

View in Israel

(Each of us has our own sentiments concerning the peace pact between Israel and Egypt. Here, for the first time, through the Information Division of World Zionist Organization, we receive a review of press and public opinion in Israel. J.T.)

By Zvi Pantanowitz

It was one of the most passionately debated issues in the history of the State: it brought thousands into the streets to demonstrate opposition and support; it sparked violent clashes between police and demonstrators at times; it split party ranks and in some cases brought dove and hawk down on the same side of the fence.

Henry Kissinger had come and gone, an interim Sinai settlement tucked under his arm, and still the question was being hotly discussed: did it bring the Middle East closer to peace or was it merely a station on the way to war?

The interim agreement provided for the further withdrawal of Israeli troops; the establishment of a fairly broad buffer zone to be policed by UN troops with American technicians aiding in the monitoring of troop movements; the evacuation by Israel of almost the entire length of the strategic Sinai passes and the Abu Rodeis oilfields which provided Israel with 60 percent of her oil needs. In return Egypt is understood to have agreed to a three year duration for the agreement, to allow Israeli non-military cargoes through the Canal and to reduce political and economic warfare. Both sides agreed to resolve the Middle East conflict by peaceful means and to renounce the use of force.

At the initialing ceremony in Jerusalem, Premier Rabin said: "We believe the cause of peace needs to take risks. And I believe that by this agreement we are embarking on a road that might be a long one but that will lead to what all the people of the area want -- a real peace between the Arab countries and Israel."

The Cabinet gave the proposal almost unanimous approval with only one minister abstaining. A fairly close vote was expected in the Israel Parliament, the Knesset, but no one doubted that the Government would get an absolute majority. The main question being asked was how the dissenters within Mr. Rabin's Labour Party would vote. The Prime Minister got an overwhelming vote of confidence when the Party's

Central Committee met before the Knesset debate. 370 voted for the agreement and only four against. But the four included former Defense Minister Moshe Dayan. He argued that Israel had made concessions while the Arabs had retained the option to go to war. The Arab concession was being made only in terms of time. The Americans were against deadlock. So was he (Dayan). But Israel had to know where the Americans intended leading Israel in breaking the deadlock. For Israel could only see the first step of this process, at present.

Dayan was echoed in this view by several leftists in other parties, including Lyova Eliav, a former member of Labour. Eliav felt convinced that the Government had no overall conception of its ultimate goals. There could be phased withdrawals in return for political concessions if from the very start it was clear that territory would be given back only for a genuine peace.

In the Central Committee debate of his party the Prime Minister countered Dayan's arguments by saying that in the current situation the Arabs were not ready for an overall peace in one jump. The only other alternative then was to seek an interim settlement in the knowledge that this was a lengthy process on the way to peace.

The most vocal opposition came from the right-centre Likud bloc. Likud leader Menahem Begin said he saw no reason to rejoice at the agreement. The state of war remained in force while Israel had given up enormously important areas and oilfields. In return Israel had only received words about not using force, in a formula which was slightly stronger than the 1974 disengagement agreement and far weaker than that of the Armistice Agreement of 1949. Both Begin and another Likud leader, Shmuel Tamir, warned that further pressure was not far off. In a radio interview Tamir said: "This is not the only arm-twisting we face. In a few months Israel will be told there must be more momentum or else." Israel was dependent on the United States and had to be flexible. But a nation was entitled to be "obnoxious" about peace.

In a signed article in the Labour Federation's Davar, Hanna Zemer, the paper's editor, attacked all the opponents of the agreement for their lack of realism, naivete, and even hypocrisy. The question was not whether it was a good agreement, she said, but whether it was better than the alternatives. It was the lack of political realism of the alternative which had brought about the interim settlement. Its

greatest advantage was that it was within the realm of the possible. The drawback of all other proposals, even if these were more logical and sophisticated, was that they could not be implemented.

Strong support for the Government came from the Left, spearheaded by Mapam, a member of the alignment with Labour. In an editorial, Al Hamishmar pointed out that ultimately the classified aspects of the agreement would be made public, but even at this stage it was clear that this was an agreement of compromise, leaving neither victor nor vanquished. It was an agreement giving expression to the relative strength of forces in the area, and their relation to the strength of global forces. Unless the viewer was prejudiced a study of the agreement showed that the withdrawal was not endangering Israel's security. Moreover, the firmer bonds with the United States would ensure the supply of weaponry and economic aid. In the Middle East everything was possible, and all options were still open. But those who went beyond paying lip-service had to make the maximum use of every chance in their striving for peace.

In Yediot Aharonot, the paper's political analyst, Erel Ginay, felt it would be unfair to judge the agreement on its published clauses. Several fundamental elements covering U.S.--Israel relations and issues between Israel and Egypt, had not been revealed. This, he said, included the U.S. guarantee of oil supplies to Israel, the Egyptian promise to renew the UN Mandate for three years and to reduce political and economic warfare and to keep the Bab el Mandeb straits at the gateway to the Red Sea open. The independent Haaretz argued that analysis of the first two clauses of the agreement did indicate a political commitment on the part of Egypt. These, it pointed out, spoke of readiness to resolve the conflict by peaceful means and not to resort to force. Yet there were weaknesses. There was no clear mention of an Egyptian commitment to abide by the agreement for three years. This vagueness might be to the advantage of Egypt and America, but it did not accord with Israel's readiness to advance toward a settlement, and created a constant threat to the de facto state of no-war mentioned in the opening paragraphs of the agreement.

One important aspect was the unpublished "understandings" with the United States. Presumably this made up in some way for the loss of oil and the passes. If Congress did endorse these understandings -- the risk Israel was assuming would become less of a gamble,

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