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END OF ACT ONE

Your reporter was present at the Knesset last Wednesday for Begin's presentation of his peace plan, as well as for a portion of the eleven hour debate which followed his speech. Subsequently, he had occasion to speak to various members of Knesset, as well as to attend a briefing by the Foreign Office, and much of what will follow is based on these sources.

Much of what transpired in the Knesset has to be seen against what was or was not achieved in the talks at Ismailiya. Reporters generally tried to analyze why it was that Begin seemed so optimistic and positive while Dayan seemed pessimistic and somber upon their return from Ismailiya. The probable answer lies more in the respective attitudes and personalities of the two men rather than what transpired objectively. Begin returned from Ismailiya confident and optimistic basically because he is convinced that Sadat is strong, confident, and determined to establish peace. On the other hand, Dayan returned somber and even pessimistic because the actual facts were that no movement whatsoever had been achieved in Ismailiya. There was no movement in the Egyptian position with regard to their two basic demands that Israel withdraw from all territories and that a Palestinian state be established in the West Bank and Gaza.

Although the Ismailiya conference did not seem to achieve any overt concrete results, Ze'ev Shiff in an article in Ha'aretz of Thursday, December 29, cites at least four important conclusions to be drawn from it:

1. The first conclusion drawn by the Israeli participants is that Sadat, although he mocks his opponents in the rest of the Arab world, is really unable to allow himself to be cut off from it. In the Arab world there are opponents, moderates and fence-sitters. Even if Egypt and Israel were to achieve a separate agreement, it must of necessity be a very slow and complex process which must take into account the other fronts and demands. The criticisms to which Sadat is subject in the Arab world do bother him; several times during the course of the conference he made reference to them. The reception which was accorded Prime Minister Begin reflected Sadat's concern about the opposition within the Arab world. Otherwise, one would find it difficult to explain why there were so many hundreds of signs and posters about Sadat, with virtually nothing about Begin or Israel. It was only within the confines of the meeting room itself that the atmosphere continued to be warm and positive.

2. The second conclusion is connected to the first. The Israelis participating in the Ismailiya conference were made aware, perhaps for the first time, that Sadat is not the only authority to be dealt with. Although Sadat does rule Egypt single-handedly, nevertheless it was clear in the course of the conference that he is subject not only to pressures from the other Arab nations and leaders but even from within, namely from the Egyptian leadership and officialdom. Here we are not talking about opposition to Sadat or any attempt to undercut or overthrow him. We are talking about officials within his government who tend to be more or less extreme, generally with regard to the Palestinian issue. Within the Egyptian Foreign Office there is a group of hard-liners who tend to be more extreme than either Sadat or Gamasy and less flexible. Israeli leaders, during the course of their conversations, were very much aware of the influence of that group upon Sadat. It is generally conceded that it was because of their influence that Sadat held back from issuing a joint statement with Begin. It could very well be that this is simply a tactic of the Egyptian delegation, an effort to play off one against the other, but the general opinion of the Israeli participants and reporters is that it does reflect a variety of opinion within the Egyptian camp itself. Begin in his speech in the Knesset did in fact make reference to the thinking of these Foreign Ministry officials which he saw as obstructionist and negative.

There is no question that Sadat does have the power to break through this obstinacy, as he demonstrated at one point during the conference. It is related that during the entire week of the Cairo conference, the opposing sides argued at great length as to whether Israel and Egypt should be aiming for a peace treaty, as the Israelis hoped, or a peace agreement, as the Egyptians would define it. Although this was a point of lengthy and unresolved argument during the course of the Cairo meeting, when it was brought up in Ismailiya it took only moments for Sadat to simply agree fully that they were talking about a real peace treaty, thereby resolving the impasse.

3. A third impression which came out of the Ismailiya meetings is that everyone is generally impressed with the determination of both Sadat and Begin to reach a real peace agreement or treaty. Both Sadat and Begin are interested in exerting their full abilities, strength and influence to continue the process in order to achieve peace. It is for this reason that it took them only minutes to decide on a way to continue the peace process by appointing two committees which would begin to meet in mid-January. It is considered significant that Sadat himself suggested that the political committee, which should be the more sensitive and complex of the two, should meet in Jerusalem away from the pressures of the Arab world. Despite Dayan's fears that no real movement had been achieved, Begin did feel that more than anything Ismailiya did secure the end of the war option for Egypt. Since the Egyptians have been told clearly that they can have back all their territory right up to the

international borders, it is difficult to imagine that Egypt will decide to go to war simply for the sake of the Palestinian issue, without any direct Egyptian national interest at stake.

4. The fourth impression drawn from the Ismailiya meetings is that Sadat, at least for the time being, has accepted the American approach that it would be unwise to attempt to achieve a separate Egyptian-Israeli agreement. It is considered unwise mainly in the fact that a separate agreement with Israel would seriously damage Egypt's already critical economic position. More specifically, Egypt's trade with the Arab world would be endangered and secondly, it is possible that the large grants-in-aid which are supplied by the oil-producing states would be cut off. This also explains the American fear of a separate agreement which might leave the United States in the position of having to support Egypt in place of the Arab countries.

Israeli impressions also include the fact that they think that Egypt is not interested in returning the P.L.O. to the scene. Egypt would like very much to see Jordan come into the negotiations and totally supplant the P.L.O. as the party to talk with in terms of the future of Judea and Samaria. In the absence of Jordan or any local Palestinian group with whom Israel can deal, it may be conceivable that Egypt and Israel would set up a trial or test of the autonomy plan within the Gaza district, which formerly was under Egyptian control, with Egypt and Israel being the guarantors and sharing authority.

In terms of the Sinai agreement, the Israeli Foreign Office has indicated that there are four elements involved to insure Israel's security after its withdrawal to the international boundary:

1. The thinning out of forces, withdrawal of forces and demilitarization.
2. Joint Israel-Egyptian supervisory teams which would oversee number 1. Egypt has agreed to such teams, preferring them to United States or United Nations forces.
3. It is even possible that Egypt would agree not only to supervisory teams, but to an actual joint Israeli-Egyptian armed force in this area.
4. The possibility of a U.S. presence in terms of inspection teams or manning various electronic warning stations.

Begin's proposal concerning local autonomy for the West Bank and Gaza is seen by many as sufficiently vague to allow various interpretations. Some see it as going much too far in that it can only lead ultimately to an independent Palestinian state, while to others it is simply a rehash of what was offered to the Palestinians ten years ago, namely

the right to determine local policy insofar as schools and bus lines are concerned and little else. The Foreign Office, as well as the Israeli press, generally see the plan in a very positive light, making a real concession and offering new possibilities. The reaction in Egypt appears to be quite negative and that of the Western world negative to mixed. Dayan's unfortunate remarks in the Knesset concerning the use of the Israeli army were very harmful and damaging, so much so that Dayan went on television over the weekend to try to dampen the negative effect.

The curtain has fallen on Act One which has included some very powerful scenes beginning with the Sadat visit to Jerusalem and concluding with the Knesset peace plan. We are now in the period of intermission and awaiting the second act, which will begin as you receive this letter when the two committees convene in Egypt and Israel.

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