

TIME-BOMB FOR PEACE

The hardest days for peace lie ahead, *after* the signing of an agreement between Israel and Egypt. The hardest days for American public opinion on Israel may lie ahead, *after* the signing of an agreement between Israel and Egypt.

What kind of a peace agreement is that? Well, it is really not a peace agreement, it is a *pre-peace* agreement.

There is such a thing as peace without conflict: two countries have nothing to quarrel about, and are engaged in all kinds of friendly relationships. And then there is such a thing as peace *with* conflict but *without* war. Thus, "detente" literally means "holding back," and means that two countries have developed a relatively long-range system for handling their conflict without going to war.

But the current Israeli-Egyptian peace could best be defined as a pre-detente peace. Israel and Egypt will not have finally signed an arrangement for handling conflict without going to war. They will have signed an agreement to *discuss* an arrangement for handling conflict without war.

The key sentence in the Camp David agreement is that the parties "will agree on the modalities for establishing the elected self-governing authority in the West Bank and Gaza."

The problem is that such a formulation may turn out to be a kind of semantic time-bomb. The two sides almost certainly have quite different understandings of the meaning of the phrase "elected self-governing authority."

That time-bomb is made more explicit a paragraph later when reference is made to the establishment of a "self-governing authority (administrative council)."

The phrase "administrative council" was inserted in order to reflect Israel's uneasiness. But it doesn't solve the problem.

What powers is this "self-governing authority (administrative council)" going to have? What about local traffic regulations? That seems a modest enough function. Or local sanitation? But is this council going to have the power to raise and allot its own taxes in order to implement its traffic or sanitary regulations?

If the council can raise and allot its own taxes, then it is well on its way to being an independent government rather than an "administrative council." But if it is not allowed to raise and allot its own taxes, then indignant cries of "taxation without representation" and images of the American Revolution will be raised. That is the bind for Israel.

The problem, still in minimal strategic terms, is the matter of the P.L.O. and a P.L.O. government on the West Bank which is bent on destroying Israel. If an independent government on the West Bank is established next month, it will be a P.L.O.-dominated government. If indigenous leaders can be developed in time on the West Bank, and some regular relationships developed between Israel and an interim West Bank leadership, then the story might be different. Even the chances of that are slim. But time will keep the options open, will keep the possibilities open for some eventuality other than a P.L.O. government. Overnight power to a West Bank government will close down those options, those possibilities.

So, how will Egypt and Israel agree on the different meanings they now put to a "self-governing authority"? And where will the American government be in that discussion? Will they consider Israel's emphasis on "administrative council" another case of Israeli "nit-picking"? That is the difficult interpretation to the American government and American people which lies ahead.

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There is perhaps an even more explosive time-bomb in these scheduled discussions. According to the agreement, the self-governance is to apply to the "inhabitants" of the West Bank. What about the Palestinian Arab inhabitants of East Jerusalem? Will the whole question of a unified Jerusalem enter by a side door?

At Camp David, a fairly solid detente was projected for Israeli-Egyptian relationships. The West Bank-Gaza framework was supposed to be a sidebar, an addendum, an opening for future negotiations. But events since Camp David have turned the West Bank-Gaza framework into a central and immediate part of the Israel-Egypt peace, which it was not originally intended to be. That unfortunate turn was caused by Egyptian afterthoughts, Saudi intransigence, Iranian debacle and the American government's continuing love affair with a "comprehensive" overnight settlement of everything.

The Israel-Egypt peace agreement is itself still a great historical event, if it is not exploded by the added time-bomb. The understanding of the American government and the American public will be crucial if that is to be prevented.

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