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The Vance Team Prepares the Landmines

What merit is there in the Government's agreeing to a meeting at Camp David? If the object of the American administration is to ensure the renewal of direct negotiations between Israel and Egypt, it should persuade Sadat; Israel needs no convincing. It is doubtful whether it is necessary for this purpose to make Sadat go all the way to the US; there is certainly no need for Prime Minister Begin to travel. The American purpose is somewhat different: it is clear from the outset that at Camp David, perhaps already in the first tête-a-tête meeting, the Prime Minister of Israel will be asked to state the price he is prepared to pay for Sadat's agreeing to negotiate.

What moved Sadat to accept the invitation? His demands are known. He is behaving like a victor on the field of battle demanding unconditional surrender from the defeated enemy. The calculations of many of us that because of the economic difficulties in Egypt Sadat might be prepared to modify these demands have long since evaporated. The existential fact is that Sadat is now demanding an immediate undertaking by Israel to evacuate the Golan, Judea, Samaria and the Gaza district — in addition to Sinai — as a precondition for negotiations. He declares over and over and over again that on territory he is not prepared to talk at all, period.

Indeed before the meeting of Foreign Ministers at Leeds Castle (in England) it seemed that the Americans tended to despair of the possibility of early negotiations — not on account of Sadat's intransigence, to which they pay no attention, but because of Israel's "intransigence". The Israeli Government had declined to give a positive reply to Washington's questions — a reply which would "soften" Sadat once more. At Leeds Castle however Foreign Minister Dayan gave the Americans the desired signal.

Moshe Dayan's statement at Leeds Castle did not give the Americans everything they asked for, but it contains a kernel, healthy from their point of view, whose natural development will bring forth the operative plan, even the time-table, for the departure of the Israeli governing authority from Judea, Samaria and Gaza and its replacement by Arab control.

Dayan's concession [providing for negotiations with Egypt, Jordan and the Arabs of Judea, Samaria and Gaza] was made — as will be recalled — as Dayan's "personal idea". Only after it was adopted *post factum* by the Israeli Government and announced in the Knesset, could Sadat feel that he has solid ground under his feet — and then he co-operated with the Americans in planning the three-cornered meeting.

There, at Camp David — so Sadat has been promised — Carter with the concession made at Leeds (together with all the earlier concessions) in his "pocket", will exert all his influence to bring about the completion of the Israeli surrender. (It is not irrelevant that at this time Carter is in need of an impressive political accomplishment in order to stop the decline in his rating in the public popularity polls — and how can he possibly succeed except at the expense of Israel?).

The significance of the concession at Leeds, so sweet to the Arab palate and so far-reaching, is clearly reflected in the light of the attitude of Saudi Arabia — the inspector-general of Moslem and Arab national properties, and the most demanding and most honoured of America's allies. When Washington provided her with an explanatory forecast of what would happen at Camp David, Saudi Arabia announced approval of the conference.

For months now Washington has been co-ordinating her policy with Cairo. Its framework is simple, clear and well-known: Washington wants Israel to return to the 1949 Armistice Lines. The difference between the Administration and the Arabs is that the Administration proposes border changes — though only insubstantial ones, and that it hopes — and is even prepared to pray on Sundays — that when Israel is compressed into that "death trap" (as Abba Eban called it) the Arabs will forget that they cannot tolerate the existence of a Jewish State in the territory that they have classified as "Arab" and will, as virtuous pacifists, not take advantage of its glaring vulnerability.

An unchanging element in American thinking is that the Arabs will not willingly agree to a "territorial compromise". That is why Washington has always demanded total Israeli withdrawal, even if in stages. Its present

view is that as an immediate Israeli withdrawal is unobtainable, it is enough for the present to find a formula which will include an undertaking — whatever its semantic form, as long as it leaves no room for doubt — that within a reasonable time, say five years, the withdrawal will be carried out.

Hence Washington's proposal a year ago, that Israel should set up a trusteeship regime which, at the end of five years, would be replaced by some form of Arab rule. The Israeli Government did not agree to this; but then it produced the peace plan (in December), and in it the Americans found the openings which could lead them towards their goal.

Ever since, in direct and indirect action, the Americans have been working consistently within the "framework" of the peace plan for the extension of two of its clauses by means of which Israel is to be maneuvered towards complete submission. In the wake of the American success — to achieve Israeli agreement to reshape the content and the significance of those two clauses — Sadat will come to Camp David, bringing with him the declaration by the Israel Government that not only does it recognize the existence of other claims to sovereignty in Judea and Samaria and the Gaza district, and will leave the question "open", as provided for in its peace plan; but that now (as announced by the Foreign Minister at Leeds) it agrees that the question shall be "negotiated" at the end of five years of the autonomy plan — with Egypt, Jordan and the resident Arabs.

All of this means that after the Leeds conference Israel is no longer tied to the "principle" that the subject of sovereignty shall remain open, but agrees to close it in those negotiations. Sadat therefore comes to Camp David confident that the three-cornered meeting will in fact consist of continuous pressure on Israel by Washington to broaden the formula so as to ensure also the *results* of those negotiations. In view of the concessions already made by the Israeli Government at Washington's coaxing, Sadat comes to Camp David believing in the Arab future of Judea, Samaria and the Gaza district. Only be patient — his advisers in Washington tell him — and all will be well.

It is not devoid of significance that while in Jerusalem reports are published of prolonged discussions and comprehensive preparations and thoroughgoing checking and testing towards the Camp David meeting, and American reports tell even of the setting up of a special team which is working in isolation in a private home remote from Washington in order to prepare the conference — Sadat sees no need to make announcements in Cairo about preparations, feverish or otherwise. He is tranquil. He regards everything as settled.

This is the bitter truth that awaits the Israeli delegation at the opening of the peace talks. It will no doubt be swaddled in appropriate diplomatic habiliments — which are being prepared by the special team set up by Mr. Vance. As soon as these are discarded, however, the Israeli delegation will be faced by the tactics of political attrition as planned by the American President to the satisfaction of the Egyptian President and the Saudi King.

Are the members of the Israeli Government the only players in the drama now unfolding who are unaware of these realities? Are they really blind to the central purpose of the Americans? Have they not learned enough from the methods of the Americans in order to realize that when their representatives appear as mediators, they direct all their advice and all their coaxing towards the central purpose of their own, which is lethal for Israel but which they regard as their national interest — and that is why they devote so much time and energy in its pursuit?

Do the members of the Government continue to believe — in spite of the evidence of their eyes and their ears — that Sadat, with complete American support assured, will "give" Israel peace on terms other than those which he is proclaiming incessantly — terms which ensure her exposure to attempts at her destruction?

As for Israeli policy the members of the Government know — at least those of its members from the "Likud" and "La'am" parties knew this well enough when they were in Opposition — that every one-sided concession only gives birth to demands for further concessions. Now, in power, they have been learning this truth almost every day. Will they not, even now, open their eyes to see where they are heading?

True, it can be said in the defence of some, and maybe most, of them that time after time statements on concessions of fateful intent to the Jewish people have been made without their knowledge, without their knowing of any such intention in advance, without their being given an opportunity to consider and weigh the issues and implications

involved. Time after time they have been presented with an accomplished fact and called upon to give it their retroactive approval.

That is what happened at the outset of the decline, when limitation of the settlements in Judea and Samaria was decided on in order to appease Washington. That is what happened in the latest phase — when the Foreign Minister gave a positive reply to the Americans' "questions" after the Government had several weeks earlier given a negative reply. But they have always accepted the situation. Now that they are able to view the trap opening at Camp David, are they under no obligation to give themselves an account of the consequences and implications of their complaisance?

It should be clear to the members of the Government, in the light of the undeniable facts coming out of Cairo and Washington, that the present political process will inevitably end either by their agreeing to a clear prescription for an ultimate withdrawal from Judea, Samaria and the Gaza district — or by their putting an end to their retreats and concessions and opening an unrelenting struggle over the fate of Israel. It should be clear to them that every present retreat from positions held, every concession, will not only add to the difficulties of the inevitable external struggle, but will gradually weaken the spirit of the people, sowing fatalism and scepticism — those most dangerous of internal enemies.

At this time, having agreed to participate in the meeting planned by President Carter, the Government has the opportunity to consider the full import of the situation at which we have arrived. It is most desirable that it should seek ways and means of extricating itself from it. Extrication now involves the most serious political difficulties; it demands a many-pronged national effort, the likes of which Israel has seen only in time of war. The alternative however is to be propelled still further in a process that threatens gradually to undermine our independence and to gnaw at our very being as a nation.