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TOPSY - TURVY

"Listen, you know me, I've always been a strong supporter of Israel. But I can't justify its current behavior. Why doesn't Israel give a little? Why did Israel turn off the peace momentum? Why not a moratorium on new settlements? I saw a picture of those bull-dozers preparing new construction in the Sinai. That was a mistake, it doesn't show good will, and it is turning off Americans. I can't support Israel under those circumstances!"

Have you heard that mouth-full lately? It's going the rounds. And it contains some strange topsy-turvy sentiments.

"Why doesn't Israel give a little?" . . . Topsy-turvy. There is a case to be made that Israel gave away too much to begin with, not too little. If Israel had not so quickly agreed to withdraw all Israeli forces from the Sinai including Sharm el Sheikh, it might not be in so much trouble. It has little left on the Egyptian front to bargain with, in exchange for security.

"Why did Israel turn off the peace momentum?" . . . Topsy-turvy. It was Egypt that pulled its negotiating team out. Sadat may have changed his mind because of Egyptian and Arab politics. He pulled his negotiating team out not because the negotiations were approaching failure - but when they were approaching success. As far as Egypt was concerned, about all that was left to negotiate was the Rafah settlement, and Israel was prepared to negotiate some security alternative on that matter, when Egypt broke off. (The details of the West Bank has to be negotiated with Israel's Eastern neighbors, not with Egypt).

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"Why not a moratorium on new settlements . . . Those bull-dozers in the Sinai were a mistake . . . I can't support Israel." To begin with, that creates a misleading images, since not one new settlement has been created in the Sinai since the negotiations began. But it is the conclusion in that last statement which is really topsy-turvy. Many people agree that "the bull-dozers" and some other dramatized activities in the settlements were a mistake. They swallowed up the fact of Israel's continuing position that it will negotiate the settlements for hard security. (If that position ever changed, it would be a different matter). Perhaps the Israelis wanted to emphasize the fact that they hadn't yet given up their last bargaining chip; perhaps the people in the settlement themselves wanted some assurance of that. But the chances are that such dramatic acts were tactical errors, public relations errors, handled badly. We can criticize them, but do we then really "withdraw support" from Israel?

There is something suspect about people who are that fast on the withdraw. As an impediment to peace, Israel's tactical sins with respect to the settlements were scarcely in a class with Egypt's abandonment of the negotiations on the eve of success. But there have not been miles of accusatory ink written about that.

Perhaps it's the old business of expecting immaculate perception when it comes to Israel. But there's something else, also. American public opinion on Israel is cooling a bit. A few months ago, Gallop found that 8 out of 10 Americans with opinions on the subject, sympathized more with Israel than with the Arabs. Now, Gallup finds that only 7 out 10 Americans with opinions, sympathize more with Israel than with the Arabs. And while

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about a quarter of all Americans today think that Israel is more willing to compromise than Egypt, almost a half of all Americans believe that Egypt is more willing to compromise than Israel.

That topsy-turvy figure is not primarily the result of Israel's actions on the settlements. It is partly a result of Sadat's new image. But it is, in most significant part, a direct result of statements coming from the White House, where Americans take their main cues on the Middle East.