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The Palestinian Arabs' Reaction to the Sadat Initiative

In general the reaction here in Israel has been that Sadat's venture has created a whole new constellation of factors, one of which is that the spotlight has been taken off of the P.L.O. but at the same time the Palestinian issue remains crucial and in center stage. As such, there is considerable discussion, speculation and concern as to the reactions of the Arab population of Judea and Samaria, of the West Bank, to Sadat's visit and subsequent speech to the Egyptian Parliament. It is the hope of the Israeli leadership that there can be a middle-ground solution to the Palestinian problem based upon that population which continues to reside in Judea and Samaria rather than the P.L.O. and those Palestinians outside the territories.

This report is based upon press reports as well as an extensive interview with Mr. Edmund Hull who serves as the Political Officer of the United States Consulate here in Jerusalem. Mr. Hull's role as Political Officer is to survey Arab opinion in Judea and Samaria.

In general, Sadat's speech to the Egyptian Parliament received widespread attention. In stores, offices and coffee-houses, crowds gathered around the radios and television sets. They wanted to know what the next step would be in Sadat's venture which began with his visit to Israel. They wanted to hear whether the Palestinian issue still took precedence over all other Arab issues.

The responses in Bethlehem and Ramallah express the general picture in terms of the other cities in the territories. Bethlehem has a Christian majority which is generally regarded as moderate while Ramallah has a Moslem majority which is generally regarded as radical. In both, there was the expectation or hope that Sadat would clearly enunciate that Egypt had not forsaken or forgotten them. However, after Sadat's speech, there were few who could say that they were satisfied with it. The fact of the matter is that Egyptian affairs and the inter-Arab conflict do not interest them and as concerns the future of the West Bank, the words of the Egyptian President were in their eyes insufficient and seemed to them to merely be pro forma on his part.

Ma'ariv, the afternoon daily, interviewed several Arabs from Judea and Samaria for their responses to Sadat's appearances. The Mayor of Ramallah, Karim Hali who is considered perhaps the most radical of West Bank mayors and is a doctrinaire supporter of the P.L.O. was quoted as saying, "Whoever wants to speak to exchange ideas, to conduct negotiations, or to reach an arrangement of any kind must first turn to Yasser Arafat." This style was adopted more recently by the Mayor of Jericho, Abdul Aziz Sveti. According to him, "Egypt is simply looking for a way out of the conflict. They have no further concern with us. Any attempt by Sadat to present it otherwise doesn't make sense to the residents of the West Bank. His political moves are so transparent that he is simply trying to reach an accommodation with Israel." However, at the same time there are mayors of cities in the West Bank as well as other public figures who have varying opinions. Some of them think that P.L.O. from the very beginning has taken too extreme a position and this has served merely as ammunition for Israeli policy. According to them, if the P.L.O.

would exhibit greater flexibility towards Israel then there would be the possibility of negotiations concerning withdrawal and the setting up of a Palestinian State in the West Bank and in Gaza.

This more moderate position is of course muted in tone and represents a minority view. Consequently, it is not heard too frequently and its exponents tend to espouse the line, "We don't deal in politics."

There are also those who walk the tightrope, such as the Mayor of Bethlehem, Elias Freij. Prior to Sadat's visit to Israel, he did say that he blessed his coming and saw his visit as an important event. However, on the day Sadat arrived at Lod, he did not appear in the welcoming party for personal reasons. However, two days later, together with other Arab personalities, he did participate in the meeting with Sadat and according to him, the exchange was a good one which held great promise. After Sadat's speech in Cairo, Freij said, "The President of Egypt gave a good speech. He spoke openly and decently. He defended his position before the Egyptian people. Insofar as the Palestinian problem was concerned, I fear that the problem has been removed from his hands. He will have to find a common language with the other Arab countries before he can continue to deal with it. In the situation that has been created, he is simply unable to represent the Palestinians and their problem." As to the question whether he himself would agree to go to Cairo to take part in the negotiations there in dealing with the Palestinian problem, Freij said, "First, let the invitation come and then I will decide. All I can tell you is that at this point it would be very difficult to decide, very difficult indeed."

Mr. Hull of the American Consulate considered the West Bank reactions to Sadat's visit and subsequent speech in Cairo in terms of three bodies of opinion: the press, the leadership, and popular opinion.

1. The Press Reactions to Sadat

There are three Arabic newspapers published for readers in Judea and Samaria.

- a) El Kuds (daily circulation approximately 12,000 copies) is the leading newspaper in terms of circulation and advertising. It generally is considered moderate with a Jordanian orientation. As such, it was receptive to Sadat's visit and published an editorial of welcome. It included an implied acceptance of the Cairo Conference and urged the P.L.O. to consider Cairo in the light of the West Bank situation which, it claims, has not improved in the ten years of occupation as well as in light of Sadat's position and the problems facing Egypt.
- b) El Fejr (daily circulation figure approximately 6,000 copies) is considered to be pro P.L.O. and Leftist in political orientation. The editorials in El Fejr were in fact censored by the Israeli military censor during Sadat's visit.
- c) El Shahib (daily circulation approximately 6,000 copies) is considered pro P.L.O. but without the Leftist tinge. Both of the latter two newspapers were consistently negative, both to Sadat's visit as well as to his call for the Cairo Conference. They considered his move as being rash, unjustified and a break in Arab unity.

2. West Bank Leaders

Mr. Hull suggested that the most interesting feature of the reaction of the West Bank leadership to Sadat's venture was that there was no knee-jerk response. Usually, one can readily predict how the various leaders in the West Bank will respond on any given issue. This time, however, the responses were much more subtle and varied. Nor, in fact, were there any extreme responses. Hull tends to divide the West Bank leadership into four categories:

- a) Discredited Leadership. He cites such figures as Jabari, the son of the past mayor of Hebron as an example of various figures on the West Bank who are often quoted in the Israeli press and assume for themselves a position of leadership but generally have neither any following or any power base. They are not to be taken seriously, in his view. However, this view may have to be qualified in light of Jabari's mission to Sadat in Egypt.
- b) Modern Leadership. There is a grouping of intelligent, sincere, influential leaders who did in fact meet with Sadat, are supportive of Sadat's venture and who felt that Sadat's speech and call for negotiations was a meaningful and positive step. Such figures as Freij, the Mayor of Bethlehem, El Massri of Nablus and Shebedi of Ramallah. These men and others like them could serve as a pressure group in support of Sadat's peace move.
- c) "The Fence Sitters." There is a grouping of leaders who would include such men as the Mayor of Hebron and the Mayor of Tulkarem who generally support the P.L.O. but are not willing to give them a blank check. It is generally their feeling that the policy of the P.L.O. calling for a national homeland and state, is the solution but see themselves as not only active participants but potential leaders in the Palestinian movement. This group initially refused to welcome Sadat at the airport but subsequently were mollowed by Sadat's speech which they considered to be pro-Palestinian and indicative that Sadat was not prepared to forsake the Palestinian issue. Hull's estimation is that this group was in fact increased by the Sadat visit.
- d) Doctrinaire P.L.O. Rejectionists. This group is best exemplified by Hali, the Mayor of Ramallah. This group not only opposes Sadat's Peace Venture but did in fact make a serious attempt to call upon all of the West Bank leadership and residents to actively reject Sadat's initiative. This move did not succeed, which is a hopeful sign. The West Bank is not prepared at this point to totally reject the Sadat peace effort.

3. The Popular Viewpoint

The initial announcement by Sadat that he would visit Israel and his actual coming created tremendous anxiety, disbelief and shock among the residents of the West Bank. The crucial moment and turning point came with Sadat's speech before the Knesset. They generally thought the speech was a good one and supportive of their interests. In general West Bank residents have reacted positively in the vein that any hope is better than the despair which seems to have set in after all these years of Israeli rule. As such, the majority

of West Bank residents, in the eyes of Mr. Hull can be considered at this point supportive of Sadat. It is possible that the attacks by the P.L.O. in Syria have changed this initially positive response and created a more negative stance.

In general Mr. Hull made some interesting points about the situation in Judea and Samaria in terms of the economy and its impact upon Arab opinion there. In general, the West Bank leadership has not benefitted economically under Israel. The major benefits deriving from the association with the Israeli economy have fallen upon the lower classes and manual laborers who have benefitted greatly. In fact, the landowners and businessmen have been hurt rather than helped by this situation. Moreover, they are not sharing in the general economic boom which is taking place in the Arab world today, which increases their bitterness. However, in terms of the political aspirations of the West Bank, economics do not play any meaningful role. They simply do not think about the economic consequences of a small economically non-viable Palestinian entity. They have been so caught up in their own political rhetoric and by their nationalistic aspirations, that they have not thought through either the economic or social consequences.

Our best estimate is that the situation in these past few weeks has become even more confused. A moderate West Bank leader, Nahad Jah Ralla, President of the Appeals Court on the West Bank was quoted in the Israeli press as saying, "I and my colleagues are in a difficult situation. On the one hand, the President of Egypt speaks about an all inclusive arrangement with Israel and his attempt to make an end of the conflict in our area. On the other hand, they treat us as if we are superfluous. Up to this moment, no one has indicated to me that Egypt wants my presence at the (Cairo) conference. I have not heard from any source about the possibility of my participation in the conference. Strange, but that is the fact." When asked whether he would be ready to participate in the conference if invited Jah Ralla responded, "Of course I would want to participate. My opinion is that we must distinguish between the participation of P.L.O. representatives in the conference and the participation of representatives of the occupied territories." The subsequent visit of a delegation of West Bank leaders to Sadat may have opened lines of communication between them but has not altered the basic situation whereby the Egyptian leader is apparently unwilling to bring in indigenous Palestinians apart from Jordan or the P.L.O.

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