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Who needed the October 1973 war?

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When Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat stood together with US President Jimmy Carter on the White House lawn on 26 March 1979, and signed a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, there were many who thought that this moment could have come one war earlier. Many, pundits and scholars, believed that the 1973 October war could have been avoided if Israel had responded positively to Sadat's peace offers during 1971–73. 'Israel's short-sightedness becomes even more unpardonable when one realizes that her leaders were fully aware of the boldness of Sadat's move,' argues Shlomo Ben-Ami, who concludes, 'It would take the trauma of the Yom Kippur War for Israel to make peace under the same conditions Mrs. Meir now so haughtily rejected.'¹ These words represent an approach that is shared by many scholars and among the public, according to which it was Israel's – and especially Golda Meir's – defiance that left Sadat with no choice but to go to war.² Others put the blame, and not without association with Meir, on US President Nixon's national security advisor, Henry Kissinger. Scholars argue that his lack of interest in an Egyptian–Israeli settlement – due mainly to arguments over authority with Secretary of State William Rogers, but also to his viewing the Arab–Israeli conflict through a Cold War lens – curbed any chance of progress through Sadat's peace initiatives.³

But is this really the case? When the process and result of the negotiations that led to the 1979 peace agreement are carefully studied, it appears that they were in fact much closer to the Israeli position and terms as presented before the 1973 war than to those set by Sadat. The 1979 peace agreement was the result of negotiations conducted directly between Israelis and Egyptians, sometimes directly between Begin and Sadat, and the peace agreement stipulated that Israel would return the Sinai, which it had occupied during the 1967 war, to Egypt, and in exchange formal full peace would exist between the two states. This peace would include 'full recognition, diplomatic, economic and cultural relations, termination of economic boycotts and discriminatory barriers to the free movement of people and goods, and will guarantee the mutual enjoyment by citizens of the due process of law.'⁴ The agreement applied just to Israel and Egypt, and the Palestinians were mentioned only briefly. All of these were terms on which Israel had insisted during the pre-1973-war years, and which Sadat had rejected. If this is the case, then who really needed the war? What purpose did the war serve in the commencement and conclusion of the post-war peace process? The present article will try to answer these questions. It

will do so by telling a story that had been told more than once, but drawing on abundance of primary sources, it will study more carefully the claims and arguments of Egypt in general and Sadat in particular. Such a careful reading of Sadat's rhetoric and exchanges will allow us to contest the common wisdom that dominates the existing historiography and to revisit the notion that the war led to a change in Israel's attitude to peace, which in turn made the peace agreement with Egypt possible. In fact, the argument of the article will be that it was Sadat who needed the war, and he needed it not in order to force Israel into a political process, but for himself, so as to accept terms he could not accept without a war.

In order to understand Israel's attitude toward the territories it occupied in June 1967, especially the Sinai and the Golan Heights, and the way it sought to use them in negotiations for peace after the war, one must understand the impact of the events that took place before 5 June 1967. For approximately three weeks – beginning on 14 May 1967, when Egyptian forces crossed the Suez Canal – and a little more than 20 years after the Holocaust, Israelis were convinced that they were once again facing the threat of annihilation. 'We have a Hitler complex,' admitted Golda Meir.⁵ Speaking before the United Nations Security Council, Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban described the mood prevailing in Israel during those three weeks of waiting: 'There was an apocalyptic air of approaching peril.'⁶ Thus, when the war was over, the feeling among Israelis was one of euphoria and exhilaration. The war and the events leading to the war also taught Israel's leaders diplomatic and military lessons that they intended to apply after the war. The first lesson was that Israel needed defensible borders. The 4 June map 'has something that is reminiscent of Auschwitz for us', said Eban in interview to *Der Spiegel* in January 1969.⁷ These vulnerable borders tempted Gamal Abd al-Nasser to initiate the moves he took against Israel, and now Israel needed defensible borders that would remove that lure and would deter another attack against Israel.⁸ The second lesson was that the United Nations' force stationed along the Israeli–Egyptian border in order to secure the peace failed to provide security for Israel, and Israel could not rely on external forces for its security.⁹ The third lesson was that the Arabs must abandon their belligerent intentions and acts against Israel and must accept it and sign a peace agreement with her. Israel would negotiate separately with each Arab country – 'face-to-face' – in order to conclude a 'contractual agreement' on 'permanent peace, and not a mere suspension of belligerency'.¹⁰

The Israeli government assumed that the territories occupied in the war gave Israel a historical opportunity that Israel would not miss. For the first time in its short history, Israel had the better cards, so thought Levy Eshkol, Israel's prime minister, and it should use them as best it could to provide security and peace to Israel. Indeed, the Ministers' Security Committee discussed these principles on 14 and 15 June and ended its deliberations with a decision that Israel should offer Egypt and Syria peace treaties based on international borders that would include security arrangements. As part of the agreement and the security arrangement, the Sinai would be completely demilitarized, and Israel's freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal and the Tiran Straits would be guaranteed. The Gaza Strip would remain in Israel's hands, as it had never belonged to Egypt, and it should not be given back to Egypt.¹¹

The decision aimed to provide the Israeli government with guidelines for future conduct and to serve as an answer to a question and request posed by Arthur Goldberg, the US ambassador to the UN, who on 9 June had asked Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban to

share with the United States Israel's thoughts 'on how peace might be best brought about'.¹² Abba Eban and Levy Eshkol presented Israel's position on peace to US Secretary of State Dean Rusk and President Lyndon Johnson, respectively, on two separate occasions. Eban and Eshkol argued that Israel would not repeat the experience of 1957, when it had withdrawn without a signed agreement from the Sinai and then had to suffer the consequences. They presented the government's decision and laid down two principles that would be in force during the coming years: negotiations should be bilateral, direct, with each country separately; and Israel would withdraw only after the successful conclusion of peace negotiations that result in a signed peace treaty, and not before then.¹³

Eban, who presented Israel's terms for peace to Rusk and Goldberg, did not intend to offer a peace proposal that would be conveyed to Egypt or Syria. As Eshkol was to do several months later, he too aimed to provide the Americans with information that would allow them to proceed toward a settlement. The Americans, for their part, did not engage in brokering, although American representatives used various venues to bring Israel's message to the Arabs' attention. Arthur Goldberg, for example, told Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in June what Israel's terms for peace were.¹⁴ In any event, the Egyptians received the message. Muhammad Riad, a member of Egypt's UN delegation, told American diplomats in December 1967 that the 'fact is' that the 'UAR's position is known and so is Israel's'.¹⁵

Instead of engaging in brokering, the US, alongside Britain, shifted its attention to the formulation of a UN Security Council resolution that would facilitate a solution to the crisis. Taking into account Israel's terms for peace, and in accordance with President Johnson's Five-Point Plan, which was also based on the principle of land for peace,¹⁶ on 22 November 1967, the Security Council endorsed Resolution 242, which institutionalized the idea of peace for territory. The resolution called on the UN secretary general to appoint a special envoy who would act on his behalf to implement the resolution.¹⁷ In late November the secretary general appointed the Swedish diplomat Gunnar Jarring to this position.¹⁸

Both Israel and Egypt accepted Resolution 242, but from the very beginning they differed in their interpretations as to the meaning and pace of the resolution. Israel argued that the resolution was only the framework, the beginning of a process, and it should be followed by negotiations on the exact terms of the peace and withdrawal. Egypt argued that the resolution was a package ready to be executed: it covered everything, and it should be carried out as it was. Egypt's Foreign Secretary Mahmoud Riad bluntly told Jarring that, first and foremost, Israel should announce that it would withdraw from the territories it had occupied in June 1967. Prior to that, Egypt would discuss nothing.¹⁹ Israel argued that Resolution 242 was not a 'self-executing' document but a set of principles over which the parties would negotiate, and which would lead to a peace agreement and secured and agreed borders.²⁰

Nasser explained on various occasions the thinking behind this Egyptian attitude toward Resolution 242. Nasser believed that compliance with Israel's terms would mean surrender to Israel's terms of victory, which would perpetuate the humiliation the Arabs had suffered in the battlefield at the hands of Israel. Nasser claimed that since the days of David Ben-Gurion, Israel was acting to force Egypt to sign a peace agreement with her, but 'as long Israel did not sign a peace agreement with Egypt it did not win the war.' In a government meeting in April 1968, Nasser stated, 'We reject for eternity any sitting with Israel and signing an agreement with her. It won't ever happen as long as I live.'²¹ In fact,

the humiliation and loss of honour were even more painful than the loss of territory. 'The question is not about solving the Middle East crisis,' declared Nasser. 'It is about the kind of solution, about the solution with honor, of our honor, our future and our fate.'²² With that, Nasser established a core principle that his successor would follow, and which would have significant consequences for Egypt and its attitude toward peace with Israel. This profound belief was manifested in an Arab League resolution adopted during its meeting in Khartoum in September 1967: 'No recognition of Israel; no reconciliation with it; no negotiations; no disposal of the Palestine question.'²³

Resolution 242 brought a sense of relief to Israel. Israeli leaders had been convinced in the aftermath of the war that as happened in 1957, when joint Soviet–American pressure led to Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai, now too, Israel would be subjected to international pressure to withdraw. The government decision of 19 June – that Israel would withdraw to the 4 June 1967, borders in return for peace agreements – was a result of that fear. However, with the endorsement of Resolution 242, it became clear that Israel would not come under pressure to withdraw immediately, and in October 1968 the government made some changes to its peace plans, including a new interpretation of the 'secured and agreed borders' mentioned in Resolution 242. The Israeli peace proposal stipulated that in order to ensure Israel's security needs, as part of the peace agreement, Israel would withdraw to a 'secured border' that would not correspond to the 5 June lines. The new border would leave the Gaza Strip and Sharm al-Sheikh under Israel's control. Israel would also maintain territorial passage to Sharm al-Sheikh, 'and other vital security arrangements'. This decision replaced the government's decision of 19 June 1967.²⁴

With that, the attempts to find a solution on the basis of Resolution 242 ended, at least until Anwar Sadat came to power following Nasser's death in September 1970. By then, Prime Minister Levy Eshkol had passed away (in February 1969), and Golda Meir had replaced him. Sadat seemed to usher in a new era in terms of Egypt's attitude toward peace with Israel, as the new leader began discussing this issue. However, Sadat's new rhetoric was well grounded in the assumptions and perceptions bequeathed to him by Nasser. In the first place, Sadat did not believe that Israel really would trade territories for peace. He argued that Israel based its expansionist claims on the biblical vision of 'Greater Israel extending from the Nile to the Euphrates'. The Zionists had been pursuing that goal since the first Zionist Congress in 1897, and the 1967 war was yet another stage in this effort.²⁵ Sadat also dismissed Israel's demand for direct negotiations, arguing that it reminded him of the Jewish 'neighbors of Muhammad in Medina. They were his neighbors, and he negotiated and concluded a treaty with them, but they eventually proved to be a mean, traitorous and treacherous people, when they allied with his enemies to strike at him in Medina and from within.'²⁶

Another dimension of Sadat's refusal to negotiate with Israel was his adherence to Nasser's view of the meaning of the June war for the Arabs. Sadat defined the struggle with Israel as a 'battle of honor'.²⁷ Just like Nasser, Sadat also believed that the June 1967 defeat was a humiliating experience for Egypt and the Arab world and that any further achievement for Israel from that defeat of Egypt would perpetuate the humiliation. Israel and the United States argued that as Egypt 'must' make concessions because it had 'lost the battle'. They 'wanted to impose a peace treaty and achieve Israel's political objectives' and to bring Egypt 'to our knees'. However, declared Sadat in January 1971, this was 'not peace, this is surrender', and Sadat would never agree to it.²⁸

Prime Minister Meir indeed thought that Egypt — and the Arabs — must pay a price for what she considered the Arab aggression. 'People had to pay for their deeds,' explained Meir, in justification of Israel's demands from Egypt.²⁹ Israel's terms for peace remained as they had been since October 1968; at their heart was the demand to negotiate first, and only after signing a contractual peace agreement with each Arab state separately, would Israel withdraw to 'secure, recognized and agreed borders' as delineated by negotiation. In any event, the borderlines would not be those of 4 June. Israel would keep Sharm al Sheikh, 'which dominates the Straits of Tiran', and the Sinai would have to be demilitarized. 'Egypt must never be allowed to deploy troops, tanks, artillery and missiles in the peninsula,' Meir said to Jarring in January 1970.³⁰

At the same time, while insisting that any peace agreement should lead to territorial changes in favour of Israel, Meir and government officials stressed time and again that this demand was not a precondition to negotiations. Each side would bring to the table its position and ideas, and they would continue from there.³¹

Jarring rejected Israel's territorial claims. He argued that there were two separate issues in Resolution 242, the withdrawal lines and the 'secure and agreed border', which would be concluded between the concerned parties. He argued that Resolution 242 stipulated Israel's withdrawal to the 4 June lines, but that did not necessarily mean that this line would be the final border between Israel and Egypt (or between Israel and Jordan or Syria, for that matter). Israel's insistence on not withdrawing to the 5 June line was hence a breach of Resolution 242.³² Jarring acted upon that premise. On 8 February he sent Israel and Egypt a questionnaire, which included questions about their agreement to take measures that would allow the implementation of Resolution 242.³³ The questionnaire was phrased in a way that accorded exactly with what Sadat was seeking. Thus, Sadat could respond affirmatively to all the questions directed to him. In his reply, he confirmed that he would be prepared to terminate the state of belligerency and respect Israel's sovereignty and right to live in peace. He would prevent acts of belligerency from Egypt against Israel and would ensure the freedom of navigation in the Suez Canal and the Straits of Tiran, accept the stationing of the UN peacekeeping force in Sharm al-Sheikh, and agree to the establishment of demilitarized zones of equal distances from each side of the border. However, Israel should first withdraw from all territories occupied in the war and the Palestinian problem should be settled in accordance with UN resolutions.³⁴

To these Sadat added two more provisions, which he had introduced earlier in an interview with James Reston from the *New York Times*, in December 1970. First, Israeli ships would be allowed to cross the Suez Canal only after resolution of the Palestinian problem. Second, Sadat would not agree to normalize relations with Israel. 'Don't ask me to make diplomatic relations with them,' stated Sadat. 'Even after you resolved the boundary problem?' asked Reston. 'Never, never, never,' was Sadat's answer.³⁵

For Israel, both the questionnaire and Sadat's answers were unacceptable. As to Jarring's aide-memoire, Israel rejected it on the grounds that it was practically a proposal for a territorial arrangement. With that Jarring had exceeded his authority and overstepped his mandate.³⁶ As to Sadat's reply to the aide-memoire, the Israeli government rejected its non-negotiability. Egypt's letter had conditioned its consent to sign a peace agreement with Israel on Israel first accepting Egypt's terms. Israel would not accede to this condition. Thus, the Israeli government's reply was that Israel had accepted with satisfaction Egypt's

consent to sign a peace agreement with Israel and suggested immediately commencing negotiations over the terms of such an agreement.³⁷

Sadat, though, was not really addressing the Israelis. His main target was the United States. Shortly after sending his reply to Jarring, he sent messages to the United States according to which he was interested in deepening the relationship between the two countries. He certainly hoped that closer ties with the United States would cause the Nixon administration to exert pressure on Israel to withdraw from the territories.³⁸ The American response was ambivalent.

Secretary Rogers was enthusiastic. He and his undersecretary, Joseph Sisco, sought an Israeli–Egyptian agreement as a means to improve US–Egyptian relations and remove, or at least reduce, Soviet influence over Egypt, and he therefore accepted with satisfaction Sadat’s reply to Jarring’s memorandum.³⁹ Now that Sadat had finally said ‘peace’, Rogers and Sisco thought it was Israel’s turn to make the next concession. After all, Sisco told Yitzhak Rabin, Israel’s ambassador to the United States, Sadat’s letter met Israel’s categorical demand that Egypt agree to sign a peace agreement with her. Israel should now make ‘the hard decisions on withdrawal and territory’.⁴⁰ They expected Israel to relax its position so as to make it acceptable to Sadat, even at the price of attaining less than originally envisaged from the bargaining chip it was holding.

The White House’s response, however, was cautious.⁴¹ Nixon, who insisted that US foreign policy be run past the White House, allowed Rogers to deal with the Arab–Israeli conflict because he and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, believed that the gap between the sides was too deep to overcome, and that engaging in fruitless efforts to bring Egypt and Israel together would generate high expectations that could not be met and would only antagonize both countries.⁴² More importantly, however, the president essentially accepted the fundamentals of Israel’s approach to resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict. In a letter to Meir from 3 December 1970, President Nixon wrote:

We will not press Israel to accept the positions of the UAR [United Arab Republic] that there must be total Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in the 1967 conflict to the pre-June 5 lines [...]. We will also adhere strictly and firmly to the fundamental principle that there must be a peace agreement in which each of the parties undertakes reciprocal obligations to the other and that no Israeli soldier should be withdrawn from the occupied territories until a binding contractual peace agreement satisfactory to you has been achieved.⁴³

That is, President Nixon accepted Israel’s terms of peace almost in full.

Sadat, for his part, continued his campaign to win US hearts and minds by introducing a new plan for partial agreement. Israel would withdraw from the banks of the Suez Canal, and he would open the Canal for shipping. The proposal had history. During his visit to Washington in December 1970, Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan had raised the possibility of ‘less than peace’, an arrangement that would allow reopening the Suez Canal.⁴⁴ Sadat liked the idea. He introduced such a plan to the Egyptian National Assembly on 4 February 1971, and on 22 February 1971, in an interview to *Newsweek*, he added some clarifications. Sadat suggested that Israel withdraw its forces about 200 kilometres east of the Canal along a line across al-Arish – Ras Muhammed, near Sharm al-Sheikh. Then Egypt would deploy its forces on the eastern banks of the Canal, and Sadat would extend the ceasefire that was about to expire in February, for three to six months.⁴⁵

Rogers liked the idea, but it contained several elements that worried the Israelis, as Sadat's proposal differed from Dayan's on several points. First, Dayan had suggested withdrawal to the Mitla–Gidi passes line, about 40 kilometres east of the Canal, whereas Sadat was proposing a much deeper withdrawal line. Second, Dayan had made no reference to Egyptian soldiers crossing the Canal, a condition Sadat specifically mentioned. Third, Dayan had not limited extension of the ceasefire as Sadat did. Fourth, and much more profoundly, Dayan's proposal was disconnected from any comprehensive solution to the conflict. Sadat declared that his proposal, even if temporary, would not be an isolated act. Israel's withdrawal to the al-Arish line would only be the first step toward the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Sinai within an agreed timeframe.⁴⁶ Thus, the only difference between Sadat's comprehensive peace proposal and his offer to open the Suez Canal was the timetable. If Jarring's peace proposal called for an immediate withdrawal of Israeli troops, Sadat's interim agreement aimed only to extend the timetable by a few months. Instead of a one-time pullout of Israeli troops, it would be a two-stage pullout, part of an agreed timetable for the complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Sinai. Sadat added one more provision: the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the banks of the Suez would be followed by a complete Israeli withdrawal not only from all of the Sinai and the Gaza Strip, but also from all occupied Arab territories, the West Bank and the Golan Heights, and 'there must be a just solution to the Palestinian problem.'⁴⁷ In an address Sadat delivered to the Palestinian National Council on 28 February he added one more clause, which Israel would find even more difficult to accept. He referred to the UN resolutions 'which were issued in this respect since 1947' as the basis for resolution of the Palestinian problem.⁴⁸ In other words, Sadat was expecting the Palestinian problem to be resolved on the basis of the UN Partition Plan as delineated in Resolution 181. That is, Israel should withdraw not only to the lines of 4 June 1967, but even farther back, to the borders established by the November 1947 UN Partition Plan.

There was one more dimension to the conditioning of the peace agreement on resolution of the Palestinian problem, something on which Sadat repeatedly insisted: it gave the PLO the right of veto over the peace process. The PLO National Charter argued that Zionism was 'an illegitimate movement' and viewed all of Mandatory Palestine as 'the homeland of the Arab Palestinian People'. The Charter stipulated that 'armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine' and that the goal of the armed struggle would be 'the elimination of Zionism in Palestine'. That is, the PLO rejected a priori any diplomatic solution that would lead to recognition of Israel. The PLO rejected the validity of Resolution 181 and its proposed partition of Palestine, as well as the legitimacy and validity of the Balfour Declaration, which provided the legal and international basis for the existence of the State of Israel.⁴⁹

Even though Sadat's proposal was far from meeting Israel's demands, Golda Meir was ready to pursue the issue. She pointed to the problematic aspects of Sadat's proposal,⁵⁰ but nonetheless, despite its reservations the Israeli government sent a message to the Egyptian government, through the United States, in which it suggested they discuss the proposal.⁵¹ Donald Bergus, the American representative in Cairo, delivered the message to Hassanain Heikal, who responded in a very non-committal manner.⁵²

While Sadat did not respond to Israel's messages, Rogers did, at least indirectly. He blamed Israel for failing to respond properly to what he considered Sadat's peace proposal, and rejected the Israeli claim that it would present its line of withdrawal during

negotiations with Sadat. 'The negotiation is already going on,' stated Rogers,⁵³ ignoring the fact that Sadat had made it very clear that his proposal was a non-negotiable package deal. This argument reflected the tendency of the State Department to smooth over the messages coming from Cairo and to demand that Israel be flexible in attitude.

Israel refused to comply with Rogers's demands. Dayan suggested that Israel do no more than send a letter to Ambassador Jarring reiterating its known position on peace with Egypt. Eban seconded Dayan, arguing that all in all Israel was on the right track. He believed that Sadat had made the proposal because of Israel's 'steadfastness and refusal to comply with unripened solutions'. Israel should hold fast to its position, and eventually Egypt would make more concessions and be more compliant to Israel's demands. The government decided in favour of Dayan's proposal.⁵⁴ A message was conveyed to Jarring, which he was asked to send to Egypt. The message restated Israel's terms for peace with Egypt. It addressed in a clearer and more explicit manner issues pertaining to peace between Israel and Egypt, making it clear that Israel was discussing matters with Egypt and not, through her, with the other Arab countries whose territories Israel occupied.⁵⁵ Egypt's reaction was almost as anticipated: the only decisive factor was Israel's withdrawal, and its refusal to withdraw to the 5 June 1967 lines was proof that it was 'committed to expansion'.⁵⁶

Thus, Jarring's mission and the Israeli–Egyptian encounters reached a dead end. However, Rogers and Sisco still thought that the interim agreement idea could save the day. They would discuss the matter for several months, trying to promote the idea both within the administration and with Egypt and Israel. What made it possible for Rogers and Sisco to continue engaging with the subject for several months was the simple fact that they were prepared to ignore the obvious, namely, the gap between Israel's and Egypt's interpretations of the meaning and place of the interim agreement. During months of exchanges led first by Rogers and then by Sisco, it became clear that the differences between Israel and Egypt over the structure and meaning of the interim agreement remained fixed. One minor change was Meir's agreement that Egyptian policemen cross the Canal, but she was utterly unwilling to agree to the crossing of military forces. Sadat insisted that Egyptian military forces cross the Canal, and he was unwilling to concede this point. Otherwise, all the differences in position remained: the depth of withdrawal, the time period of the ceasefire, Israel's shipping rights in the Suez Canal, and the link between the partial and final agreement.⁵⁷

Rogers and Sisco understood that the core of the problem was Israel's refusal to accept the link between the interim and the final agreement, but they still hoped that it would be possible to soften Sadat's position. Only after several months did Sadat make it clear that he would not change his mind as to the nature of the interim agreement. In an address to Egypt's People's Assembly on 20 May, Sadat stated, once more, what Rogers and Sisco preferred to ignore. 'The problem of opening the Suez Canal is not a separate case, nor a partial settlement,' he said. 'It is merely one of the stages of the complete withdrawal and of the time-table for the implementation of the Security Council resolution.'⁵⁸ This address was followed by a written message Sadat handed, personally, to Bergus that contained Egypt's terms for an interim agreement. It contained everything that Rogers, Sisco and Bergus were trying to ignore.⁵⁹

With that, the talks on an interim agreement had reached a deadlock. Kissinger saw through the reasons for the failure of the initiative: the State Department's inclination to

'minimize differences' between the two sides on issues that were 'fundamental to each'.⁶⁰ Indeed, since March 1971, Rogers and Sisco had been selecting — mainly from Sadat — what they wanted to hear, ignoring the more disturbing aspects of the Egyptian position. They sought to close the gaps between Egypt and Israel and in the process ignored the fact that both sides had defined red lines that they would not cross. Each side's red line was far from the other's, making it impossible to bring the sides together. While pressing Israel to relax its position regarding differences with Egypt, Rogers and Sisco refused to accept that Sadat rejected any change to his demands. Sadat's terms for agreement, partial or comprehensive, did not shift one bit throughout those lengthy months of negotiations.

Thus, the 'year of decision', as Sadat called 1971, ended up with nothing as far as the diplomatic process was concerned, and from the Egyptian perspective, things were even worse. Sadat saw the United States growing closer and closer to Israel, militarily and diplomatically. President Nixon agreed to sell Israel more major arms systems, including combat aircrafts. Rogers tried to create a linkage between the supply of combat aircraft to Israel and Israel's readiness to soften its position regarding the peace settlement. Yet President Nixon promised Prime Minister Meir during her December 1971 visit that such a linkage would not exist.⁶¹ The shipments of combat aircrafts to Israel resumed, without Israel having to make any change in its position on peace with Egypt. Israel agreed to participate in proximity talks on a partial agreement to open the Suez Canal, and Rogers and Sisco agreed to accept Israel's primary condition, that the partial agreement not be connected to the final agreement in any way. In addition, Rogers agreed to an Israeli demand that he play a more modest role in brokering between Israel and Egypt, serving more as a 'mailman' than an initiator of ideas.⁶²

At the same time, Israel celebrated the stalemate. Gone were the threatening ideas about withdrawal to the 4 June 1967 line on the basis of what the Israelis perceived as ambiguous promises of peace that do not take Israel's security needs into account. Jarring's mission was in deep freeze, and so were the State Department's initiatives. Israel and the United States should 'maintain a position of firmness and strength', explained Abba Eban to Rogers, as 'the ultimate objective would be for Sadat to have no alternative to negotiations' that would result in an agreement that Israel could accept.⁶³ Eban's statement was beefed up by public statements by Israeli ministers such as Meir, Yigal Allon, Eban and Israel Galili, in which they emphasized Israel's insistence on holding on to some of the occupied territories, even at the cost of war.⁶⁴ These were complemented by the establishment of settlements in the Golan Heights, the West Bank and the Sinai, as well as the deportation of Bedouins from the Rafah area with the aim of clearing the way for the construction of a new city.⁶⁵

These statements and actions served as proof for Sadat that Israel was acting to 'establish accomplished facts', and it did not seriously intend to implement Resolution 242.⁶⁶ It was against this background that Sadat replied in the negative to Rogers's invitation to join the proximity talks. The reason for his rejection was obvious: Egypt saw no point in entering the proximity talks without seeing how they were linked to the final resolution.⁶⁷

In practical terms, this was the end of the State Department's involvement in Israeli–Egyptian peace encounters. Rogers understood this, even though he and his team continued talking with both Israelis and Egyptians.⁶⁸ At the same time, slowly and steadily, working under the radar, Kissinger took over. While Rogers had been trying to broker peace between

Israel and Egypt, Kissinger stayed away from the negotiations. Now, when it was clear that the State Department had failed to make any progress, Kissinger secretly established contact with Sadat's national security advisor, Hafez Ismail. Kissinger initiated the contact with the Egyptian advisor, and in January 1973, after hesitating briefly, Sadat approved Hafez Ismail's contact with Kissinger.⁶⁹ This contact, which produced a series of meetings between the two, was important for two main reasons: first, it marked Kissinger's takeover of the peace process from the State Department – as well as the United Nations and Jarring – and second, it marked the resumption of discussions on a peace settlement between Israel and Egypt.

At the White House, President Nixon spoke in favour of Kissinger's move, arguing that Israel should relax its position. 'The time has come that we've got to squeeze the old woman,' he told Kissinger, referring to Golda Meir.⁷⁰ However, this was just Nixon being rhetorical and letting off steam. He did not believe that it would be possible to move toward a comprehensive agreement, so he suggested that Kissinger instead work to achieve an interim agreement. Toward that end, he thought that Sadat should make concessions. 'The Egyptians are just simply going to have to take a settlement of that sort,' he told Kissinger.⁷¹ When he met Prime Minister Meir during her next visit to the United States in March 1973, Nixon told her, 'I have kept our commitment to you and did not squeeze you. That will continue.'⁷²

Hafez Ismail came to Washington DC to start the backchannel talks in February 1973, carrying with him what Uri Bar-Joseph described as 'the most important diplomatic proposal of the 1967–73 period', a proposal that was 'the first of its kind'.⁷³ Unfortunately, this was not the case. Before outlining the details of the Egyptian terms for peace, Ismail emphasized Egypt's premise for peace: 'Egypt cannot accept peace at the expense of its sovereignty, territory or pride. Egypt will not be humiliated.' These were code words, meaning one thing and one thing only: 'There is nothing to negotiate.' Repeating a theme raised time and again by Sadat, Ismail explained that there could be no negotiations as long as Israel was occupying Arab land. Egypt would negotiate only after Israel had committed to complete withdrawal.⁷⁴

Furthermore, it turned out that Ismail had not come to the United States to introduce a new Egyptian–Israeli peace plan. His goal was rather to negotiate a change in US–Egypt relations, at the expense of Israel. The path to change would not be through Egyptian concessions, which Egypt would not make, but through a change in American policy toward Israel and through American pressure on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories.⁷⁵ In essence, Ismail was saying the following: There would be no interim agreement; Israel should withdraw, first and foremost, to the pre-Six-Day-War lines; this should also apply to Jordan and Syria, although Egypt would be willing to see Hussein negotiate a separate peace agreement with Israel, which would include border changes, but 'not major concessions in Jerusalem'. That is, Egypt would sign a peace treaty with Israel only after Israel's withdrawal from all the occupied territories, not only from the Sinai; the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt would not lead to 'full peace'; that is, the agreement would not include exchanges of ambassadors, trade agreements or the opening of borders for routine travel. These measures would be part of the normalization of the relations with Israel, which would 'take a long time', and would occur only after resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem; the Palestinian refugee problem should be resolved in accordance with UN resolutions, which Ismail inferred as granting the refugees 'unlimited opportunity to return to Israel'; the agreement would allow Israel free passage in the Tiran

Straits and the Suez Canal; the Sinai would not be completely demilitarized. Israel and Egypt would establish demilitarized zones on both sides of their mutual border, although Ismail agreed that Israel's zone be smaller than Egypt's; an international force would be stationed in 'areas of special importance in Sharm al-Sheikh'. All of this, suggested Ismail, would be discussed between Egypt and the United States. 'Once the US has developed a sound position and reached an understanding with Egypt, the US had to stand by it, and influence Israel to accept it.'⁷⁶

Ismail's plan did indeed mark a change in the Egyptian position on some points. It acknowledged Israel's security needs, and it included passage through the Suez Canal for Israel. However, the proposal still fell short of what Israel demanded: there would be no direct negotiations between Israel and Egypt on the basis of Resolution 242; the agreement would not be bilateral; there would not be full diplomatic relations, with embassies and comprehensive peaceful relations between the two countries; the security arrangements were less than what Israel demanded, especially regarding the Tiran Straits and the demilitarization of the Sinai (Ismail's plan mentioned only partial demilitarization, along the Israeli–Egyptian border on both sides of the border); and the settlement would include the unconditional and non-negotiable return of Palestinian refugees to Israel, which for Israel meant the end of the Jewish state. But the most disturbing element of the proposal was its pace: Ismail, just like Nasser and Sadat, demanded an Israeli commitment to withdrawal from all the occupied territories prior to any move by the Arabs. That is, Israel should trust Sadat – and the other Arab leaders – to implement their part, once Israel had withdrawn from the territories.

Kissinger's conclusion from what he heard Ismail to be saying was concise: 'In short, he did not change Egypt's position on any basic issue.'⁷⁷ There was no way Israel would agree to give up its precious assets, on the basis of which it expected to achieve full peace with the Arabs, in return for a promise by an Arab leader.

The Kissinger–Ismail backchannel remained active during the following months.⁷⁸ However, the Egyptian position remained what it was when Ismail had presented it in February, which in its main points was the same position Sadat had presented in 1971. For Sadat, the failure of the Ismail mission meant that war remained his only option. By early 1972 Sadat was raising the issue of war, after the 'year of decision' – 1971 – ended without any decision. Sadat then resorted to militant rhetoric and started talking about his decision to go to war. 'It should be clear that the decision [to go to] battle is final,' he told the People's Working Force in late January 1972. A few days later, he told air force officers, 'Today, we have neither another solution nor another path, but only the path of war.' The only thing that remained unclear was the date.⁷⁹

Thus, Sadat was determined to go to war. But to what end? What purpose would the war serve, in Sadat's mind? As mentioned in the introduction, it is commonly held that Sadat went to war in order to break the status quo and force Israel to be more susceptible to his ideas for peace. In fact, this was also how his lieutenants understood it.⁸⁰ However, when we re-examine the 1979 Israeli–Egyptian peace agreement, this assumption seems to become less grounded. The process and terms of the peace were, in practical terms, closer to those Israel had been proposing since 1967. Although Israel did relinquish its territorial claims in the Sinai, it was Sadat who accepted terms to which, before the 1973 war, he had vociferously asserted he would never agree. Peace was achieved following direct negotiations between Israeli and Egyptian representatives, without preconditions and

without Israel making a prior clear commitment to withdraw to the 4 June lines. The negotiations over peace and the conclusion of the peace agreement were conducted on a bilateral level, between Israeli and Egyptian representatives, disconnected from the other occupied territories. As to the Palestinians, a modest formula was introduced, which fell far short of what Sadat was demanding before the 1973 war. The negotiations led to a comprehensive, contractual peace agreement that included the full demilitarization of the Sinai, a concept Sadat had fiercely opposed before the war, and to normalization and the exchange of diplomats, also measures to which Sadat had objected vehemently before the 1973 war.⁸¹

So why did Sadat go to war, if eventually he accepted the principles for peace as outlined by Israel before the war? His widow, Jehan Sadat, provided a clue to an answer. In an interview to the Israeli *Yediot Aharonot* in November 1987, she said:

I don't agree with those claiming today, among us and in Israel, that Sadat tried to achieve genuine peace before 1973. I believe that he tried to achieve a cease-fire, no more than that. Sadat needed another war in order to win and to commence negotiations as equals. My husband was a man of peace, but as an Arab leader he was unwilling to sit with Israel while feeling 'short'.⁸²

This is of course a post factum interpretation, which cannot sustain a thesis by itself. However, it is in line with everything Anwar Sadat actually indicated time and again during 1971–73 regarding how he saw things. Even more than the lost territory, Sadat was offended by the Egyptian military defeat in 1967. The Israeli occupation of the Sinai hurt, of course, but of no less importance in Sadat's rhetoric was the humiliation that came with the defeat, and the damage the defeat caused to Egypt's pride. In his memoirs, he described his reaction to the defeat as follows: 'I myself was completely overwhelmed by our defeat. It sank into the very fabric of my consciousness so that I relived it day and night.'⁸³ There were two options for erasing the humiliation, according to Sadat: either by regaining the territories without having to negotiate with Israel, or by going to war.⁸⁴ With the failure of the diplomatic campaign that aimed to return the Sinai to Egypt without negotiations with Israel, Sadat felt that only the second option, war, remained open to him.

However, Sadat and his senior military commanders knew full well that the Egyptian army would not be able to repel the Israeli forces from all of the Sinai, back to the 4 June lines. Here Nasser provided the answer. Sadat relates how Nasser told him that 'if we get even 10 cm of the Sinai, and [are able] to entrench there in a way that no power could remove us from there, the whole situation would be changed, in the east and in the west and anywhere! We will remove the shame that we carried from the 1967 defeat.'⁸⁵ And indeed, this was precisely Sadat's war plan. He aimed for a symbolic yet significant achievement, occupying a narrow strip of land on the eastern banks of the Suez Canal. The military would cross the Suez Canal by surprise, with a large number of troops under the cover of surface-to-air missiles, and would defeat the small number of Israeli soldiers deployed along the Suez Canal. When the Israeli reserve forces counter-attack a few days later, the Egyptian army would build a sufficiently strong defence line to repel the Israeli forces.⁸⁶ That is, Sadat did not intend to send his military to capture the whole of the Sinai, and the war need not result in Sinai's reoccupation. The goal of the attack would be to occupy that small piece of land and 'to entrench there in a way that no power could

remove us from there'. This would be enough to declare victory and to announce that the shame of the humiliation had been removed.

That conception allowed Sadat, ten days after the start of the October 1973 war, while the fighting was still raging, to declare victory following the Egyptian military's successful crossing of the Suez Canal and the entrenchment of Egyptian forces on its eastern banks.⁸⁷ This feat would qualify as a symbolic achievement allowing Egypt to claim victory. It's 'not only the liberation of our land' that mattered, declared Sadat. Of no less importance was 'the defeat of the Israeli conceit and arrogance so that they once again return to the condition decreed in our holy book: "humiliation and abasement has been stamped on them."⁸⁸ With that, declared Sadat, 'We restored our *pride and self-confidence* [...]. We are no more driven by [...] defeatist complexes of inferiority. [...] Thus the rival sides could meet shortly after the end of the fighting, and start talking.'⁸⁹

Indeed, that was the main point: it was only now, after restoring Egypt's pride and honour, erasing the humiliation, that Sadat could meet the Israeli leaders and talk with them. Once the humiliation was gone, Sadat 'had no doubt that a face-to-face confrontation with the Israelis was the only way to reach [a] just and sustainable peace in the Middle East'.⁹⁰ Only now could Sadat agree to terms that, before the war and under the burden of defeat and humiliation, had been impossible. Now that he was facing Israel as an equal, peace no longer meant 'surrender' and diktat. Now Sadat could hold direct negotiations that would lead to a contractual peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, including fully open borders and diplomatic relations.

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87. Excerpts from a speech before the People's Assembly by President Anwar Sadat, calling for an Arab–Israeli peace conference, 16 Oct. 1973, <http://www.sadat.umd.edu/archives/speeches/AADG%20People's%20Assembly%20Speech%2010.16.73.pdf>, accessed on 8 Jan. 2015.
88. Speech by President Anwar Sadat at the religious ceremony held in Al-Husayin Mosque in Cairo to celebrate the prophet's birthday, 25 April 1972, Cairo Domestic Service in Arabic, in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports*, 26 April 1972.
89. Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, p.238 (emphasis added).
90. *Ibid.*, p.228.