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THE PANIC ON THE SETTLEMENTS

Congressmen, in a straw poll, just voted five to one against Israel on the subject of the settlements. We have never had such a hostile expression in Congress on any Israeli policy. And now it is up to Congress to approve or disapprove military aircraft sales to Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

However, the larger issues in the Middle East still stand. The natural tie between American national interest and Israeli security still stands. The real danger does not lie in whether Israel is right or wrong in its tactics on the settlements. The real danger is that settlements issue can be escalated into something more than it is - and effect such matters as the aircraft sales.

The settlements are just part of the total negotiation. Israel has again reaffirmed that the settlements are negotiable. Israel has already made extensive concessions. It has agreed publicly that it will return to Egypt sovereignty over all of the Sinai. It has said that, for reasons of security, it will have to negotiate the conditions under which two per cent of that land is returned. That slice of land is the Rafah settlement, with about 2000 Israelis located in that spot which has always served as the launching ground for Egyptian attacks on Israel. For security reasons, Israel wants to negotiate certain self-defense capabilities for that settlement.

Egypt has not announced any concessions on its part. Sadat did a fine thing when he "recognized" Israel, which made negotiation possible. But now, it is necessary for

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concessions to come from both sides. So far, if there is intransigency, it is not on Israel's side; Israel has made the only announced concessions, and cannot be expected to give away all its bargaining chips before negotiations. This is all true of the West Bank settlements, too, which Israel will have to negotiate finally with the parties concerned.

The crucial words are always negotiations and security. The assumption is - and Begin has said it often enough - that Israel will trade West Bank and Sinai land in exchange for security. If Israel were to say that it wanted that land for the land's own sake, then the Congressional vote would stay five to one against Israel. But Israel does not say that.

Now, it may be that Israel's negotiating tactics at this point are ill-advised, with respect to the settlements. That is what some of Israel's dearest friends in Congress are saying: "The way you are handling the settlements tends to convey the impression that you aren't going to negotiate them, even for security; and that you are improperly changing conditions during negotiations." Many friendly Congressmen and American Jews are making this complaint in private communications to the Israeli government.

However, whether Israel is or is not making a tactical and public relations error in the way it is handling the settlements at this time, it is important to put the whole settlements issue in perspective: Israel says it is willing to negotiate the settlements, in exchange for real security; Israel is the only one which has made major concessions so far; and the only way these matters will be settled is if the direct

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negotiations, which Egypt broke off, continue. Those are the real and larger issues which we must try to bring home to our own President, Congressmen and newspapers.

The Administration's proposed sale of F5s to Egypt and F15s to Saudi; and its proposed sale of only half of Israel's request for aircraft represents an untimely interference with the negotiations. It represents deliberate pressure on Israel - although it is not Israel which has broken off negotiations, or refused to make concessions. It represents the first historic sale of offensive equipment to Egypt, at a time when Egypt needs some pressure applied. The Saudi and Egyptian sales, with reduced Israeli sales, threatens the balance of arms in the Middle East, and therefore threatens the negotiations for peace.

Between now and April 2, the Administration will be wheeling and dealing with Congressmen on these proposals. Then, in April, the resultant proposals will be formally presented to House and Senate Committees. Now is the time for interested people to write their Congressmen and President.