

A Voice of the Egyptian Left

Mark Bruzonsky and Judith Kipper Speak With Mohamed Sid-Ahmed

Mohamed Sid-Ahmed is one of Egypt's most prominent and respected leftist critics. His *After the Guns Fall Silent*, published in 1976, was widely acclaimed as the single most important Arab statement on the Middle East crisis since the October, 1973, war. Sid-Ahmed argued that peace was at last possible, for the October war had changed the regional situation and détente altered the global environment.



Until a few years ago Sid-Ahmed was in charge of the editorial page of *Al-Ahram*, Egypt's most respected daily. A Marxist since 1946, he had long been a leading figure on the Egyptian left and was imprisoned by both Farouk and Nasser. Following his release in 1964 he helped establish the Marxist review *Al-Talia* and was one of the key members of *Al-Ahram's* Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

How has the Left in Egypt responded to the various steps Sadat has taken?

Its basic critical stand toward the trip has not changed. The Left now believes that the small degree of reciprocation by Begin is proof that the party was right.

The Left party believes that the euphoria that began with Sadat's trip is built on issues that are not solid. This state of mind is a bit similar to that during the January riots of 1977. In both cases it is an expression of deep dissatisfaction with the everyday life of the Egyptian people and the economic difficulties they're living with. The basic difference is that in January this state of revolt exploded *against* the president, and this time it was the president who used the state of revolt to get *support* for his trip by identifying peace with a promise of prosperity and an end to the everyday difficulties.

What one should be afraid of is that, if hopes do not materialize, we could have a third edition of the January events. The first edition is one that can be repeated, while the second edition is one that is difficult to repeat.

How long do you think Sadat will hold back from a separate peace while trying to bring the other Arabs into the process?

If Sadat gets something completely satisfactory on Sinai, then there will be a real dilemma. A step forward toward this might occur at this juncture. But there will be another moment in between. He would first make an attempt at an Arab summit. What he is keen on is to get enough on the Palestinian issue, not to satisfy the Palestinians or to satisfy the PLO, but to satisfy a certain number of Arab countries who will then take care of the Palestinians.

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Which Arab countries specifically?

Saudi Arabia first. Jordan, of course. Lebanon doesn't count and depends on decisions of others. And there will be a bit of wooing Assad as much as possible. For some time now the Palestinians have been viewed by many Arab parties—especially since the Lebanese war—as a threat to them, not just to the Israelis. What happened in Lebanon is being viewed by these new, powerful, conservative Arab regimes as a threat to their stability. They worry that the phenomena of Lebanon could be extended.

So it is most important for these regimes to be offered something for Palestine that they think could result in a compatible solution. The bargain is this: "You Israelis give us something on the Palestinian issue so they will not be an element of subversion for us. And we will guarantee fully that they will not be an element of subversion for you."

Is the PLO in decline? Is the PLO out of the ballgame now?

Even if Sadat looks for other leadership than the PLO, this is not yet acceptable to other relevant Arab parties. The attempt since the Riyadh and Cairo summits after the Lebanese war was to try to produce from within the PLO a leadership that would consider the interests of these countries before the basic, traditional Palestinian requirements.

That effort having failed....

It didn't fail. Something more important came up—Sadat's trip. It didn't fail; it wasn't tested. But at least this was the Arab stand.

What now?

Now a further step. Now you enter into the real difficulties concerning the PLO and Israel. PLO or no PLO, you must obtain a minimum on Palestine so that you can be sure there are relevant Arab parties who will stand with you against the

Palestinians' basic demands—and who are ready to crush....Even the Syrians were ready to crush the PLO in a previous stage.

What is the minimum?

For sure what is being offered by Begin as "self-rule" is not the minimum.

Where do we reach the point that the Palestinian issue really becomes negotiable?

Probably it will be somewhere around this institutional link with Jordan.

So it's the old 1972 King Hussein plan, with two parliaments?

Yes, if you like. Let's put it this way: a formula by which Jordan will replace what Israel is now requiring as direct presence within the Palestinian entity.

Egypt is back in the leadership role in the Arab world, even though there is a rift and split. Can Egypt today correct its negotiating stance and exert the kind of pressure on Israel that will give it the bargaining power to produce results?

It looked, at one moment, as if Egypt was cornering everybody. But it is a very risky situation, one in which Egypt can be completely cornered. The sort of things I think help correct the situation are the following:

Let's begin with one I have already spoken about. "I overcame a taboo in the Arab world. Now you overcome a taboo, that is, deal directly with the PLO." This would be reciprocation, real reciprocation. If Sadat were to accomplish this, then nobody could defend the Palestinians if they insisted on not coming. And Sadat's position would be extremely strong after that.

Another thing. Sadat made an enormous psychological breakthrough. So now let's be consistent. Sadat could say, "U.S., stop the pipeline to Israel. Completely. Make a sign, a gesture. Everybody knows that the only party who's able to fight is the Israelis, that the disbalance is already enormous. No need to increase it further. Give a sign of hope to the other parties that a negotiating process is possible and that there's not the threat of war, which has become worse than ever since Egypt is out." Such a gesture would not appear to be addressed to Sadat but to the others, to the whole region. That's point two.

Point three. A thing for Israel. "Stop changing anything outside the '67 borders. Stop the settlements, stop the changes in Jerusalem, stop the building in Golan, in Sinai, in the West Bank, and in Gaza. Give us a sign, at least, that this is really negotiable and that you're not just winning time by negotiations."

But I don't see anything of this sort being brought up.

What, basically, does the Left want for Egypt?

The basic attitude of the party is for peace. But we believe that the peace now being achieved will not bring stability to the region. It is a peace that is not creating favorable conditions in which all the peoples in the region can achieve their national aspirations and improve their backward conditions. It's doing the opposite.

What is happening now is power politics, arm twisting. The very idea that when I come to an agreement with Israel, all Arab parties have to follow—that's power politics. It's not a logic of national aspirations. Power politics is a right-wing policy by definition. Left-wing policy is based on fighting for given rights—your power is alignment of forces to achieve certain aims. The game now played will not achieve stable

peace and settlement. But the Left party does accept the principle of peace. This is something that distinguishes the Egyptian, who is more aware of the issues than others in the Arab world. In the Arab world, yes, there are still slogans of war—though they know very well that achieving war is not easy and perhaps not even possible.

Let's put it this way. War is certainly not the best way yet to achieve national aspirations. On the contrary, it could create cataclysm and catastrophe in the region. Peace, on the other hand, also doesn't achieve the aspirations of all the parties.

Let's go farther. To be specific, I don't think that the Palestinian-Israeli issue, which is at the heart, can be solved today. It will not be solved when the only experience between, Palestinians and Israelis has been one of total antagonism. There must be another moment to definitely solve this issue—a moment of peace, of intercourse between these two peoples so they will know what are their ultimate motives. The ultimate philosophy and motive of either side are not developed enough for a solution at this juncture.

This is the logic that I've been defending all the time: That you should not touch the ultimate motives at this juncture because they are not mature enough to be solved at this time.

So what should you do now?

All you do at this juncture is replace modes of conflict that are mutually antagonistic and detrimental. We need détente, institutional change, mutually accepted in advance. The peace agreement is precisely to devise these rules of the game. And then there will be another historical process for a period to come. And finally, then it will be possible to see what is relevant and what is not relevant in all that the parties are bringing up as slogans today.

I believe that the slogans of all the parties will not be the realities of tomorrow. But I can't talk about that, I have no right to talk about that; today—nobody knows. The main reason there is blockage today is because they are taking irrelevant issues and making them relevant. And the relevant ones they're making irrelevant.

When you talk about a secular state, which is a dream of the future, or the Zionism of Israel as it is looked upon today—these are not *the* issues. The real issue is that we pass from an antagonistic mode of conflict to a nonantagonistic mode of conflict; fight your way in social terms with dealings between the two peoples.

Sounds like what Sadat is doing.

No, he is not doing it in a balanced way. I think that the way Sadat is acting now is creating a form of normalization that, sooner or later, and necessarily, will allow Egyptian sovereignty to be violated because the deal is not balanced. More has been given by Egypt than has been received. So that is why it will impinge—even this economic build-up will impinge—on Egyptian sovereignty. It won't be mutually beneficial in an equal way. That's what I reproach. Also what's being done is done in isolation from the other Arab parties. I don't reproach the principle of normalization. You're giving Israel its basic desire. Get, in counterpart, your basic desire!

You know, in power politics the Palestinian issue is the weakest link. What is the Palestinian issue—just a small piece of territory? In the dialectics of the conflict, the mechanisms of the conflict, the Palestinian issue is the heart; it looks enormous. It can only be dealt with properly in the logic of the genuine, justifiable aspirations of the various parties who are at the origins of the conflict.

The question is not what you formulate but what you achieve. I don't think the peace that is being achieved now is a peace.