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BOLSTERING THE REGIME FROM WITHIN:

Egyptian Intellectuals behind the Sadat Initiative

Joan Peters, writing in an article that appeared in Commentary after the second disengagement agreement between Egypt and Israel, went looking for moderate Egyptians and could not find them. They were no doubt hard to come by then, but a few courageous individuals fitting that description did indeed exist. One of them was Najib Mahfuz -- an author of legendary fame in both Egypt and the Arab world -- a figure who without doubt commands the respect of his colleagues, the adoration of the educated who buy his books in the hundreds of thousands if not in the millions, and that of the common folk tuning in to radio adaptations of his famous works.

Mahfuz's search for peace first became public in 1971 soon after the War of Attrition. It was, however, only after the 1973 war that his ideas were publicized with increasing frequency. And as if attesting to his fame and the interest his ideas arouse, his most lengthy articles appeared not in Egyptian newspapers, as one would not unnaturally assume, but in the Kuwaiti press, not known for its moderation on the issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It came as no surprise then when as the Camp David talks drew to a close, an influential Kuwaiti newspaper invited Mahfuz and a number of prominent, mostly leftist, intellectuals to a series of discussions on Sadat's peace initiative. The proceedings appeared in full-page length sections in eighteen issues and most probably will come out in book form.

The symposium started out on a confrontative note. Mahfuz was challenged to explain his seemingly contradictory stance regarding the peace problem. He was reminded that before the October war he was almost alone in calling for peace with Israel. Once war broke out, though, he quickly made an about-face, preaching victory at any price. Now once again the author calls upon Egypt to take up the olive branch on Israeli terms. Mahfuz's answer to these charges was clear cut; namely that he has been a consistent supporter of peace. What he said during the war was an act of loyalty to the state during a time of war, not a sign of agreement with the decision to go to war. The 1973 war deepened his conviction that this one had to be the last, the last of four bloody confron-

tations where "neither the victor gains from his victory nor does the vanquished pay the price of his defeat." According to Mahfuz the superpowers to whose tune we were playing "sought to stamp the area with an image, having the natives fight it out together until we both fade away in order that the image be realized." The conclusion is obvious, namely, that peace is not only a disengagement process but, more important, disentanglement from a deadly web.

The discussion naturally gravitated to consideration of Israel's past and present policies. Mahfuz's antagonists suggested that past history rendered Israel an ineligible partner for any dialogue. Mahfuz shocked the participants with his answer. In his view, Israel's main objective has always been to develop a state that would coexist in peace and on an equal footing with the other states of the area. He saw no evidence of Israeli expansionism -- a term inevitably used and reused in any Arab statement on the issue. The fact that the author was asked to reaffirm what he had said reflected the gulf between Mahfuz and most, if not all, of the other participants. In a peeved tone he added that Arabs could not expect to wage war on Israel thinking it should be a no-lose proposition; in other words that Israel should not realize gains from its military victories.

An Egyptian critic eager to save a sacred cow from slaughter argued unconvincingly that Mahfuz was unfit to make the above pronouncements. The writer, he claimed, was stricken by the plight of the common man in Egypt to the point of denying the true facts of the case. The rebuttal of a prominent leftist author, Louis Iwad, was possibly more interesting for what he did not say than what he did. The main omission that would have been included only a few years back was a charge of treason. Mahfuz was later to comment on its absence as evidence of changing times in the Arab world.

After a heated emotional discussion in which plight was pitted against plight: that of the Egyptians against that of the Palestinians and the tragedy of the Holocaust against that of the Palestinians, Mahfuz reiterated that though what he said previously... was important, the truth remains that his quest for peace stems from present day problems, not from some historical evaluation of the combatants' behavior. Egypt is exhausted, her power limited, her adversary incomparably stronger. Arab support assures Egyptians of a state of limbo, a life not quite death but close to it. Yet while the necessary conclusion is obvious -- to negotiate peace -- its reality is much harder. As Mahfuz sees it, successfully negotiating with Israelis will be anywhere from impossible to barely probable. Israelis suffer from a complex wrought not only by a 30-year war but by 2000 years of persecution the likes of which no people has borne before. He suggested that during those long years, culminating in the Holocaust, Jews lost confidence in humanity, and as a result see the worst in everything -- to the point that they eye with suspicion guarantees promised by a munificent and long-standing ally, the United States. No one, according to Mahfuz,

can fully fathom the depth of Jewish distrust, or the consciousness of being isolated in a hostile sea, let alone the Egyptian negotiator.

Mahfuz's views are in part shared by Tawfiq al-Hakim, another pillar of Egyptian and Arab letters, a man no less famous but more suspect to Arab nationalists for the role he played in developing the pharaonic concept, Egypt's home-grown nationalism. This ideology saw its heyday in the 1920's and 1930's only to be suppressed during the Nasser era in the 1950's and 1960's when pan-Arab nationalism dominated the intellectual limelight and this particularist nationalism was discredited. Incidentally, the "pharaonic concept" is again making headlines -- as "Rejectionist Front" propagandists and, one might add, the West Bank press fear that once again it is rearing its head with the subtle encouragement of Israelis anxious for Egypt to take on a more inward and African-directed orientation. These accusations are doubly effective in an area where Islamic militancy is gaining ground and the glorification of Egypt's pharaonic past is interpreted as an act of historical sacrilege. Still, Hakim's support of the Sadat initiative is much more of an asset than it is a liability.

Though Mahfuz has been the more voluble of the two, Hakim is clearly Egypt's veteran supporter of peace. His ties with Israel date back to pre-state days, having been started in 1943 when Abba Eban, then an officer in the British army stationed in Egypt, gave him an excellent English translation of one of Hakim's books. Hakim often regretted that the relationship was fated to come to an abrupt end, one year before the book was published in 1949 and two years after his trip to Tel Aviv to see a Habimah production of one of his numerous plays. In 1957, at a time when virtually all Arabs were verbally "drowning Israelis in the sea", Hakim had the temerity to write a play whose theme was peace. The symbolism permeating the play was the price the writer paid for getting his ideas across in a way that even censors could not censor.

Other writers, younger intellectuals in the dual roles of literati and journalists, a phenomenon especially prevalent in third-world societies with sizeable educated and politicized elites have joined the ranks of those behind Sadat. They have served him well, especially in providing the necessary polemical ammunition fired in the radio air war raging between Cairo and the capitals of the by now widened rejectionist front. The daily confrontations are serious business in a society where transistors are owned by almost all urban households, can pick up almost all Arab stations, and when an Arab listener can tune in the standard Arabic and understand them.

The phenomenon is remarkable in demonstrating how linguistic bonds in our day and age can serve to promote political disintegration rather than a cohesive community in denying centralized states the level of control of information needed to maintain a tight hold over the ideas to which their populations are exposed. All the

Arab governments in opposition to Sadat are taking part, the Jordanian and Saudi Arabian radio broadcasts proving no less vitriolic than the rest. Obviously some regimes are seeking to encourage the destruction of the Sadat regime from within -- and the radio is the second most important weapon they possess.

The Egyptian radio stations do not stand "mute before Pilate." The Egyptians are reminded in the words of Yusuf Idris, author and former medical doctor, that Egypt must bandage her wounds, accompanied by numerous messages of peace, short interviews with Egyptians from all walks of life lauding the benefits of peace, and songs in Sadat's praise. For the antagonists there is invective -- and no one is spared. Iraq is reminded of its loyal verbal support of the Palestinian cause and its almost total absence from the battlefield. Occasionally names of Palestinians, members of rival guerilla organizations assassinated presumably by Iraqi intelligence, are announced to remind Palestinians that long-standing friends have been known to become enemies.

King Hussein's stand on the peace treaty is presented as nothing short of betrayal. For a while Egyptian radio treated him with kid gloves, obviously taking into account recent mass demonstrations, sometimes violent, that have taken place in Jordanian universities threatening the stability of the regime. More recently however Egyptian radio has broadcast detailed accounts of the 1970-71 massacres noting that it was Egypt that offered asylum to the Palestinians and it was to Egypt, not Syria or Iraq, that the Palestinians fled.

But it is Syria that merits special and exhaustive treatment from Egyptian radio, no doubt for its historical struggle with Egypt for a major role in the Arab world, its deep involvement in the actual conflict, its dominating presence in Lebanon, and its growing influence in Jordan.

Settling scores with Syria is nothing new. The aftermath of both the dissolution of the United Arab Republic and the 1973 war witnessed bitter confrontations, the former out in the open, the latter away from the public eye. Yet in neither case did either country seek to destroy the other's regime. Today the Syrian government is referred to as the Alawite clique, referring to the fact that Assad and many of his close assistants are drawn from a small religio-ethnic minority within Syria. Obviously the Egyptians are hitting at a sensitive nerve. Alawites comprise 10% of the Syrian population and there is a long history of animosity between them and the Sunni majority.

Egypt's propaganda machine, with the help of local intellectuals, concentrates on two main themes. The first is that Syria's involvement in Lebanon is a betrayal of Arab nationalism that the Baathists preach, and a revival of Anton Saadeh's "Greater Syria" plan. The second, a corollary, is that the Palestinian issue is merely a tool for achieving a Greater Syria. One small

proof, as one recent columnist in Al-Ahbar put it, is the secret gentlemen's agreement concluded between Syria and Israel to avoid confrontation during last year's Operation Litani. Once again, the victims of the truce were the Palestinian guerillas, as they were during the days of the Phalangist (Lebanese Christian)-Syrian alliance.

Sadat's success in recruiting intellectual support is an important factor bolstering his regime. This is, of course, not to say that Sadat has everyone thinking his way. The Mahdists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the still sizeable and prominent intellectual left are all part of a living opposition. Sadat's regime is more likely to stand or fall over the issues themselves: the ability of American technology to provide the bandages that Yusuf Idris writes about and Israel's willingness to give substance to a Palestinian autonomy palatable to Egyptians. After all, Mahfuz wanted his views heard in Kuwait, an indication that however loyal Egyptians are to their country, they remain Arabs. With a peace treaty that set in motion the peace process but left many of the issues outstanding, we can all safely assume, like Mahfuz, that there is a long hard road ahead until full peace between Egypt and Israel is achieved.

by Hillel Frisch