

Egyptian Attitudes Toward Peace

Editor's Note: Since this article was submitted, significant progress has been made on military disengagement on the Suez front. Following implementation of this accord, attention will shift to peace negotiations in Geneva. While there is room for optimism regarding an eventual peace settlement, Mr. Castellani, a student of Middle East affairs recently returned from a trip to Egypt, warns against an excessively hopeful reading of Egyptian attitudes.

by Seth Castellani

On three occasions since 1956 Israel has won wars against Egypt and occupied some of its territories. Subsequently, it has been subjected to intense international pressure to return the territories to Egypt in exchange for guarantees of peace and security. Israel has consistently resisted these pressures, fearing that it would be giving up its tangible advantage in return for easily breached Egyptian assurances. The Israelis mistrust their Egyptian neighbors and argue that any concessions made will probably be exploited. Since no peace can be negotiated around this mistrust, the great powers notwithstanding, it seems especially important to examine the present state of Egyptian attitudes towards Israel in order to determine the credibility of Egypt's oft-stated peaceful intentions.

The 1967 war marks the beginning of the current situation. Losing Sinai seems to have changed the Egyptian view of its problem with Israel; what was a "Palestine problem" now became a "Sinai problem." The slogan "Palestinian rights" lost favor to "liberation of occupied Egyptian territories." While it was Egyptian threats to Israel's existence which directly caused the 1967 war, the entire Egyptian effort since then has been portrayed as an attempt to reoccupy no more than its lost territories. This is the crucial shift which requires analysis. If, indeed, Egypt now seeks only to regain Sinai, then its intentions are peaceful. If, however, this is simply a ploy designed to win by diplomacy what was lost by war, then the observer must conclude that Egypt's intentions are still aggressive. In short, Egyptian sincerity is under question. Are the Egyptians denying any plans to

attack Israel only because of the tactical advantages involved or because these are their true intentions?

There is much evidence to show that the change in stated Egyptian policy towards Israel is not sincere but simply a tactical device aimed at pressuring the Israelis. This is shown by (a) the dictates of Egyptian appeal to international opinion, (b) the interests of its military leadership, and (c) various other indications.

(a). Recalling the international political pressure that Egypt has gathered against Israel places Egypt's peaceful talk in a dubious light. A change in its position was almost inevitable after the 1967 debacle, for unless it gave up hopes of destroying Israel, how could it have Israel pressured to return Sinai as a move towards peace? By talking peace, the Egyptians have found a convenient tool to extract its war losses from Israel without risk. Egyptian peace talk has made the most of the Israeli attack of June 5, 1967, claiming



that Israeli aggression caused the hostilities, and omitting all mention of Egyptian war noises before that date. In a stunningly audacious move, they have completely disclaimed the old battle cries. Egypt has been able to induce most of the world to forget that it lost Sinai as a result of its own aggressive policies by absolutely denying its pre-1967 goals. Also, Egypt has gained considerable sympathy since it has portrayed

itself as the innocent victim of a mighty and brutal foe. This image was achieved when Egypt restricted its goals to the repossession of a conquered province and no longer intended the destruction of a sovereign state.

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(b). Who in Egypt is interested in fighting Israel and why? Socialist propaganda to the contrary, Egyptian society is dominated by class divisions and so, in order to distinguish between the various attitudes towards Israel, some basic divisions are required first. The country has a population nearing 40 millions, of which the 30 million who live outside the two main cities (Cairo and Alexandria) and the six million urban poor have almost no political influence whatsoever in matters of foreign policy. This leaves the following groups with all the political weight: the university students; the professionals, intellectuals, and merchants; the military officers; and the government employees. All of these groups comprise under one million persons — making the "enfranchised" about 2% of the population. Finally, there is the small political elite, totalling several hundred, perhaps, the actual policy makers.

Taking each of these three groups in turn, we find that the great majority of Egyptians, those who make up the first group, are politically insignificant. This is in part because the government is authoritarian, but also because they have almost nothing to say about politics beyond occasional demonstrations of tenacity and obdurateness. The average Egyptian's understanding of the world is considerably more restricted than nearly any other Middle Easterner's. He has had less experience in self government, less contact with foreigners or travel, he is illiterate, and he has no understanding at all of international affairs. Ultimately the Egyptians may be the most passive populace in the world thanks to their low economic level and apolitical nature. As regards Israel, most Egyptians are, of course, antagonistic, but not violently so, nor are their feelings deep.

The second group, while better informed and more interested in Israel than the masses, still shares its apolitical character. Whatever political interest that

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does exist is directed towards international affairs, due to the obstacles of involvement in internal issues (i.e. the secret police, the lack of press coverage). As for Israel, this group repeats the government's claim that Egypt only wants to repossess Sinai. They further emphasize that once Sinai is regained, Egypt will be content, that it will not go on to attack Israel itself. These people are usually sincere in saying this. They have only suffered because of the hostilities with Israel and, aware of the terrible price they pay for the war, they are eager to end it. These people — students fearing the draft, merchants tied by heavy taxes and controls, professionals restricted by the immense military burden, and all of them suffering economically because of military expenses — want peace for real (self-interested) reasons. They all expect circumstances to improve for them once peace is established and impatiently demand a resolution (the student riots manifested this). Only a small minority of the important urban class really feels much concern about the fate of Palestine or its people; unquestionably, they care more about Egypt — which is to say, themselves.

This brings us to the third group, the small ruling elite composed of a few journalists, engineers, lawyers, aristocrats, but mostly of military officers. The military junta which came to power in 1952 has, over two decades, thrown off its military aspects and turned into a democratic and socialist party. But the government remains, as much as ever, a military autocracy. The officers have continuously engaged in military adventures since then for several reasons. i) The armed forces remain their power base and an active military policy has played an important role in keeping their support. ii) The revolutionaries' ambitious plans for

social reform and economic development have, most observers agree, failed, and military undertakings have been a useful means of deflecting public criticism. War has served to protect the regime from the populace. iii) Nasser's ambitions to achieve international prominence were best served by an assertive foreign policy, and, especially, by military involvements.

These are the reasons behind Egypt's initial entanglement with Israel and they continued to spur it until 1967. The question to ask now is whether, in the changed circumstances since then — and especially since the war last October and the recently signed disengagement pact — they still apply, whether they still motivate the Egyptian leaders.

While one might have expected that the new military leadership that replaced the generals discredited by the 1967 war would want to avoid further engagements for long after that debacle, in fact they have been continuously pressing for a resumption of hostilities. They have been eager to win back Sinai and to show their superiority to their predecessors. Since Sadat cannot survive if he loses favor with the military leadership, this pressure for action was the crucial factor leading to the October War. Indications seem to show that Sadat had been procrastinating for over two years, postponing the war on an almost daily basis. In October, after assuring himself of Saudi Arabian support, Sadat finally gave the military their chance.

The military results of the war, although widely misunderstood, are quite clear; despite the initial advantage of a surprise attack, the Egyptians fared badly and were only saved from humiliating defeat by the superpowers restraining Israel. It seems, however, that the military leadership in Egypt has chosen to ignore this fact and, true to tradition, it is pressing once again for a resumption of hostilities. The repeated threats emanating from Cairo since October confirm their unsated desire for battle with Israel.

Since 1967 the Egyptian regime has found itself more dependent than ever on its involvement with Israel to protect itself from public criticism. The government has negligible public support. Almost

every sector of Egyptian society has a major grievance against the government: the peasants and the urban poor have been hurt by large price increases on staple commodities, the industrial workers have had strikes severely crushed, the merchants are incapacitated by ever-changing and corruptly enforced regulations, university students fear the draft, soldiers are kept by the army for indefinite tours of duty, the old aristocracy and the capitalists hate the government for expropriating their properties, the minorities have been badly treated, the Copts have been discriminated against, the pious Muslims remember and resent the suppression of the Muslim Brethren, the Communists are in jail . . .

Faced with such massive opposition, it is difficult to imagine the regime voluntarily disengaging from an involvement which has been of immense value in distracting Egyptian opinion away from itself. Should hostilities with Israel be terminated, the Egyptian leadership will lose a shield against criticism. At this point the regime is, to a certain degree, captive to the war — but a willing captive, for the war in turn serves it as a clamp on the widespread discontent. All this suggests a strong reason for doubting that the leaders are truly enthusiastic about the idea of peace.

Anwar Sadat came to power in late 1969, upon Nasser's death. His rule has been characterized by a reduction in governmental arbitrariness. In domestic politics this had been shown by the greater attention paid to the law; in international politics it is reflected by a diminution in adventurism. The current Egyptian president does not seem to aspire to an international status as Nasser had; satisfying his ego is no longer a major reason for maintaining hostilities with Israel. Indeed, what Sadat tells the foreign press about

his wanting peace may even be true. However, under present circumstances, his personal desires carry less weight than the military and domestic imperatives outlined above.

(c). What other indications are there that Egypt will not arrange a real peace with Israel, even when it has regained Sinai? Firstly, there is the Egyptian denial of having ever harboured intentions to destroy Israel before the 1967 war, a disquieting precedent. If the Egyptians can now deny that they had planned to attack Israel only recently, why should they not deny, once they have Sinai again, that they had earlier pledged to live in peace with Israel? The Egyptian government is already embroiled in such a maze of duplicity that its word cannot be easily trusted. Its past record is poor; in order to avoid future predicaments, Israel needs more than an Egyptian promise.

Secondly, the deliberately quiet manner in which the Egyptian goals changed after 1967 is cause for concern. The transformation of Egyptian policy was intended to be imperceptible so that its sponsors would neither have to recognize the change, explain it, nor delineate the new policy. In other words, by denying their pre-1967 intention of "throwing the Jews into the sea" the Egyptians have avoided the burden of formally repudiating that intention. Had they explicitly announced that the present military and diplomatic moves are no longer aimed at Israel's destruction, but only the repossession of Sinai, then the Egyptian desire for peace would appear more credible.

Thirdly, the Arabic and English accounts do not match. Internal Egyptian propaganda blatantly contradicts the peace-loving spirit of the international version. Two examples: while the Egyptian Foreign Minister has repeatedly hinted at normal relations with Israel once the Sinai question is resolved, as recently as October 19, 1973, M.H. Haikal wrote the following about Arab aims in his weekly column in *al-Ahram*: "This matter does not relate to the liberation of Arab territories which were occupied since June 5, 1967, but strikes further and deeper against the future of Israel." Also, of the many interviews Sadat granted

Newsweek over the past few years, only one has been made available within Egypt; the others were kept out by the censors. This dramatizes the careful distinction made between government views made known abroad and domestically. The one soothes with repeated references to peace, the other bristles with talk of war. One is sorrowful, the other angry.

Which of the two versions is the truer reflection of the Egyptian government's attitude? If we presume the first, then the government is playing a cowardly game which will eventually rebound against itself. Rather than hide his peaceful intentions towards Israel from the people now and later shock them with news of his having recognized the state, Sadat should prepare them for the changes to come. An experienced and savvy politician is unlikely to make such a mistake; so this is reason for believing the alternative, that the warlike intentions expressed domestically (in Arabic) are correct. If so, then Sadat has been lying to the outside world, much as Brezhnev does when he says friendly things about detente to Westerners and explains how it will exploit the West to fellow Communists. And, just as with Brezhnev's speeches, we are correct in believing the internal version. The sweet words intended for international consumption are meaningless when contradicted by a harsh domestic account.

A final reason for doubting Egypt's peaceful intentions relates to the changes in the situation once it controls Sinai again. When that happens, how will the Egyptian military resist the temptation of pushing on into Israel, of succeeding after so many defeats? It is easy to plan to stop at Sinai's borders now, but it will be different when the Egyptians actually control the area. Related to this is the possible confusion in the Egyptian leaders' minds between concession and weakness. When the Israelis withdraw from Sinai, this may well be interpreted as a sign of infirmity, no matter what the real case is. And it is difficult to conceive of the Egyptians resisting attack on an enemy they believe to be retreating.

In conclusion, the forces for peace in Egypt are real; they include almost the entire populace and, possibly, Sadat himself. The force of war is numerically small but enormously influential — the governmental leaders, mainly military, who feel that war with Israel serves their interests. As long as they retain power no true peace with Israel will be possible.