

Super-power diplomacy limited after Sadat's visit to Israel

By Georges Vigny

The major event of 30 years of Israeli-Arab history has clearly been President Anwar Sadat's trip to Israel. The visit was the political and moral equivalent of the Six Days War. Thirty years after the birth of Israel, Sadat's recognition of its existence imparted an irreversible legitimacy to the country. It was as if the Egyptian head of state had turned his back on war and decided to go in search of peace. So Anwar Sadat, the man who made the improbable happen, has knocked down the psychological wall that accounted for 70 per cent of the problem. In doing so he has made the remaining 30 per cent still more difficult to solve – what used to be only part of the problem has become the whole of it.

What was surprising was not so much the spontaneity and warmth of the welcome the Israelis gave Sadat (who was greeted by a 21-gun salute, although the two countries were still technically at war) as the perfect understanding achieved by the Arab visitor and his Israeli host. After that Sabbath sunset when Sadat inspected an Israeli guard of honour, there was an obvious *rapprochement* between the two old adversaries. The knowing smile that passed between them in front of the American cameras said more than their statements, which were necessarily evasive.

This wholly natural *rapprochement* between Israel and Egypt marked the turning-point in Middle East politics. It has set bounds on the freedom of action of the super-powers – for the Soviet Union as much as for the United States.

Two approaches

Let us enter into the debate on the merits of two approaches to the Middle East question, which are said to be complementary but are

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in fact basically different: the Kissinger-style "step-by-step" diplomacy compared with the global approach; the bilateral approach as practised by Israel and Egypt along the Suez Canal, for example, compared to the multilateral approach, in which all parties are supposed to come together in a forum dedicated to the search for a general peace.

Before the Sadat trip to Israel, the latter approach was – both rightly and wrongly – identified with the Geneva Conference. Rightly, because all the "confrontation states" would have found themselves in a single Arab delegation (and why not?) face to face with Israel, the other party to the conflict. Wrongly, because the flaw in the bilateral approach – evading the Palestinian issue, which is nonetheless a basic part of the whole problem – is also to be found in the Geneva Conference approach. Until Anwar Sadat's historic visit, the Palestinians, represented by the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), were not invited to attend.

Even if they had been invited, they would not have been able to take part. The Geneva Conference was conceived in terms of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 of 1967 and 1973, both of which refer to the Palestinians as "refugees". Claiming, as it does, an exclusive Palestinian legitimacy, the PLO felt that it could not go to Geneva as the representative of a refugee cause rather than a national one. Not having renounced its charter (the articles of which claim that Israel must disappear and give way to a vague "democratic and secular" state for the three faiths), the PLO could not be accepted by Israel as a participant in the conference, nor could there be any question of changing the terms of the UN resolutions without at the same time having to re-think the conference itself.

The disquieting conclusion is that, while the bilateral approach risks ignoring the Palestinian issue, that very issue is a stumbling-block in the way of the multilateral approach.