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The Reaction in Israel to the Sadat Initiative

ELIAS SHOUFANI*

In the last three weeks of November 1977, the Israeli politicians and public were completely preoccupied with the visit of President Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem and the subsequent developments which led to the convening of the Cairo Conference. The Israeli press, whose headlines in the first days of the month had been devoted to the internal discontent and strife resulting from the drastic economic measures of Menahem Begin's right-wing government, now concerned itself almost entirely with the Middle East conflict. Political interest and commentaries started with some doubts as to whether the visit would take place at all, reached a peak during Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, and then subsided somewhat until the announcement of the forthcoming Cairo Conference revived hopes of a peace settlement that would satisfy Israel's minimum terms.

1. SURPRISE AT THE VISIT

When, on the evening of November 9, Sadat announced before the Egyptian parliament that he was ready to go before the Israeli Knesset to address it on the Middle East conflict, the Israeli press expressed surprise and disbelief. High officials cracked jokes about the matter, and considered Sadat's offer to be purely rhetorical. (Preparations for the visit did not, in fact, start seriously until one or two days before it occurred.) The most influential and respected Israeli newspaper, the independent *Haaretz*, referred to the visit as something like the "coming of the Messiah" in its editorial of November 11, but warned about the danger of Israel being outmanœuvred by Sadat in a public relations game of statements aimed at convincing the American

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government to put pressure on Israel to make substantive concessions on basic issues: "It is impossible to ignore these statements [of Sadat]; it will either make Sadat the most dangerous adversary or the man with whom we can bring the problem to an end."

Sadat repeated his offer on November 12 before a visiting delegation of US Members of Congress, the same day on which Begin made a response to Sadat's statements in a televised address to the Egyptian people (*Jerusalem Post*, November 13), in which he affirmed Israel's desire for peace between the two countries, stating that, "In ancient times Egypt and Eretz Israel were allies, real friends and allies, against a common enemy from the North." Begin's announcement was interpreted by some quarters as an attempt to substitute for Sadat's visit, and *Haaretz* in its editorial of November 13 urged the government to issue an invitation to Sadat, to seriously attempt to bring about the visit. The newspaper warned that Israel would appear in a very bad light before world opinion if it failed to respond appropriately to Sadat's offers.

Caution, if not doubt and suspicion, still prevailed in government circles. Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan was reported as saying in a session of the Israeli cabinet that, although the idea of a summit meeting between Sadat and Begin was a positive one, this could not be a substitute for comprehensive negotiations at Geneva (*Haaretz*, November 14). The Commander-in-Chief of the Israel Defence Forces, Mordechai Gur, in a strange interview with *Yediot Abaronot* (November 15), introduced hints of forthcoming war into the discussion of Sadat's visit, by suggesting that it might be a cover for military preparations, an unauthorized interview for which Gur was reprimanded but not dismissed by the Minister of Defence, Weizmann. An invitation was, however, made to President Sadat to visit Jerusalem and address the Knesset. An Israeli journalist, Y. Tira, described the mood of the Knesset as it ratified the invitation on November 15 (*Haaretz*, November 16):

For the first time in the Ninth Knesset, national unity was pronounced. This was around the issue of the invitation to the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, to visit Jerusalem and conduct negotiations about peace. . . . There was a sense of a special atmosphere of hope mingled with scepticism vis-à-vis the expected visit. Because of the vague sense of historic opportunity, or at least the beginning of a turning point in our country, the debate in the Knesset was conducted in a seemly manner. All the speakers, regardless of party affiliation, spoke about the positive developments in a serious tone and elated spirit. The only exception was Rakah [the Communist Party], which made several interjections during the delivery of the Prime Minister's speech.

Even after this, some Members of the Knesset expressed something less than eager receptivity to Sadat's initiative. Yigal Allon, a former Cabinet Minister in the Labour Government said that when Sadat came, "if he comes," he would have to explain why just a few years ago he had said that he would sacrifice a million Egyptian soldiers to regain conquered Arab territories (*Jerusalem Post*, November 16). The newspaper *Davar* (November 18) asked a number of Members of the Knesset what they wished to say to the Egyptian President. The answers included:

Abraham Melamed (Mifdal, the National Religious Party): "Welcome. I want to be convinced that Sadat really wants peace."

Amos Hadar (Maarakh): ". . . I have no illusions about his visit suddenly leading to peace—things do not happen in that way. It may be a successful propaganda manoeuvre. But for all the dangers it is something positive."

Charlie Beton (a Black Panther, of the Hadash Party): "I shall tell Sadat that he should not have come here and made himself a laughing-stock. The government is in no way prepared to relinquish the occupied areas. In any case, I do not think that he will come."

Much discussion centered around the motives for Sadat's initiative: whether it would embarrass Israel and open her to further pressure from international opinion, or whether it indicated a greater willingness to accept Israeli terms. According to Moshe Jacques (*Maariv*, November 11, 1977), Sadat's decision was motivated by a "hidden desire to free himself from the shackles of a Geneva Conference convened on the basis of the Israeli-American working paper. From the public relations point of view, he does not want to reject the American proposals on procedure at the Geneva Conference." (These proposals, of course, excluded the PLO from participation.) Jacques added: "He tried at first to avoid [the American proposal] by a counter-proposal calling for the formation of a working group to pave the way for the Geneva Conference. When he failed in his manoeuvre he said that he was ready to come to Geneva without any consideration for the procedural issues and that he is willing to come to Jerusalem. The moment Israel falls into the trap and declares the replacement of the Geneva Conference by direct negotiations, the working paper will have been rendered invalid and everything is back to square one."

Others argued that Sadat had come from a position of weakness. Yoel Marcus (*Haaretz*, November 18) maintained that "if this step was not planned in detail from the beginning, there is no doubt that it is part of a gradual change in Sadat's mind, particularly after the Yom Kippur War." According to Marcus, the Israeli penetration into Egypt in the October 1973 war had left

a deep impression on the Egyptian President: “Kissinger once described it to Rabin, saying that [Sadat] was chilled to the bones, and ceased to believe that there would be a military solution to the problem.” Sadat had then embarked upon a path of no return, jettisoning Soviet support and trying to obtain a political settlement through America, hoping that Saudi Arabia would induce the US to put strong pressure on Israel. But once Sadat realized that this path had led to a dead-end, he sought another means of unfreezing the situation “through taking a new decision similar to that which led to the October War.” *Haaretz* (November 18) quoted the Minister of Health, Eliezer Shostak, as implying an American role in the initiative; Shostak stated that Sadat had delayed his reply to the Israeli invitation until he received a message from the US President giving his blessings to the visit.

All sides paid tribute to Sadat’s personal courage in undertaking the mission. But both before and after the visit, there was a general feeling that he had come because he had been forced to do so, with the ruling Likud Party and former governing Labour Alignment disputing exactly whose toughness had rendered the visit inevitable. Likud supporters argued that the visit showed the correctness of their belief that a firm, clear and decisive right-wing nationalist stance would finally be accepted by the Arabs, while the Labour Party maintained that Begin was reaping the fruits of its own former policies. According to Likud Member of the Knesset Geula Cohen, it was her Party leader’s hard line that was responsible: “The fact that Sadat came to Israel when Begin is Prime Minister proves it doesn’t pay to be moderate” (*Jerusalem Post*, November 23). Shlomo Nakdimon also attributed the visit to the achievements of Begin, by arguing that, with the suggestions presented by the Prime Minister to the American administration in July 1977, and Dayan’s successful proposal for a joint Israeli-American working paper Israel had become the side in the Middle East conflict that was taking the initiative. “It is possible that Sadat’s dramatic step, expressed in his readiness to destroy all givens and come to Jerusalem, was sanctified in order to retrieve the halo that accompanied his actions as a man of initiatives and political moves.”

On the other hand, the former Labour Minister of Information and Director of Intelligence, General Aharon Yariv, attributed the “first seed” of the visit to the October War, when “Arab states went to war against Israel in ideal circumstances and failed to achieve a military victory. Thus, they gradually reached the conclusion that it would be better for them to follow the political path.” Yariv argued that Sadat was motivated on the personal level by a combination of “interest, inspiration and courage.” Politically, the Egyptian president was concerned above all with solving the “real problems

of Egypt,” which the conflict with Israel was rendering very difficult to tackle. Economic problems were also cited by former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (*Yediot Abaronot*, November 25) as an important motive for Sadat’s visit: Egypt was bogged down by internal problems, and the oil-producing states had not been able to provide it with sufficient help to solve these. Sadat had been guided, too, Rabin argued, by a mixture of frustration at the deadlock in peace negotiations caused by procedural issues; the fear of the possibility of a new war, and irritation at the fact that the United States had seemed to be shifting to a position where it no longer regarded Egypt, but Syria instead, as the Arab cornerstone of a peace settlement in the Middle East.

2. THE VISIT

President Sadat arrived in Israel to a ceremonial welcome. An Israeli military band played the national anthems of both countries at the airport, and Sadat reviewed a military guard of honour before being introduced to the leading Israeli political personalities, with whom he exchanged pleasantries before driving to Jerusalem where he had his first discussions with Begin. He was guarded throughout his visit by 10,000 soldiers, police and security personnel.

Israeli politicians and newspapers made every effort to show goodwill to their guest and the watching Egyptian public.

The morning after Sadat’s arrival in Israel, *Haaretz* published its editorial in Arabic, under the headline: “A Word to the Egyptian People.” The leading article said:

The Knesset and our Prime Minister unreservedly welcome the courageous initiative of your President, and this is certainly an expression of the friendly feelings of all classes of the Israeli people. Your President, Muhammad Anwar Sadat, has been received among us with every sign of welcome and respect, as is the custom between states that have peaceful relations with each other, although in fact a state of war exists between the two countries. As an example of this, the guard of honour of the Israel Defence Army accorded a military salute to the Egyptian President, who is the Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Army, which the Israel Defence Army has been obliged to confront on the field of battle on several occasions. This is excellent and incontrovertible evidence of Israel’s desire for peace, for this salute also was directed, through President Sadat, to the Egyptian Army, from whose ranks the President emerged.

The public highlight of the visit was provided by the speeches of Sadat and Begin to the Knesset. Sadat spoke first, and reiterated what is both the

predominant Arab and international position on a peace settlement. Israel, he said, would have to withdraw to the 1967 borders and agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state, otherwise there could be no peace in the area and renewed war was likely. However, his speech was newly conciliatory to the Israelis on certain points. On the Palestinian issue, he omitted any reference to the PLO: *Maariv* (November 23) explained that Moshe Dayan had “suggested” to Acting Egyptian Foreign Minister Butros Ghali on the road from Lod Airport to Jerusalem that Sadat should not mention the PLO in the Knesset. Secondly a number of references were clearly intended to assure the Israelis that Egypt would accord them full recognition: “You want to live with us in this part of the world. In all sincerity I tell you that we welcome you among us, with full security and safety. This in itself is a tremendous turning point, one of the landmarks of a decisive historical change ” (*Jerusalem Post*, November 21, 1977).

Begin in his reply defended the principles of Zionism, and put forward the Israeli claim to Palestine:

It is my duty to tell our guests and all the nations who are watching us and listening to our words about the contacts between the Jewish people and this country.

The President mentioned the Balfour Declaration. No sir, we did not take a foreign country. We came back to our homeland. The contact between ourselves and this country is eternal. It was created in the dawn of humanity; it was never disconnected, never disrupted. We developed our civilization here, we had our prophets here. This is where the kings of Judea kneeled before their God...

Begin made no specific concession on any issue (apart from an offer to allow Egyptian tourists to enter Israel), but invited King Hussein and the Presidents of Syria and Lebanon to follow in Sadat’s path. His only reference to the Palestinians was as the “Arabs of the Land of Israel.” Many references were made to the Nazi Holocaust.

Most Israelis considered both speeches to be equally hardline, with the only way to peace lying somewhere between the two positions. As opposition leader Shimon Peres put it, in his Knesset speech, addressing Sadat: “I listened carefully, with great care, to what you said. I could not agree with what you said, not in regard to peace. We have a different opinion, and not in regard to settlement... We shall listen to what you have to say and you will listen to us. We will find a compromise, or a third way we did not think about, neither you nor we” (*Jerusalem Post*, November 21).

Haaretz (November 21, 1977) published a selection of reactions to the

speeches of Sadat and Begin. Eilan Shihori wrote: "Yesterday the public were divided in their views on the speeches... many did not conceal their disappointment at both of them, saying: 'We expected more.' Others regarded the speeches as an extension of the miracle that had taken place before their eyes, seeing the inflexible attitudes of the speakers as being intended for the Arab world and the world in general."

The daily also published the reactions of certain members of the Knesset:

— Benjamin Halevy: "Sadat's speech was disappointing because of its inflexibility. Begin's speech expressed his attitudes, but there should be more thinking about both speeches."

— Yehoshua Rabinovitz: "Sadat's speech was inflexible and hardline. It is true that he was expressing his point of view, but he could have expressed it in more conciliatory terms. Begin's speech was Beginish as usual."

— Abraham Melamed: "Sadat talked about peace, and that is what is important. Begin should have come closer."

— Moshe Shamir: "Sadat's address was not like his action — that is, it was not like the fact of his coming here. Sadat disappointed us because he repeated all the Arabs' extremist demands. Begin's speech was fine, because he stressed continued peace negotiations, thus indicating that the important thing is talks between the two parties."

— Amnon Rubinstein: "Sadat did one good thing — he did not mention the PLO, and one bad thing — the threats in his speech. Begin also did not mention the PLO and stressed continued negotiations, which is the most important thing."

— Abba Eban: "In fact Begin opened no doors, nor did he close any. In spite of their extremism, the speeches of Begin and Sadat constituted an important basis for continued negotiations."

— Yisrael Kirgman: "Sadat's speech was very inflexible: he uttered threats for half an hour. Begin's speech was extremist. Peres' speech was better than both."

Although there was disappointment at Sadat's speech, there was an even more marked feeling that Begin himself had not risen to the occasion. As the commentator Zeev Shitanhil put it (*Haaretz*, November 25); "When he came to Jerusalem, Anwar Sadat did not expect miracles and he does not seem to have had any clearly defined demands. The leader of Likud occupied the seat of the Prime Minister of Israel, but in spite of his admirable response to the Egyptian President's initiative, at the moment of truth, when the President appeared in the Knesset he proved incapable of rising to the level of the historic debate. The President of Egypt showed himself as very inflexible, but

the Israeli Prime Minister's speech was worse than that — it was banal. It showed no imagination or élan and it failed to recognize the greatness of the moment. . . .” According to Yitzhak Smilanski (*Davar*, November 25), President Sadat should be informed that his speech fell on attentive ears, although it did not meet with full acceptance. “This,” he said, “was not the case with Begin's speech. The most violent thing in it was the tone. Whether he intended it or not, the tone of his speech was violent, not only obstinate. The aim was to make the antagonist/guest a Zionist at once, and then to establish the priority of our rights, to hold the head high in the presence of this senior ‘stranger’ and to speak to him on the basis of ‘Jewish pride.’ The time for such a tone is past and no one listens to it, to the extent that, but for the seriousness of the subject and the moment, Begin's speech would have been heard here and elsewhere as a message of aggression, if not an outworn melodrama. His exploitation of the holocaust as a pretext is a case in point. . . .”

Yediot Abaronot (November 21, 1977) published its own selection of reactions of members of the Knesset to the speeches of Sadat and Begin.

— Shimon Peres: “There are three aspects to the speech: the place — the Knesset. The manner — Sadat is a good orator and speaks in a manner that commands respect. The content — it contained very effective and moving anti-war passages and the tone was tolerant of Israel. There was nothing new in the political part. We are faced with a largely inflexible Egyptian attitude and we have to face up to it. On the whole it was a hardline speech.”

— Yitzhak Rabin: “The problem is not what view is to be taken of the speech — the speech was part of a process. If it is impossible to know what is happening, and I do not know myself, I say that there was nothing unexpected in the speech. I did not expect a public speech in the Knesset to adopt attitudes out of keeping with known attitudes.”

— Liova Eliav: “I am not disappointed. The three speakers stuck to known attitudes. The most important thing in Sadat's speech was the force of its full, unambiguous and major recognition of Israel, her existence and her frontiers — the 1967 frontiers, of course — and of full peace.”

— Tawfiq Toubi: “President Sadat proposed to Israel a permanent, just and secure peace, and a common life within the frontiers of June 4, 1967. The Prime Minister rejected this historic opportunity when he replied: No Palestinian state.”

Despite disappointment with Begin's speech, there was a general feeling that he had handled the ceremonies attending Sadat's visit very well, and conducted himself with great courtesy and politeness before his Egyptian

guest. Boaz Evron wrote (*Yediot Abaronot*, November 20, 1977): “I did not [at first] believe, in the bottom of my heart, that [the visit] was about to materialize. In spite of everything it seemed remote and incredible. The first idea that came to me (and I still find difficulty in admitting it) was that it was lucky that Begin was Prime Minister. One thinks: what would previous Prime Ministers have done in such a situation? They would have utterly ignored Sadat’s statement. They would have imagined, on the basis of the comments of the ‘experts,’ that it was no more than a ‘propaganda balloon’ for consumption by the Western information media. They would have answered correspondents’ questions that, as Sadat had not provided any real proof of his desire for peace, there was absolutely no need to answer him, and while saying this they would have looked askance and nervously at Begin.” The writer praised Begin’s sense of history because he knew how to pick up the ball that had been thrown into his court and to deal with it astutely.

One more irreverent commentator was former deputy Uri Avnery, writing in his magazine *Haolam Hazeh* (November 23, 1977). Begin, Avnery said, “did not think for long. He picked up the ball and ran away with it. He did this with the astuteness of the first-class politician. Every word was in place, every movement was in harmony, every formula was right. He did everything to facilitate the visit and to ensure that everything took place in ordered sequence until the very last moment. And why not? For him, this visit was a gift from Heaven. It was handed to him free, on a silver platter. It was Sadat who initiated it and paid the full price for it, endangering his life and his regime, and gave Israel an invaluable prize— full recognition of her existence and her legitimacy. What did Begin pay? Nothing at all, not even a piastre with a hole in it. He did not risk anything and did not give anything. Sadat gave him much support and enhanced his national prestige and his international status, while Begin did not give Sadat the slightest thing. I therefore cannot understand the congratulations that showered on Begin like rain in the first wave of enthusiasm. . . . What Begin did by welcoming Sadat bears witness to his political wisdom, and nothing more.”

On the day following the speeches, Sadat met with the different factions of the Knesset, who expressed to him their ideas on a Middle East peace, and wound his trip up with a joint press conference with Begin. All Zionist factions of the Knesset who met Sadat reiterated their refusal to envisage a return to the 1967 borders or the creation of a Palestinian state, but most expressed their hope for a “compromise peace.” At the press conference, Sadat stated that Egypt and Israel had agreed that there should be “no more war” between the two countries. Begin also referred to the Palestinians for

the first time during Sadat's visit in English, explaining that the Hebrew words for "Palestinians" were "the Arabs of Eretz Israel." Sadat himself however, had not shown great enthusiasm for pursuing the Palestinian issue, apart from his speech. Moshe Dayan later disclosed to a meeting in the Knesset of the Likud grouping that when the issue of meeting Palestinians from the occupied territories arose, Sadat had simply told Begin "I am your guest and you should decide with whom I shall meet" (*Yediot Abaronot*, November 23). In the end a group of conservative, pro-Jordanian notables accompanied by Israeli General Abraham Orly, military coordinator of the occupied territories, was invited to meet the Egyptian President.

3. THE PROSPECTS OF PEACE

The subsequent announcement of the convening of a conference in Cairo showed that Egypt and Israel were determined to continue on the path of direct negotiations. It was no longer possible to avoid issues of substance, and the Israeli politicians and press devoted a great deal of attention to the future possibilities of peace negotiations. It was generally agreed that the Egyptian front was the one on which there were fewest problems; the prevailing attitude, however, was to attempt to bring about a comprehensive settlement, even though a separate settlement with Egypt would be acceptable.

There was unanimous agreement that a turning point in the conflict had now been reached. Former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban had once written (in 1965) that the aim of Israel's foreign policy was "to create doubt and eventually resignation and despair about the dream of eliminating Israel from the world's map." With Sadat's visit there was a sense that this final point had been attained. The balance was now shifting in Israel's favour, and the main problem was how to attain a settlement that would secure for Israel its long-standing demands and yet be acceptable to the Arabs.

It was widely felt that Sadat's visit, by establishing direct negotiations as the means for discussing outstanding issues, had superseded the procedural issues that had previously arisen in discussions in which the United States was mediator, and in connection with the Geneva Conference. In the joint press conference on November 21, Begin cited as the principal achievement of Sadat's visit the fact that direct negotiations had begun and would continue, although he emphasized a commitment to a comprehensive rather than a separate Egyptian-Israeli settlement. Press commentary noted the fact that the Soviet Union had now effectively been excluded by Sadat from any effective role in the Middle East peace negotiations, and urged the United

States to play a more active role in backing the Egyptian-Israeli talks. As *Haaretz* put it in its editorial of November 21, maintaining that the US had shown an initial reserve towards the idea of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem because of its divisive effect in the Arab world,

President Carter's prayers for the success of President Sadat's mission and his support for him came only after the US had withdrawn its reservations, having received explanations to the effect that Sadat and his hosts had no intention of making a separate settlement, which could greatly diminish America's role. But in spite of this, the direct dialogue that is today being built up between Egypt and Israel, one of the immediate causes of which may have been the two states' common disapproval of the American-Soviet document [of October 1977], will oblige Washington to exclude the Middle East from the number of those problems it uses as a basis for reviving detente with the USSR. The era of new diplomacy, which we hope has started in our area, will dwarf the ambitions of intermediaries from outside who have too often tried to fish in the troubled waters of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In view of the opposition of much of the Arab world to Sadat's initiative, the issue of a possible separate settlement with Egypt was inevitably a common topic of Israeli political discussion. Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, after stating initially that Sadat's visit could not replace the Geneva Conference, subsequently stated that "if there were the slightest hope of the Egyptian President being ready for a separate peace with Israel, I would then recommend responding with an open heart immediately. We would not wait for Geneva" (*Haaretz*, November 18, 1977). But as Dayan pointed out at a press conference in the Foreign Ministry after the visit: "Egypt has maintained a firm line on the idea of a comprehensive settlement. Even if Egypt was the only Arab state to take part in Geneva [Sadat had said], she would negotiate a comprehensive settlement covering Judea and the Golan Heights; she would not negotiate a separate agreement with Israel" (*Haaretz*, November 24, 1977).

Inevitably, however, the question arose as to what Israel would do if a comprehensive settlement proved unattainable. Aharon Yariv explained in an interview that "on principle it is better for us to achieve a general and comprehensive agreement because that would lead us along the shortest road to peace." To try to drive a wedge between Egypt and the Arab world, Yariv argued, would make Sadat appear as a traitor to the Arab people. Nevertheless, the idea of a partial settlement should not be excluded. "I think that this is the moment to speak of a number of steps: (A) A general and comprehensive settlement, which can be explained as meaning full peace with

all the confrontation countries. This, of course, is the best choice. (B) If this is impossible, we shall seek a general settlement with some of the Arab countries, or even with Egypt alone. It seems to me that if we succeed in reaching a general settlement with Egypt alone, that would be a very important step along the road to peace. (C) If we are unable to reach a general settlement, with even one of the Arab countries, we must not refuse a partial settlement with one or two of them" (*Yediot Abaronot*, November 23, 1977).

The extent to which Sadat had isolated himself from the Arab world was noted by former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who pointed out that Sadat "did not consult elements outside Egypt when making his decision." Rabin observed that Sadat was still committed to a comprehensive settlement. But the idea of a separate settlement was an issue on which Israeli politicians, whose statements are always liable to be reported in the Arab world, were much more cautious than some press commentators. From the moment the visit was announced, the possibility of cutting Egypt off from other Arab countries was explicitly affirmed. Arieh Tzimaki, writing in *Yediot Abaronot* (November 18, 1977) quoted "American government officials" as having said that "they had formed the impression from what Sadat's men have said, that if there is no progress towards the Geneva Conference, Sadat may explore the possibility of making a separate agreement with Israel on the basis of ending the state of war. They believe that Sadat knows that Israel is prepared to return all the territory taken from him in the Six Day War, and all Sadat needs is the approval of King Khalid of Saudi Arabia, for him to be able to continue his courageous steps, without coordination with al-Assad."

One strong undercurrent of Israeli opinion was reflected in an analysis by Shmuel Schnitzer (*Davar*, November 25), who stated: "Israeli leaders have repeatedly stressed, before and during President Sadat's visit, that they are not trying to drive a wedge into the Arab world. Similarly, the Egyptian President has explained that he did not come to negotiate separate agreements. Everyone is avoiding the words 'separate peace' as if it was something shocking... For myself, with all respect for the politicians who took part in this, I disagree with them. A separate peace is a legitimate expression, not a dirty word: the wedge we have promised not to drive into the Arab world exists, and it would be stupid to ignore its existence..."

Schnitzer argued that the violent reaction of an appreciable part of the Arab world to Sadat's initiative had negated Sadat's claim to speak on behalf of other Arabs, "so that the value of the commitment he took on his shoulders has diminished." Sadat could no longer claim on behalf of all the Arabs that no more wars would be fought, or commit Syria, Iraq, Libya or the PLO to

peace with Israel. Furthermore, "the concessions he is asking from Israel cover all the frontiers, whereas all that can be offered him in return concerns the frontiers of Egypt only." It was not in Israel's interest "that Arabist tendencies should grow in Egypt," Schnitzer said. "On the contrary it is in our interest to drive the wedge even further into the Arab world until it splits altogether."

It is a regrettable fact [he continued] that the history of acceptance of the existence of Israel has only just started, and only a minority of the Arab countries are really prepared to make a peace that is not the prelude to our annihilation. In these circumstances alleged Arab unity becomes an obstacle that enables the extremist Arab leaders to impose their view on the moderates....

As long as there is in the Arab world no unified and coordinated advance towards accepting the existence of Israel, unity is a lie and division is the situation which we must strive for, not only because it reflects the facts, but also because it is the sole basis of hopes for peace.

It was recognized that the territorial problem between Egypt and Israel could be solved relatively easily. Although Moshe Dayan denied an *al-Abram* report that Israel had offered Egypt full withdrawal from Sinai, there was a widespread sense that, as Aharon Yariv argued in *Yediot Abaronot* (November 23), a distinction could be made between "sovereignty and a military presence." Yariv hinted at an arrangement by which Egypt's legal right to Sinai would be acknowledged, but Israel "could lease areas for specific periods.... We should distinguish between security lines and frontiers. When we talk of the possible courses open to us, we can also think of demilitarized zones, under mutual control and with mutual guarantees." According to Yosef Harev, writing in *Maariv* (November 20), a highly significant Israeli withdrawal from Sinai was planned, possibly with American troops being stationed at Sharm al-Sheikh.

On the territorial question Israel will show great flexibility so as to come closer to Egypt. Israel will not ask for a presence in Sinai except as regards what can be interpreted as security considerations and safeguarding freedom of navigation. This applies to Sharm al-Sheikh, where Israel is ready to discuss with President Sadat arrangements satisfactory to both parties... Observers believe that what is being considered is the possibility of a joint Israeli-Egyptian presence in Sharm al-Sheikh by agreement, and with Egyptian sovereignty over the area being assured. There is also another possibility: that Israel should acquire the place on a long lease under an arrangement agreed on in the negotiations. Some time ago the possibility was examined of an American presence there, in the

form of a warning station in Umm Khushaiba. But it is feared that this might lead to complications because the USSR would also want to get a foothold there, so that the trend is towards a settlement based on the approval and the free will of the two states, Israel and Egypt.

Ambitious plans for future Israeli-Egyptian economic and technological cooperation were also put forward. One commentator, Haggai Eshed, even urged the establishment of a "Cairo-Jerusalem axis" (*Davar*, November 24). The Minister of Finance stated just before Sadat's arrival that ideas being considered by his Ministry included "a regional economic aid project, a free trade area like the European Common Market, the joint exploitation of energy, irrigation and agriculture, and the joint exploitation of minerals and joint industries. The aim is also to recruit companies for joint establishments and, among other things, to set up a public company in all the countries of the Diaspora, with Jewish and other shareholders, for such establishments."

The Minister of Finance and his deputy also proposed the exchange of economic and banking information between the two countries. During Sadat's meeting with the different Israeli parliamentary factions, the Deputy Minister of Finance advocated economic cooperation between the two countries, "even without peace being made," notably through tourism, customs agreements and mutual investments.

In *Maariv* (November 24, 1977) Member of the Knesset Yosef Rom reviewed the economic possibilities that could result from a settlement following President Sadat's initiative and urged the planning and implementation of "joint national projects between Israel and Egypt in Sinai, such as nuclear energy plants, and a sea water distillation plant, for the development of industry and agriculture in Sinai." Israel should stress its desire to become an integral part of the Middle East. "There can be no doubt that only direct contacts, such as the Egyptian President and the Prime Minister have initiated, can make progress towards this goal possible."

On areas other than Sinai, an impassioned debate arose, with both "doves" and "hawks" putting their views clearly. All groups of any significance rejected a withdrawal to the 1967 borders and the establishment of a Palestinian state in exchange for peace, but within these general limitations of perspective, differences did emerge, especially on the future of parts of the West Bank and Gaza.

The more dovish commentators expressed anxiety that Begin might make an inadequate response to Sadat. Uzi Benziman in *Haaretz* (November 18) noted that the moment of decision had now arrived, and it remained to be seen whether the government would maintain its claim to the West Bank as part of

Israel, “thereby losing the chance of reaching peace,” or whether it would abandon the dream of maintaining Eretz Israel intact. “And the moment when it will be Dayan’s duty to decide whether he prefers peace or Sharm al-Sheikh is also approaching.” Yoram Brovski, in the same newspaper five days later, emphasized the necessity of a quick response to Sadat on the West Bank: “If Begin does not say ‘yes,’ he will in fact be saying ‘no,’ and he knows this as well as the rest of us.” Brovski criticized the prevailing government formula that “everything is negotiable” as a form of evasiveness. “If Begin does not express readiness to withdraw, it will be clear that he intends not to relinquish Judea and Samaria, but to hold on to them and to maintain control over the million Arabs living in them, for no logical reason except ideology, that is, the question of the ‘eternal rights.’”

Among politicians, there was a return to many old positions. In the Labour Alignment, some members revived the position of the former Finance Minister Pinhas Sapir, to the effect that the population of the West Bank and Gaza posed a serious demographic threat to Israel, and a withdrawal from these areas sufficiently large to interest King Hussein in a peace agreement was essential. Former Prime Minister Golda Meir expressed her viewpoint, on the other hand, when she met President Sadat on November 21: “We are ready for a compromise solution on all fronts,” on condition that Israeli security was guaranteed. But no solution involving the creation of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza would be acceptable, even though “we certainly do not want the Palestinians to be in difficult circumstances forever. We believe in a solution that is good for them and reliable for us. Our rejection of the establishment of a third state has nothing to do with our wish to solve the problem of the Palestinians [although this solution would be] within the framework of a peace agreement with Jordan” (*Haaretz*, November 22). Former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin told Sadat on the same occasion that as Chief of Staff of Israel’s armed forces in 1967, he could not accept a solution which would require any future Israeli Chief of Staff to draw up defence plans from within the same borders.

The present leader of the opposition in Israel, Shimon Peres, expanded in more detail upon his outlook in an interview with *Yediot Abaronot* (November 25). Although he pointed out that the easiest solution would be a separate agreement with Egypt, it would be difficult for Egypt to accept such an agreement unless another Arab country— Jordan or Syria (or the Palestinians) — joined it. He discussed the West Bank issue at some length, stating his belief that even the Likud government might accept some form of

partition of the area if the Arabs showed interest in it. Peres cited four possibilities for the future of the West Bank.

1. *Outright Annexation*. “The most extreme, [meaning] that our historic right means the enforcement of Israeli law there. I believe that such an action would eliminate all possibility of dialogue.”

2. *Coexistence*, or “some form of *modus vivendi* between us and the inhabitants of Judea and Samaria. I should not object to this, but it is doubtful if the other side will accept it.”

3. *Confederation* (an old Peres idea). “A federal union, either between us and the inhabitants of Judea and Samaria and Gaza, or between us and Jordan, covering Judea and Samaria.”

4. *A compromise territorial solution* “in Judea and Samaria, which the Maarakh programme does not reject.”

The idea of a “compromise territorial solution” — in effect, the return of part of the West Bank to Jordan — also featured in the programme of the Democratic Movement for Change (“Dash”), led by Yigael Yadin, and one of the parties in the Israeli coalition government.

After a bloc meeting in the Knesset, Dash proposed that, in the context of a “real peace,” Israel “should show that it is in principle prepared for a compromise territorial solution with all the neighbouring countries... thereby promoting the peace process.” The party pointed out that a majority of the Israeli population would support such a compromise.

The way should now be open to peace settlements in all sectors, so that Egypt can concentrate on dealing with her domestic problems, without feeling the need to devote a huge part of her revenues to strengthening the army and preparing for a new war. The government of Israel, in the form it was constituted after the elections to the Ninth Knesset, is strong enough to participate in establishing peace — that is, pursuing a policy of a territorial settlement vis-à-vis parts of the country that are, from many points of view, the most sensitive. Even the most violent opponents of the idea of partitioning the country concede that, at the end of the day, Mr. Begin will have to distinguish between an ideal historico-religious principle and the necessity imposed by regional and international political realities. The leaders of the opposition parties, who in their time claimed that their governments did not have a wide enough mass and parliamentary base, cannot but agree to a courageous decision by the government when two thirds of the members of the Knesset support it. We must not miss the chance. When its enemies reach a settlement with it, it befits the State of Israel, as a democratic Jewish state, to pay the price involved in any relinquishment of the principle of the indivisibility of the land.

The main problem with such proposals, however, was that they still fell short of the minimum declared conditions for a peace settlement of all Arab

states, and therefore were unrealizable. No Arab leader, for instance, could accept the Israeli annexation of Jerusalem, which all major Israeli parties insisted upon, as well as the annexation of at least a portion of the West Bank. The Israeli Right thus offered its own counter-proposals, from common premises that it shared with the other parties: no Palestinian state, and no recognition of the PLO under any circumstances.

Since no territorial division of the West Bank and Gaza proposed by Israel was acceptable to the Arabs, the main aim should be to think in terms of new concepts. Earlier in the year, Moshe Dayan had proposed a "functional solution" to the problem of the West Bank, in which certain administrative tasks would be undertaken by the Jordanian government, while military control over the area would be maintained by Israel, who would, in effect, also incorporate it economically by simply having no economic frontiers, taxes or restrictions between Israel and the markets and cheap labour of the West Bank. On the precise nature of the Arab administration, there remained some dispute. Begin, at one time before Sadat's visit, informed a British television team that he did not consider King Hussein specially competent to discuss the future of the West Bank, since he had accepted the Rabat Summit resolutions of 1974 recognizing the PLO as sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians and thereby presumably excluded himself from negotiations on the subject (*Maariv*, November 17). Begin's speech of November 20 to the Knesset, on the other hand, did imply a willingness to deal with Jordan on the West Bank issue. But one idea coming increasingly to the fore was that of "autonomy" for the inhabitants of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (an idea not incompatible with the confederation option suggested by Shimon Peres).

The main problem facing right-wing strategists was how to devise a formula that would enable a situation very like the current status quo to continue in the West Bank, but would be able to be presented to the Arab world in a different light. The key requirements for such a policy would be to maintain a situation on the ground that included:

- The maintenance of Israeli military bases. Israel would thus have a line of defence against any attack from the Arab East.

- The retention by Israel of overt or covert control over the "security" of the area, i. e., the power to deny entry to persons likely to mobilize the local population against Israel, to deport persons actually doing so and to imprison, or have put into prison, Palestinians linked to the resistance movement.

- The right of Jews to settle in the West Bank. No existing settlement would be removed and land for further settlements would be purchased, when possible, from absentee landowners. Some quarters hinted that a similar

“right” to settle in Israel could be given to Arabs living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The point here is that, in practice, much of the land of Israel is controlled by Zionist organizations like the Keren Kayemet who are bound by covenant only to lease it to Jews, so that even if the *government* on paper awarded the West Bank and Gaza Strip Arabs the right to settle in Israel, in practice in almost all cases they would not find it possible to acquire land. The mutual right of settlement would thus be significant for Israel, but insignificant for the Arabs.

— Any peace treaty would structure the economy of the West Bank in such a way as to favour Israeli economic development. This would be accomplished through the guarantee of “open borders” between the two areas. As history has shown, it is extremely difficult for an area, in this case the West Bank, to develop industrially with limited resources and capital, without the right to economic protection against the products of more developed neighbours (Israel). Open borders would thus consolidate Israeli industry in the Palestine area, through providing it with the West Bank market, while local and less competitive Arab industry would find it difficult to get off the ground. Such borders would, furthermore, guarantee Israel a permanent supply of cheap labour from the West Bank population.

— Palestinian refugees outside the West Bank and Gaza areas would not be permitted into the new entity except in very limited numbers. These refugees have been the popular base of the PLO, and their admission into the West Bank and Gaza would have serious political implications for the ability of Israel to control the area. It could very easily, some quarters argued, open the road to a Palestinian West Bank state.

Administrative powers that could not encroach on the situation mentioned above, such as the appointment and election of local officials, and the organization on a small scale of the local economy, education and the gendarmerie, would be accorded to the local inhabitants, as their “autonomy,” or “self-rule.”

Despite the Bantustan character of the new entity, Israeli hardliners hoped that the Arab Right, and Egypt in particular, was so desperate for peace and stability in the area that declarations that the West Bank and Gaza would enjoy “self-rule” might sugar the pill of Israeli occupation and control behind the scenes, and receive a favourable hearing among some sections of Arab public opinion.

One of the principal factors underpinning the various Israeli attitudes on the West Bank issue was a common agreement that no independent Palestinian state should be created there. As the *Jerusalem Post* reported

(November 20), the leader of "Dash," Yigael Yadin, "noted that there was full Cabinet consensus on opposition to a separate Palestinian state, opposition to PLO participation at Geneva, and opposition to a return to the 1967 borders," although "on issues beyond this consensus," his party was prepared to take its own distinctive and assertively compromising stand. Apart from a very few minority groups, there was a general feeling that the idea of a Palestinian state and PLO representation at Geneva had been bypassed. A few days before Sadat arrived in Jerusalem former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban had explicitly described the forthcoming visit as "a slap in the face for the ideology of the PLO." Addressing a meeting of the Maarakh bloc in the Knesset, Eban continued: "Sadat's move is in Egypt's interests. He knows that he can recover the greater part or all of Sinai, and that solidarity with the PLO is the obstacle to that" (*Haaretz*, November 15). As a commentator of *Yediot Aharonot*, Aharon Ben-Ami, put it (November 20): "Why deny it? Sadat's Egypt is today making a huge diplomatic concession to Israel, if not as regards substance, at least as regards form. Israel asked for negotiations without the PLO, and Egypt has in fact accepted this demand." Israeli commentators were soon demanding a change in American policy to the PLO as well (Haggai Eshed, *Davar*, November 29). Following the visit, *Davar* commented on Sadat's approaches to Arabs from the West Bank and Gaza (November 25):

The Egyptian political drive is destroying principles that are held sacred in the Arab world, one after another. President Sadat's visit to Israel has buried the Khartoum "Noes," and Egypt's invitation yesterday to the Arab notables of Israel and the occupied areas to attend the Cairo Conference puts an end in both word and deed to the Rabat resolutions that, in 1974, made the PLO the sole representative of the Palestinian people. The Egyptian invitation is a long-term attempt by Egypt to separate the Palestine problem from the PLO, Sadat having realized that its distinctive attitude is an insurmountable obstacle to reaching an agreement with Israel. The persistent refusal of Israeli governments to make contact with the PLO as it is at present, and the Organization's refusal to amend its Charter in such a way as to make itself acceptable to the US and Israel, have turned the scale. Egypt is now trying to work out some other form for Palestinian representation, and if she succeeds in her efforts to produce an alternative to the PLO, or at least to weaken its position within the Palestinian arena, there will be better hopes of a settlement and both Israel and Egypt will be satisfied.

Precisely how the Palestine issue could be "separated" from the PLO was never made completely clear in Israel. In the municipal elections in the occupied West Bank in 1976, pro-PLO candidates had won convincing majorities. Moreover, in the eyes of almost the entire Arab world, the

Palestine problem concerns in large part the Palestinian refugees of 1948, who have been the popular base for the PLO. Any Palestinian entity would have to provide them with a "right of return" to obtain widespread Arab acceptance; yet precisely because their right to return would mean the introduction of a population sympathetic to the PLO, this solution of the Palestine problem was opposed by Israel. Menahem Begin's preferred alternative to the PLO, "the inhabitants of Judea and Samaria." (*Maariv*, November 17, 1977), could after their pro-PLO election votes in 1976 only yield him an unrepresentative minority, if the condition that the "representatives" really be an "alternative" to the PLO were maintained.

No easy solution to this dilemma could be found. Some commentators hoped that Egypt could think of a solution, even if Israel could not. Haggai Eshed wrote (*Davar*, November 24, 1977): "Sadat came to Jerusalem to reach an agreement with Israel to the effect that Egypt shall decide how the Palestinians are to be represented, on condition that such representation is acceptable to Israel. From now on Egypt and Israel will be able to exercise a veto (at least) on the choice of Palestinian representatives. These representatives will be the first to know about this, and to adjust themselves to its consequences." In case other Middle East countries should feel themselves left out of the process of selecting "Palestinian representatives," Eshed adjudicated that "Syria and Jordan are also entitled to obtain this right of veto, but not to monopolize it."

The suggested alternatives to the PLO usually led in one way or another to Jordan or pro-Jordanian right-wing factions and figures in the West Bank, such as Burhan Jaabari of Hebron, and Abdul-Raouf Faris, a former Jordanian deputy from Nablus. In its important editorial on the day of Sadat's Knesset speech, *Haaretz* wrote:

We are entitled to expect that [Sadat] will express readiness to discuss all problems in the light of an understanding of the problems of the Israelis. To be more precise, he should understand that we shall never accept the PLO as our neighbour, for our vital security interests cannot be safeguarded through the establishment of a third state in Eretz Israel [the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan being the second state established in "Eretz Israel" in the eyes of the writer]... Moreover, the time has come for our government to take steps in the direction to make it possible for the Egyptian President to return to his country as an Arab leader qualified to solve the Palestine problem. The Egyptian President, who has come to Jerusalem, spoken in the Knesset and prayed in the Aqsa Mosque, thereby ignoring the propaganda against the unification of the city under Israeli sovereignty — such an Arab leader should be told, unequivocally, that we do not want to go on ruling more than a million Arabs in Judea,

Samaria and Gaza forever. The Israeli government can and should tell the Egyptian President that it is prepared that the 1949 armistice lines should be adjusted, to the extent that our security permits, and be replaced by permanent lines, by virtue of which the majority of the Palestinians would be outside the State of Israel so that, through cooperation with the members of their people in Jordan, they could express their Palestinian Arab identity.

Jordan was seen as an attractive negotiating partner because the Israelis believed that its government was basically hostile to independent Palestinian national aspirations; but the problem that seemed to present itself was that the Israelis could not offer sufficient concessions to Jordan to bring it effectively into peace negotiations. The "autonomy" or "functional arrangement" suggested by the Israeli Right in fact offered King Hussein far worse terms for peace than he had already rejected in previous years. The Israeli compromises on issues such as Jerusalem, settlement in the West Bank and territorial withdrawal, that might be required for successful negotiations with Jordan, were not forthcoming.

On the Syrian and Lebanese fronts, the interesting aspect of Israeli political and press comment was its relative silence. Former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin did refer to Syrian-Egyptian rivalry in an analysis of the reasons for Sadat's initiative (*Yediot Abaronot*, November 25):

Although Egypt is still the keystone of American policy, [the US] gave Syria the right to object to the whole process. Egypt was not in favour of a joint delegation to Geneva, but in spite of this the US responded to the Syrian demand. . . . During Vance's visit in August 1977 Egypt proposed a meeting of Foreign Ministers, including the Foreign Minister of Israel, in New York, under the supervision of the American Secretary of State. But Syria objected, and the US gave in to her. Moreover, when the Working Paper was completed by the Israeli Foreign Minister and President Carter, and Egypt agreed to accept the Israeli interpretation of the form of Palestinian representation, the process was interrupted because of Syria's inflexible attitude. On top of all this, in the American-Soviet joint statement, the US stressed its desire for further cooperation on the part of the USSR so that Syria might be persuaded to adopt a more conciliatory attitude and so that it might be possible to continue along the course that American policy had followed.

Apart from the evaluation that Sadat had created a situation in which the US could now be less responsive to Syrian demands, very little was said about a peace treaty with Syria. Despite Begin's invitation to President Assad to follow in the footsteps of President Sadat, it seemed that Israel could think of very little to offer Syria in terms of withdrawal from the land and Israeli settlements on the Golan Heights. Indeed, it appeared that Israel would prefer not to have to think about such subjects at all.

Following Sadat's visit, Israel thus found itself in a dilemma. On the one hand it wanted peace. As Boaz Evron put it:

I have told some of my friends, jestingly though half seriously, that if this government achieves peace, I undertake to vote for Likud for the rest of my life. Indeed, I shall run through the streets shouting 'Begin! Begin!' If we look at things without prejudice, we shall see that even though this government is rightist, with a clear trend towards private capitalism (and between ourselves, the Maarakh government was too) if peace is achieved it will lead to immense economic prosperity in all classes... If the defence budget alone was reduced from 40 percent to 20 percent or 15 percent, this would lead in two or three years to a great relaxation in all economic fields. Huge amounts of oil money seeking something to invest in would start to flow into the country, and Israeli contractors, businessmen, technicians and skilled workers would start working in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Egypt, Sudan and Jordan. And with the fear of war eliminated and economic pressure reduced, investments, Jewish and other, would pour in from Europe and the US. Then real Jewish immigration would start, with no need for envoys from the Jewish Agency to encourage it; re-emigration would also stop. Why should Israelis emigrate to New York, in search of a place secure from war, and of economic opportunities, if there was no longer any fear of that and if huge economic fields were opened up to them in all parts of the area? As a result of this, the process of construction would resume, and the Israeli army would be based on voluntary service, as is the case in Britain and America. And we should not be obliged to be constantly afraid for our sons in the Israeli army.

On the other hand, Israel had no intention of giving up the territory and accepting the Palestinian rights necessary for a peaceful settlement. Indeed, it regarded any Arab insistence on the pre-1967 borders and the right of self-determination for the Palestinians as evidence of a "lack of seriousness" among Arabs in the quest for Middle East peace. As Moshe Nissim of the ruling Likud Party put it, commenting on the Sadat visit, after voicing the old proverb, "Respect him and suspect him": "Only when the Arab states, or Egypt, agree that Israel cannot put up with the pre-1967 boundaries... will I believe that there is not only a wish for peace but a readiness for it" (*Jerusalem Post*, November 22).

As far as hopes for a comprehensive peaceful settlement to the current Middle Eastern situation were concerned, the situation following Sadat's visit seemed deadlocked. Israel was more determined than ever not to accept a Palestinian state or to deal with the PLO; and the fact that Sadat's visit occurred during the period of government of Begin and the Likud Party, traditionally the most opposed to Palestinian rights, strengthened this anti-Palestinian trend by appearing to give it Egyptian backing. Only a month

after his government passed drastic, harsh and unpopular economic measures, usually lethal for politicians, Begin was attaining huge ratings of approval in the public opinion polls, as an obvious result of the visit.

The only clear outcome was a continuation of Egyptian-Israeli talks, although it was uncertain where they would lead: whether to deadlock, if Sadat stood firm on his public declarations that a Palestinian state must be created, or whether to the kind of partial or separate settlement hinted at by Yariv, and clearly attractive to a number of Israeli politicians. "History and the Lord have decreed that Israel and Egypt shall lead the whole area," former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin told Sadat on November 21 (*Haaretz*, November 22). But on the more mundane level of the present-day world, where peoples seek self-determination and recognition of their ties to their land, rather than submission to the leadership of others, no real movement towards a just peace was visible.