

Statements and joint press conference Begin-Sadat in Ismailiya

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Statements and joint press conference Begin-Sadat in Ismailiya, 26 December 1977.

Almost at the beginning of the Ismailiya summit, agreement was reached between Mr. Begin and Mr. Sadat on the convening of joint military and political committees, the first to meet in Cairo, the second in Jerusalem, with rotating chairmen, to deal with the major issues. But when discussion began of these issues, difficulties arose and the conference was extended by another day. On 26 December, the two leaders appeared before the press to read statements and to answer questions. Mr. Begin described the talks as very good and said he was leaving Egypt a happy man. In replies to questions it became clear that the future of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the Palestinian issues were the major problems to be resolved. Following is the text of the statements and replies to questions:

Sadat's statement:

In the name of God, let me seize this opportunity to express my gratitude for the efforts you have done to cover the historical moments here in Ismailiya. As you know, after my visit to Jerusalem on the 20th of November, a new spirit prevails in the area and we have agreed in Jerusalem and in Ismailiya also to continue our efforts towards achieving a comprehensive settlement.

We have agreed upon raising the level of the representation in the Cairo conference to ministerial level and as you have heard yesterday (Sunday) we have agreed upon two committees - a political committee and a military committee headed by ministers of foreign affairs and ministers of defence. The military committee will convene in Cairo. The political committee will convene in Jerusalem.

Those committees shall work in the context of the Cairo conference, meaning that they will report to the plenary whenever they reach any decision. The question of the withdrawal we have made progress, but on the Palestinian question, which we consider the core and crux of the problem here in this area, the Egyptian and Israeli delegations here discussed the Palestinian problem.

The position of Egypt is that on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip a Palestinian state should be established. The position of Israel is that Palestinian Arabs in Judea, Samaria, the West Bank of Jordan, and the Gaza Strip should enjoy self rule.

We have agreed that because we have differed on the issue, the issue will be discussed in the political committee of the Cairo preparatory conference.

I hope I have given you some light upon our work and thank you again.

Begin's statement:

Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen. I have come here a hopeful prime minister and I am leaving a happy man. The conference in Ismailiya has been successful. We will continue with the momentum of the peace-making process.

Now starts the phase of the most serious negotiations - how to establish peace between Egypt and Israel as part of a comprehensive settlement throughout the Middle East. These two days are very good days for Egypt, Israel and for peace.

May I express our gratitude to the president for his gracious hospitality he bestowed upon me, upon my friends and colleagues, the Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan and the Defence Minister Ezer Weizman and our collaborators and advisers.

This is the second meeting between President Sadat and myself after the historic event of his breakthrough visit to Jerusalem.

Here, too, may I say, we spoke as friends. We want to establish real peace. There are problems to discuss and in these two committees, the chairmanship of which we will rotate between our respective ministers, those serious negotiations and talks will take place.

Now my friends and I will leave Ismailiya and Egypt with the faith that we contributed to the peace-making process and there is hope that, with God's help, President Sadat and I and our friends will establish peace.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

News conference

Q. Mr. Begin, what are the advantages of two or three committees working in tandem rather than a cohesive peace forum and since you and President Sadat obviously coordinated these discussions, do you expect to meet soon and frequently?

Begin: The committees will start with their work quite soon. In the first week of January they will work every day. We hope for good and concrete results. President Sadat and I also agreed during our private talks, if necessary, from time to time we shall meet again.

Q. Mr. Begin and Mr. Sadat, would you say Egypt and Israel are about to achieve a peace treaty in a couple of months?

Sadat: We are working towards a comprehensive settlement. As I said before, we want to establish peace in the area. Without a comprehensive settlement we can't achieve peace.

Begin: I agree with the President.

Q. To Begin: What about the declaration of intention you were both to announce? And how do the proposals you submitted to President Carter differ from those you brought here?

Begin: The statement made by the President is an agreed upon statement. So we don't need now an additional written declaration. We agreed to continue the efforts to establish a comprehensive peace settlement in the Middle East on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 242 and 338 and to establish these committees. This is the basic agreement. This is the most important development at the Ismailiya conference.

Our colleagues and friends will continue with the efforts as the president and I explained. We have presented to President Sadat the proposals I took to President Carter. There were a few amendments not of decisive importance. And yesterday at the conference I presented all our proposals in detail. The president listened very attentively and now the

committees may have counter-proposals by Egypt as is natural in the process of negotiating peace treaties.

Q. Looking beyond a peace settlement, can you tell us something about your long-term grand designs for peace? How to satisfy your people's expectations of a better life, of a renaissance in this Middle East cradle of civilization? Are you in favour of cooperation in science, education, agriculture, industry, trade and cultural exchanges between your two countries and eventually between Israel and the Arab world as a whole?

Sadat: Well, the two committees will start, and, as I said, will report to the plenary. Let me say this - we are working towards a comprehensive settlement in the area here and the nature of peace is on the agenda between both sides of the two committees, and all that you have mentioned will be discussed in the committees.

Begin: May I congratulate you, Mr. Carr on the poetry you read to us and I think this is a very good vision and when we establish peace, all those good things you put into your question will be put into realization.

Q. Mr. President, is the gap on the Palestinians unbridgeable?

Sadat: In as much as we shall be continuing in the Cairo conference to discuss whatever points of difference between us, we shall continue. As Prime Minister Begin has said, if need be we shall meet again. I don't think there is any gap that cannot be bridged between us.

Q. President, do you agree that Egypt not only holds the key to peace in the Middle East, but also that no combination of Arab countries can wage war in the foreseeable future against Israel?

Sadat: Well, maybe you have heard my speech. We were sincere in war and we are sincere for peace since my visit to Jerusalem last November. Let us sit together like civilized people and discuss whatever problem between us. Let us agree upon the fact that the October war should be the last war. We did not differ upon this at all. The continuation of our efforts will answer all this.

Q. What about waging war without Egypt?

Sadat: Well, we have here, for sure, in the Arab world, in this area here, the key to war and peace. In Egypt here, this is a fact, an historic fact. Well, I can't speak for anyone but I can say this.

Q. Mr. President, can the West Bank Palestinian issue be solved without a role for the PLO?

Sadat: There should be a solution for this problem. We have passed it to the political committee that we have agreed upon in the Cairo conference. For sure, we shall find a solution. Because, as I have said before, the Palestinian question is the crux of the whole problem. Maybe in the future, after the political committee works and the discussions start, a new situation will develop.

Begin: The organization called the PLO is bent on the destruction of Israel. It is written in their charter. They never changed their position. As I stated time and again, from our point of view everything is negotiable except the destruction of Israel. Therefore, this organization is no partner to our negotiations. Now as I read before I reached Ismailiya, the spokesman of this organization threatened the life of President Sadat - speaking about one bullet that may change the course of events. So now we have a situation, after Tripoli, in which such threats are issued both against Israel and Egypt. We want to discuss the problem of the Palestinian Arabs with our Egyptian friends. We want to

negotiate with the representatives of the Palestinian Arabs and this we are going to do in the first week of January.

Q. Is there any possibility that other Arab countries will join the conference? Will you keep King Hussein of Jordan informed?

Sadat: For sure I will be informing King Hussein of all the developments that have taken place here in Ismailiya and let us hope that others will join yet in the next stage.

Q. In view of the dramatic changes that have taken place, have you, Mr. President, changed your mind about delaying diplomatic relations for future generations?

Sadat: As I have said before, the nature of peace is one of the important points that is on the agenda for the two committees and for the plenary session after that. Let me tell you this - it is now not more than 35 or 40 days since my visit to Jerusalem. Everything has changed. Everything has changed since that visit took place. I quite agree with those who say that the world after the Jerusalem visit is completely different to the world before the visit.

Q. Seven years ago the U.S. and China started ping-pong diplomacy. Will you open the borders to allow sportsmen of both sides, even at this stage, and in that way to allow people to know each other and play together? The Egyptian football team - which I'm told is better than Israel's - could play the Israel team.

Sadat: It is not yet ripe. But for sure we shall be continuing our discussions in our meetings. As you have heard, there will be a committee here and a committee there and gradually we shall be in a position to reach agreement upon all what you are proposing here.

Begin: Until the day the president agrees to exchange sportsmen on both sides, do something to strengthen our football team (laughter).

Q. Mr. President, in view of the disagreement on the Palestinians, can an interim accord be reached between Egypt and Israel?

Sadat: The differences should be overcome in the committees. It is a fact.

Q. You are not seeking an alternative to peace?

Sadat: As I have already stated before the Knesset, this time we are not either for a disengagement agreement or a partial agreement - trying to reach some stages and then postponing other steps after that. No. This time we are for peace. Genuine peace. Comprehensive settlement.

Begin: May I add, Mrs. Zemer, the President and I agreed that there is no alternative to peace.

Q. How do you explain the abrupt change from years of enmity and distrust to friendliness and trust?

Sadat: It is not abrupt. It must have been in the subconscious of all of us and when I made my step, in my calculation, really, I knew my people would agree to it. But I never thought that they would go to this extent. It is a natural feeling and there is no fear at all. There will be no revival of anything that has happened in the past.

Q. Mr. President, Mr. Begin, have you reached the stage where mutual troop reductions in the Sinai are possible?

Sadat: Let us hope that in a few weeks we shall be in a position to report.

Begin: Yes. Yes. We hope so. When peace comes on, both countries, all countries, in the Middle East will be able to reduce their military forces and expenditure which is eating up our substance and rather devote our sources and resources to the liquidation of poverty, development of agriculture and industry. This is our common aim.

Q. I was asking about troop reduction at this stage.

Begin: We do hope for the possibility of reducing troops from all sides.

Q. On what moral grounds, Mr. Begin, are you denying the Palestinians, the West Bank and Gaza their right to self-determination? And you, Mr. President, on what moral grounds can you negotiate about the future of the Palestinians without a single Palestinian representative present?

Begin: One correction, my friend. I belong to the Palestinian people too. Because I am a Palestinian Jew and there are Palestinian Arabs. But, of course, we want to live in human dignity, in liberty, justice and equality of rights. Therefore, I brought the president a proposal of self-rule for the first time in the history of the Palestinian Arabs. Now we have established a political committee. We stated our positions clearly and the political committee will continue the discussion of this very serious problem.

Sadat: What we are discussing really is within the Arab strategy that was agreed upon in the Arab summit conference. But in the details I shall not negotiate for the Palestinians. So they should take their share. But in this Arab strategy, what I am doing really is that I am not speaking for myself but for this strategy in its principles. But I shall not put myself as a spokesman for them or speak for them. They should join in the next stage.

Q. Is Israel's demand for a military presence in the West Bank a major stumbling block?

Sadat: I do not want to reveal what we have already discussed in the proposals that have been made by Prime Minister Begin. He has shown his will to end the military government on the West Bank. But we differ upon the issue, as I have told you, of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. That means self-determination.

Q. Did you discuss the future of the Golan Heights?

Sadat: I cannot speak for Syria or the Golan Heights, as I told you, now we are concerned with the main principles in the Arab strategy. And whenever we reach agreement upon those points between us in the committees, in the political and military committees, after that everyone should negotiate for himself.

Begin: I do want to express the hope that President (Hafez) Assad (of Syria) will join our common effort. We want a comprehensive peace treaty. We want peace with all our neighbours to the south, to the north and to the east and when President Assad agrees to negotiate with us, we will be willing to negotiate with him. This is a problem of the northern border of Israel and the common border of Israel and Syria.

Q. I am an Egyptian journalist and I want to ask Mr. Begin in his language.

Begin: You want to speak to me in Hebrew? I understand Hebrew (laughter).

Q. (in Hebrew) Mr. Prime Minister, I want to ask you if the initiative of President Sadat brought about profound changes in your thinking and outlook, and also how you see the future of Israel and the Middle East after peace.

Begin: (in Hebrew) Firstly, I want to tell you, you speak better Hebrew than I do. (In English, addressing Sadat) I want you to know he speaks better Hebrew than I do (laughter). Congratulations. No, I want to answer. I thank you for your question. (In Hebrew) I want to say that the visit of President Sadat to Jerusalem was a visit of historic significance, for the whole Israeli people, for the whole Egyptian people, for all the peoples, and we appreciate it. Since the visit we have worked well on a peace plan, and I brought this peace plan before the president, and we explained it in detail yesterday in the joint meeting, when we were alone, and when the two delegations met.

The future of Israel after peace is achieved, as in the case of Egypt - I have no doubt, it will be glorious and that peace will be achieved between the peoples, the Middle East will develop, and as his majesty, the King of Morocco has said, it can become a sort of paradise on earth. This is the cradle of human civilization and from here came the tidings of peace and progress. Therefore, I was very happy to hear your question and that is my answer. Now I shall translate into English with a Hebrew accent. (Begin then translated his remarks in English).

Q. Now that you have raised the level of the talks, how do you see the role of the U.S.? Will you be inviting Secretary of State Vance to take part in some of your talks and is there a role for the Soviet Union?

Sadat: I foresee for the U.S. and the U.N. in the political committee (inaudible) but the military committee will be bilateral, as for the U.S., it will be in the political committee without the Soviet Union. We didn't exclude them. They excluded themselves. Well, we have no objection from our side.

Q. Mr. President, will you call an Arab summit, and will the other parties be invited to the Cairo conference when the level is upgraded?

Sadat: Until we reach in the committee agreement on the main issues and mainly the Palestinian issue, on which we have differed - until we reach this point, as it is part of our Arab strategy, I shall not be in a position to ask for an Arab summit meeting. But whenever we reach this, I think that after that, I shall be in a position to discuss with my Arab colleagues the possibility of a summit.

Q. Do you feel that Mr. Begin's proposals contain sufficient concessions to have justified your trip to Jerusalem?

Sadat: Well, we have agreed on certain points. We have made progress on the withdrawal. We have differed among us on certain points, namely the Palestinian question. These proposals that have been made by Premier Begin will be put before the committee, political or military, and other counter-proposals will be submitted to these committees, and until we reach them we think that the momentum that we have given to the peace process is continuing.

Q. What do you think of Begin's proposals?

Sadat: Well, as I have told you, we have points of difference and points of agreement.

Q. Can you be more specific on what progress was made on Sinai? And does this mean foreign ministers exclusively in the Cairo conference?

Sadat: I have stated before that in the political committee there will be the foreign ministers, and in the military committee there will be the defence ministers. For the first part that you have asked, I have heard the proposals Premier Begin told us about and we are preparing our counter-proposal in the military committee. But really what concerns us in this respect is a comprehensive settlement. This is not the Sinai that is the problem now, because as I told you, after peace, after a genuine peace in the area, regarding

Sinai, this is a side issue and, of course, in a comprehensive settlement it will be part of it. And as I told you, I prefer not to reveal anything, and leave the military committee to work on the details and discuss proposals and counter-proposals until we reach agreement.

Q. Mr. President, what about the PLO? Don't you feel the Palestinians have the right to choose their representatives? What role do you think the PLO should play in the peacemaking process?

Sadat: I have stated before the Knesset that the Palestinians should be a part of the settlement because, as I said, the Palestinian question is the core of the whole problem. The PLO is now in the rejection camp. I sent them an invitation and they refused and excluded themselves. Well, I didn't exclude them. For the future, let us wait for what will develop.

Q. Mr. President, is it still your position that Israel must withdraw from all occupied land, including East Jerusalem?

Sadat: That's right.

Q. When you speak of progress on the question of withdrawal, may I ask Mr. Begin how he interprets that progress?

Begin: Well, Resolution 242 does not commit Israel to total withdrawal, and therefore this matter is a matter for negotiation, to establish those secure and recognized boundaries which are mentioned in the second paragraph of Resolution 242. And this is the crux of our problem - to negotiate the conditions of peace in order to establish peace throughout the Middle East. This is what we are going to do in the next few weeks and months.

Q. Will Syria eventually join the talks, and what would be the effect?

Sadat: I can't answer this. You should ask President Assad. I can't speak for him, as I told you whenever they find it convenient for them to join, we shall welcome them.

Q. Will the Cairo conference reconvene simultaneously with the two ministerial committees? Or alternately?

Sadat: It has always been my position that without good preparation, Geneva will be a failure. I said this during my visit last April in the U.S. I made my first proposal for a working group under Vance to start contacting all the parties concerned and a meeting to be prepared before Geneva.

Q. But what about simultaneous meetings of the two committees?

Sadat: They will be working in the context of the Cairo conference, and as I said, they will report to the plenary.

Q. Does this mean the Cairo conference will continue on the foreign minister level, that Mr. Vance and Mr. Waldheim will come here?

Sadat: Let us hope so. But for sure, we shall not go back. We are going forward.

Q. But the political committee is meeting in Jerusalem. Does this mean that Mr. Vance and Mr. Waldheim will also be in Jerusalem?

Sadat: Well, we shall leave this to them.

Q. Mr. Begin, do you accept the principle of non-acquisition of territory by force and are you going to apply it to a comprehensive settlement?

Begin: Yes, we are for a comprehensive settlement and I accept the principle established under law attesting that there mustn't be any acquisition of territory in the wake of a war of aggression. The war of the Six Days was a war of legitimate self-defence, and the president told me yesterday, yes, he does remember the slogans issued in those days to throw the Israelis into the sea, and so we defended ourselves in accordance with international law and practice. Thank you.