

Now Mubarak faces the same dilemmas, but without having Sadat's authority. The U.S. confronts a Middle East more torn by social tensions and divided by political frustrations. Israel finds itself on a crucial hinge on which Menachem Begin can swing Israel's future (and that of the entire region) in the direction of reconciliation or toward inevitable catastrophe.

It will be many months, if not years, before the true direction of Mubarak's Egypt is known. Sadat, it should be remembered, was forced to feint and twist in the early '70s before arriving at the course he initiated in Jerusalem just four years ago last month. He would not have been the Nobel Laureate of Peace had he not been the Hero of the October War. Indeed, it is likely that Mubarak's direction, as Sadat's, will be dictated by the flow of events rather than by well-developed plans. He is known more as an operator than a thinker, more for his shrewdness in handling the Army and the bureaucracy than for his strategic concepts.

Consequently, today's U.S. and Israeli policies and attitudes will help to determine Mubarak and Egypt's fate, as well as the final outcome of Sadat's grand gamble. For Egypt has fully exhausted its flexibility and much of its self-confidence. It has gone as far as it can in nurturing a peace process that few believed could be accelerated at the pace Sadat insisted was possible. Normalization of relations between Egypt and Israel will continue to be touted publicly, but it may simply freeze in place or atrophy if the inescapable Palestinian issue remains stale-mated.

America's postassassination attempts to buttress Egypt with displays of rhetorical toughness and military prowess may provide marginal reassurances about U.S. muscle, but they hardly speak to Egyptian and Arab doubts about America's political determination and sophistication. Under Reagan, U.S. Middle East policy has gotten tangled up in simplistic notions, foremost among which is that of "strategic consensus." Yet neither the

Soviet Union nor Libya is actually challenging basic American interests in the region right now, though it is convenient to have these whipping boys so as to avoid the more immediate and fundamental issue: how to approach a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, including a fair solution of the Palestinian predicament.

A coalition of moderate Arab states is quite prepared to follow U.S. leadership on strategic matters if American political credibility is restored. But not now, when they perceive American insensitivity and ignorance to be threatening their internal cohesion and what remains of pan-Arab honor. And if the U.S. were less hung up on protecting specific regimes in the name of the false god "stability," we could get on with the far more difficult task of consolidating social, cultural, political, and economic links with the key states of the region, transcending individual personalities.

Much more transpired in the '70s than the West's uneasy dependence on OPEC and the creation of petrodollar power. As Arab societies have matured and modernized, they have made deep psychological adjustments. Coexistence with Israel is no longer a heretical notion; Sadat was prescient in perceiving that the conflict was ripe for resolution. But the requisite conditions have yet to be established. From Washington vision and courage are required, from Israel a new attitude toward the Arab Middle East—not just toward Egypt—and a willingness to thrash out a partition compromise with Palestinian nationalists.

As for Washington's record thus far, James Reston has hit the nail on the head: The Reagan administration's performance borders on "diplomatic scandal."

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