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| INTERVIEW

Options and Risks After Camp David

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIC ROULEAU

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Eric Rouleau is the Middle East editor of *Le Monde*. He is currently on leave in the United States, under the auspices of the Council on Foreign Relations, Princeton University, and the Middle East Institute, preparing a book about the Palestine problem. Shortly after he had covered the summit conference at Camp David, he was interviewed by Mark Bruzonsky* about the results of the conference, and agreed to discuss its repercussions at greater length for the *Journal* in November 1978. The text of the interview follows.]

Q. *What is the meaning of the Camp David agreement in the historical context of the Arab-Israeli conflict? How are we going to look back on Camp David?*

A. Whatever the consequences of Camp David — whether it leads to an overall settlement or to no settlement and war — I think Camp David is a turning point. It marks the very first time since the Balfour Declaration that a responsible Arab government is signing a peace agreement with Israel. It's also a turning point because the biggest Arab country is opting out of confrontation with Israel in spite of the opposition of the other Arab states and without a resolution of the Palestinian problem.

It could be an even more important event — a real watershed — if it does lead to a solution of the Palestinian problem.

* Mark A. Bruzonsky is Forum Editor of *The Middle East* magazine, in which an earlier version of parts of this interview appeared in November 1978. The interview was conducted on October 1 and up-dated in mid-November.

Q. What does it mean for the US role in the Middle East?

A. Camp David is a manifestation of the limitations of the *pax Americana* which the US would like to conclude in the Middle East. It is also the proof that some Arab leaders were wrong to say that the Americans have a decisive influence in Israel and that the moderate Arabs should therefore turn to the US and abandon reliance on the Soviet Union. In the eyes of many Arabs, Camp David is proof that Sadat's belief that the Americans have 99 percent of the cards is baseless.

Q. Is Camp David a triumph for Begin over Carter, especially in view of Carter's policies when he first came into office?

A. I would say yes. Beforehand, Carter was against a separate peace because he realized it didn't serve American interests. The US came to the conclusion that a quick and overall peace was the goal because they thought, and they still think, that strife and conflict in the Middle East are potential threats to their interests in the area.

Q. But now they are risking an overall settlement for a separate peace.

A. This is why it's a victory for Begin. Since 1967 I've heard from several responsible Israelis that a separate peace with Egypt was possible; their objective, their dream was to cut Egypt off from the confrontation states.

I remember in 1973 just after the October War I met General Bar-Lev and he told me, to my great surprise, that Israel had very strong indications that there was a good chance for a separate peace with Egypt.

What is the use of a separate peace? Of course it reduces the possibility of pressure by the Arabs. But it's not leading to the kind of settlement which can be stable in the Middle East.

Q. So why did the Americans do it? If Carter believes that stability is so essential, he's now risking that stability.

A. He's taking a big gamble. But he probably felt he had no choice. His two guests, Begin and Sadat, were of unequal strength. Begin came to Camp David saying that it wasn't the last chance, and that it was still possible to wait, even though Israel wished to reach an agreement. It wasn't just propaganda, because he was negotiating from a position of strength. Begin wasn't threatened if Camp David failed. On the contrary, he could go back and say to the Israelis that they were trying to force him into a settlement jeopardizing the security of the State of Israel. And few Israelis would have then turned against Begin.

The person who was really threatened by the collapse of Camp David was Sadat. He had promised his people that if his initiative failed he

would resign. Failure would have put him in a very difficult position. And if he did not want to resign he could have put up a show by saying he was now going to try other means — in other words go back to the Arab fold, to Syria and the PLO and especially the allies of those people, the Soviet Union, for which Sadat has an allergy.

As a matter of fact, I think one of the reasons which took Sadat to Jerusalem in November was that he wanted to break up the possibly approaching Geneva conference, where the Soviets would be present.

So Sadat was in a far weaker position than Begin. He had to get something out of Camp David. Sadat was coming without the support of the Arab world and taking an independent path. This reduced his strength. Egypt's strength lies not only in its geography and demography but Egypt has traditionally been the leader of the Arab world and has had the support of at least parts of the Arab world in which the Western world has interests. Egypt, coming to Camp David without the Arab world supporting it explicitly, had been reduced to a minor power — important, but still minor.

Now, to come back to your question. Carter had these two people facing each other and one of them was giving in to the other. He could not be more inflexible than Sadat. He himself was also in an awkward position because on one side he had the pressures of the domestic groups — who are unconditionally for the policies of Israel — and on the other he had Arabs who did not exercise enough pressure on him. Of course, the Americans perceived a potential threat from the Arabs. But that threat was not there, it wasn't real at the time.

These were the essential components of the balance of power which led to the Camp David accords.

Q. What positive aspects do you see in what Begin agreed to at Camp David?

A. Things that one does can have a certain effect even if one doesn't aim for this. Begin aimed only for a separate peace with Egypt, in order to cut Egypt off from the Arab world, to weaken the Arab front, and eventually to do the same thing with Assad of Syria. The objective was to have a free hand in the West Bank and Gaza, considered by him as Jewish lands.

But in the process of getting this separate peace, Begin killed at least three myths which hinder a peace process.

The conviction of most Israeli politicians beforehand regarding their policy was "ain breira" [no alternative] — there is no possibility of peace with the Arabs. Now the Egyptian-Israeli treaty has demonstrated that peace is possible based on a trade-off — territory in exchange for full peace

and normalization.

Secondly, the Egyptian-Israeli agreement demonstrates that settlements are not sacred cows, that Israel can dismantle settlements without betraying Zionism. This will certainly discourage even more Jewish settlers from going to the West Bank and Gaza. Even the Gush Emunim movement has lost a lot of its momentum since the Camp David accords.

Thirdly, most Israeli politicians used to say that security is intrinsically linked with territorial expansion, or at least military occupation of Arab territories. Now what happened in the Sinai demonstrates that this is not true – territories can be given up and important airfields dismantled without endangering Israeli security. If this is true with a powerful and large country like Egypt, why couldn't it be true with a small, future Palestinian state of 1 1/2 million?

Q. So you believe that to get his separate peace Begin had to allow certain precedents which at some point may backfire on him?

A. That's exactly what I mean.

Q. Many people have talked about "Palestinian participation" and "Palestinian self-determination." The Egyptian ambassador in the US continues to refer to the "Palestinian nation." Is there any significant likelihood in your view that out of the Camp David framework will eventually come a real Palestinian state? I know that there's always hope. But does it make any real political sense?

A. As you say, hopes carry little weight. Hopes can be expressed on both sides and in contradictory directions. But let's go back to the political basics. What gives momentum? Momentum doesn't come out of a written text like Camp David. Momentum comes from a thrust and a thrust comes from political forces. The Camp David agreement could evolve into a positive momentum – and by this I mean a solution to the Palestinian problem – or it could, on the contrary, be a momentum in the other direction, a step backwards. It all depends on the balance of power.

If the Arabs, to take a scenario, organize themselves, unite and exercise very strong pressures on the US, or if the Palestinians, as another example, organize themselves and put real pressures on Israel – and pressures are not necessarily military, they could be political or economic or social – then the Camp David agreement would evolve into something else.

Q. But you don't think there will be such strong, united Arab pressure, do you?

A. In the immediate future I don't think it can happen. To illustrate this, let's consider the factors of pressure on the US and on Israel.

Saudi Arabia quickly condemned Camp David, but immediately, and in the very same communiqué, said that it did not want to interfere with Sadat's getting Sinai back. The Saudis should be judged on their actions, not their words. And in this particular case there are just words of condemnation and real acts in the other direction. Also, Saudi Arabia in the past few years has consistently repeated that it would not use oil as a political weapon. So one should exclude any pressure on the US of that nature.

Even Syria, although it has taken a very hard line in appearance, is keeping open its channels of communications with the US. And we know the Israelis are prepared to give back the Golan Heights to Syria on the same basis as Sinai to Egypt — in other words, the terms would be another separate peace and leaving the Palestinians to their fate. I don't think Syria will go as far as this; it's impossible for many reasons. But anyway, Syria's position is really not a hardline position.

Q. What about the Americans? Begin keeps saying that he will never allow a plebiscite among the Palestinians. And yet the Americans — for instance, Assistant Secretary Saunders — go to the Jordanians and Palestinians and say that the Americans really do back a Palestinian homeland and really do consider the West Bank and Arab Jerusalem "occupied territories." Are the Americans really serious in implying they want to pursue some form of true Palestinian self-determination?

A. I don't think so, because self-determination has a precise meaning. First of all, it means consulting all of the people and not just one-third of it. Even holding elections in the West Bank and Gaza means leaving out two-thirds of the Palestinians who are refugees throughout the Arab world. This is not self-determination. Camp David is, in fact, the antithesis of self-determination. Camp David was a place where Mr. Carter, an American, Mr. Sadat, an Egyptian, and Mr. Begin, an Israeli, tried to shape the future of the Palestinians. There was no Palestinian there.

Secondly, the Camp David accords state that the so-called "self-governing authority" is going to be set up by people foreign to the Palestinians — the Israelis, the Egyptians, and the Jordanians if they decide to join in. Palestinians "may" participate in this process — the accords say — but there are several important conditions, including that these Palestinians will have to be handpicked either by the Egyptians or the Jordanians and then agreed upon by the Israelis.

Q. But you've indicated to me before that you believe the Americans do realize the necessity for a solution to the Palestinian problem. So what kind of solution do you think they envision?

A. When they speak of self-determination the Americans may seem to be working for a Palestinian entity but this is certainly within the framework of the Hashemite Kingdom. Every single American statement indicates that they do not support independence for the Palestinians. Self-determination would be exercised if the people were asked in a plebiscite whether they wanted independence, or to be linked to Jordan, or to be linked to Israel. Now these questions are not going to be put to the Palestinians – either those inside or outside the West Bank and Gaza.

Q. *So on what basis do Saunders and other US government officials found their optimism that they can ever get the Palestinians to cooperate in the post-Camp David period?*

A. I think that the Americans, Egyptians and Israelis are really banking on the erosion of Palestinian and Arab opposition to the brand of peace they have worked out at Camp David. They were hoping to get King Hussein in, but they can't if he's not even sure eventually to get back the West Bank and East Jerusalem. They were hoping the Saudi Arabians would back Sadat in a more vigorous manner, but the Saudis decided they couldn't do it because of popular Arab feelings against the Camp David agreement. But I suppose the Americans have still not lost all hope. Washington strategists still think that with time they can get more Arabs into the process.

Q. *Has there been a partial reversal of American policy? It seems that last year Carter did toy with dealing with Palestinian nationalists, with the PLO. But now, from what you're saying, you seem to think that the Americans are determined not to deal with Palestinian nationalists, but to find some other way of dealing with the Palestinian problem.*

A. I think the American objective has remained unchanged. What Carter said near the beginning of his presidency about a Palestinian homeland did not, in his mind, mean an independent Palestinian state. Now the Americans did toy – as you said – with the idea of at least the moderate part of the PLO coming into the process, but it didn't work out. The PLO has minimum demands which the US couldn't accept either because they didn't agree with them or because they felt they couldn't force their Israeli ally to accept them.

Now they've apparently abandoned any idea of reaching an agreement with the PLO, while still urging them in private to go into the West Bank elections. But this may not be the final position of the American government. All governments are pragmatic and take political forces into account when dealing with a problem.

Now it depends on whether the PLO can become a sufficiently signi-

ficant factor for the American government to turn back to trying to get the PLO again into the process and to decide the Israelis must be confronted with this problem. But at this point the Palestinians and the Arab world behind them are not strong enough.

Q. Carter has returned to the Kissinger approach, hasn't he — by saying he will not deal with the PLO, by trying to keep the Soviets out and by accepting a step-by-step process?

A. I think so, yes.

Q. So Henry Kissinger is the real winner of Camp David?

A. Yes, you are right, the Camp David agreement is just an outgrowth of those same Kissinger policies which were condemned by this administration. Camp David seems to go counter to what Carter has been saying about a settlement.

Q. You have warned of the risks of Camp David, saying the US might regret what it has done. What are these dangers and risks?

A. If we have to look at the pessimistic side — and I don't say this will happen, but only that there are real risks — the following could happen:

1. The complete isolation of Sadat — what I call pushing Sadat into the ghetto, the same ghetto where Menahem Begin is. Sadat could have been much more useful to both the US and Israel if he remained in a middleman position. His usefulness will be completely lost if he loses all credibility and legitimacy as an Arab leader. If this does happen, the risk of destabilizing Sadat's regime would be greater.

2. The second risk is that of division of the Arab world into two camps. As you know it was decided at the Damascus "steadfastness" conference practically to create another Arab League outside of Cairo. When you divide the Arab world, you make a settlement with Israel much more difficult. You create a polarized situation where overbidding and exaggeration are the rule, as you have to demonstrate that you're a better Arab than the next. We knew a period like this in the 1960's. Polarization breeds cold war tactics, tensions, strife and possibly military conflicts.

Q. Isn't there a potential for the Soviet Union to put its foot down?

A. Of course. This is the factor which hasn't been discussed very much and it's very important.

The Soviet Union, because it has lost a lot of its influence in the area, is thought by many people to be finished. But it's still a factor in the Middle East. It's not only in Iraq, in Syria and in South Yemen. It is also everywhere else in the Middle East in forms which are not obvious or visible.

More important, the Russians are on the periphery of the Middle East. They have a good deal of influence in Afghanistan and in Ethiopia and maybe tomorrow in Iran. It's not out of the game.

It's just being blind to say that it can be done without the Soviet Union. In fact, it was this US administration's point of view in the beginning that it would be a mistake to exclude the Soviet Union. The intention of this administration was to bring all concerned powers to guarantee a peace. But again, the US has given in to double pressure – not only from Sadat who doesn't like the Russians, but also from Begin. Carter seems to have departed from his path under pressure from his minute allies, small countries such as Egypt and Israel.

Q. Eric, why do people such as Matti Peled and I.F. Stone, who formerly shared many of your outlooks and attitudes, have such optimistic assessments of Camp David while you have such a gloomy assessment of what Camp David means and of Carter's capabilities?

A. I do not know and, anyway, I cannot speak for Matti Peled and Izzy Stone. However, I have noticed among "doves" in the US and in Israel what I believe to be a faulty assessment of what the words "process" and "dynamics" mean. Some say that though the Camp David agreements have many failings there's a "process" going on and the "dynamics" will lead to a satisfactory solution for the Palestinians.

This is not necessarily true. Why? Because while every move in politics has a dynamic of its own, the process it engenders does not necessarily go in a positive direction – it can also go in the opposite direction.

What determines whether the process will go in one direction or the other? It is the balance of power. A treaty is only a piece of paper. You make it white or black according to your strength or weakness. If the present balance of power persists, I don't see the Camp David agreement evolving, as the optimists hope, toward Palestinian self-determination. Why? Because those who are implementing it are not great fans either of the Palestinians or of their aspirations. Israel is, of course, not in favour of what the PLO would like to achieve in the West Bank and Gaza. Egypt is at best indifferent – one day in favour of the Palestinians, the next against, depending on whether Palestinian objectives coincide or not with Egyptian interests. Jordan is certainly not in favour of a Palestinian state with PLO leadership. And the US only wants some kind of a Palestinian entity which would fit into the American strategy in the area.

Those who are sceptical about the Camp David agreements have reason to be suspicious. The whole process – since the word is so in vogue – is being shaped and manipulated by people who do not claim to be champions of the Palestinian cause.

Now we come to the balance of power. If these people are going to shape the future of the Palestinians, if the Palestinians remain weak, and if Arab support for the Palestinians remains either ambivalent or non-existent, why should one be so confident that the outcome would satisfy minimal Palestinian aspirations?

Of course we all believe that one day or another there will be a Palestinian entity — history has demonstrated that this is what happens. But this might only happen after years of strife and bloodshed which in my eyes are quite unnecessary.

I think that there is a quicker alternative to peace. This is by admitting outright that the Palestinians have a right to establish their own entity the way they want it on the West Bank and Gaza. But if Camp David means that another five or ten years are necessary to reach this conclusion then I don't see any reason for exhilarating euphoria.

Q. Do you really think a Palestinian entity or state is inevitable? Or can't the Americans, Egyptians, Jordanians and Saudis sabotage Palestinian nationalism if they really work at it?

A. My point is that they may or may not. It depends on how strong the Palestinian movement is.

When I say "strong" I don't mean how many guns they have — this is the least important factor. I am speaking of strength in terms of their position among the West Bank and Gaza population, and in terms of effectiveness of organization and the extent of their influence in the Arab world, as well as their support on the international scene.

Q. If you were Yasser Arafat, responsible for making decisions fateful for the Palestinian people, how would you react to Camp David?

A. Well, nothing is offered to Yasser Arafat as a PLO leader, except one area in which he can play a role — the elections.

Now if those elections are completely free, then I believe it is a basic right of anybody, whether PLO or not, to play the game of the elections. This is not just an abstract democratic right. It is a way for the people to express their will.

In this way elected persons might be able to stand up and say what they really want. And if they confirm that the Palestinians are yearning for independence, this fact would weigh in the implementation of Camp David.

Q. Does Begin intend to maintain Israeli settlement rights and land purchase rights in perpetuity?

A. Of course he will try. His whole life has been based on that. There

was even an exchange of letters with Carter to dispute terminology, Begin saying the West Bank means Judea and Samaria. This is very significant. If they can't even agree on the name of the West Bank it shows how deep the conflict is. Begin is so adamant about it that he even got Sadat to use the term Judea and Samaria back at Ismailia last Christmas.

So Begin will try to keep all of Judea and Samaria Jewish, not just the settlements. He may also try to revive what he suggested publicly in December – his plan that the territories will never be given back to the Arabs but that the inhabitants will choose between Jordanian and Israeli nationality.

Q. In your mind, did Begin compromise any significant principles at Camp David different from those in his Begin Plan of December 1977?

A. He made no compromises on substance. Much of what people think he has given up is already in his so-called self-rule plan of December, such as the abolition of the military government.

Q. Dayan offered to abolish it unilaterally some months ago.

A. Exactly. And you know why? Begin was very much opposed to a military government in Israel proper when it was imposed on the Arabs in Israel in the 1950's and 1960's. At that time, he called for its abolition and suggested that laws be put in effect in its place, as was done in the 1960's. Begin simply doesn't believe in military government and he believes that "law and order" can be maintained through normal legislation. For him, it is not a question of substance but of form.

Q. Well, is Camp David then an improved version of the Begin Plan?

A. In a way, it is. There is no significant change of substance, but there are new features concerning the mechanisms of self-rule and negotiation.

Q. About the settlements. Has Camp David superseded 242 in the following way – not legally but politically? Before Camp David, Israeli settlements were not only illegal, but the terms of 242 implied the withdrawal of settlements along with withdrawal from territories. After Camp David, we have only discussion of future settlements and no discussion of present settlements, which implies de facto acceptance.

A. The great success of Begin at Camp David is to have obtained acceptance of the settlements for at least another five years. What the Americans and the whole world were asking before was to get the settlements out right away. Today there is a kind of legitimacy given to Mr. Begin's policies. In a way this has cancelled the 242 resolution,

Mr. Sadat's answer was, well, we have to help President Carter, who's been so good to us, and anyway he's given me his word of honour that he will stand on our side and press Begin into making more concessions leading to a solution in the West Bank and Gaza. And Kamil's answer was that, however good the President of the United States and however much we like him, we cannot base the policy of the state of Egypt and our future on the basis of the word of one man, or trust in one man. And he resigned.

In other words, I want to say, if Mr. Carter cannot get his own way on a freeze on settlements, the whole basis on which Mr. Sadat agreed to sign the accord would collapse. If he can't get this, how can he get anything else for himself, for the Palestinians or for the Jordanians or whoever it is?

Q. Do you think Camp David represents any basic change of outlook by Begin? Or is Begin the same man we have always known but simply manoeuvring in a somewhat different international environment?

A. People seldom change. What makes people modify their behaviour, if not their basic attitudes, are circumstances and pressures. And if they don't change with circumstances they usually fall out of the picture.

Of course Mr. Begin hasn't changed and would like to keep the West Bank and make it part of Israel. But Begin faces new realities now. If realities and the balance of power favour him he will stick to his views. If realities don't help him, either he will be forced to go against his own convictions or he will resign and let someone else do what has to be done.

Q. What about Jordan? Do you conceive of any circumstances under which the Camp David agreements can be modified with Israeli approval so that King Hussein would take the risk of joining the negotiations?

A. First, there is a lack of unanimity within Jordan about getting back the West Bank. Crown Prince Hassan and others are telling the King to forget about the West Bank, that it will be a source of trouble and that Jordan is doing O.K. now. Let the Palestinians be Israel's neighbour, they argue.

The King himself is interested in the West Bank but he's being very cautious. He can still envisage himself at the head of a unified Jordanian kingdom if he can get the minimum of what the Palestinians are demanding today. But one can't ask him to go against both members of his family and the Arab consensus while offering him only a part of the West Bank as the Labour Party wanted to do and no East Jerusalem! The risk is just too great for him.

Q. So your answer is no, you don't see changes in the Camp David

creating a new legal framework superseding 242.

Q. That would be denied because 242 is mentioned in the Camp David formula. Could you say that it's not a legal change, but a political change?

A. The US and Egypt have given up the idea of removing settlements for at least five years.

Suppose that Begin agrees not to establish new settlements, which is the maximum that he can accept. Then the trade-off is that there will be no new settlements and nothing more will be said about the existing ones. And if negotiations don't succeed in five years, things will remain as they are. And maybe they'll expand the population of the settlements to 30,000 from today's less than 10,000 settlers. This will make it more difficult to reach a settlement.

Q. What does Begin's decision to expand the West Bank settlements mean to Carter's political credibility as someone capable of following through with Camp David's entire framework?

A. Well, this is a major point you are raising. Even those who are secretly in favour of Camp David in the Arab world want some proof that the American involvement in the process is a real involvement, not just in words but in deeds.

King Hussein and others are waiting to see if the American view will prevail on this settlements issue.

The decision by the Israeli cabinet to expand settlements is an open challenge to Carter, and until now I see no sign of Carter accepting the challenge. He does criticize Israeli policies from time to time but it's never transformed into deeds, either because he just wants to please his Arab friends or because he fears he cannot stand the domestic pressures if things come to a confrontation with Israel.

Q. What's your judgment as to the consequences if the Americans do decide to take Begin on over the settlements issue?

A. Well, it seems now that many people do consider this issue of a freeze on settlements, and especially the right of any West Bank autonomous government to have a power of veto over settlements, as the crucial test for Carter.

Let me tell you a story which I hold as authentic and which came from very good sources.

At Camp David when Sadat called his Foreign Minister, Mr. Kamil, to say that he was going to agree, Kamil protested. He said that this is the very agreement we've refused for twelve days so why are we accepting it today?

alliance in the area, and facing up to Soviet threats around them in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Iran, or they will side with Sadat and not implement them, and thus go against Arab public opinion and lose the position of leadership in the Arab world.

This is a very uncomfortable situation for the Saudis, and Camp David put them in this position. And this too is negative for American interests in the area.

Q. Does the reconciliation between the Baathists of Syria and Iraq and also apparently between the PLO and Iraq have any major meaning for the politics of the area?

A. Although I don't believe very much in the sincerity of this reconciliation, yes, it does. The very fact that they felt obliged to reconcile with each other shows how great the anti-Camp David pressures are. Popular feeling against Camp David is real, or else they would not have done this.

Q. How strong is Sadat in Egypt? If he can't bring major economic improvements within nine months or a year will he be in deep trouble at home?

A. Sadat has bought time. In fact, both sides are only buying time without settling the key problem.

In Israel the economy and inflation and social suffering are creating great pressures on Begin. Look at the municipal elections in early November. The Likud didn't come out as the first party of Israel — Labour gained ground.

Q. If Sadat's position in Egypt deteriorates might he attempt another attack on Libya as I've heard other analysts speculate?

A. At this point, I think it is an unlikely development. Not because Sadat wouldn't like to get rid of Qadhafi, but because it's a very dangerous venture. I doubt whether his army is capable of occupying Libya and anyway his army can turn against him. Wars are very dangerous in the Middle East because the loyalty of armies cannot be guaranteed by any regime.

You know, every single political party or faction in Egypt — from extreme right to extreme left — came out very strongly against the Camp David agreements, even those who are basically in favour of peace with Israel. It would be a serious error to underestimate the impact these political groups will ultimately have on public opinion and, naturally, on the army itself.

agreements acceptable to Israel which would entice the King?

A. I can't see the Israelis giving him what he thinks he should get, namely, some kind of explicit commitment on substance, not only on procedure.

Q. Was anything of great importance accomplished at the Baghdad Summit in your view?

A. Whatever the practical consequences of the Baghdad Summit, it demonstrated one crucial thing: the Arab world — willingly or unwillingly — has had to take a unanimous stand against the Camp David agreements. That's important, because it reflected an Arab consensus.

Those who are backing Sadat in his venture were unable to say so publicly. This is already a sign that the Camp David agreements fell short of the minimum any Arab — moderate or not — can accept in 1978.

The second thing about Baghdad is that the PLO came out stronger. The Arab world again, for political reasons and under the pressure of the current Middle East situation, felt obliged to reiterate its full support for the PLO as "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." Even King Hussein made an impassioned speech in favour of this. And this shows that the PLO remains a very strong political factor in the area.

The third thing about the Baghdad conference is that some secret decisions have been taken. And if what has been published about those secret decisions is true — that is, the progressive isolation of Egypt from the Arab world with political and economic sanctions — this is a potential force, in the sense that if the Camp David agreements turn out to be what the Arabs believe — a separate peace with Israel and a selling out of Palestinian rights — those secret decisions might be progressively implemented under the pressure of events.

And so the Baghdad conference, whose decisions may today seem ineffective, may turn out to be a real counterweight to the Camp David agreement.

Q. The Saudi position is, of course, crucial to American efforts. Did the Saudis shift toward a more negative attitude at Baghdad and since?

A. The Saudis felt that they had to go to Baghdad and take a common stand with the other Arab states against Camp David — something I'm sure they would have liked to avoid. It was a shift in the sense that they are said to have agreed to take sanctions against Egypt. Now even if they don't take them in the near future, the fact that they had to take this stand is already creating problems for the Saudi leadership. Either they are going to implement them and in a way go against their own interests, which lie in keeping Sadat in power, strengthening the anti-communist