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EGYPTIAN - ISRAELI "SECURITY BORDERS"

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29 October 1971

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(Essay)

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AUTHOR: Arthur C. Winn, COL, MI

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A study was made of the possibilities for permanent Egyptian-Israeli Borders to replace the present cease-fire line along the Suez Canal, which is unacceptable to Egypt, and the 1967 pre-war armistice line, which has become unacceptable to Israel. The analysis deals with politico-geographical problems related to: the Gaza Strip, the Suez Canal, passage of Israeli shipping through the canal, Sharm el Sheikh, and most prominently with stages of withdrawal of Israeli forces in the Sinai Peninsula. Conditions for withdrawal were examined and proposals made for the orderly carrying out of such withdrawals up to the line considered likely to become the optimum geographical and political border to assure lasting peace in the area. Data for general background, from both Arab and Israeli view, were gathered through pertinent books. Data for recent trends and developments were taken from periodicals, and statements of diplomats and political leaders were compiled by a review of the daily news media. Conclusions as to the feasibility and desirability of the resulting borders were based on an analysis of the data.

In considering the possibilities for permanent borders, it is important to constantly remind oneself that claims and counterclaims abound, and that each of them is invariably supported by unimpeachable documents, culled at different points in time. International law, moral principles, history, pragmatism, all are called upon to support the respective claims and counterclaims of the interested parties.

It is also important that we recognize, that the decisions to be made concerning the Egyptian-Israeli borders will be political as opposed to non-political decisions. While a non-political decision may be based solely on the merits of a proposal, a political decision must consider who has made the proposal, who supports it, and who objects to it. The acceptable proposal invariably will be a compromise.

Both Egypt and Israel want security. Since absolute security for either, however, would be absolute insecurity for the other, there must be compromises and concessions on the part of both.

In discussing diplomatic actions by the United Nations, Lieutenant General E.L.M. Burns (former Chief of Staff, United Nations Truce Supervision Organization) points out

that negotiations proceeded on the assumption of goodwill and desire for peace by all parties, and of their intention to honor their obligations under the United Nations Charter and the General Armistice Agreements. But he said:

It seemed to me that eventually the negotiations were reduced to trying to produce a protocol, a form of words to which both sides could agree. However, when the objections of both sides had been circumvented, these protocols usually turned out to be so vague, that each side could later adopt the interpretation which suited them, and the interpretations of both sides would of course be conflicting....It appears to have always been impossible to get both sides to sign any agreement or undertaking drawn in such precise form that there could be no escape from its exact meaning.¹

General Burns' words appear to be no less true today than when he wrote them. Fortunately, in the light of their public expressions during 1971, it seems reasonable to state, that the parties involved in the Middle East conflict do not want the renewal of hostilities. They may not be able or willing to make a final peace settlement this year or next, but they do appear able and willing to de-escalate the crisis situation. There may not be any one right answer for solving the conflict, but there does seem to be a consensus that some answers are better for all concerned than others.

¹LtG E.L.M. Burns, Between Arab and Israeli (1963), pp. 279-280.

Egypt, Israel, France, Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union, all have accepted United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 of 22 November 1967, setting forth principles for obtaining peace. The distinction of, and the flaw of the resolution is that its wording is just sufficiently vague to be accepted by both sides as meaning different things. It calls for "...withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict."², not from the territories occupied -- a significant semantic difference, when politics are involved, between partial and total withdrawal.

The Gaza Strip

The main points at issue between Egypt and Israel -- the Suez Canal and the Sinai Peninsula -- do not concern the Palestinians, the principal inhabitants of the Gaza Strip. The Egyptians have indicated that they will accept any arrangement for the Gaza Strip short of continued Israeli occupation.³ As pointed out by Secretary General

²US Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, A Select Chronology and Background Documents Relating to the Middle East, 91st Cong., 1st sess., 1969, p. 263.

³"All right, we're neighbors, but who'll mind the fence?", The Economist, 6 March 1971, p. 33.

U Thant on 19 September 1971, in his annual report to the United Nations, Egypt has agreed to an Israeli withdrawal of forces from Egyptian territory to the former boundary between Egypt and the British Mandate of Palestine -- a line that would leave the Gaza Strip on the Israeli side of the boundary line.⁴

On 10 October 1971, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat stated that the people of the Gaza Strip had the right to decide for themselves whether to become independent or to join Egypt, but added that they could not be annexed by Israel.⁵ The Egyptian position seems to be that the Gaza Strip with its Palestinian population should eventually come under either Jordanian or Palestinian sovereignty with international control of some undefined sort during a transition period.

The often stated Israeli position has been that there is no alternative to Israel's own presence in the Gaza Strip. But in a report to the Knesset, Mrs. Golda Meir, Israel's Prime Minister said only that Gaza would not be returned to Egypt.⁶ It therefore seems probable that

⁴Anthony Astrachen, "Thant Urges US to Push Israel to Accept Mideast Plan," The Washington Post, 20 September 1971, p. A16.

⁵William Dullforce, "Soviet-Bound Sadat Hits U.S. Proposals," The Washington Post, 11 October 1971, p. A2.

⁶"The strategists v. the nationalists," The Economist, 20 March 1971, pp. 34-37.

Israel would be willing to see the Gaza Strip problem dealt with as part of a Jordanian-Palestinian-Israeli agreement. The Gaza Strip, therefore, should not be a bar to an Egyptian-Israeli agreement concerning permanent borders.

Sharm el Sheikh

A more serious obstacle to an Egyptian-Israeli agreement--even an interim one is the Israeli occupation of Sharm el Sheikh. Mrs. Meir, has stated that she would gladly give up most of the Sinai Peninsula in return for a peace treaty.⁷ Based on official and non-official comments from Israeli leaders, it is clear, however, that Mrs. Meir did not include Sharm el Sheikh in the offer.

The Israeli Government fears that withdrawal from Sharm el Sheikh would again jeopardize the shipping routes through the Straits of Tiran which are Israel's link to Africa and Asia and the primary route for its oil supplies. Considering the role Sharm el Sheikh has played in the Egyptian-Israeli conflict, this fear is understandable. It is doubtful if the Israelis would leave Sharm el Sheikh unless there were credible guarantees for freedom of passage through the straits for Israeli shipping.

⁷"You can't have peace & no peace." The Economist, 24 April 1971, pp. 13-14.

To date, Israel has refused to contemplate, publicly, leaving Sharm el Sheikh in the care of the United Nations, believing no doubt that a United Nations force that could be removed as easily and as quickly as was done in 1967 cannot constitute a credible guarantee.

Egypt's specific acceptance of the idea of an international force that could not be so easily removed, is an important step forward toward a credible guarantee. President Sadat has said that he would agree to a force guaranteed by the United Nations Security Council, and to a stipulation that the force could not be removed without the agreement of all four major powers.⁸ But the Israelis may very well want more tangible evidence. Until they receive it, it appears that any Israeli withdrawal from Sinai will not include withdrawal from Sharm el Sheikh.

There have been indications however, that the Israelis are not obsessed with retention of Sharm el Sheikh to the point of blocking progress toward a final settlement. The pragmatic Israelis recognize the doubtful defensibility of Sharm el Sheikh unless a significant part of

⁸"Egypt - time to plunge," The Economist, 20 February 1971, pp. 33-34.

Sinai remains in their hands, which according to Mrs. Meir is not intended.

In addition, the 11 June 1971 attack on an Israeli chartered tanker as it passed through the Bab el Mandeb Straits, enroute to Eilat, clearly points out that retention of Sharm el Sheikh cannot prevent attacks on Israeli shipping further south. General Chaim Herzog, former Director of Israeli Military Intelligence, and a frequent unofficial Israeli Government spokesman, has proposed that an international naval force patrol the Straits of Bab el Mandeb.⁹ It appears possible that in lieu of continued Israeli occupation of Sharm el Sheikh the Israelis would agree to such a patrol for the Straits of Tiran as well, especially if tangible evidence of Egypt's good faith could be presented by the passage of the first Israeli ship through a reopened Suez Canal.

The Suez Canal

There is general agreement among the parties involved that the Suez Canal should be reopened. This agreement

⁹"Red Sea - bazookas from the left," The Economist, 19 June 1971, pp. 40-41.

exists despite any advantage Israel may see in a closed canal as a natural obstacle, and despite the potentially significant advantages of a reopened canal for the Soviet Union vis-a-vis the United States.¹⁰

For Egypt, the reopening of the canal would enhance its pride as a sovereign nation and would bring in additional revenue to aid in internal development.

For Israel, a reopened canal with Israeli shipping using it, would constitute a major step toward full acceptance by its Arab neighbors, over and above any trade benefits it might gain. Israel would also stand to gain from United States guarantees and increased economic and military aid, granted as a result of acceptance of an agreement permitting Egyptian reopening of the canal. These gains would exist, even if an agreement did not provide for immediate use by Israel of a reopened canal. In addition, Egyptian investments in a reopened canal, and the development of the towns along the canal, would be some assurance that the Egyptians do not intend to initiate any action that would lead once again to a closing of the canal and the destruction of the towns.

¹⁰For a discussion of these advantages see Alvin J. Cottrell, "Implications of Reopening the Canal for the Area East and South of Suez," New Middle East, July 1971, pp. 29-32.

The question then is not, "Should the Suez Canal be reopened?" but rather, "How can this be achieved?"

Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban has proposed, that Israeli forces move back partway in Sinai, to permit reopening of the Suez Canal.¹¹ Egyptian Foreign Minister Mahmoud Riad has said, an interim boundary and the establishment of temporary buffer zones between Egyptian and Israeli forces could be a matter for negotiation.¹² The point of disagreement lies in Egypt's demand for an Israeli statement, that it will withdraw from all of Sinai; whereas Israel insists, that the final boundaries must be negotiated.¹³ Assuming, however, that Egypt can be dissuaded from insisting on an Israeli statement of total withdrawal, an agreement, permitting the reopening of the canal appears feasible. This is particularly so since the importance of Sinai to Egypt is primarily geopolitical. Exploitation of Sinai resources was never a crucial factor in the Egyptian economy, and the loss of Sinai oil has been replaced.¹⁴

¹¹Henry Tanner, "Egyptian Insists Suez Pact Includes a Pullout Pledge," The New York Times, 7 October 1971, p. 1.

¹²"Arabs and Israel - no, no", The Economist, 10 April 1971, p. 37.

¹³Tanner, p. 10.

¹⁴Harry N. Howard, "The United Arab Republic", Current History, January 1970, p. 8.

Provisions for three other points at issue must be contained in any agreement. These are: the duration of a cease-fire, Egyptian presence on the east bank of the canal, and Israeli use of the reopened canal.

Israel wants Egyptian commitment to a permanent cease-fire in connection with any interim agreement to reopen the canal, while Egypt insists on one limited to six months. A fact that both sides conveniently ignore, is that the present cease-fire, which on 18 August 1970 started out as a limited cease-fire of 90 days, has now lasted almost fifteen months with only slight interruption.

Israel must realize, that an agreement to a permanent cease-fire is no more binding than one limited to six months, and that President Sadat could not be expected to publicly agree to a permanent cease-fire as part of an interim settlement, without endangering his domestic leadership.

President Sadat, on the other hand, must realize, that by his insistence on a six months cease-fire he would be imposing a deadline on himself, limiting his room to maneuver. If Israel will drop her insistence on a permanent cease-fire statement, President Sadat, using the present cease-fire as justification, should be able

to drop his demand for a six month agreement. Both sides must agree to a cease-fire with no specific duration.

Egypt has insisted, that its military forces must be allowed to cross into territory evacuated by Israeli troops, while Israel remains adamant that they must not. At first glance, this seems to present an unsolvable problem and prevent any agreement. However, in discussions with US Secretary of State William P. Rogers, Egyptian Premier Mahmoud Fawzi and Foreign Minister Mahmoud Riad indicated that the military force on the east bank need not be terribly large.¹⁵ US Assistant Secretary of State Joseph J. Sisco has suggested to Israeli leaders that a "symbolic" Egyptian force of perhaps 750 men be permitted;¹⁶ and Mrs. Meir stated that Israel might not object if non-military Egyptians crossed the canal; there were hints that policemen might be considered non-military.¹⁷

¹⁵"Middle East: The Underrated Heir," Time, 17 May 1971, pp. 23-28.

¹⁶Robert Kleiman, "US Said to Weigh Pledges to Israel," The New York Times, 5 October 1971, p. 1.

¹⁷Ibid.

If Egypt would be willing to substitute "border police" for a military force, it appears that a solution to the problem of an Egyptian presence on the east bank of the canal, at least during the period of an interim agreement, can be found.

Israeli use of a reopened Suez Canal is the third point at issue. Israel wants such use covered in the interim agreement. Egypt has agreed to open the canal to Israel only when the other parts of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 have been implemented.

Fortunately for diplomatic efforts, the Suez Canal cannot be reopened to any nation's ships overnight. Thus, the actual test of passage of Israeli shipping cannot occur immediately after an interim agreement is reached. It is estimated, that at least four to six months of work would be required before the canal could be reopened.¹⁸ Thus, there would be some time for easing the distrust between Egypt and Israel.

One compromise, that might be acceptable to both Egypt and Israel, would be a wording of an interim agreement, that provides for passage of Israeli oil tankers,

¹⁸"The Suez Canal: Beer and Boredom," Time, 17 May 1971, p. 28.

merchant, and passenger shipping while leaving unaddressed the question of passage for Israeli naval forces. Such an agreement would enable the Egyptians to indicate to their people continued Egyptian sovereignty, but actually would not affect adversely the Israeli military position.

It would have to be clear to both sides, that "eventually" all Israeli shipping must be given free passage. It is probable, that the Israelis would seek to send an Israeli naval element through the canal soon after it opened, but if they could be talked into being realistic, and avoid the temptation to make the passage a parade, there is a chance, that the Egyptians will permit it, especially if an interim agreement has proceeded relatively smoothly.

Withdrawal of Israeli Forces

The initial withdrawal of Israeli forces from the east bank of the canal is more important as a concrete sign of intent than is the actual withdrawal distance. But the distance does have military and political implications for both the Egyptians and the Israelis.

Assistant Secretary of State Sisco has suggested that the Israelis pull back their forces to the vicinity of a series of mountain passes that range 25 to 40 miles

east of the canal.¹⁹ Significantly, withdrawal to this distance could provide the Israelis with the second best defensive line after the Suez Canal itself. General Dayan also has proposed withdrawal to about the same distance.²⁰ This line would run south for approximately 140 miles, from the Mediterranean coast through the key Giddi and Mitla passes, then south-west to Ras Sudr on the Gulf of Suez (See Appendix). It would not be new to either the Egyptians or the Israelis, since the initial withdrawal of Israeli forces in December 1956 was to a similar line.²¹

If Israel considers this first stage successful, that is, if no Egyptian military build-up develops either in Egypt or in the vacated territory, the Israelis can start the second stage, designed to ease Egyptian fears that Israel intends to retain a substantial part of Sinai.²²

¹⁹Marilyn Berger, "25-Mile Israeli Pullback Reportedly Urged by US," The Washington Post, 19 September 1971, p. A1.

²⁰"The bit-by-bit approach to peace," The Economist, 13 February 1971, pp. 30-33.

²¹LTG E.L.M. Burns, Between Arab and Israeli (1963), p. 240.

²²The Egyptians' fear that Israelis will make a partial withdrawal line a permanent border is a major obstacle to an interim agreement. Terrence Smith, "Rogers Steps Up Mideast Efforts," The New York Times, 30 September 1971, p. 1.

Israeli forces would pull back to a line, running south from a point on the Mediterranean coast, approximately three to six miles west of El Arish, through Bir Hasana, and An Nakh1, to the vicinity of a road junction approximately 20 miles northwest of the Saint Catherine monastery; from there generally south to a point on the Gulf of Suez approximately 20 miles southeast of El Tor. The Israelis withdrew to the same general line during the first three stages of their December 1956-January 1957 withdrawal, so a precedent exists here too.²³

By withdrawal to this line, the Israelis would be giving up approximately half of the Sinai Peninsula—a significant step considering their past experience with the Egyptians in Sinai. They would also be giving up the oil fields at Abu Rudeis. This would be a clear indication to Egypt that Israel does not want territory for territory's sake nor for its natural resources. It is estimated that the Abu Rudeis oil wells are providing about three fourths of Israel's annual oil consumption.²⁴ But as one Israeli official has been quoted as saying:

²³Burns, pp. 240-241.

²⁴"Sinai, Rugged Peninsula is a Mideast Key," The National Observer, 3 May 1971, p. 10.

"Peace means more to us than oil, but as long as peace eludes us, we might as well keep pumping the oil."²⁵

The next stage in the withdrawal would be to a line, running from a point on the Mediterranean coast at the 1939 international border of the former Palestine Mandate, due south for approximately 240 miles to the vicinity of Sharm el Sheikh, which would remain in Israeli hands.

Prior to any Israeli withdrawal, even in stages, however, Israel will want strong guarantees that she will not be leaving herself open to a new Egyptian attack. Past Israeli experience with peace-keeping forces, demilitarized zones, and guarantees, leaves her dubious about the value of such and the depth of commitment of the guarantors to support them. Any guarantees must be more credible and concrete than pious pronouncements uttered in the United Nations or in the capitals of the major powers.

Arrangements must include provisions for maintaining a continuing balance of power between Egypt and Israel, the establishment of buffer and demilitarized zones, marking of borders, temporary or transition administration by United Nations forces of vacated areas to insure orderly progress, monitoring of agreements reached, by both human

²⁵Ibid.

and technical means, to include United Nations observers, international and/or joint Egyptian and Israeli patrols, and ground and airborne monitoring equipment. In addition, there must be local commanders' agreements to minimize the effect of accidental violations and a peace-keeping force, large enough and organized to enforce the agreements.²⁶

Without an effective United Nations combat force along the canal, the farthest that Israeli forces would probably withdraw, at least initially, would be to an area from which they could see or hear Egyptian troops crossing the canal in strength. Israel would no doubt also insist on firm guarantees from the United States that if there were any cross-canal troop movements, the United States would veto any Security Council resolution censuring Israeli retaliation, and provide direct support if Israel proved unable to cope with the situation.

It seems clear that the major powers will have to be represented in the peace-keeping force. The gain in credibility of a guarantee that was physically

²⁶LTG Burns estimates that such a force for Sinai would have to be about division-size and that individual contingents must be at least battalion-size if the unit is not to be hindered by problems of command and control. Burns, p. 188.

secured by the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France might well outweigh the political difficulties and suspicions of the Powers and of the Egyptians and Israelis as well. In view of the stakes, it is worth the try.

If the parties involved sincerely want peace and are willing to pay its price, the compromises necessary to achieve it are practical. Each of the proposed stages of withdrawal is feasible, and provides for the orderly return of Egyptian territory, while allowing for Israel's security.

The permanence of the last proposed boundary between Egypt and Israel will depend on the events occurring thereafter. If no permanent peace comes, the last proposed border line represents the best dividing line between the two countries, being a geographical as well as a political compromise. A rapprochement between Egypt and Israel developing out of the initial withdrawal agreement could lead to a final peace that would result in all of Sinai being returned to Egypt. New hostilities, on the other hand, would lead to Israeli efforts to reoccupy all of Sinai--the world would be fortunate indeed if this was the extent of the conflict. The danger that it would involve the United States and the Soviet Union is great.

It would be the height of political naiveté to think that the withdrawal agreement could be carried out successfully, without a United Nations peace-keeping force. With an effective force, including Great Powers representation, there will be at worst a continuation of the no peace-no war situation. Without an effective force, that would be the best we could hope for.

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APPENDIX
THE SINAI PENINSULA

