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ANWAR AL-SADAT AND THE CROSSING: A STRATEGY OF NECESSITY

CORE COURSE I ESSAY

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ANWAR AL-SADAT AND THE CROSSING: A STRATEGY OF NECESSITY

Introduction. Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat's initiation of warfare on 6 October 1973 set in motion a train of events that changed the political face of the Middle East for at least the remainder of the century. A variety of influences and considerations contributed to Sadat's decision to go to war--Kissinger believes he decided in the summer of 1972¹--and to his strategy for its beginning, conduct, and aftermath. Some elements of Sadat's strategy can be instructive to US strategists.

The International Context. From Sadat's vantage point in Cairo in 1972 and 1973, the international system imposed steadily increasing constraints on movement toward liberation of Arab lands conquered in 1967. (At least publicly, he had not yet made the transition from concern for "Arab" land to concern almost exclusively for "Egyptian" land.) Like most Third World leaders during the Cold War, Sadat saw himself operating in a bipolar world at the pinnacle of whose international system were the two superpowers. The relative strengths of the United States and the USSR and the intensity of friction between them globally were critical guides to the activities of lesser powers regionally.

Globally, US-Soviet detente dealt a severe blow to the nonalignment idea, upon which nationalists had thrived since the 1955 Bandung Conference. Regionally, the Nixon-Brezhnev declaration of Middle Eastern "military relaxation" at the conclusion of their May 1972 Moscow summit meant an indefinite perpetuation of the situation of "no peace, no war" and Israeli occupation. Sadat saw virtually no hope for a negotiated settlement short of Arab--and Egyptian--capitulation.

The United States, he had become convinced, was unwilling to pressure Israel. It had allowed its half-hearted Rogers Plan to collapse in 1971, and it was distracted by Vietnam, presidential elections, and, increasingly, Watergate. The Soviet Union supplied arms to Egypt, but not in types and quantities required for

¹Henry A. Kissinger, Years of Upheaval (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982) 226.

offensive operations--or so it was thought. Moscow delivered enough to make the Egyptians dependent, but not enough to allow them to start a war that would endanger detente (and which the Soviets were convinced Egypt would lose). Neither of the superpowers, then, wanted Egypt to fight to regain Arab land; and neither appeared prepared to risk other interests to press for return of the land by any other means.

For their part, the Israelis appeared to have no interest in changing the status quo. Their settlement policies in the Occupied Territories indicated plans for a long stay. With virtually unlimited supplies of sophisticated US arms, and repeatedly demonstrated ability to use them, it appeared to almost everyone that they could do so indefinitely.

For Arabs, the "Arab arena" or "Arab system" falls into a category between "international" and "domestic." Egyptian relations with Damascus, shaky since the breakup of the United Arab Republic in 1961, had improved, and Syria would be essential in any attempt to retake Arab lands. At least as significant, Nasser's death and Sadat's friendship with King Faisal had facilitated a rapprochement between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh would be the linchpin in any attempt to use Arab oil wealth in the cause of regaining Arab land. Still, there remained threats in the Arab world. Chief among them, it appeared more and more clearly to Sadat, was Libya's Mu'ammarr Qadhafi, whose brand of radical Nasserism attracted the Arab world's frustrated and disillusioned.

The Domestic Context. One legacy of the Nasser years was that Sadat inherited a system that vested in him exclusive control over national security strategy. Although in 1971, in what he came to call the 15 May Corrective Movement, Sadat had purged the government ministers and Arab Socialist Union leaders most threatening to his rule, his hold upon the presidency was by no means secure in 1972 and 1973. By mid-1972, Egypt's slippage into the Soviet orbit, which Nasser had accelerated from 1967 until his death in 1970, appeared virtually complete to thoughtful Egyptians. Sadat, moving from the "Year of Decision" to the "Year of Total Confrontation," was rapidly losing credibility inside Egypt. He still operated under the shadow of the defeated, yet immortal, Nasser. Worse, the butt of cruel jokes since assuming the presidency, Sadat was becoming a laughingstock among

Egyptians on the street.

Coptic-Muslim sectarian strife--a traditional barometer of Egyptian discontent--was followed by student rioting for "democracy" and "mobilization" in late 1972. Leaders of Egypt's intelligentsia, disgusted and embarrassed by repeated calls to arms without movement, in January 1973 publicly petitioned the regime not abuse the word "battle" any further. More ominously, Army morale was low, and rumors of coup-plotting circulated. The flow of refugees from the canal cities exacerbated the loss of canal and tourism revenues and the burden of military spending upon Egypt's inefficient state-directed economy. Domestic politics did not constrain Sadat from going to war; much to the contrary, constraints were growing on how long Sadat could call for war without delivering and remain in power.

Interests and Threats to Them. Egypt in the years 1967 to 1973 was a gravely wounded nation. The most fundamental Egyptian interests as viewed by almost every Egyptian at the time, including Sadat, were its honor and its territorial integrity. In their view, everything else would follow the restoration of these, particularly economic improvements and a renewed claim to Arab world leadership. Sadat's basic interests, of course, were to retain and expand his power, to move from beneath Nasser's shadow, and to gain legitimacy as an Egyptian and Arab leader in his own right.

Continued Israeli occupation of Arab, particularly Egyptian, lands, perpetuated by the diplomatic stalemate, as well as by Israeli complacency, military strength, and feeling of invincibility, threatened Egypt's and Sadat's most basic interests. US support to Israel ensured its military superiority, and detente ensured that Israel's margin of superiority would at least continue undiminished. At home, nondelivery on his threats of war were hastening Sadat's political--and perhaps physical--demise, while next door, Qadhafi waited to assume the mantle as champion of Arab rights should Sadat falter. Time, in short, was the paramount threat.

Objectives. The Egyptian president was one of those "statesmen of less favored societies" of whom Henry Kissinger wrote without specifically mentioning Sadat, leaders whose "means oblige them to pursue goals less ambitious than their hopes,"

and whose "circumstances require them to approach even those goals in stages."² Sadat realized that his (and virtually all Arabs') preferred goals of complete Israeli withdrawal from lands taken in 1967 and ultimate Arab liberation of Palestine were unattainable in the near term.

Sadat's near-term strategic objectives, then, were the restoration of honor and pride--Arab, Egyptian, the Egyptian regime's, and his own--and the destruction of the "myth" of Israeli invincibility. Egypt and Sadat strove for more maneuver room on the Egyptian-Israeli front, within the Arab arena, and between the two superpowers.³ The United States identified with Israel, but only the United States could influence Israel. Egypt needed to emerge from beneath its identification with the Soviet Union and engage the United States and the leverage it could wield over Israel. Sadat sought to reassert Egyptian leadership of the Arab world, to prove Egypt could employ the Arab world's principal military force on its behalf, and to justify continued support. Sadat understood that Egypt--and he--could not make the concessions necessary for the restoration of its land from a position of weakness, and Egypt could not negotiate from a position of strength until it had restored its honor and pride. What was needed, then, was a psychological boost for the Egyptians, a shattering psychological blow for the Israelis, and a jolting alarm for the West, principally the United States.

Power, Resources, and Instruments. Despite Israel's qualitative military superiority, Sadat's Egypt was not without its military advantages. Egypt had strategic depth that Israel lacked, yet Egypt's lines of communication to the Suez front were shorter. Cairo's contiguous allies, Libya and Sudan, provided even greater strategic depth, if needed. In Cairo, unlike in Jerusalem, strategic decision making at the top was unencumbered by cabinet or parliament. Egypt had vast human resources upon which to call. Egypt's large standing army could be deployed almost indefinitely and strike on short notice, while Israel depended upon

²Kissinger, Diplomacy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994) 23.

³Fouad Ajami, The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981) 99.

reserves. Egypt's economy was less complex than Israel's, less subject to dislocation by protracted warfare, and could endure longer at close-to-subsistence level. Israel was constrained from large-scale preemptive or preventive strikes out of concern for US opinion, while Egypt was not. Although weak in maneuver warfare, Egyptian troops could be tenacious in defense and were good military engineers. Above all, Egypt had historically shown itself more willing to absorb human losses than Israel.⁴

The process of mobilizing Egypt's military power and subordinating the country's economy and political system to the coming battle had been under way since well before Nasser's death in 1970. The addition of the Syrians to the equation to create a second front would be a crucial force multiplier. To supplement these military advantages, Egypt had its standing in the nonaligned and Arab worlds and its political alliance with Saudi Arabia, which would provide an important economic instrument. In addition, Egypt had an implicit guarantee against ultimate failure in the USSR's unwillingness to allow another ignominious rout of Soviet-armed Arab armies. There was no question of mobilizing Egyptian public opinion for war; restraining it was a major challenge for Sadat.

Plans and Priorities. To achieve his strategic objectives--which were political--Sadat and his generals established three principal, high-priority, short-run military aims, or operational objectives: crossing the canal, holding recaptured territory, and inflicting maximum Israeli casualties. Crossing and holding would restore Egypt's honor and pride; inflicting casualties would strike at Israel's center of gravity and principal vulnerability. With the appointment of War Minister and Commander-in-Chief, General Ismail, and his Chief of Staff, General Shazli, Sadat created a team that could turn what appeared to be Egyptian military deficiencies into advantages. Soviet doctrine emphasized repetitive, set-piece training, and Moscow provided large quantities of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and manpack anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), both defensive systems. Egyptian troops

⁴In June 1971, in typically hyperbolic but nonetheless revealing language, Sadat vowed "the issue" would be settled that year, even if it meant sacrificing 1 million Egyptian lives. By the end of the year, Egyptian officials had raised the figure to 3 million. See David Hirst and Irene Beeson, Sadat (London: Faber & Faber, 1981) 122, 124.

trained incessantly on crossing, bypassing strongholds, and defending, using SAMs as cover against Israeli air superiority, using ATGMs to defend recaptured territory against Israeli armor, and avoiding maneuver warfare. Egypt's operational plans, then, were to use its strengths in rote training and defensive systems asymmetrically in offensive operations.

Deception would provide the strategic (to some Bar Lev Line defenders, even tactical) surprise. Sadat and his generals excelled at this; from 1970 to 1972 Sadat had threatened war in hopes of forcing the issue on the diplomatic front and thereby avoiding war. In 1972 and 1973, he simply continued his practice, with such embellishments as military exercises, counting on Israeli arrogance and Western complacency to sustain disbelief.

Concurrent with these efforts, Sadat reinvigorated Egypt's diplomacy in the service of his war aims.⁵ With non-Arab states, he tried to develop broad support for return of lost territory. He courted Libya and Sudan for strategic depth, and coordinated with Syria for a second front. Although he nurtured relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states with an eye toward when Egypt would require massive financial aid and the political leverage of oil, he seems not to have precoordinated the use of the Arab "oil weapon" to the extent some early observers implied.⁶

Whether Sadat's July 1972 invitation to 15,000 to 20,000 Soviet military advisors to leave Egypt was part of a matured strategy is problematical. Sadat would have us believe it was part of a carefully laid plan.⁷ It was likely more spontaneous, although resulting from years of pent-up frustration: a combination

⁵The successes and effects of this part of Sadat's strategy can be overemphasized, however. Certainly, other Arab, Muslim, and East Bloc actors were hard at work isolating Israel internationally, and Israel was more inconvenienced than threatened by Third World resolutions and withdrawals of ambassadors.

⁶Cf., for example, Bard E. O'Neill, "The October War: A Political-Military Assessment," Air University Review 25 (July-August, 1974): 31, with M.S. Daoudi and M.S. Dajani, Economic Diplomacy: Embargo Leverage and World Politics (Boulder, CO: Westview P, 1985) 117-32.

⁷Anwar al-Sadat, In Search of Identity: An Autobiography (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 230-31.

of Sadat's pique; attempted signals to the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia; an attempt to reduce Soviet influence; and a realization that a war, if and when it occurred, would be extremely difficult to initiate in the presence of thousands of Soviets without Moscow's acquiescence.

Sadat's Strategic "Style" Sadat once said his decisions and actions were based "mainly on intuition." He always, he said, tried to "weigh a particular decision on the scale of its chances of success and failure--I do my calculations (hisabat)--before I act,"⁸ a process that sounds very much like cost-benefit analysis. Officers and diplomats who worked closely with him have testified to Sadat's oft-demonstrated inability to distinguish between fact and fiction, and to his lack of interest in detail.⁹ Intuition, an automatic cost-benefit analysis, isolation from and intolerance for advice, a penchant for "surprise" or "shock" diplomacy, and an impatience for tedious details produced Sadat's style through 1973. (The Western media and hubris that produced the post-1973, reflective, pipe-smoking statesman adorning the dust jacket of his autobiography is beyond the scope of this paper.)

How Did the Strategy Work? In the near-term, Sadat's strategy achieved its aims. Egyptian forces crossed, held, and inflicted casualties. The war changed the psychological basis of the conflict, boosting Egypt's confidence, and undermining Israel's. His strategy broke the Soviet stranglehold on Egyptian freedom of action (albeit eventually to replace it with US- and Saudi-imposed constraints). Some of the war's most important effects were on the United States, to whom Sadat would turn for the next stages in the recovery of the Sinai. Israeli military power had not assured stability, as Washington had assumed it would. The war undermined the belief that US-Soviet detente would minimize the danger of regional conflicts. The war challenged prevailing attitudes of US policy makers toward the Arab world, and sensitized them to the possibilities of the Arab oil weapon.¹⁰ For Sadat, himself,

⁸Majid Khadduri, Arab Personalities in Politics (Washington: Middle East Institute, 1981) 179.

⁹Shibley Telhami, Power and Leadership in International Bargaining: The Path to the Camp David Accords (New York: Columbia UP, 1990) 176-177.

¹⁰William B. Quant, Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967 (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993) 177-78.

it provided legitimacy, paving the way for his emphasis on an Egyptian as distinct from Arab identity in his dealings with Israel and the United States, a process already begun by Nasser.¹¹

The failures in Sadat's strategy were mostly in the military operational realm. His interference in operational issues in the second week of the war almost caused disaster. The rigid military strategy his generals formulated made no provisions for exploiting opportunities on the ground. Sadat's refusal to see the danger of Israel's counter-crossing to the west bank of the canal led him to delay acceptance of a cease fire, leaving the 3d Army encircled and Israeli forces in the Nile Delta at the end of the war. His claims not to have foreseen the possibility of rapid US resupply to the Israelis¹² appear disingenuous at best. His acceptance of a cease fire without consultations with Damascus caused a permanent rift with Syria. Certainly, Sadat expected more rapid progress regaining Egyptian territory following the war. Israeli withdrawal from Sinai (less Taba) was still nine years off, would require a trip to Jerusalem and abandonment of the Palestinians and Sadat's Syrian allies, and would not be completed in his lifetime.

A Strategy of Necessity. The rigidity of the international situation, the domestic threat, and the virtual impossibility of long enduring the situation and retaining power dictated the necessity for action. As Fouad Ajami aptly puts it,

[S]ooner or later the chatter had to end if the Egyptian state was to remain in command at home, to redeem its standing in the Arab system, to check the appeal of Mu'amar Qaddafi, to challenge the detente of the superpowers and the complacency of Israel.¹³

Sadat could have capitulated to the Israelis without a fight, which course he was not inclined to take and which would probably have led to his immediate removal. He could have continued to drift, promising action but taking none, which would probably have eventually led at least to his political demise. He could have fought, achieved nothing and been defeated--which he risked--and refused

¹¹Ibrahim A. Karawan, "Sadat and the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Revisited," International Journal of Middle East Studies 26 (1994): 252.

¹²Sadat 260-61.

¹³Ajami 94.

concessions. Or he could have fought, won a bit, been defeated, and eventually have conceded virtually everything save Egyptian territory, which, in the event, is what he did. Sadat had to act, and the extent of his boldness was that he acted sooner rather than later. "We give to necessity," said Quintilianus, "the praise of virtue."

Lessons. Beyond the obvious lessons in strategic surprise and the consequences of complacency that have by now become fixtures of writings on the October War, and despite Sadat's shortcomings, the planning for The Crossing can still be instructive to US strategists. Sadat's strategy achieved his near-term goals for a variety of reasons, not least of them the unwitting complicity of his enemies. Among the principal sources of his success, however, were that 1) he first established overarching, but limited, political goals, and 2) he then picked the ablest military leaders available to devise and implement a military strategy to attain the political goals. It worked for Sadat in 1973, and it worked for the US-led coalition in 1991. Strategists must know their nations, and if Sadat did not know the Egyptian people by 1981, he nonetheless knew them in 1972 and 1973. He knew that the prospect of regaining their pride would give the Egyptians spine, and he knew that regaining it would make them flexible on the hard choices for peace. Both his knowing them and forgetting them are instructive. Finally, strategists must have clear views of their own limited resources, and Sadat's and his generals' strategy employed limited means to reach limited goals, imaginatively capitalizing on Egyptian strengths and exploiting Israeli weaknesses. Certainly, the means at the disposal of US policy makers, as at the disposal of Sadat and Kissinger's "statesmen of less favored societies," will often "oblige them to pursue goals less ambitious than their hopes." Therein can lie success. Perhaps more importantly, therein can lie the avoidance of failure.