

OPINION AND COMMENTARY

Will Egypt alter course?

By Mark A. Bruzonsky

Egypt has been making strenuous diplomatic attempts to orchestrate movement in US-Palestinian relations which could lead, after a PLO evacuation from Beirut, to progress toward Palestinian self-determination.

The reason for Egyptian involvement is clear. Should Israel invade west Beirut, or should the stalemate on Palestinian rights continue while Israel acts as regional bully, pressures will build for a major shift in Egypt's political course, or even a shakeup in Egyptian political leadership.

Three times before, since World War II, Egypt has been forced to alter course. In 1952, in the aftermath of the Arab world's first loss to Israel, the revolution that brought Nasser to power catapulted Egypt to the forefront of pan-Arabism. In this role, Egypt became the center of the struggle to recover Palestine.

In 1972 Sadat dismissed the Russians and embarked on an "open door" relationship with the West, a relationship that had badly eroded after American refusal to finance the Aswan dam and sell Egypt arms in the '50s and '60s.

The 1973 war provided Sadat with the psychological context in which to approach Israel in search of a comprehensive peace. The Geneva Conference was convened in December of that year.

Then in November 1977 Sadat took Egypt beyond pan-Arabism into an uneasy relationship with Israel — still in the name of a comprehensive peace but now with Egypt willing to go it alone under American tutelage.

Egypt's present course is not one from which the current government wishes to depart.

And yet serious rumblings of discontent and even rebellion are increasing — within the government, the army, the intellectual elite, the controlled press, and, most important, among the masses themselves.

Israel's invasion of Lebanon has been a



major shock to the government's explanation of the meaning of peace with Israel. Coupled with seeming American acquiescence or impotence as well as unfulfilled promises of economic aid, events in Lebanon have tremendously heightened Egyptian anxiety and caused a partial surfacing of the heretofore muted sense of betrayal and shame.

If the Begin government's approach to the Palestinian predicament continues, Egypt may soon find itself unable to hold to a course predicated upon assumptions now being proved false.

Egypt's ambassador to the US, Ashraf Ghorbal, publicly warned recently, "If you let Israel annex the West Bank, or you acquiesce in it, you can forget all of us!"

But to fully appreciate the crossroads Egypt faces, one has to go beyond the language of diplomats and delve deeper into the Egyptian collective psyche. One of Egypt's major literary figures — Yusef Idris — did just that recently in a revealing discussion after he toured the US for a

month.

"I think this invasion has cancelled Camp David. . . ." Idris told me. "The people in Egypt are boiling." Camp David, he added, underscoring the basic Egyptian assumption that is now in doubt, was "a treaty for peace in the Middle East, beginning with peace between Egypt and Israel and then autonomy for Palestinians and a state and then peace with other Arab countries." If Israel is allowed to continue its policies, undermining Egyptian expectations, Idris says, "it will be the end of any moderate governments in the Middle East, and the end of American influence in the Middle East."

Why, then, has Egyptian reaction so far been so restrained?

"If you study the Arab personality, the reaction is not immediate, it is not spontaneous," Idris replied. There is a "latent period" in which Arab reaction builds. "Then the reaction is usually very vigorous." That is how it was with Sadat's assassination, Idris said, noting that there

should be little doubt in the West that Islamic fundamentalists killed Sadat primarily for his "traitorous" acts with Israel.

Unless there is movement toward a fair settlement of the Palestinian question — which for Idris as for most Egyptians means a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip — fundamentalism throughout the region will be greatly strengthened at the expense of moderate Arab governments, the US, and Israel. "There will be nothing left except fundamentalism" for the Arabs, Idris warned.

American diplomacy is now saddled with a highly provocative Israeli attempt to assert its hegemony throughout the Middle East. Since this is being done with American arms, American financial aid, and partially in the name of the Camp David accords, there should be no wonder why in Arab eyes the US is highly implicated.

President Mubarak himself sadly warned at the end of July that the time may soon be upon us when US divisions will be required to protect American embassies in many Arab countries.

Today's political tremors may erupt into major political earthquakes unless the Reagan administration firmly moves to check Israeli assertiveness and reinvigorate the moribund peace process.

The Egyptians are probably correct to insist that only American recognition of the Palestinian right to self-determination coupled with the PLO's maintenance of its political legitimacy can salvage what was begun at Camp David. And Yusef Idris is probably right in saying that, otherwise, today's unrest in Egypt will eventually spill over, with unknown consequences for vital American regional interests and eventually for Israel's existence.

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