

“The Palestinians Will Have Their Independence!”

—an Interview With Butros Ghali, Egypt’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs

Mark A. Bruzonsky

When President Anwar el Sadat decided upon his “sacred mission” to Jerusalem in November, 1977, he appointed Butros Ghali to be acting foreign minister after the resignation of Ismail Fahmy. Since that time Ghali has been one of the highest Egyptian officials involved in the sixteen-month negotiations that culminated on March 26 in the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.



Today Prime Minister Mustapha Khalil also holds the portfolio of foreign minister and Ghali is minister of state for foreign affairs. It is considered likely that Ghali will be appointed Egypt’s ambassador to Israel.

Ghali was interviewed in Cairo at his office in the foreign ministry on April 25 by *Worldview* associate editor Mark A. Bruzonsky.

BRUZONSKY: Let me ask you first what is probably the most important question. Do you feel Egypt has more or less leverage over Israel on the crucial Palestinian issue now that there is a peace between Egypt and Israel?

GHALI: I believe that now that there is peace Egypt will have more leverage than before.

Why? So many experts disagree with you.

Because through normalization of the relations between Egypt and Israel—before there were no relations, so there was no leverage. Now we will have more leverage.

In other words, when I had no close relations at all between Egypt and country A, I had no leverage on country A. But if I have relations with country A, I can stop them. I can just discuss with them, I can put pressures—asking more and asking less. The fact that I have relations with a country offers me leverage on this country. If I have no relations at all, I have no leverage.

Usually leverage is considered—in a *Realpolitik* sense—to be a factor of economic, political, and military power. If Egypt has given up the military option, if it has already given Israel normalization of

relations politically, and if it has entered into economic relations, how can it have more power over Israel than before?

No, I’m sorry. I will have power over, leverage over Israel according to this normalization of relations.

You think simply by arguing or presenting your case to the Israelis they will come to understand it and agree?

No, not just by arguing it will they accept it. The normalization is in my hands. They are not interested so much in, let us say, the “formal” peace. The Israelis are interested in moving from peace-keeping to peace-building. So they want to build peace. My leverage is that it will be impossible to build the peace unless we find a solution to the Palestinian problems. There will be no real normalization—in the real sense of normalization, like between France and Germany—unless there is a solution on the Palestinian question.

So if there is not a solution, if the negotiations do not go forward successfully, if they break down, will you withhold normalization of relations with Israel?

I would not put it in such a white and black position, but certainly this will be a major impediment to any good normalization of relations between Egypt and Israel.

But it will not necessarily prevent the process from going forward.

It certainly *will* prevent the process from going forward.

It will *prevent* it?

Certainly, yes. So this is the real leverage, and the Israelis know it. We discuss it very frankly.

Well, many Israelis I've discussed this with assure me that they will never allow the Palestinians to have a homeland. Never.

They have assured you that they will never leave Sharm el Sheikh, that Sharm el Sheikh is essential for their defense, and that all the security of Israel is based on Sharm el Sheikh.

They assured that they need a strip of land and a road from Israel to Sharm el Sheikh. They have assured that according to Zionist ideology, if a settlement had been built somewhere, this land belonged to them. They have assured you—Ben-Gurion in the cabinet—that the Sinai was always a part of Israel. And the position was adopted in 1957 by the Knesset concerning, let us say, the *anschluss* of the Sinai to Israel.

So you think the analogy can be made between Israeli attitudes toward Sinai and Israeli attitudes toward Samaria and Judea, as they now call the West Bank?

Without doubt! The same principles which are applied there will be applied if the Palestinians accept to enter in the process of negotiations.

And are you familiar with Herut ideology, the ideology in which *Eretz Yisrael*...?

But, this, this, this Herut ideology was saying that it is impossible to leave Yamit!*

No, that's not correct.

It isn't? Herut? According to the ideology, any new settlement that is constructed is in Israel.

I apologize for having to correct you on this, but for Herut *Eretz Yisrael* includes Judea and Samaria and the present-day Israel and actually Jordan too. But not Sinai.

Maybe you are right. I'm not sure myself. But according to what I read about the Herut program, there was a demand for partition of the Sinai.

For my purpose I believe that sooner or later we will obtain a Palestinian entity in the West Bank and Gaza.

I'm sure you are familiar with the Knesset debate in which the leaders of Begin's party assured the Israeli people that the attitude they had taken toward Sinai could never be taken toward the West Bank.

Yes.

You think this is just rhetoric on their part?

I don't think it's just rhetoric. But when you are in discussions, you need certain phrases to be used in your internal policy.

What were your feelings when President Carter went to the grave of Vladimir Jabotinsky and prayed for him?**

[Pause] I think it was just an event among different other events.

It wasn't troubling to you that Mr. Carter by his actions was legitimizing the most intransigent elements in Zionism?

I think you can be intransigent at the beginning of your life and change yourself at the end of your life.

Like Mr. Begin?

I have not said this. You can do this.

Let me ask you about the military aspects of the agreement. It's difficult for many people to understand that now that you've made peace with Israel—which was your primary enemy and the only real threat to you in the region—Egypt is strengthening its armed forces and requiring from the United States greater amounts of sophisticated weaponry. What is the reason that a peace agreement must be buttressed by so much military force?

If you have a SALT agreement between the two superpowers, or an entente between the two superpowers, in spite of this both of them have continued to have armaments. There is no incompatibility between peace and between having your own security and your own armaments. On the contrary, you need a kind of equilibrium of forces to reenforce the formal agreements.

Are you afraid that the agreement might break down and that there's still the possibility of a war in the future so you must remain strong and ready?

If you are a man dealing with security, you cannot take any kinds of risk. You must have a strong army.

What about the U.S. efforts to build up its military forces in the area? There will be a Fifth Fleet, there will be more American forces, and it's been reported that 100,000 American soldiers are being trained for possible intervention around the world and specifically in the Middle East. Do you endorse this American build-up?

We don't endorse this American policy or policies. We believe in nonalignment. When the Americans offered us a kind of memorandum—exchange of notes—as was done with Israel, we refused it because our policy is based on a policy of nonalignment. We don't want to have any; we refuse to give any military facilities to the Americans. Our policy will continue to be the policy of nonalignment.

And again, you are exaggerating a lot about the

*Yamit is an Israeli town south of the Gaza strip along the Mediterranean coast from which the Israelis have agreed to withdraw at a later stage in the implementation of the Egypt-Israel peace agreement.

**Jabotinsky is the founder of Revisionist Zionism and the Herut movement.

American presence. The American presence was always there in the region for the last twenty-five years. I don't believe that there will be more. Maybe they are talking more about it, but I don't believe you have a great difference in the American presence.

The PLO. Do you continue to consider the PLO to be the legitimate representative of the Palestinians?

We believe that the PLO can play a very important role in the next step of the negotiations.

And would you advocate that Yasir Arafat be invited to a separate seat, to a separate delegation for the Palestinians?

At what step? At the second step?

When the autonomy negotiations begin.

Yes, it depends what will be the relation between the PLO and the United States. It depends what will be the new policy of the PLO. It is an academic question to put it like this. You want this to have a headline in the newspaper....

The real problem is that we believe the PLO can play an important role in the process of the negotiations—directly. We believe that contact between the PLO and the U.S. would be very important.

If Israel refuses unalterably to accept members of the PLO, would you then advocate other Palestinian participants?

Again, you must return to the agreement of Camp David. According to the agreement of Camp David, negotiations will begin one month after exchange of the documents of ratification, and we can have in our delegation representatives from the West Bank and Gaza. And this is the first step. So you can have people from the West Bank and Gaza belonging to the PLO. There is no objection.

Do you feel isolated now that Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries have broken relations?

I can assure you that we will continue to have relations with different, other Arab countries. But for special reasons they say "Please don't mention the relations existing between us and Egypt."

But at the formal level, at the diplomatic level, at the level of normal bilateral relations...?

If you know well the history of inter-Arab relations in the last thirty years, this is not the first time and this will not be the last time in which you'll have such confrontations among Arab states. Now you have exactly the same thing that happened after 1961, after the end of the union between Egypt and Syria.

You don't think this is more serious?

No, we had exactly the same dispute in 1948, after the first Arab armistice agreement with the State of Israel. And the dispute was exactly for the same reason. Because we were for the creation of the Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza and the Hashemites were against it. And then the Arab world

was divided into two groups. And this confrontation took two years.

Do you consider Jimmy Carter to be a strong American president?

I have no comment on this question. I just can say that he has played a very important role in the process of negotiations which we've had together from Camp David #1 to Camp David #2 til the signature of the peace treaty plus the negotiations at Blair House.

If you can't comment directly on his strength, can you comment on how secure you feel that, if there should be another American president, he would continue and fulfill the promises that he has made to you?

I believe that the real problem is that we must put all our energy on our own strength rather than to think about relations with the United States or relations with the Soviet Union or relations with Europe. Egypt by itself can solve its own problems and Egypt by itself could find a solution to the Palestinian problem.

But your president for many years has said that the Americans have 99 per cent of the cards when it comes to the Palestinian issue. Now are you saying that you, Egypt, have 99 per cent of the cards?

No, I'm saying the 99 per cent to solve the Middle East crisis, which is what we have obtained now. As to the second step of the negotiations, concerning the full autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza, certainly the Americans will play a very important role. But what is more important is the role that Egypt will play in this kind of negotiations. And we come back to the problem of the leverage on the Israelis. We have today more leverage than before.

The question of leverage again. For thirty years the strategy of the Arab world was to deny Israel a place in the Middle East unless....

This was the wrong strategy. The result was that in thirty years we've obtained nothing, while Israel, from the partition on, has taken every year some more land. This was the wrong policy. And this is the problem: The Arabs take time to understand this drastic change. We believe that we'll obtain more from the Israelis through a kind of permanent dialogue and through normalization of the relations between our two countries and through the leverage we will obtain through this normalization than through military confrontation every five or six years in which the Israelis have at least a kind of guarantee from the U.S.

You are a man with deep awareness of Arab history and Arab affairs. How does it affect you when leaders of other Arab countries or responsible publications brand what has happened as "traitorous" and brand the individuals responsible, including yourself, as "traitors" to the Arab cause? It must have a personal effect. You don't agree, I'm sure, but it must cause you a certain anxiety.

No anxiety at all.

You don't respect any of the people who have used these terms?

No, I just say they need time to understand the future gain, to look to different historical precedents. I think anybody who is trying to obtain reconciliation between two states in war at the beginning will be accused of betrayal, just as happened during the French decolonization of Algeria. This is normal. I can give you hundreds of precedents. And I don't believe it is a main difficulty.

If King Hussein were not on the throne in Amman, and if a Palestinian leadership were in control of the East Bank of the Jordan River, and if the Israelis said that this is the Palestinian state and the British illegally partitioned Mandate Palestine in 1922, what would be ...?

I have no comment on this question.

On such an important question?

Yes.

It seems to many people one of the crucial questions that will have to be dealt with, though.

I am, after all, minister of state for foreign affairs. I cannot just discuss with a journal what would happen if King Hussein is not there. This would create difficulties.

Others, including Hussein, feel free to discuss your situation.

I have no comment on this question.

President Sadat once said that he did not have to go to Jerusalem in order to obtain the return of Sinai for Egypt. And yet, in the minds of many people, that is the result of his efforts. Has there been some change ...?

Those many people are wrong! If it was just obtaining the Sinai, this could have been obtained. And I was

involved from the first day of the negotiations to the last day of the negotiations; I participated in all negotiations from the trip to Jerusalem to the signing of the treaty. If it was only the Sinai, this could have been obtained on the 25th of December, 1977 [at the Ismailia summit meeting]. The fact that we have continued during one year and a half proves that we are not interested only in the Sinai, but we were trying to obtain something for the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

You don't think that the "Begin Plan" for autonomy offered in December, 1977, is similar to what has been achieved in this treaty?

Not at all. I completely disagree.

Could you give me the specific differences?

I don't want to enter into detail. But I just want to confirm to you that there is no relation between the two, without entering into detail.

Well, I've read both the Begin Plan and the treaty....

Then I advise you to read them again. Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the Parliament I detailed the rights of the Palestinians to get an entity. *The future of the West Bank is not in the hands of the Israelis, but belongs to an international treaty.* We can enter into a hundred technical details to show this.

I'm still not sure what is so different about what Begin eventually agreed to and what he proposed in December, 1977. Now Mr. Yosef Burg will be leading the Israeli negotiators and will endorse the "full autonomy" Begin put forward back then.

We are sure that we will obtain for the Palestinians the right of self-determination. We will obtain for the Palestinians a Palestinian entity, and at the last step the Palestinians decide by themselves what they want to do with their rights. If they want to create a Pales-

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tinian state, they will have a Palestinian state. If they just want a federation between them and Jordan, they may have a federation. Our role will be finished when they will have the right to express themselves and to decide what they want to do on their own.

And what if they say to you they want nothing to do with your negotiations?

We believe that at the second stage of our negotiations they will decide to participate.

I can't recall many historical experiences where everything seemed to be based only on "hope."

What is your age?

I'm thirty-one.

I'm fifty-seven. I remember the decolonization process step-by-step. I was in contact with Ben Bella. I saw the decolonization of the Arabs. And I'm sure as I'm talking to you [pounds table] that what has been obtained for Algeria, that what has been obtained for different Afro-Asian countries, will be obtained for the Palestinians; in spite of all the declarations of Israel, in spite of all the attitudes of the Arab rejectionists and the Israeli rejectionists which have created an alliance among themselves—an objective alliance if you want to use this Marxist terminology. I'm sure that in the next one or two years you will have a Palestinian entity.

Despite Zionist ideology, you think it's simply a pragmatic problem?

I don't say it is a pragmatic.... We will solve it as a pragmatic problem. If you just read what was the ideological position of Charles de Gaulle about the French Empire. If you read all the ideology which has been written about the White Man's Burden in Africa just forty or fifty years ago, you'd say it was impossible that all the Third World would obtain its independence. In spite of all this ideology they have obtained their independence. *There is an irreversible movement for independence all over the world. You cannot keep under a military occupation more than a million Palestinians. Sooner or later they will have their independence.* Sooner or later they will have their entity. How this entity will work in the general framework of the Middle East—in association with the Jordanians, in association with the Israelis—I don't know. But they will have their own entity and they will have the way to express their right of self-determination.

And you believe that Egypt has the right to take unilateral decisions about the future of the Palestinians?

No, we have never said that. Again, I'm sorry, you have not read your Camp David agreements. We never said that we have this right. What we are saying is that we are just helping the Palestinians to put their leg on the horse, as is said in French.

We are just helping the Palestinians. We are offering to the Palestinians a framework. We have done the

same with Sudan, exactly. We were negotiating with the British even about the Sudan, and this is how they obtained their independence. This has been done in different parts. You can have long discussions with all the different parts. We did this for Libya in 1948. Nobody knows this history. Libya was supposed to be divided into three regions. And who was behind Libya? It was Egypt at the United Nations.

We are doing exactly the same.

At the last stage it is not we who will decide. It will be the Palestinians.

Or maybe the Israelis?

No, the Palestinians, not the Israelis. The Palestinians with the agreement of the Israelis. We have decided to do this through peaceful means. And furthermore, if the Palestinians will refuse at the end in the last stage, then we can do nothing. They have to accept.

So if this process does not go successfully forward and the Palestinians do not cooperate, then you will blame the Palestinians?

No, we will not blame the Palestinians because we will have more negotiations, and we know that *sooner or later the Palestinians will cooperate because we know it is in their real interests to cooperate and to work through this process. Because they have no other alternative.*

I appreciate your talking to me. I know this is a difficult time and a busy time. You must be exceedingly busy.

No, I remember quite well your two visits in Cairo in October, 1977. But you are not happy about this peace?

Well, I'm sure from the questions I've asked you realize I have many doubts.

I'll tell you. You see, we are at the beginning of a long process. You must not do like the Arab rejectionists or like the Israeli rejectionists to say this is bad. Let us give a chance to this process in the next six months. Then we can have again a good conversation. And I will tell you with great humility that you were right and I was wrong.

Now, as we are in the beginning of the process, I believe that you are wrong and that I am right.... We know that at the final stage we will have a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.... Believe me. You will have a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. It will take maybe more than one year, but you will have this.

And if not?

There is no "if not." You will have it! I'm sure of this. You see it is like a belief here. You cannot have a discussion with somebody who says "I don't believe in the existence of paradise; it doesn't exist." He asks, "How do you prove it?" I say, "No, I believe. I believe in God." So I'm believing that you will have a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. **WV**