

Egypt

Israelis running sects against Sadat

In January and February 1980, when the Israeli government of Prime Minister Menachem Begin began its sharp turn with the start of the Hebron settlements program and the appointment of hardline Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir, suddenly, serious sectarian troubles started in Egypt between the Christians and the Muslims of that country. These troubles were fed by extremists in both camps, especially the leadership of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Muslim Brotherhood secret society. At the time, many observers saw the hand of Israeli intelligence in the disorders.

For years, Israel has maintained close connections with the religious leaders of Egypt through the Mossad, Israel's intelligence agency.

Now, in his speech May 14 in Egypt, during which Egyptian President Sadat explained his decision to unilaterally suspend the talks with Israel on the issue of Palestinian autonomy, Sadat spent at least one full hour in a diatribe against the Copts, accusing them of subverting the Egyptian state and planning to declare an independent "Coptic state." He delivered similar warnings to the Muslim extremists and declared:

"My orders to the interior minister, effective tomorrow, are: the activity of all societies and organizations which spread sectarianism, religious fanaticism, and radical preaching will be suspended. Societies will be limited to those registered with the Social Affairs Ministry. This shall be applied particularly to the educational institutions and schools." In a speech the next day, Sadat said that the Muslim Brotherhood and certain Coptic societies were "gangsters" who would be crushed by the Egyptian authorities.

For Sadat, this was a complete reversal. For many years, Sadat has attempted to build his political power by forging a political alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been ruthlessly suppressed during the Nasser era in Egypt, and Sadat gradually let the Brotherhood undertake political activities. "Now it has become Frankenstein's monster," said an Arab analyst.

Given the powerful police-state apparatus that Sadat

has set up, there is no reason to think that Egypt is about to disintegrate into political chaos. But, on the other hand, many of Sadat's top officials are corrupt and willing to sell themselves to intelligence services of foreign states, and may seek to fuel the internal unrest. And, more and more, the Israeli regime appears to believe that giving Egypt "the Iran treatment," as one source put it, might take the heat off Israel for its refusal to negotiate.

The following are excerpts from the May 14 Sadat speech, as reported by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service:

In the 1960s the Western states wanted to use religion in the course of their struggle with Abdel Nasser. ... A plan was worked out. A foreign body participated in this plan and in its financing. This plan called for the sowing of religious sedition whereby the Copts would rise against their country. The purpose was to establish a Coptic state in Egypt with Asyut as its capital.

[At present] the expatriate Copts have escalated their activity staging protest marches in the cities of foreign nations, particularly in front of the United Nations and the White House in Washington; sending strongly worded telegrams to the White House on amendments to the Egyptian constitution ... launching a personal campaign against President Sadat to the effect that he heads the Islamic groups in Egypt and is working to crush the Copts. ...

In 1972 a leader of the Palestinian resistance in Beirut was here. As you know, the PLO first clashed with the Falangists who are the Maronite Christians in Lebanon. The Falangists were equipping an army and enlisted volunteers to fight, supplying them with arms from Israel. This PLO leader came to me in 1972 and told me: We captured five Falangists ... and three of them were Egyptian Christians working with the Falangists against the Palestinian resistance.

... The plan also called for the convening of a world conference of Coptic expatriates—which would be backed by a coordinated propaganda campaign in various church and world information media—to discuss the condition of the Copts in Egypt. ... Why all this uproar? Are the World Council of Churches, the Vatican, Carter, the American Council of Churches or the UN closer to the Egyptian Copts than their brothers, the Muslims of Egypt? ... It is part of a big plan. Since the Voice of America and the BBC have reported it, this is what is required. I know who told these things to those radios. They wanted to intimidate us, so that I would run to Carter. ... [They] try to exert pressure through the BBC, the Voice of America, Carter, leaflets, and all these things.