

Behind The Sadat Visit To Israel — The Looming Crisis

What motivated the Sadat trip to Israel is beginning to surface in the recent statements of the Egyptian president and other Egyptian officials, and in the recent accounts in the press. The story shows how close the Middle East was to war, locked in a diplomatic stalemate, on the very eve of Sadat's decision to offer to visit Jerusalem.

In an interview with CBS News, Sadat was asked about the reasons for his sudden visit to Israel. He answered that there were two factors:

The first one is this. When we started for the Geneva conference to make the preparations, and the U.S. submitted a paper, out of that it was said that the Israelis had their remarks, and then another paper, a second one, that has been called the American-Israeli paper. I wondered: We should be again in the vicious circle of a word here and a word there. The Arabs don't agree to what is called Israeli — whether it is the American-Israeli paper or the Israeli. And the Israelis will never agree to whatever we say in the Arab world because of the psychological barriers... Well, I found that we shall not be going to Geneva; instead we shall be quarreling among ourselves in the Arab world, because this is the American paper or this is the American-Israeli paper, or this such and such. And Israel is very happy because through the procedural arrangement they can have the time they are playing for.

Behind Sadat's worries was the ominous problem that the U.S. had essentially capitulated to the "Jewish Lobby" after the signing on Oct. 4 of the U.S.-Israeli "working paper" at a meeting in New York between Carter and Moshe Dayan. The Baltimore Sun reported that after Secretary of State Vance told Sadat that the terms of the U.S.-Israeli working paper were subject to negotiation, he was forced to retract in mid-October when Dayan insisted that the terms of the U.S.-Israeli paper were unchangeable. That convinced Sadat that the U.S. was useless as an intermediary. "We are done with the Americans as intermediaries," said an Egyptian foreign ministry official.

In addition to breaking the diplomatic stalemate, Sadat revealed that the region was perilously close to a new war.

The second point... Do you imagine that 15 days ago, or two weeks ago, we were supposed to be in battle together?

Why? The Israelis started a maneuver in Sinai, which they declared. Gamassy, the commander-in-chief here is focusing and observing everything, and each side of us is alert. Well, when they started the maneuver, Gamassy started this maneuver here on the fifth day. They declared about their maneuver, but Gamassy didn't declare. For me, when I met Ezer Weizman, the defense minister in Israel, and he asked me why were you going to attack us ten days ago? I told him, No, why? He said there had been extra movements, and so I told him this is a maneuver, because you were already at that time on a maneuver in Sinai. Well, he told me the reports of his intelligence, and because also the intelligence in Israel, like my intelligence, also were very alert, and no one wants the other to strike first. So they sent the reports to the Defense Minister in Israel telling that the Egyptians are preparing... We were — if it happened one error from any side of us, we would have entered war.

Sadat's two key points were also made, in a slightly different form, by the Arab Socialist Party Politburo last week in an official statement. Commenting on the Sadat initiative to visit Israel, they stated:

The Arab Socialist Party of Egypt, in accordance with world reaction, world public opinion represented in the stand of world states and in the world press, affirms that the initiative has achieved an important part of its aims by winning further international support for the Arab peace efforts and that the initiative has put the Israeli leadership in a better position before Israeli public opinion to enable it to adopt resolutions for peace based on justice and to assume its responsibilities in this field. The Egyptian initiative has strongly penetrated the barriers of suspicion, hatred and fear in such a way that it created the necessary climate for establishing peace based on justice.

The initiative has provided the U.S. Administration with a broader staging point armed with U.S. public opinion to assume its responsibilities regarding the pressure groups which are acting from biased positions to influence world public opinion. The initiative has also checked the attempts to dissolve the question by adopting extraordinary measures as well as by influencing the U.S. Administration through pressure in U.S. election campaigns.

The initiative also paved the way for international leaderships to act in suitable conditions, thus contributing to enlisting greater sympathy among world public opinion to bringing about a solution to the question.

The initiative has likewise foiled the chances and voices of those advocating preemptive military strikes by surrounding them with a world public opinion which now believes in Egypt's earnest desire for peace.