

Looking Beyond The 'Begin Plan'

Expectations are currently running high in Cairo, Jerusalem, and Western capitals that the upcoming summit talks in Egypt between Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat will provide the groundwork for new Israeli initiatives vis-a-vis the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip territories and the question of Palestinian Arab self-determination.

The optimistic assessment is based on recent developments from Paris, Bonn, Washington, and the two Mideast capitals that a consensus is being reached about the broad principles that must underlay a Middle East peace.

- During his Washington trip, Begin revealed a plan for "self-rule" for the West Bank Palestinians that provided for a relinquishing of both Israeli and Jordanian sovereignty over the area, and that would be equivalent to "self-determination" for the local population, although maintaining Israeli troop deployments in the region. When this plan was attacked by all the Arab states, including Egypt, Begin announced in London that the idea was a "proposal, not a blueprint," and that further concessions were under consideration.

- On Dec. 20, Begin dispatched his Defense Minister and political ally Ezer Weizman to Cairo to hold a special series of negotiations with his Egyptian counterpart, Mohammed Gamassy, and with Sadat. After the talks, Cairo sources labeled them "absolutely crucial" since they dealt with the "fundamental principles of an overall peace." Dr. Osama Baz, Sadat's special negotiator in the current round of Egypt-Israel-U.S. talks in Cairo, told reporters that he expects "major strides and a Geneva conference ... within weeks," because of new "big concessions from Israel."

- Sources in Bonn reported on Dec. 22 that the Dec. 27 visit to Egypt of West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt could expand into a major tripartite summit between the three leaders. In an interview published in the latest issue of West Germany's *Stern* magazine this week, Sadat identifies West German technology and West German contributions to regional security guarantees as vital to a stable Middle East.

- French media reported Dec. 22 that Begin and French President Giscard d'Estaing will meet during January or February of the new year. In London, Begin requested a special meeting with a personal envoy of Giscard's and called for an "improvement of French-Israeli relations... to the status that prevailed before the 1967 Arab-Israeli war." In a recent interview Giscard identified regional industrial development as the basis for providing Israel's security needs.

- Also on Dec. 22, highly reliable United Nations sources revealed that the Palestine Liberation Organization, in coordination with independent West

Bank Palestinian Arabs, is preparing the formation of a Palestinian "government-in-exile" that would present itself as a negotiating body with Israel. According to a prominent U.S. Mideast expert just returned from Jerusalem, Begin would be open to dealing with non-terrorist factions within the PLO and with responsible West Bank Palestinian leaders in the context of a U.N. forum.

- On Dec. 21, the Saudi Arabian government called for the recirculation of U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim's late November proposal for a special U.N. Middle East conference that would include the U.S. and the Soviet Union. In an official statement, Saudi leader Prince Fahd for the first time offered public, if critical, support for the recent peace initiatives of Sadat.

These highlight developments of the past days converge on three critical conclusions for the Mideast situation.

First, Begin and Sadat and the governments of Western Europe, the U.S., and Saudi Arabia perceive great possibilities emerging from the bilateral Egypt-Israel talks but are determined to ensure that these talks produce genuine solutions to the more comprehensive outstanding territorial and Palestinian questions.

Second, the parties sharing this perspective are broadly the same as those involved in piecing together the rudiments of a new world financial center in Luxembourg. These forces perceive Mideast instability as a grave threat to stemming the collapse of the dollar and want a stable Mideast to be an underpinning for the coalition of forces that would be necessary to make Luxembourg work. An interesting example of the potentialities inherent in this dynamic is that the nation of Luxembourg became the third European country — after France and Belgium — to allow the opening of a PLO office, only days after Luxembourg and Saudi Arabia instituted diplomatic relations. The existing office in Belgium, notably, is a conduit point for peace initiatives from the PLO and Egypt to Israel.

Third, the "Luxembourg" forces have adopted an approximate notion that the key to Middle East peace and security lies in the industrial development of the region. This common realization could produce movement toward French, West German and-or U.S. offers to provide the technology for either parallel nuclear development projects in Israel or Egypt, or a joint nuclear development projects in Israel or Egypt, or a joint nuclear development project between the two countries.

Israeli Faction Fight

The successful resolution of these tendencies will in part be determined by the outcome of a remarkable faction fight that has broken out in Israel over the past few days.

Over the past two days, an incredible alliance has taken shape involving Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, the paranoid Labour Party social democrats led by former Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Golda Meir, and the religious extremist Gush Emunim group — plotting together to prevent Begin's peace moves from continuing.

As Begin returned today to Israel, the opposition Labour Party opened a drive for a vote of no-confidence in Israel's Knesset (Parliament), ostensibly because Begin's statements on the West Bank made in Washington last weekend "open the way for the creation of an independent Palestinian state" and challenge the right of both Israel and the Kingdom of Jordan to have sovereignty over the region.

Preceding the no-confidence drive, Meir told a Labour Party leadership meeting Dec. 19 that the Party should "stop Begin from making his political moves and should not give him backing because this policy would harm the country." One day later, the social democratic paranoids opened up coordinating sessions with the Gushies to oppose any "sell-out" on the West Bank.

It is no longer a secret in Israel that Dayan is orchestrating these moves. The Anglo-American traitor is known to be irate that Begin has systematically cut him out of regional diplomatic action — the Jerusalem Post last week labeled Begin "Israel's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister" — and that Begin is determined to push for a comprehensive settlement with all the Arab states rather than attempt to blackmail Egypt into a separate peace.

In the topsy-turvy political configuration that has occurred in the wake of Sadat's Nov. 19 trip to Jerusalem, Begin is now receiving support, even if critical, from the Labour Party dovish faction centered around former Foreign Minister Abba Eban. One Eban ally, Knesset member Yossi Sarid, factionalized against Meir and insisted instead that the Labourites should pressure Begin to make real concessions vis-à-vis the West Bank, rather than the "self-rule" non-starter.

A prominent Israeli dove and former violent opponent of "hawk" Begin told France's *Nouvel Observateur* magazine this week that "we should do nothing to embarrass Begin, while at the same time pushing him to make concessions....Begin is a man with historical vision who will hopefully understand what is needed on the Palestinian question to get the foundations of a real peace."

According to recent published opinion polls, Begin's support among Israel's population is very high. One U.S. source just returned from Jerusalem says the Prime Minister may "collapse the government, force new elections, and move to splinter into pieces the opposition parties if he feels too hemmed in by what Dayan and Co. are doing." This move, the source emphasized, "would give Begin a mandate for considering new concessions."

What Dayan Is Up To

This assessment comes from a U.S. Mideast expert just returned from Israel.

On The Israeli Internal Situation

(Israeli Foreign Minister) Dayan and (former Prime Minister) Rabin are in indirect contact, discussing ways to stop Begin's drive for an overall Arab-Israeli settlement. Dayan is holding discussions with the religious parties to find ways to bring Begin back in line, and, if not, what can be done. Dayan's problem, though, is that he has lost his constituency inside the country and needs more than the three men that he controls in the Rafi (a 1965 split-off from the Israeli Labour Party — ed.). As for Rabin, he's trying to get control of the Labour Party again and sees the Dayan alliance in very favorable terms.

The problems Dayan is facing are not going to be easy for him to solve. Begin is aware that Dayan is very upset with the way things are going, and, more specifically, that he has left Dayan at home during the recent regional diplomatic moves. Begin has clearly expressed his intention that he will not allow Dayan to handle serious matters with the Egyptians, and I am not going to be surprised if Begin does not take him to Cairo for the meetings with Sadat.

If by any chance Begin perceives that the whole affair is developing into a crisis, he will threaten to resign. This will give him the upper hand, since it will create splits inside the Labour Party and will cause fissures in the Democratic Movement for Change, and both groups will suffer losses to Begin.

On Begin And Sadat's Diplomatic Intentions In The Next Two Weeks

Begin needs time as much as Sadat does. Sadat and Begin have agreed on this. And in my opinion Sadat wants to allow Begin to work out his internal problems. But Sadat is willing to do this only if Begin agrees to come out with real concessions.

On the Palestinian question, Begin and Sadat — but more specifically Sadat — have a plan in mind. Begin won't negotiate with the PLO. But he will negotiate with some other Palestinian body, most likely the Palestinian National Council, which is, after all, a legislative group for the Palestinians. So, negotiating representatives for the Palestinians will be elected from the Palestine National Council and will include representatives from Egypt, from Syria, from Lebanon, and from the West Bank.

This will really get rolling only when the negotiations shift from Cairo to the United Nations. I am very optimistic that Begin and Sadat, after they meet in Cairo, will agree to a new UN-sponsored conference, which will take all these questions under consideration.

But this process I am describing will take three to four months to take place. In the meantime, Begin and Sadat will be engaged in many acrobatic and diplomatic actions to keep the momentum going.