

# FORUM



When Anwar Sadat announced his "sacred mission" to Jerusalem in November 1977, Ismail Fahmi resigned from his post as Foreign Minister. Today, Fahmi is writing his memoirs from his memento-filled apartment overlooking the Nile in the Cairo suburb of Zamalek. Next to Sadat only Fahmi knows the intimate details of how the world powers conducted their Middle East diplomacy from before the October war until Egypt's decision to make a bilateral arrangement with Israel.

Ismail Fahmi rarely grants interviews. He has said very little in public since his resignation. But at the end of April he agreed to discuss Middle East developments with *Mark Bruzonsky*.

## EGYPT'S EX-FOREIGN MINISTER ISMAIL FAHMI

**Bruzonsky:** When President Sadat first went to Israel, do you think he had in mind what most people consider to be a separate peace? Or did he realise later that this was the most he could get?

**Fahmi:** One of the main reasons why I refused to join President Sadat is that the only thing which could come from such a visit was a separate agreement.

You had no hope in October 1977 that there could be a psychological breakthrough to a comprehensive settlement? You foresaw this separate agreement?

Certainly, because there was nothing else. People try to justify major political steps on a psychological basis, but I don't believe that politicians become psychiatrists.

As a politician I deal with things on a pragmatic basis, especially when these things affect human lives, the future of a whole population, the national security of nations, justice, international law, or treaties. It was clear that the Israelis could not risk their national security and their philosophy just for a psychological effect or to break psychological barriers.

All this is an invention to justify certain actions. When I deal with things I deal with them as they are. I don't dream. This is a new thing as far as I am concerned and I'm not going to take part in it.

You negotiated with the new Carter Administration for almost a year before you left the Egyptian Government. Why



do you think Carter agreed to a separate agreement after insisting so strongly that there should be a comprehensive settlement and a Palestinian homeland?

Right up to President Sadat's visit to Israel President Carter, Cyrus Vance and their colleagues were working very hard to

have the Geneva Conference convened. And they were going to succeed! There is no doubt about it!

First they were going to have all the parties go to Geneva and sit and negotiate sometime in the last week of December 1977. And the Russians were going to participate.

President Carter himself had prepared the whole thing - procedurally and substantively. Concurrently, President Carter and Cyrus Vance negotiated for a long time with the Russians about a framework for solving the Middle East crisis once and for all. Then the Joint Statement came on the first of October 1977. It was the real framework for a comprehensive settlement, with all parties concerned attending and the two superpowers as co-chairmen.

And this is why President Carter and his colleagues were reluctant at the beginning to support President Sadat's trip to Jerusalem. They waited a little to watch things, but when they examined the pros and cons they had no choice but to support it.

Here is the biggest Arab country in the area offering a separate peace with Israel, so why the hell shouldn't the Americans profit from this, bearing in mind their own internal problems with the Jewish community and the Jewish lobby?

If Sadat knew that Geneva was to be convened in a few months and that the Americans and the Russians were serious about pushing for a comprehensive settlement, he must have in-

### 'I propose two-year UN trusteeship for Palestine'

**tentionally set out to abort that process.**

○ No, I don't believe Sadat did this intentionally, because Egypt was co-operating with President Carter formally on the convening of Geneva. We were not against it. We even accepted the single Arab delegation and the whole Carter formula.

**□ Is that how the PLO problem was going to be solved with PLO people coming as part of that one delegation?**

○ Exactly. And before that you may remember again that President Carter in August 1977 took the unusual step of proposing a formula to the PLO leaders which would enable his Administration to sit with PLO people. This was to overcome the difficulty resulting from Kissinger's agreement with the Israelis in connection with the second disengagement of the Egyptian-Israeli front that the Americans would not sit with the PLO without previously consulting Israel.

This would have been the real breakthrough between the American Administration at the highest level and the PLO. As a superpower the US should sit with anybody, everybody, especially when the problems involve war and peace, human rights and justice.

I was the intermediary between the Americans and the PLO. The process was starting - the PLO proposed another formula. And the Americans proposed a second formula. So the process of negotiations started through me. This was a major step.

**□ You really think that in view of US domestic politics Carter would have been able to succeed?**

○ He took the initiative! I didn't ask him to do it. He knew exactly what he was doing. And he repeated it even two months ago.

**□ But he went back on the US-USSR Joint Statement within two days by producing the US-Israeli "Working Paper".**

○ But this was a bilateral thing. The Joint US-Russian Statement was intact and was going to be respected by the Americans and the Russians

**□ Even after the American Jews and the Israelis protested so effectively?**

○ I was sure of it because I saw President Carter myself after that. Up to this very minute I haven't heard any concrete statement to suggest that the Americans were going back on what they agreed with the Russians. Ultimately, if there is any comprehensive peace settlement, it will be in accordance with this statement.

**□ You consider that Statement such a historic accomplishment?**

○ Yes, I may disagree with some parts of it. But I am not a superpower. I am an interested party. We don't speak the same language. Our vision is completely different and our interests are different. Our commitments are different. Our dedication to

principles is different.

**□ The treaty has a large military component and there has been some discussion that the Americans are planning to buttress their military potential in the Middle East in three ways: by strengthening Israel as a potential arm of Western military might; by strengthening Egypt as a potential gendarme in the Middle East and North Africa; by a 5th Fleet and the preparation of American contingency forces.**

○ (long, unusual pause) So far as Israel is concerned, I believe the Americans paid a



**"Right up to President Sadat's visit to Israel, President Carter . . . was working very hard to have the Geneva Conference convened"**

very high price. And this will appear in the future, because it will backfire.

**□ How? Why?**

○ The only thing which really generates peace is to have a balance between the major countries of any region of the world. If one of the superpowers is very weak and the other much stronger, there would be an imbalance in everything. There would be a big temptation for the strongest to do whatever it wanted.

The same applies on the regional level. If Israel realises that Egypt alone, militarily speaking, is not that weak and that in any armed conflict between Israel and Egypt there would be a lot of damage, Israel will

think a hundred times before launching any pre-emptive war or ever threatening to use force. Instead Israel would concentrate on peaceful methods.

On the other hand, if Egypt is weak militarily it will be in a very bad position to negotiate peace. The result of negotiations will reflect this weakness. Egypt would be negotiating under duress, and Israel would have the upper hand in negotiating about the Palestinians.

This means it will never be a permanent peace. Egypt, itself, when it gets stronger or when things change, will say "No, I was forced to accept this under duress, this must be changed", and the whole thing will start again. There will either be another armed conflict or some sort of massive pressure will be needed to convince Israel to agree to new Egyptian demands.

The military help which the Americans are giving to the Egyptians now is far inferior to what they are giving to the Israelis. Take, for instance, the deal of the F-5s. What the hell do I need with F-5s. They're obsolete. They are giving them to the Yemen or to Ethiopia or Sudan!

The Israelis had F-5s about 10 years ago. Now, they give Egypt, the biggest and strongest country in the Arab world, 50 F-5s. And they give the Israelis the most sophisticated planes in the American arsenal. This is a mockery!

**□ If there were a new President in Egypt, could Egypt once again seek arms and political support from the Soviet Union?**

○ If President Sadat or a new President really appies a diversification policy, he could certainly obtain weapons from the Soviet Union which is a big source of weapons.

Diversification does not mean that Egypt only gets its weapons from France or from the United Kingdom or the United States. Diversification means that you get whatever you need - the best quality at the proper time and at the best price - all over the world.

**□ Do you see any likelihood of the autonomy negotiations leading to any solution of the Palestinian problem?**

○ It depends on what you mean by a solution of the Palestinian problem.

**□ A solution which will be widely considered . . .**

○ You are using very evasive words. Come to the point. Do you want to ask whether I believe autonomy will lead to a Palestinian state?

**□ If that's the only solution that you see.**

○ Yes. I don't see any permanent peace to the Middle East crisis unless the Palestinian problem is solved on the basis of restoring the full rights of the Palestinian people in the form of a homeland with territorial boundaries.

Once this state of Palestine is established I am not at all against this new state having some relations with Israel. It's up to them - federation, confederation, even if they decide to unite in a secular state. If they choose to have a political link with Jordan, it's up to them.

But let us understand each other very clearly. There will be no peace unless the Palestine problem is solved on the basis of a Palestine state.

**But the Israelis are hinting at a somewhat different solution which many Egyptians I've spoken with don't seem to object to too strongly. If Jordan were controlled by the Palestinians politically, Israel could argue that the Palestinians had three-quarters of Palestine - the East Bank of the Jordan River - and the Jews, one-quarter - everything to the West of the River.**

○ This means aggression against the Jordanian state. It means the Arabs and the Palestinians would relinquish their rights in Palestine. More importantly, the result of the Palestinisation of Jordan would be the Israelisation of the West Bank and Gaza. This is why the Israelis are promoting this idea, but this is not the solution. This is exactly what Begin and some American strategists are trying to do. But they are evading the main problem. This is impossible.

**Why?**

○ Because it attempts to solve the problem of the rights of one people at the expense of another people.

**History's full of examples of such things. It might not be "just," but it might be a solution.**

○ If this is a theoretical exercise I can extend it to many more things. Begin and his colleagues could go back again to Poland, Germany, France and the United Kingdom. Or, they could start shopping all over again for new ground and go to Madagascar or Libya or Uganda.

**Do you think the treaty has greatly strengthened the Likud-Begin political forces in Zionism?**

○ I don't believe that there is any difference between all these people. They have their old testament. They are trying to implement it by stages, by force, or influence all over the world.

**But don't you see a difference between Labour, Mapam, Likud . . .**

○ No difference. All this is semantics, believe me.

**Are you afraid that after the treaty the Israelis may seek excuses for further expansion?**

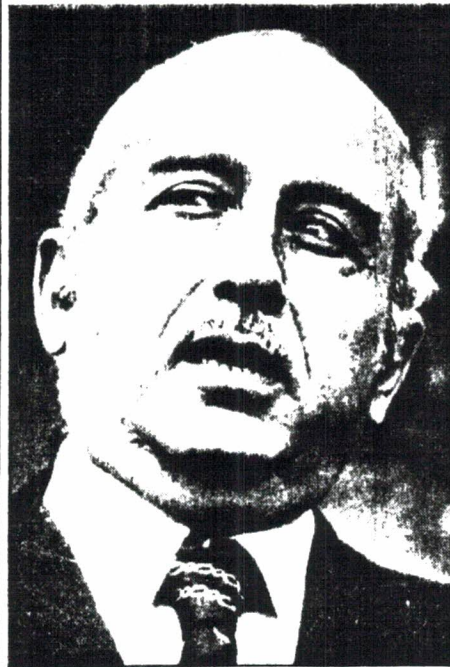
○ You see, Israeli expansion can be in different forms - war and armed conflict is just one way. And history taught us that they can create the conditions in which they can justify through the media that what they took was in self-defence. They can

either use physical means or complete penetration through various slogans like "peace," "open frontiers," "joint projects". And all what you hear now is this new vocabulary.

**But it's not unwarranted penetration if Egypt welcomes these things. It's not Israeli expansion, it's something that the Egyptians - desire.**

○ Yes, but I don't believe that the Egyptians do welcome this. I am sure that all the Egyptians, if they understood exactly what's going to happen, would never have accepted it. And the future will show you.

**What do you expect when the**



**"I was the intermediary between the Americans and the PLO . . .**

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**autonomy negotiations begin?**

○ The whole process is a non-starter for the Palestinians. It is based on Begin's plan, which means, as you will see, that the Israelis will try to change the demographic composition of the West Bank and Gaza and they'll try to establish a massive number of new settlements. And this is why the framework agreed upon at Camp David is a non-starter, and is rejected by all the Arab countries without exception.

**What about Sudan, Oman . . . ?**

○ No, no, no. No exception. Go to Sudan yourself. Walk in the street. Speak to the people of Sudan, the responsible people. They will tell you exactly this.

The Israelis and the Americans claim that

they are very just and fair, that they believe in international law and common sense. So I have only one very simple proposal. Let us agree to have the West Bank and Gaza under international trusteeship, under the United Nations trusteeship. I formally propose a UN trusteeship for Palestine, namely the West Bank and Gaza, for two years.

**You don't seriously think the Israelis would be interested in such a proposal, do you?**

○ I said before, if they are interested in peace, in human rights, in justice, in international law, what is wrong with the UN having a trusteeship on Palestine? After two years there will be elections under international supervision. We give to the Palestinians - like anybody else - the right to say yes or no to their statehood. And I may add, to assure the Israelis of their own security. In addition, I propose that the new Palestine state, once it is established, declares its complete neutrality - another Switzerland.

**No army, at least not a large one?**

○ A security force composed of, let us say, 50,000. A security force to control its own territory and frontiers and so on. I make this concrete proposal for, if the Israelis are really honest, why should they fear an international trusteeship.

The Americans, the Russians, the French could serve on the Board of Transition too - the five permanent members. Anybody the Israelis want!

**Many of the leaders of the Arab states have declared that the leaders of Egypt who have entered this treaty with Israel are "traitors". Do you share that view?**

○ (*long pause*) No. Every politician takes decisions for one reason or another and tries hard to justify his position. Statesmen rarely declare they are wrong. But calling people bad names is not my style. History will judge whether the Arabs are wrong and President Sadat is correct.

**You are busy writing your memoirs. What are you trying to accomplish?**

○ I will try as honestly as possible to put on record my views and to try to rectify many misconceptions. This I will do at the proper time and for the sake of Egypt and for history in general.

President Carter and his Administration tried throughout 1977 to approach the Middle East crisis in its totality and they rejected the Kissinger policy. Vance was convinced that all parties should go to Geneva, and the process of contact with the PLO had already started.

But now a Palestinian state will not emerge unless either the geopolitics of the area change again or the Arabs use force to bring it about. I prefer an international effort with massive support from the American President.