

Sadat's Tragic Mistake —an Interview With Ismail Fahmy, Egypt's Former Foreign Minister

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When Anwar el Sadat announced his "sacred mission" to Jerusalem in November, 1977, Ismail Fahmy resigned from his post as foreign minister. Today, Fahmy is writing his memoirs from his memento-filled apartment overlooking the Nile at Zamalek, a Cairo suburb. For five years Fahmy was Sadat's front man, opening and closing doors in both Moscow and Washington. Next to Sadat, Ismail Fahmy is the only Egyptian who knows the intimate details of how the world powers conducted their Middle East diplomacy from before the October War through Egypt's decision to make a unilateral arrangement with Israel.

A few months ago in Cairo Fahmy agreed to discuss Mideast developments with Worldview Associate Editor Mark Bruzonsky.

BRUZONSKY: When President Sadat first went to Israel, do you think he had in his mind to reach what most people consider to be a separate peace with the Israelis? Or did he just finally realize that this was the most he could get from the Israelis and the Americans?

FAHMY: One of the main reasons why I declined to join President Sadat [in his visit to Israel] is the fact that the only thing that could come from such a visit is a separate agreement, not any more than that. And this is why I resigned.

You saw no hope at all back in October, 1977, that there could be a psychological breakthrough and that the Israelis and the Americans would then really pursue a comprehensive settlement? You foresaw this separate agreement?

Certainly, because there was nothing else. There was no previous preparation for such an unusual step. I'm afraid people try for one reason or the other to justify major political steps on a psychological basis. But I don't believe that politicians become psychiatrists just like that. As a politician I deal with things on a pragmatic basis, especially when these things affect human lives, the future of a whole population, the national security of nations, of justice, of legalities, of international law, of treaties.

Even for the Israelis, if one would like even for a moment to play on this psychological guitar, it was one-sided. It was very clear that they cannot risk their own national security and their own philosophy just for the sake of psychological effect or psychological barriers. All these are inventions to justify one action or another.

When I deal with things, I deal with them as they are. I don't dream.

You negotiated with the new Carter administration for almost a year before you left the Egyptian Government. Why do you think the Carter administration acquiesced in the notion of a separate agreement after insisting so loudly that there be a comprehensive settlement and a Palestinian homeland?

First of all, President Carter and Cyrus Vance and their colleagues, right up to President Sadat's visit to Israel, were working very hard to have the Geneva Conference convened. And they were going to succeed! There is no doubt about it!

In holding the conference, you mean, but not necessarily in getting an agreement from the conference?

Sure. First they were going to have all the parties go to Geneva and sit and negotiate. And Geneva was going to be convened, almost definitely, sometime in the last week of December, 1977. And the Russians were going to participate. President Carter himself had prepared the whole thing—procedurally and substantively. You may recall that this Carter formula for Geneva—how it's going to be convened, who is going to attend, what questions are going to be discussed....And procedures, when they concern an important conference like Geneva, mean substance.

Concurrently, President Carter and Cyrus Vance negotiated for a long time with the Russians a framework for solving the Middle East crisis once and for all. Then the Joint Statement came on the first of October, 1977. So there was serious work being done already—finished—procedurally, which means substance too. And substantively with the Russians—the other co-chairman, the other superpower.

And as a result of this you had this famous Joint Statement on the first of October. What was this Joint Statement? Really it was the real framework for the comprehensive settlement with all parties concerned attending and the two co-chairmen, the two superpowers. And this is why President Carter and his colleagues were reluctant, at the very beginning when President Sadat went to Jerusalem, to go ahead and support his visit. After a little while they had no choice but to do it, to support President Sadat. But at the very beginning President Carter and his administration were not *fully* supporting the whole thing. They waited a little to watch things. But when they examined the pros and cons, they had no choice but to support it. Why?

Because here is the biggest Arab country in the area offering a separate peace with Israel. And why the hell should the Americans not profit from this, having in mind their own problems internally with the Jewish community and the Jewish lobby?

If Mr. Sadat knew that Geneva was to be convened in just a few months and that the Americans and the Russians were serious about pushing for a comprehensive settlement, then he must have intentionally desired to abort that process.

I don't know. What I know for sure is that I cannot

believe that President Carter, when he reached that stage in preparing Geneva and the Joint Statement with the Russians—I don't believe that they were beating around the bush.

Well, President Sadat must have known that by going to Israel he would set up separate negotiations and that the Geneva process would not continue. He must have realized that.

No. I don't share your opinion when you say that President Sadat did this intentionally to sabotage Geneva. I don't believe so. Because Egypt itself was cooperating with President Carter formally on the convening of Geneva. We were not against it. We even accepted the one Arab delegation and the whole Carter formula.

Is that how the PLO problem was going to be solved, with PLO people coming as part of the overall delegation?

Exactly. And before that you may remember again that President Carter took, in August, 1977, the unusual step of proposing that a formula be accepted by PLO leaders so that he and his administration could sit with PLO people. This was to overcome that very well-known difficulty with which the Carter administration found itself as a result of the Kissinger agreement with the Israelis. You recall, with the second disengagement of the Egyptian-Israeli front it was agreed that the Americans would not sit with the PLO without previous consultations with the Israelis.

President Carter had to overcome this. So in August, in conjunction with his moves to push everything toward a comprehensive agreement, he proposed a formula that could go around Kissinger's commitment to the Israelis and he could sit formally with the PLO in Washington. And this would have been really a historical thing. Not only historical politically, but legally and psychologically—if I may use this word you're very fond of.

I think your president is very fond of it.

This would be the real thing, the breakthrough of the sound barrier between the American administration on the highest level and the PLO. The U.S. is a superpower, and a superpower should sit with anybody, everybody, especially when the problems at issue are problems of war and peace, of human rights, of justice.

And I am very glad that President Carter himself very lately referred to this initiative which he took in August, 1977. And I was the intermediary between the Americans and the PLO people. What happened really was that the process was starting. And the PLO proposed another formula. And the Americans proposed another formula, a second formula. So the process of negotiations started through me on various formulae. This was a major step.

Do you understand what it meant? Suppose that we would have succeeded? And we *were* going to succeed with some formula. Do you understand the political and legal, and psychological even, meaning of the Americans sitting with the PLO?

You really think that in view of domestic U.S. politics

Carter would have been able to succeed and do that?

He took the initiative! I didn't ask him to do it. He knows exactly what he was doing. And he repeated it even two months ago.

But he also took the initiative of the U.S.-USSR Joint Statement back in 1977. And within two days he had to come out with another statement that largely abrogated the Joint Statement. The new U.S.-Israel "Working Paper" said many different things from what was in the Joint Statement.

What he said with Dayan [in the U.S.-Israel "Working Paper"], this was a bilateral thing. But the Joint U.S.-Russian Statement was intact, was going to be respected by the Americans and the Russians.

Even after the American Jews and the Israelis protested so effectively?

I was dead sure of it. Because I saw President Carter myself after that. And not only that. Up till this very minute I didn't hear any concrete statement to give any impression in one way or another—even after President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem—that the Americans were going back on what they have agreed with the Russians.

Yet statements are only one form of policy and actions are another. And the actions of the American Government do not seem compatible with the stated plans of the American Government in 1977.

But you know, ultimately, if there will be any comprehensive peace settlement, it will be within and in accordance with this statement. Which is amazing.

You consider that statement such an historic accomplishment between the Americans and the Soviets?

Globalwise, yes. I may disagree with some parts of it. But I am not a superpower. I am an interested party. We don't speak the same language. Our vision is completely different from the vision of a superpower. Our interests are different. Our commitments are different. Our dedication to principles is different. Small powers are completely different than superpowers.

Let me shift from the history to the treaty that was signed recently and ask you about the superpower interests.

The treaty has a large military component for both Egypt and Israel. And there has been some discussion that the Americans are planning to buttress their military potential in the Middle East in three ways: One, by strengthening Israel as a potential arm of Western military might; two, by strengthening Egypt as a potential gendarme in North Africa and possibly other Middle East Areas; and three, by a Fifth Fleet plus the preparation of American interventionist forces.

Do you believe that there is a large military component to this Egyptian-Israeli treaty?

[Long, unusual pause] So far as Israel is concerned, I believe the Americans paid a very high price. [Pause] And this will appear in the future, because it will backfire.

How? Why?

The only thing that really generates peace is to have a certain balance between the major countries of any region of the world. Even on the level of the superpowers, what is détente? Détente was the child of what is very well known as overkill, which the two superpowers have. If we imagine for a moment that one of the superpowers is very weak and the other is much stronger, there will be an imbalance in everything. There will be a big temptation for the strongest superpower to do whatever it wants to do. Even to the extent of hitting or committing aggressive acts against the other, the weaker, superpower.

The same thing applies on the regional level. How? If Israel realizes that Egypt alone, militarily speaking, is not that weak and that in any armed conflict between Israel and Egypt there will be a lot of damage to Israel, automatically Israel will behave. And automatically Israel will think a hundred times before taking any preemptive war or any provocative move or even threat to use force. The net result of this is that Israel will divert its attention from physical misuse of force to the peaceful ways and means of how to reach peace.

The same thing applies as far as Egypt is concerned. If it is in a weak position militarily speaking, Egypt will be in a very bad position even when it negotiates peaceful conditions. The result of any negotiations between Israel and Egypt under conditions most favorable to Israel will reflect this weakness, this big difference. In other words, Egypt would be negotiating under duress, not free. So Israel will have a say in negotiating about the Palestinians. So this would be an unusual situation, the result of which would be a paper in favor of one side completely and against the other side almost completely.

The meaning of this is that it would never be a permanent peace. Egypt itself, when it got stronger or as things changed, would stand and say "No, I was forced to accept this under duress, this must be changed." The Israelis would say "No," and the whole thing would start again, and either you would have another armed conflict or some sort of a massive pressure would convince Israel to agree to the new Egyptian demands for rectification of the wrongs that were done as a result of this imbalance in power.

In fact, the military help the Americans are giving to the Egyptians now is far inferior to what they are giving to the Israelis. Take, for instance, the deal of the F-5s. What the hell do I need with the F-5s? They're obsolete. They are giving it to the Yemen now or to Ethiopia or to Sudan. But Egypt is not Yemen or Sudan or Ethiopia! Haile Selassie used to have the F-5s! The Israelis used to have the F-5s about ten years ago! They give me now, Egypt, the biggest and strongest country in the Arab world, fifty F-5s! And they give the Israelis the most sophisticated airplanes in the American arsenal. This is a mockery! This is not American military help! This means a dictate on Egypt to keep Egypt as it is militarily or to put Egypt backward ten years!

If there should be a new president of Egypt, does Egypt retain the option of returning to a policy where arms and political support could be sought from the USSR?

President Sadat, or the new president of Egypt if he follows the policy of President Sadat, if he applies really, literally, this diversification policy, should certainly obtain, if he can, weapons from the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union is one of the big sources of weapons. Diversification does not mean that Egypt gets its weapons only from France or from the United Kingdom or the United States. Diversification, if it means anything, means that you get whatever you need—the best quality at the proper time and at the best price—all over the world. You go shopping for the best airplane that suits your own purposes, which your enemy doesn't have, which could be delivered to you as quickly as possible, and in terms most appropriate for you and the prices nice.

The Soviets will never supply Sadat again with weapons. And who would pay for them?

You didn't ask whether the Soviets will give Sadat or a specific person weapons. We're not talking about personalities. You asked me a simple question—that, after President Sadat, do you think that Egypt will get weapons from the Soviet Union? And my answer was very clear. That the policy of diversification—which President Sadat himself proclaimed—means, if I understand it correctly, that Egypt looks for the best arms it wants from all over the world. He didn't say that he is making diversification only to buy from the French or from the Americans. He didn't say, "I'll buy from everybody but not the Russians."

Your answer to this next question seems implicit from what you've already said, but I'll ask it in a neutral way anyway. Do you see any likelihood, any possibility, any reasonable hope, that the autonomy negotiations can lead to any form of solution to the Palestinian problem?

Depends on what you mean by solution of the Palestinian problem.

Solution which will be widely considered....

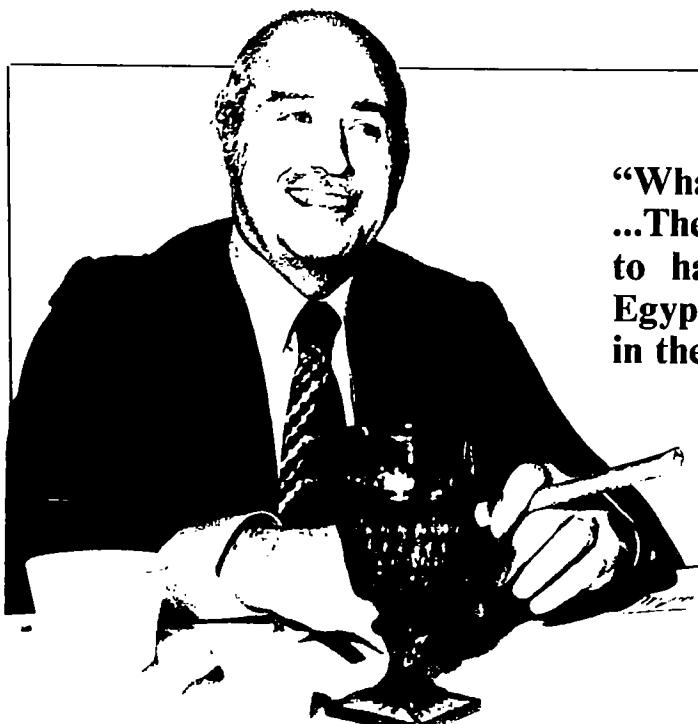
Now you are going around and using very evasive words. Come to the point. You want to ask whether I believe this autonomy will lead to a Palestinian state. Right?

If that's the only solution that you see.

Yes. I don't see any permanent peace in the Middle East crisis unless the Palestinian problem is solved on the basis of restoring the full rights of the Palestinian people in the form of a homeland with territorial boundaries. In other words, to give back the Palestinians their statehood. Without the establishment of a state of Palestine, there will be no peace in this area.

Now once you have this state of Palestine established I am not against it at all if this new Palestine state chooses to have some relations with Israel. It's up to them—federation, confederation, even if they decide to unite in a secular state—it's up to them. I'm not against it. If they choose to have this political link with Jordan, it's up to them. But let us understand each other very clearly. There will be no peace unless the Palestine problem is solved on the basis of a Palestine state. This is my opinion. I may be wrong.

But the Israelis are hinting at a somewhat different solution, which many Egyptians I've spoken with don't seem to object to too strongly. If King Hussein did not rule in Amman, if Jordan were in fact controlled by Palestinians politically, then the Israelis could argue that the 1922 division of Palestine by the British has been validated, that the Palestinians now have three-fourths of Palestine (the East Bank of the Jordan River) and the Jews have one-quarter (everything to the west of the river) and that



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there is a Palestinian state. Isn't this a possible solution?

You see, we can write a book both of us, you and me, about the various solutions and various failures and various interpretations. Then we reenter automatically into the very strange and huge encyclopedia of the Middle East.

Every problem here in the Middle East—every problem—has a big dictionary, alone. If we go like this, we will never find a solution. It is easy to say, for instance, why the hell this big noise is made. The Jordan is there. The majority are Palestinians. Have the Palestinian state in Jordan.

Many people do say that. Especially in Israel.

Yes, in Israel. Why? Because this automatically means an aggression on the Jordanian state. Second, that the Arabs and the Palestinians relinquish to Israel their own rights in Palestine itself. More important. The result of the Palestinization of Jordan is the Israelization of the West Bank and Gaza. This is why the Israelis are promoting this idea, but this is not the solution.

Now just think very seriously about what I've told you about the Palestinization of Jordan and the Israelization of the West Bank and Gaza. This is exactly what Begin is trying to do and what some of the American strategists are trying to do. But they are running from the main problem. This couldn't happen. Impossible.

Why?

Because this attempts to solve the problem—the rights of people—at the expense of other people. And only to please the Israelis.

History's full of examples of such things happening. It might not be "just," but it might be a solution.

If this is a mental exercise, I can go with you and stretch it to many more things. One of them, that Mr. Begin himself and his colleagues can go back again to Poland and Germany and France and United Kingdom. Or, they can start all over again shopping for new ground and go to Madagascar or even to Libya or Uganda. If you want to have a mental exercise—a nice one—you can start all over again and try to dismantle the Zionist theory.

Let me ask you about Zionist theory and Zionist politics. Do you think the treaty has greatly strengthened the Likud-Begin political forces in Zionism? Has the right wing of Zionism....

I don't believe that there is any difference between all those people. They have their old testament. They are trying to implement it by stages, by force, or by influence all over the world. They succeeded, succeeded for the first time in their life to have Egypt, the United States, and the European countries—and especially Egypt—agree for the first time to have an Israeli state in the area.

But you don't see a difference between Labor, Mapam, Likud....

No difference. All this is semantics. Believe me.

Then you didn't mind that President Carter went to pray at the grave of Jabotinsky?

He didn't take my permission. He didn't ask my opinion.

Because I know many Jewish persons, including myself, who felt that Carter's praying at the grave of Jabotinsky was an act of ideological idiocy. And I'm rather struck by the fact that almost all Egyptians—and here you and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Butros Ghali have the same opinion—are not sensitive to the serious ideological differences that exist within Jewish-Israeli politics.

Who said so?

Because you think they're all about the same.

Sure, as far as their own state in Palestine and their expansion in the area, they are all the same. All of them are implementing the Zionist dream.

Are you afraid that after this treaty—after Egypt has opted out of this conflict—that the Israelis may look for excuses for further expansion?

You see, Israeli expansion could be done in different forms—physically through war and armed conflict from time to time is just one way. History taught us that they can create the conditions and the explanations and the atmosphere and the press media and, and, and, and to justify that what they took was in self-defense.

So now by physical action or by complete penetration through various slogans like "peace," "open frontiers," "joint projects." And all that you hear now is this new vocabulary.

But it's not unwarranted penetration if Egypt welcomes these things, welcomes open borders, welcomes joint projects. It's not Israeli expansion, it's something that the Egyptians—or at least some of the Egyptians—desire.

Yes, but, you know...I don't believe that the Egyptians are welcoming this. I differ with you completely—not with you personally, but with what you are saying.

I, for instance, I am dead sure that all the Egyptians, if they understood exactly what's going to happen, they would never have accepted it. And the future will show you.

What do you expect when the autonomy negotiations begin? Do you expect them to drag on for months or to break down or what?

For years, you know, this is a non-starter, the whole process for the Palestinians. Because it was based already on Begin's plan, which means, as you will see, that the Israelis will try either to change the demographic composition of the West Bank and Gaza and they'll try to plant a massive number of new settlements. And this is why the framework which was agreed upon at Camp David is a non-starter, as I told you. And this is why it is rejected by all the Arab countries without any exception whatsoever.

What about Sudan, Oman...?



No, no, no. No exception. I don't count those countries. Go to Sudan yourself. Walk in the street. Speak to the people of Sudan, the responsible people, they will tell you exactly this. Go and see.

My view is that if the Israelis and the Americans are really sincere about profiting from this new atmosphere, and if the Israelis are really sincere about solving the Palestinian problem.... They claim that they are very sophisticated. And they are. They claim that they are very just, fair, that they believe in international law and common sense. So I have only one simple, very simple proposal.

As a result of whatever President Sadat did and this new atmosphere, and having in mind President Carter's human rights proposals and beliefs, it's very simple. Let us agree—and this is a concrete proposal—to have the West Bank and Gaza under international trusteeship, under the United Nations trusteeship. For five years. No. I formally—if I can propose anything formally—I propose a U.N. trusteeship for Palestine, namely the West Bank and Gaza, for two years.

You don't seriously think the Israelis are interested in such a proposal, do you?

I said before, if they are serious, if they are interested in peace, in human rights, in justice, in international law, what is wrong with the U.N. having a trusteeship on Palestine and after two years there will be elections under international supervision?

We give to the Palestinians—like anybody else—the right to say yes or no about their statehood, about their new state. And, I may add, to assure the Israelis of their own security. You see, on the one hand they say we can beat everybody, all the Arabs together. On the other hand they say we are a small country, we are weak, the Arabs are going to swallow us.

This is not true, you know. At any rate, in addition to what I told you, and this is a concrete thing, I propose that the new Palestine state, once it is established, declare its neutrality completely—a neutral, another Switzerland.

No army, at least not a large one?

A security force composed of, let us say, fifty thousand. A security force to observe its own territory and frontiers and so on. After that, whether this new Pales-

tine state would like to have a linkage with the Jordanians, it's OK, it's up to them. If they want to have this linkage with Israel, it's up to them. After all, the Palestinian original position is that they are ready to live with Israelis—Christians, Moslems, and Jews under one roof.

So, they are not very bad people, the Palestinians! But I make this concrete proposal so if the Israelis are really honest, why should they fear an international trusteeship? And the Americans and the Russians and the French would serve on the Board of Transition too—the five permanent members, OK? Anybody the Israelis want!

Let me ask you about Arab politics. Many of the leaders of the Arab states—prime ministers, kings—have declared that the leaders of Egypt who have entered this treaty with Israel are "traitors." Do you share that view?

[Long pause] No. You see, I mean, I have never called people bad names. Every politician takes decisions for one reason or another and tries hard to justify his positions. Very rare that statesmen declare they are wrong. But calling people bad names is not my brand. Every politician takes his decisions according to his own circumstances. History will judge if maybe all the Arabs are wrong and President Sadat is correct. Nobody can judge this now. The future will judge.

You are busy writing your memoirs. What are you trying to accomplish?

I will try as fair and honestly as possible to put on record my views and to try to straighten many misconceptions. This I will do at the proper time and for the sake of Egypt and for the sake of history at large.

President Carter and his administration were consumed throughout 1977 to approach the Middle East crisis in its totality, and they refused all efforts to have any new steps like the Kissinger policy. Vance was convinced all parties must be there at Geneva. And the process of contact with the PLO had already started.

Now a Palestinian state will not emerge unless either the geopolitics of the area change again or the Arabs use force to bring it about. But I prefer international efforts with massive support from the American president.