

FOCUS

EGYPT

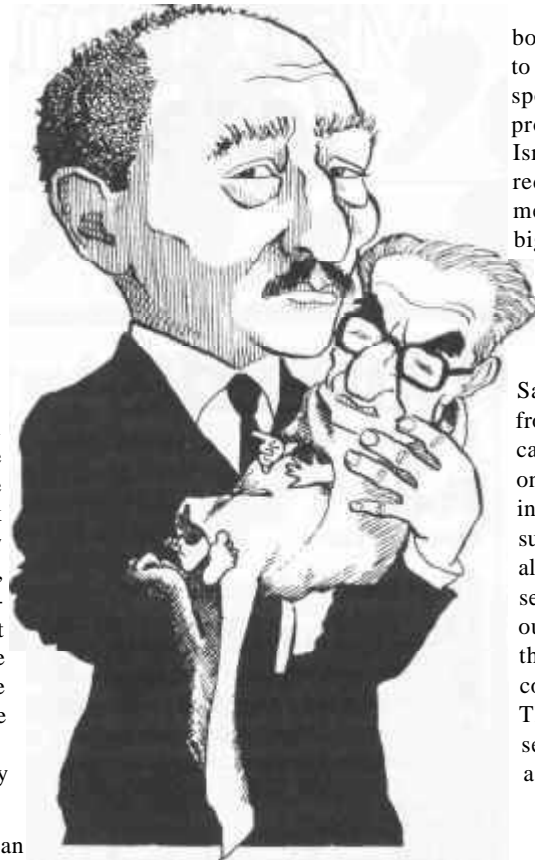
Anwar el Sadat took his first steps towards Camp David and the US/Egyptian/Israeli alliance very soon after he succeeded Gamal Abdel Nasser as President of Egypt in October 1970. The reversal of Nasser's foreign policy was heralded in May 1971 by the arrest and imprisonment of a group of prominent political leaders known for their active support of a policy based on friendly relations with the socialist countries. By July 1972, Sadat had expelled from Egypt all the Soviet military technicians, a move rightly understood as a signal that the way was open for Egypt's alignment with US strategy in the Middle East. This became obvious after the October 1973 war. When the ceasefire took place, Egypt had regained only a narrow band of the Israeli-occupied Sinai peninsula, but the effects of even this limited achievement were extremely worrying to the Zionist state whose claim to invincibility in the military field had been shattered. The indecisive outcome of the fighting gave the US State Department its chance to step in.

The aim of Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy

terms that would meet the needs of American strategy. This meant an initial rapprochement and then a separate peace between Egypt and Israel whose armies, the most powerful in the Middle East, would both become dependent on American assistance and available to defend American interests in the whole region and beyond. The two Sinai disengagement agreements of 1974 and 1975, negotiated under Kissinger's leadership, marked a further American advance. Under the pretext that a watchman over both the Egyptian and Israeli forces was needed, the US installed its own personnel in the Sinai, thus establishing a precedent for the present use of Egypt's air bases by the US air force operating in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, the Geneva Conference set up in October 1973 under United Nations auspices with joint US and Soviet chairmanship, had been adjourned in 1974. It was intended to negotiate a comprehensive Middle East settlement with the participation of all the parties concerned including the representatives of the Palestinian people demanding their right to self-determination. Rather than this comprehensive settlement, Sadat's 'peace initiative', ie, his visit to Jerusalem in November 1977, led to a hardening of the American and Israeli positions and to a series of Egyptian capitulations culminating in the peace treaty signed in Washington in March 1979.

Sadat told the Knesset in November 1977 that Egypt insisted on the withdrawal of



Israel's military forces from all the occupied territories, including the West Bank of the Jordan, the Golan Heights in Syria, the Gaza enclave and the Arab part of Jerusalem; that he would not sign a separate peace treaty; and that he would defend the right of the Palestinians to their own State. Yet while the negotiations were proceeding and then after the signing of the Washington treaty, the Israeli Prime Minister repeatedly declared that he would never accept a withdrawal to Israel's pre-June 1967 borders, or to return the Arab part of Jerusalem to Arab sovereignty, or grant territorial autonomy to Arab Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

The peace treaty of March 1979 in fact upholds these claims, since it acknowledges the right of Israel to station its military forces within the West Bank and Gaza even after the proposed 'Palestinian autonomy' and provides for discussions to determine the form of this 'autonomy' without the participation of the Palestinians themselves. The Palestinians never authorised Sadat to speak on their behalf, let alone make concessions to Israel in their name in contradiction with UN resolutions.

Sadat has so far managed to manoeuvre thanks to two important factors in Egypt's life in the 1970s. There is little doubt that a large part of the Egyptian people aspire to peace and therefore welcomed his initial steps towards reconciliation with Israel. The devastation of the Suez Canal Zone by Israeli

bombing and shelling and the enormous cost to the economy were all too apparent when he spoke to the Egyptian people of the era of prosperity which would follow peace with Israel. Few imagined that, instead of a reduction in military expenditure, this peace meant that the Egyptian army would need bigger armaments and more men than ever in order to play its new role as US policeman to defend unpopular regimes in the Arab countries and in Africa.

Equally important for the conduct of Sadat's policy was the support it received from a significant section of the Egyptian capitalist class. Nasser's main achievements on the economic front were the removal of the influence of the big landowners thanks to successive agrarian reforms, and the nationalisation of a large part of the industrial sector. These measures were however carried out without parallel political advance, with the trade unions under tight government control and democratic rights strictly limited. Thus it was inevitable that the large public sector should be exploited to the advantage of a small part of the population. The outcome

contractors etc, who accumulate immense fortunes without investing in productive projects, while the nationalised industries decline for lack of investments and administrative neglect.

Sadat's response to the disastrous state of the productive sectors and the roaring inflation was the 'open door' policy intended to attract foreign investments. But while it failed to attract significant investments from abroad, rewards for his political line did come from reactionary Arab countries and the US in the form of larger and larger loans, grants and military supplies. For 1980 alone the promised US financial assistance to Egypt is 1,500 million dollars, to be followed by 4,000 million in the next four years.

The enormous debts contracted since 1973 have inevitably been accompanied by foreign interference. In 1976 the International Monetary Fund investigated Egypt's finances and imposed severe restrictions, including the cancellation of state subsidies on essential food items which led to nationwide riots in January 1977. Another IMF agreement signed in 1978 stipulated further restrictions.

Disillusionment with Sadat's policies is now spreading to all classes including the capitalists who had hoped to turn his policies to their own advantage. The opposition remains muzzled but is growing despite more and more repressive laws passed by a National Assembly dominated by Sadat's own party, the National Democratic Party.

Some of these laws were recently publicly denounced by the Egyptian Bar Association and the Journalists' Union. The Progressive National Unionist Party which claims a membership of 150,000, groups Marxists, Nasserites and other progressive opponents of the regime and remains active despite the banning of its official newspaper. The trade unions affiliated to the PNUP have supported its denunciation of the Washington peace treaty. A recently formed National Front of opponents of the regime is active in Egypt and abroad. Groups of religious fundamentalists, opposed to the Israeli alliance, represent a threat of a different character.

The Sadat regime has survived so far partly because of the lack of a cohesive opposition and partly because of the American money poured into its coffers. The price Sadat has had to pay is complete subservience to the US and the disgrace attached to pro-Americanism in the Middle East.