

Egypt prepares for new U.S. peace bid

by Thierry Lalevée

A new page in Egypt-Israeli relations may soon be opened. The "cold peace" which has existed between the two countries since Ariel Sharon succeeded in invading Lebanon in June 1982 is expected to come to an end. In protest over Lebanon, the Egyptians withdrew their ambassador. Though it still may be too early for full restoration of relations—Israel occupies a large part of the south of Lebanon—talks are already under way.

On Nov. 8, Israel's ambassador to Cairo, Moshe Sasson, met with Egyptian Prime Minister Kamal Hassan Ali and Foreign Minister Esmat Abdel Meguid. Thereafter, Sasson flew back to Jerusalem to brief Israeli leaders. Rumors spread that a high-level Egyptian envoy may soon be on his way to Jerusalem.

As Radio Jerusalem commented Nov. 12, such an initiative is essential to prepare for a new peace initiative from the Reagan administration. "Egypt is committed to easing tensions, to give the Americans no pretext not to lead a new initiative," concluded the commentator. Indeed, the general feeling in the region is that after more than a year and a half of paralysis, it is time the United States act.

This was item number one on the agenda during the Middle East tour of Defense Secretary Weinberger just prior to the U.S. elections. Favorable to such a move is the general wave of support for the re-election of President Reagan, greeted with a sigh of relief in Israel, Egypt, the Gulf, and even Iraq. Baghdad, which broke diplomatic relations with the United States in 1967, is expected to resume them later in December when Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz meets with President Reagan.

The Egyptian gambit

Egypt, however, is in the lead. During the past 24 months of American passivity, Cairo felt alone and without the support implied by its commitment to the Camp David treaty. The Egyptians frequently experienced the uneasy feeling that some in Washington want them to go the way of Iran. They are impatient for their allegiance to Camp David to be rewarded by a concrete peace initiative. Abdel Meguid told the *Financial Times* Nov. 9: "I hope that now that Mr. Reagan . . . has won a very strong mandate from the American people, we will see his words translated into action for the sake of peace and stability."

In a private message on Nov. 7, President Mubarak congratulated Reagan on his re-election, but emphasized that the

"deteriorating situation demands urgent action." Abdel Meguid stressed that Egypt favored the Soviet-proposed Middle East conference, but "this will not be very practical as Israel refuses to participate."

Hence, in a not very diplomatic way, Cairo is moving on many fronts against those in Washington tempted to think Central America more important than the Middle East.

For example, Osama al Baz, political affairs adviser to President Mubarak, created a diplomatic incident by questioning the validity of Camp David. Interviewed by *Al Akhbar*, he said bluntly: "The Soviet Union may soon enter the Middle East picture . . . with a revival of a Geneva-type Middle East conference. Washington may lose the monopoly it has enjoyed in Middle East peacemaking. . . ."

It is doubtful that this reflects a fight inside Egypt between pro-American and pro-Soviet factions. More to the point was the commentary of the *Jerusalem Post* on Nov. 9: President Mubarak "has so far refrained from backing openly the idea of a Geneva conference as an alternative to Camp David." Mubarak "has been using al Baz as a stalking horse, testing positions he is not yet ready to adopt, but which he may yet do if the American peace efforts remain deadlocked."

The new Palestinian initiative

As Abdel Meguid stressed to the *Financial Times*, Egypt's attitude is now "much better appreciated, with a silent majority of Arab states supporting Cairo." Egypt has achieved reconciliation with Jordan, and soon, with Iraq and other Gulf states. And then comes Israel, whose government is said to have "shown a new flexibility." Peres wants to negotiate an immediate Lebanon withdrawal.

One country very unappreciative of this is Syria. An Israeli withdrawal would call Damascus's bluff on also withdrawing, and would shift the Arab-leadership balance back toward Egypt—something Assad's Soviet friends do not want, at least not under American auspices.

And third, there is Yasser Arafat, displaying all signs of wanting to join the new Egypt-Jordan axis. Arafat has announced his intention to convene the Palestinian National Council in Jordan on Nov. 22, a decision seen by Assad as a double-insult—timing and location. Palestinians based in Syria have already received a message from Assad announcing that if they go to Amman to attend, they will "not come back to Syria alive." An Oct. 19 assassination attempt against Arafat, as his sabotaged plane had to make an emergency landing, provoked the PLO chief into saying: "The enemy and some brothers are participating in the conspiracy. . . . I will not bow to Syrian pressures."

Were Arafat to convene such a meeting with even a small majority, it would represent a severe, if not fatal defeat of the Syrian-controlled Palestinian faction, and send Israel as well as the United States the unmistakable message: "We are ready to negotiate!"

These are the kinds of messages the Reagan administration can no longer afford to ignore.