

A War for Peace:

The 1973 October War and the Development of the US-Egyptian Relationship

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May 15, 2012

The Egyptian state has known revolution and turmoil before today. From the war against Israel in 1948 to the Free Officers' coup in 1952, from the Suez War in 1956 to the Six Day War in 1967 Egypt has not shied from exerting her power or making her views known in both victory and loss. Historically, the United States, with progress as its standard and supremacy over the forces of Communism as its ultimate objective, could not avoid the rough waters of the Middle East. Its relationship with Egypt has faced many challenges over the decades, and, by the beginning of the 1970s, it appeared that Egypt's close alliance with the Soviet Union had created a sizeable political divide between the governments in Cairo and Washington. On the evening of the 28th of September, 1970, though, something happened that put the future of this reality into question. The Egyptian people lost their leader. A man revered around the world as the embodied spirit of the Pan-Arab movement, the voice of the third-world, seemed irreplaceable. Just two weeks later, though, a new leader, President Anwar el-Sadat, officially took over the reins of government. During his administration, Sadat would test the limits of his power. Through war and hardship he brought his country to peace and sovereignty, but it was not without the involvement of others.

It is my belief that the 1973 October War exists as an historic turnstile in the course of US-Egyptian relations. As crises so often do, this outburst dramatically altered the political landscape both within the region and around the world, and its consequences fell only inches short of revolutionary change. It is my contention that the actors involved in these events, namely President Anwar el-Sadat, President Richard Nixon, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, and Secretary of State William Rogers, played significant roles in this period as they acted and reacted to conflicts and difficulties, fundamentally restructuring the bilateral US-

Egyptian relationship. But why did these events occur in the first place? Who wanted this restructuring, and how did it come about? It is my objective in this analysis to look critically at these questions and the arguments that historians and political scientists have put forward to discover to what extent these arguments prove compelling and how I, myself, see the events unfolding. In doing so, I have divided my analysis into two sections. In the first, I will seek to identify why Sadat went to war. In the second, I will look at the ways in which Sadat's actions and the reciprocal actions of the Americans led the two to lay the foundation for a new and promising relationship.

Sadat and the Move to War

Domestic Political Considerations

In an address at the Naval Academy in Alexandria, June 22nd, 1971, Sadat declared that Egypt had come to the brink. The status quo had become unbearable after Egypt's defeat by the Israelis in 1967 as the country faced intense economic, social, and political challenges. In one of the earliest and strongest indications for the impending war, Sadat stood before his officers and resolutely asserted, "I fully understand my duty towards my homeland, towards national problems and towards our courageous Armed Forces . . . [and] I am telling you in all sincerity and clarity that the year of 1971 is a decisive one, for we cannot wait forever."¹

Historians have taken Sadat's words as a critical statement of the President's expectations for future conflict with Israel and the dire importance of quickly realizing progress in Egypt's

¹ Israeli, Raphael, ed. *The Public Diary of President Sadat: Part I, The Road to War (October 1970-October 1973)*. Vol. XXV. Social, Economic, and Political Studies of the Middle East. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978. 82.

domestic arena. The idea that these domestic political factors along with the individual personality traits and leadership exerted by Sadat heavily influenced the move to war is a popular argument. But why was the domestic situation in Egypt so intolerable? In this section I will delve into the arguments put forward and look, with a critical eye, to the role each of these main factors—including the state of the economy, the public perception of the need to regain the Sinai, and the internal power struggle—played on the road to war.

By the time Sadat had become President in 1970, the sway that Pan-Arabism had over Egyptian policy was much reduced. As President, Sadat was forced to deal with the situations that confronted him in a very different way than had Nasser. The fact that Pan-Arabism was no longer so closely aligned with Egyptian national interests as before had a significant impact on his leadership of the country. Internal rivalries and confrontations among the Arab states had broken the Pan-Arabist ideal. Consequently, Sadat was forced to develop new connections with his neighbors and work to effect policy through a different political system to achieve his goals. He could not be an ideologue and last long within the domestic political context. Whether the masses saw it or not, Pan-Arabism was not going to save them. Nevertheless, Sadat's statements, decisions, and actions were not totally devoid of emotion or any personal expressions of his own beliefs. He was a highly dramatic man, and has been caricatured thus for decades. Biographer Raphael Israeli argues that Sadat "regarded the figure of the President as the supreme representative of Egypt, the personification of its dignity and honor."² Sadat even famously described himself as "the last of the pharaohs." This penchant for the sensational, though, cannot

² Israeli, Raphael. *Man of Defiance: A Political Biography of Anwar Sadat*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985. 8.

explain the President's decision-making on its own. It is best understood as an influential variable encouraging but not catalyzing decisive actions.

Historians have also put a good deal of weight on the motivation originating from the terrible state of the Egyptian economy before the war. National income in this period saw only modest growth. Private and public consumption dramatically outpaced investment, and the little investment that occurred was "attained only by massive borrowing abroad and deficit financing."³ This was the reality Sadat faced in his first three years in office, and he was certainly conscious of the potential effects of the economy continuing in its current direction. In an interview following the war, Sadat told a journalist how, at a meeting with his National Security Council, he had stated "that as of that day we had reached the 'zero stage' economically in every sense of the term . . . I could not have paid a penny toward our debt installments . . . or have bought a grain of wheat."⁴ Because of this, some historians have argued that Sadat tried to use the war in 1973 to distract the populace away from the failing economy. Having the economy's poor condition center stage, would further solidify the public's lack of confidence in its ability to right itself as well as undermine Sadat's own political leadership. Sadat understood the necessity "of doing something because if the status quo continued . . . he wasn't going to be around much longer."⁵

Generally, this idea seems highly appealing, but it does not appear that Sadat ultimately went to war for this sole reason. First, Sadat appears to have already begun preparing for war

³ Waterbury, John. *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983. 113.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 128

⁵ Daigle, Craig. Personal Interview. 12 Jan. 2012.

early in his presidency. His declaration of the year of decision in 1971, his expulsion of the Soviets in 1972, his repeated military mobilizations throughout 1973 all indicate that the process of planning and preparing for the war was a long one. Why would Sadat wait three years, planning for a diversionary war, when he could have initiated hostilities so much earlier in office? That wouldn't have been diversionary in the least. Secondly, in the lead up to the war in 1973, a number of individuals and groups from various sectors of society were coming forward, putting a great deal of pressure on Sadat to strike out against Israel as he would do in October. Why would the people that the President was trying to distract push their leader to a diversionary war? It doesn't make any sense. Yes, the economy was in poor condition. Yes, the Egyptian people were hurting because of it. In the end, though, the evidence does not seem to point to these factors as motivating the initiation of war.

Probably the most compelling and popular argument for the import of domestic factors in the move to war has been laid upon the role of national pride in Egyptian politics and the perceived significance of Egyptian control over the Sinai. After their devastating defeat at the hands of the Israelis in 1967, the Egyptian people suffered a massive shock to their national pride.⁶ After all the moving speeches by Nasser and the ambitious efforts at unifying the Arab states it seemed to have all been bluster. Following the war, the ineffectiveness of the War of Attrition and the humiliation of the constant reminder of the Israeli occupation of the Sinai, the Egyptian people are perceived as harboring a greatly tarnished pride and a strong desire for revenge. Ambassador Richard Parker emphasizes in his work, *The October War*, that “the

⁶ Howard, Adam. Personal Interview. 10 Oct. 2011.

Egyptians [need] to restore their honor and erase the humiliation of 1967.”⁷ Adam Howard, of the U.S. Department of State's Office of the Historian, contends that Sadat had to reawaken in “the Egyptians a sense that they could fight, and by doing well in the first week in the war, that was a way of restoring their confidence.”⁸ Even Sadat himself, in a post-war conversation with Kissinger, points out that he had gone to war “to teach Israel that it could not find security in domination . . . and to restore Egypt’s self-respect—a task no foreigner could do for it.”⁹ The literature on the 1973 War is full of these statements and arguments.

Before one even gets to this larger characterization of the Egyptian people, though, it is important to note that many of these same historians have also focused on Sadat’s personal sense of national pride. Certainly, Sadat was a dramatic leader and one who was not afraid to embellish and exaggerate. After the death of Nasser, he tried to recreate his image as a traditional man with strong roots in the culture of the Egyptian peasantry. He would retreat to his village home in Mit Abu al-Kum and give press conferences wearing a simple *galabeya*. He invoked Islam much more in his public addresses than had Nasser. He even encouraged the Egyptian soldiers before crossing into the Sinai to think of their fight as a religious imperative. Raphael Israeli describes how, upon surmounting the Israeli fortifications on the Suez, all the soldiers would break out into chants of *Allahu Akbar!*¹⁰ Sadat was not only making the liberation of the Sinai a religious and

⁷ Parker, Richard Bordeaux. *The October War: A Retrospective*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001. 19.

⁸ Howard, Personal Interview

⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. XXV, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), Doc. 324.

¹⁰ Israeli, *Man of Defiance*, 48

nationalist cause, he was making it a cornerstone of his political objectives, effectively staking his future on its success.

In analyzing the persuasiveness of these arguments, I don't think one can deny their basic assumptions. The first, that Egyptian pride were severely damaged after the 1967 War and the Israeli occupation of the Sinai, cannot be greatly challenged. Sadat admitted that he and his fellow countrymen felt deeply ashamed after the 1967 loss, and he went into great detail in his memoir, speeches, and conversations about his personal struggle with it—describing himself as “completely overwhelmed” as his mind wandered for days on the future of the Egyptian people and abstract questions of identity.¹¹ However, I do not think that the reinvigoration of national pride was Sadat's ultimate objective in the war. Sadat was a long-term thinker. He realized the importance of connecting a renewed national pride with actual results and progress in the confrontation with Israel. If he had not, why would he have continued for years, through dangerous political waters, in his pursuit of a comprehensive settlement with Israel and the complete return of the Sinai? It was one objective on the path to greater and more ambitious goals, namely the reclamation of all the territory lost in the 1967 War, an end to the hostilities, and a more powerful, dynamic Egypt. The aim of reviving national pride is best understood in this international context.

It has also been argued that Sadat may have been pressured into war by the intense opposition he faced at home and within his own government. This notion would paint Sadat as a feckless leader without a legitimate claim to power or a solid support structure. In fact, in his first years in office, this is exactly how many Egyptians and others, notably the United States and

¹¹ Sadat, Anwar. *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978. 184.

the Soviet Union, saw Sadat. Sadat had only been named vice-president in December of 1969, roughly ten months before he ascended to the presidency, and much of his work throughout the 1960s had been outside of government.¹² Many of his contemporaries, seeing Sadat in this weak light, felt that they could make something of Sadat's vulnerable situation. Ali Sabry, the vice-president, figurehead of the leftists, and ally of the Soviets, and his supporters appeared to challenge Sadat to share power. These men pushed for "a more militant stance against Israel and for greater power for their own ruling party."¹³ In 1971, in an internal debate over unification with Egypt's neighbors, Sabry "mounted an acrimonious verbal attack on Sadat, hurling personal insults at him."¹⁴ Sadat was extremely angry, and on May 2nd he removed Sabry from the vice-presidency, proving, he believed, that "Moscow has no man in Egypt."¹⁵ It did not end there, though. Less than two weeks later, the *New York Times* reported an attempted coup d'état against Sadat following the simultaneous resignations of six top government officials as well as three from the Arab Socialist Union. Sadat was forceful in his response. He ordered the men under house arrest and installed new officials in their places.¹⁶ To combat the image of a weak, threatened leader, Sadat went to the people, declaring his success and the beginning of the "corrective revolution" that would continue the work of the 1952 revolution in purging the government of the "foci of power." After this, Sadat appeared much more securely in power.

¹² Israeli, *Man of Defiance*, XV

¹³ Israeli, *Man of Defiance*, 60

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63

¹⁵ Daigle, Craig. *The Limits of Detente*, N.d., Unpublished TS. 127.

¹⁶ Anderson, Raymond. "Sadat Declares He Foiled a Coup; Installs Cabinet." *New York Times (1923-Current file): ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2008)*. 15 May 1971. Web. 15 May 2012.

However, the internal dissent did not totally dissipate. A CIA report from May 22nd, 1972, detailed how Sadat once again moved against his opponents. A number of political friends of former Prime Minister Zakaria Mohieddin had been put under house arrest. Sadat felt that they had tried “to supercede Egypt’s established institutions” through a new national front.¹⁷ Again, a report from November 17th, 1972, records “a coup attempt by a group of air force officers where “as many as 20 arrests may have been made.”¹⁸ It is noted that “as discontent increases, so do the dangers to his [Sadat’s] position.”¹⁹

Knowing all of this history, it seems that Sadat would have initiated conflict with Israel to bring together his opponents to weaken support for their dissident activities and see the public coalesce around his leadership. The goal of the war would then be purely for its rally around the flag effect. This analysis does not fit, though. What of all the other domestic factors, the poor economy, the sense of a tarnished national pride and all the international and regional variables? There’s no room for them in this argument. Secondly, what would a proponent of this idea say to Sadat’s dogged efforts to negotiate with the Israelis after the war for the complete return of the Sinai even at the expense of full recognition of and peace with Israel? This was something that ultimately cost Sadat a good deal of support in the public’s eyes. It would be nonsensical for Sadat to initiate war in order to gain popular support and then knowingly lose that support

¹⁷ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, “Central Intelligence Bulletin.” Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room. 22 May 1972. <http://www.foia.cia.gov/best-of-crest/CIA-RDP79T00975A021900100002-6.pdf>.

¹⁸ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, “Central Intelligence Bulletin.” Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room. 22 May 1972. <http://www.foia.cia.gov/best-of-crest/CIA-RDP79T00975A021900100002-6.pdf>.

¹⁹Ibid.

directly afterwards. This idea of the importance of internal dissention does not carry much weight, though it can tell one about the environment in which Sadat was working.

Regional Political Considerations

Some scholars have focused their attention on the leadership and unique personality traits exhibited by President Sadat along with certain influential domestic events and decisions as pertinent factors playing on Egypt's eventual move to war; conversely, many have also sought to address the conflict in the terms of cold war, superpower politics where détente and issues of global security and international alliance networks had the sole impact on policy-making. However, there has been comparatively little said on behalf of the regional political factors involved. In this section, I will raise some of the arguments that have been put forward from this perspective and attempt to identify why they may have had the influence attributed to them in Sadat's initiation of the war.

In order to understand the October War from this regional perspective, it is important to remember a few facts. First, Egypt is very strongly grounded in its image as a leader in the Middle East and has been for quite some time. Not only have outsiders, be they other Arabs, Turks, Persians, French, or British, traditionally viewed Egypt as distinct amongst the states of the Middle East and before that among the territories of the Ottoman Empire, but Egyptians themselves have been historically self-aware of their uniqueness in the region. Muhammad Ali, the traditionally celebrated founder of the modern Egyptian state, brought a high degree of autonomy to his territory from the Ottoman Empire in the early part of the 19th century. In a region with an impressive history where the foundations of human civilization and the creation of the world's largest religions have their roots, many of Egypt's neighbors in the Middle East,

nevertheless, did not see the fruits of a true nationalism until the end of the First World War, and this reality is not lost on the Egyptian people. A central focus of the Islamic world and the home of Al-Azhar, the renowned institution of Islamic education and jurisprudence, the kingdom of the pharaohs and their ancient empire, the destination and glory of conquerors and poets alike, Egypt has taken great pride in its past. Home to one of the largest cities in the Middle East, the bridge between Africa and Asia and the connection between the Mediterranean and the seas beyond, the media capital of the Arab world, Egypt's claim to a strong sense of leadership in the Middle East is well-grounded in the modern age as well.

Second, though it need not be stated that not all Arabs are the same, their minds working in unison, and that there exist distinct avenues of thought on governance, religion, and daily life in the area, it is nevertheless good to recall that these differences throughout the region have historically created a level of competition between peoples.²⁰ Whether during the time of President Nasser and his Pan-Arabism movement or later periods of ideological and political divides, the states of the Middle East have never relinquished the pursuit of their own national interests and their concern for domestic issues.

Much of the literature focusing on this regional explanation cites as a central assumption of its arguments Egypt's backsliding trajectory in both absolute and relative terms as well as in the minds of Egyptians and other peoples of the Middle Eastern. Shibley Telhami in his wonderfully comprehensive, "Power and Leadership in International Bargaining: The Path to the Camp David Accords," argues that competition amongst the states of the Middle East laid the foundation for Sadat's move to war, and he lays out a number of factors he finds compelling in

²⁰ Fahmy, Nabil. Personal Interview. 20 Feb. 2012.

this argument, namely: the decline and failure of Pan-Arabism, the collapse of the Egyptian military forces in the 1967 War and their underwhelming performance in the North Yemen Civil War, as well as the comparative rise among other Arab states in military expenditures and economic vitality. Such potential for reversing the then-current state of affairs and reasserting Egypt's prominent position in the regional arena would have been enough then to push Sadat to war.

Much of Egypt's history in the 1950s and 1960s in the lead up to the October War was defined by a dogged pursuit of and strongly-held faith in Pan-Arabism. On June 10th, 1971, Sadat took the stage before the People's Council and declared his faith in Pan-Arabism. He stated that "Arab Unity is not a preaching for historical record, but a necessity for our future . . . [for] casting doubts with regard to Arab Unity, affords Imperialism the opportunity to resort to the weapon."²¹ This may have been something more than flat deception in 1971, perhaps, but, less than a year later, Sadat, before a national convention of the Arab Socialist Union, posited "Should we wait for our battle until the slogan of the 'All-Arab Battle' could be realized?"²² No, for "we would be awaiting a mirage to become reality," he responded.²³

It is clear that throughout this period the influence of Pan-Arabism, despite periodic flare-ups, gradually became less and less a motivation behind and perhaps more of a cloak for policy objectives, including a renewed aggression toward Israel. This breakdown put mounting pressure on Egypt and her leaders, first Gamal Abdel Nasser and then Sadat, as it undermined the nation's claim to regional importance and leadership. The President's death in 1970 and the resulting rise

²¹ Israeli, *The Public Diary of President Anwar Sadat*, 79.

²² *Ibid.*, 165

²³ *Ibid.*

to power of Sadat, while not completing this trend, certainly marks an important turning point in Pan-Arabism's influence. There are a number of reasons for this decline.

First, Pan-Arabism was simply not delivering the results that it promised. Nasser had a penchant for "intervention in the affairs of other states," always seeking to further his own influence and that of Egypt, and, in the end, "he exhausted Egypt's resources" in numerous struggles with her neighbors.²⁴ In 1962, Nasser sent troops into the Yemen in order to assist the rebels in the North Yemen Civil War against the royalists and their Saudi backers. It was a small proxy war in a large theatre of battle against the spread of Saudi power. Of course, the 1967 War proved the true catalyst, speeding up Pan-Arabism's eventual fall. The Arab states had failed to effectively unite, and, because of the ultimate defeat at the hands of the Israelis, whether or not this was the cause of the defeat became irrelevant. Pan-Arabism, so inextricably tethered to the Arab struggle against Israel, would feel the same effects of the war that Egypt did, defeat. The following War of Attrition and other conflicts helped ensure the collapse of the ideology's influence.

What is more important than Pan-Arabism losing its appeal in the region, though, is its new inability to deliver for Egypt's national interests. By the time Sadat had begun thinking more seriously about war with Israel it seems that this had become Pan-Arabism's new reality. Telhami points out that, as Egypt is a rational actor, its "ultimate abandonment of the Pan-

²⁴ Cleveland, William L., and Martin Bunton. *A History of the Modern Middle East*. Fourth ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009. 343.

Arabist policy [would] come when the overall benefits of this policy were overwhelmed by its costs.”²⁵ Resources could be better placed in tackling the issues of the day in a different way.

Besides all of this, it is also possible that the movement was not able to live on in the hands of Egypt’s new leader. First, Sadat “possessed none of Nasser’s majestic charisma nor did he have his authority and prestige,”²⁶ which were extremely important factors involved in Nasser’s ability to maintain his position of leadership in the movement. Second, even though Sadat was “very much a product of Nasser’s pan-Arab movement and had served Nasser loyally for more than twenty years, [he] had a far different vision of Egypt’s role in the world.”²⁷ National interests came first. Though as the decline of Pan-Arabism continued, it is argued that Egypt’s loss of leadership in the region shifted the balance of power in her neighbors’ direction, creating not a vacuum but perhaps a small breathing space for the influence of these other states to grow. As a result of this, Egypt also found that it lost a key piece of leverage over the Israelis, the ability to mobilize the greater Arab community against Israel. Of course, with that, Israel’s interest in negotiations was further reduced as would be Sadat’s tolerance for the status-quo. So, as much as Sadat may have tried to make the October War seem to be in the pursuit of Pan-Arab unity, the evidence says otherwise.

Another view on Sadat’s motivations for war can be seen in the declining regional influence and power of Egypt as a result of relative regional changes in economic and military might. In conjunction with what was stated earlier, the Egyptian economy was in a poor

²⁵ Telhami, Shibley. *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining: The Path to the Camp David Accords*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. 94.

²⁶ Israeli, *Man of Defiance*, 54.

²⁷ Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, 121.

condition when Sadat took over. After the 1967 War, Egypt had lost its Sinai oil fields, the Suez Canal and its revenue and inherited a ruined military that required intense and sustained financial support to rebuild, a population explosion in Cairo with the settlement of refugees, and the ensuing War of Attrition.²⁸ At the same time, Egypt's Arab neighbors, most of whom could not claim any comparable economic losses, found their economies thriving. People saw this emergent divide, pointing out, as Elaine Hagopian and Halim Barakat do in *The Middle East Crucible*, that as "Egypt's posture was weakened . . . it came to rely on aid from fellow Arab states, namely Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Libya."²⁹ They continue, pointing out that Saudi Arabia, in particular, saw "its wealth become realized in practical terms" and thus "could and did move to the center of the stage," beginning to play a dominant role in the region.³⁰ To some, such as Telhami, this relative fall from influence and the "embarrassing political conditions . . . generally attached to economic aid" frustrated Sadat and motivated his actions in 1973.

Similarly, Egypt, by the outbreak of the war, did not have the superiority in military power that it once had in the region. The long, painful slog in Yemen had broken the military's morale and shown the significant strength of Saudi Arabia's military. Sadat even describes the conflict and mismanagement of it in his memoirs as the "worst turmoil imaginable."³¹ Remarkably, in the first three years of Sadat's presidency, Egypt was able to continually increase its military spending. Nevertheless, its neighbors persisted and doggedly followed Egypt's lead,

²⁸ Telhami, *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining*, 99.

²⁹ Aruri, Naseer Hasan. *Middle East Crucible: Studies on the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973*. Wilmette, IL: Medina University Press International, 1975. 123.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 124

³¹ Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, 161.

and by 1972, Saudi Arabia was spending only 1.8% of its GNP less than Egypt in military affairs (down from a 9.1% gap only two years prior).³² These variables together helped erode “whatever leverage Egypt could derive from its military power.”³³ I don’t think Telhami and those who agree with him, though, believe that Sadat went to war because of these neighbors and these disparities but rather that he might have made the decisions he did to achieve the results more purely and starkly in Egypt’s interests than in those of the region.

Regardless, I do not think that Telhami’s argument carries much weight. In connection with Egypt’s relative economic conditions and the rise in foreign aid from Egypt’s neighbors, Sadat does not seem to have been as upset as Telhami purports. Of course he didn’t like the imposed conditions put on the aid and describes his unhappiness at such offers from Qaddafi in his memoir. Nevertheless, he seems to have understood that the aid gave Egypt’s neighbors a stake in the country’s economic recovery. Waterbury argues that Sadat “in essence . . . offered, implicitly, not to throw Egypt’s weight around so long as Egypt was compensated for its tolerance by economic and military aid.”³⁴ I tend to agree with this assessment and would argue that Sadat’s actions after the war—working with Kissinger, negotiating with Israel, etc—do not constitute Egypt throwing its weight around. Sadat’s new openness to engaging Israel and the West, namely the US, diplomatically shows that Sadat understood Egypt’s national interests were different from those of its neighbors and certainly of some imagined, unified Pan-Arab interests.

International Political Considerations

³² Telhami, *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining*, 96.

³³ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁴ Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*, 415.

As Egypt once lay at the geographic and strategic crosshairs of the struggle between the world's superpowers, so too would Egypt's interests and pursuit of those interests play an important role in the Cold War players' involvement in the Middle East. Historians have given a great deal of thought to the international environment in which Sadat found himself in the early years of his administration. Within this contextual understanding, some have argued, lie the most influential and convincing causes factors motivating Egypt's move to war. Chief among these is the perception within Egypt of an oppressive, inalterable status quo that is, if not imposed upon Egypt, certainly maintained by foreign powers. It was Sadat's struggle with this status quo, his failures in peaceful negotiations and diplomacy prior to 1973, and his perception of the influence and importance of the Cold War superpowers that would have pushed the President to initiate war according to this view, and it is a compelling argument. The evidence, from Sadat's own words to the views of the Soviet and American governments to the opinions of important policy-makers of the period, strongly indicates that the causes for this war were deeply rooted in the arena of international politics. In addressing this internationalist argument, I think it is important to analyze these different factors to discover why they have been identified as particularly compelling and to what extent they may have actually motivated Sadat's move to war.

On February 23rd, 1973, Egyptian National Security Adviser, Hafiz Ismail, met with President Nixon and his staff in the Oval Office. The two men took pictures and exchanged pleasantries before sitting down to their business. As they were completing the formalities, Ismail reached into his pocket and drew out a sealed letter and handed it to Nixon. It was from Sadat. In it, Sadat wrote of the harsh difficulties Egypt was facing. At the end, he stated that "the situation in our region has deteriorated almost to the point of explosion."³⁵ The domestic factors,

³⁵ Kissinger, Henry. *Years of Upheaval*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982. 213.

reviewed in the earlier section, may have been weighing on the President's mind, of course, but what else was there? What, on a systemic level, was so troubling about the status quo to Sadat? Simply put, it was détente that was strangling Egypt and the fear that it might become a permanent reality. When Nixon came to office in 1969, his administration turned its attention to the Arab-Israeli conflict. With the Rogers Plan, the Jordanian Civil War, and the War of Attrition putting a great deal of pressure on Nixon and coming at a high cost to his political capital, though, the Middle East became increasingly frustrating for the US to work with.³⁶ At the same time, then-National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger was arguing that the Soviet Union was not going to be a willing and true partner when it came time to pressuring each sides' respective allies for a negotiated settlement. He believed "that the Soviet Union had worked hard to build a position of influence in the Middle East" and that position depended on arms sales to its client states.³⁷ Peace and reduced demand for weaponry would significantly reduce the Soviets' leverage, so it is not a surprise that the Soviet Union "had an interest in preventing a real peace agreement."³⁸ In order to confront this challenge as well as to curb the costly proxy wars and engagements the US had supported against the Soviets and reduce the likelihood of future nuclear confrontations like the Cuban-Missile Crisis, Nixon shifted his administration to a policy of détente. The Soviets joined him.

For Egypt, détente was terrible. It energized and escalated the political difficulties Sadat was already facing within his country, from the opposition of the ambitious "foci of power" to

³⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. XXV, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), Doc. 22.

³⁷ Quandt, William B. *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967*. Third ed. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005. 65.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

the plummeting national pride. The Soviets were lagging in their arms shipments, and their unwillingness to pull through with all of Sadat's requests for aid put immense pressure on the President. By withholding military aid, Sadat keenly felt the Soviets' failure "to support a renewal of the Arab war against Israel [and] to provide Egypt . . . with a capability to reconquer [its] lost territories."³⁹ Then, on the 24th of June, 1973, Nixon and Brezhnev released a joint communiqué outlining their policy of détente and calling for a "further relaxation of tensions and the strengthening of cooperative relations in the interests of peace."⁴⁰ Sadat was furious. How could Egypt's ally, the Soviet Union, so boldly stand up against Egyptian interests? In a speech following the war, Sadat stated that the "reference to 'military relaxation,' . . . automatically meant that no-war-no-peace would continue indefinitely . . . [and] that was intolerable to us."⁴¹ Shortly after the communiqué was released, Sadat called the Soviet Ambassador before him. He bluntly told the ambassador that the Soviet experts and advisors in Egypt were no longer welcome and that they had one week to leave the country.⁴² It seems Sadat was going to act with or without the Soviets.

Did action on this front necessitate war, though? If Sadat had not spent any time or effort prior to his expulsion of the Soviets in reaching a settlement with the Israelis that would remove

³⁹ Kohler, Foy D., Leon Gouré, and Mose L. Harvey. *The Soviet Union and the October 1973 Middle East War: The Implications for Detente*. Coral Gables, FL: Center for Advanced International Studies, University of Miami, 1974. 32.

⁴⁰ "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—United States: Agreements Concluded During Summit Meetings Between the President and the General Secretary." *International Legal Materials*. Vol. 12, No. 4 (JULY 1973), pp. 888-915. Published by: American Society of International Law. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable20691129>.

⁴¹ Israeli, Raphael. *The Public Diary of President Sadat: Part II, The Road of Diplomacy, The Continuation of War by Other Means (November 1973-May 1975)*. Vol. XXV. Social, Economic, and Political Studies of the Middle East. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979. 465.

⁴² Israeli, *Man of Defiance*, 71.

the pressure of détente then, yes, one would have to conclude that he had other objectives in going to war. However, it is clear that Sadat did in fact reach out to Israel and the United States repeatedly in his first years in office, including in the period before the Soviets' expulsion. In the most public and perhaps significant instance, Sadat proposed in 1971 that he would be willing "to open the Suez Canal to international navigation and sign a peace treaty with Israel."⁴³ In subsequent talks with Secretary of State Rogers, Sadat even offered to sweeten the deal, but it was to no avail. Israel would not accept. This was not the only attempt by Sadat, too. He spent a good deal of time and effort in trying to win over the Israelis. Unfortunately for him, though, the status quo was actually treating the Israelis quite well, and they were in no rush to change anything big.

Because of the enormous burden that the status quo left on Sadat and his inability to change the situation he faced through peaceful means, it seems clear that Sadat felt that the use of force was his only option left. In what ways would war, though, be able to change the status quo, if at all? There are two main, compelling cases to be made for war in this argument. First, it appears that Sadat felt he could gain some sort of leverage over the Israelis by going to war. In the current political conditions, Israel held all the cards. Not only did it control the entire Sinai, but it appeared unassailable, especially after the 1967 War. Kissinger, in a conversation on the first day of the war, stated that, "by Tuesday and Wednesday if the war isn't ended, the Arabs will be pleading with us to get this [a settlement] for them, since within 72 to 96 hours the Arabs will be completely defeated."⁴⁴ This was a commonly held belief and not just in within the US.

⁴³ Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, 129.

The Soviets, the Israelis, even some of the Egyptians felt that Israel would easily defeat Egypt in a protracted war. However, if Sadat was able to change this belief, if he was able to take and hold some land on the east bank of the Suez he could greatly diminish the Israelis' leverage. He had to find a way "to change the political atmosphere . . . [and] break Israeli intransigence."⁴⁵ By dashing the small country's oversized confidence, Sadat just might have had a better chance of negotiating his land back. This argument fits well with the facts. Sadat, one should remember, did not continue far out into the Sinai. He stayed where he thought he could consolidate his control. He certainly shocked the Israelis, too, in Egypt's amazingly quick crossing of the Suez Canal. Sadat, no doubt, would have benefited from a change in the Israelis self-perception.

It has also been argued that Sadat went to war in an effort to gain the attention of the United States and the Soviet Union. In the reality that was détente, the Soviet Union would have had no influence, no leverage over the Israelis. It was the US that had a special relationship with Israel, and Sadat recognized this. He believed that "if you're going to get anything out of the Israelis it's going to have to come from the United States because they're the only ones who are going to be able to bring weight and leverage into [the] situation."⁴⁶ How was this to be done, though, as Sadat had seemingly depleted his efforts of outreach to the United States? Sadat must have recognized, in the end, that "for Nixon and Kissinger, if he was going to get on their radar, something more than just . . . peace gestures was going to have to be the way."⁴⁷ A war between

⁴⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. XXV, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), Doc. 114.

⁴⁵ Daigle, Personal Interview

⁴⁶ Howard, Personal Interview

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Egypt and Israel would certainly draw the attention and perhaps intervention of the Cold War Superpowers, and it would severely test the strength of détente as both the US and USSR would face real incentives to stepping in on behalf of their respective allies. For example, if the Soviets had allowed their Arab proxies to go to war against Israel and lose (as most predicted they would), then that would reflect poorly on the Soviets. Are the Soviets really dependable? Is their weaponry comparable to that of the Americans? A domino effect that the superpowers could ill afford would ensue, or so the argument went. Sadat once stated in an interview with Newsweek magazine that “the time has come for a shock. . . . Everyone has fallen asleep over the Mideast crisis.”⁴⁸ Well, with war, Sadat would certainly have America’s attention.

The Development of the Relationship

American Actors

America, before, during, and after the war stood as the global power; it possessed the greatest potential to effect change in the struggle between Israel and the Arab states, and it stood to gain the most from a seemingly-new infusion of dynamism in the politics and alliance networks of the region. This section will pose a critical look at the ways in which America and her leaders confronted this new opening as they were eventually able to dredge from the pain and shock of war an opportunity for friendship and peace. First, however, it is important to understand the roles of and establish the pre-war mentality of America’s leaders in Washington, namely that of President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger as well as Secretary of State William Rogers and a few select others who dealt with Middle East policy during this period.

⁴⁸ Israeli, *The Public Diary of President Sadat*, 347.

At the apex of the American government, of course, stood the president, the commander in-chief and head of state. President Nixon came to office with a strong interest in dealing with the larger-scale global difficulties the United States faced, and he had more than enough to occupy him.⁴⁹ The exhaustive, hard-fought struggle in Vietnam waged on, relations with China demanded attention, and, of course, the Cold War with the Soviet Union was an accepted constant that required steady monitoring. In his views of the Middle East, though, Nixon did not appear to have a firmly entrenched opinion on the best way to move forward. He seemed to be at the crossroads of the competing arguments within his administration. One proposed an even-handed policy that advocated neutrality and a step-by-step approach, rejecting any sense of urgency. The other, a more interventionist, pro-Israeli stance, sought to further ground America in its proxy war against the Soviets and their Arab allies. The US State Department unofficially stood behind this first approach. Kissinger, at that time only the National Security Adviser, advocated the latter. The President, recognizing the potential risks of Kissinger's stance, at first authorized "the State Department to test the waters of Arab-Israeli diplomacy" and lead the more cautious approach.⁵⁰ This policy generally framed American actions in the region through the President's first term. Most significantly, this period of Nixon's administration was marked by the proposal and failure of the so-called Rogers Plan in December of 1969. After the let-down, Nixon shifted to a more Cold-War oriented policy that solidified US support for Israel and the status quo, eventually leading to the adoption of détente in the region.

In understanding President Nixon's position leading up to and including the time of the war, though, it is important to take into context the extremely difficult and volatile domestic

⁴⁹ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 195.

⁵⁰ Quandt, *Peace Process*, 61.

situation the President was facing. The “war occurred in the midst of the Watergate crisis . . . [and] its culminating events spanned the entire period of the war,” immensely impacting the President’s ability to govern and deal with the situation as it unfolded.⁵¹ On one end, it siphoned away a great deal of the President’s time and energy. Kissinger describes how the President began neglecting to study his memoranda, noting that “they came back without the plethora of marginal comments that indicated they had been carefully read.”⁵² He further states that “Nixon’s mind was troubled and distracted.”⁵³ On the heels of this, Vice President Spiro Agnew’s eminent resignation in the midst of the war (October 10th) and the President’s execution of the so-called Saturday Night Massacre (October 20th) should not be overlooked. Besides the initial effect of draining the President’s time and energy, the conflict also necessitated the administration’s search for areas in which the President could regain some political capital. In a memorandum from Chief of Staff Alexander Haig to Kissinger on the 8th of November, for example, Haig pushed the Secretary to hold off on announcing his success in easing oil restrictions so that it “could be announced by [the President] from the White House” because of the “overriding necessity to reinforce confidence here,” in Washington.⁵⁴ Historian Adam Howard, in supporting this notion, states that at this time the President “needs political . . . ammunition to show that he’s still presidential and that he’s accomplished [a] great thing.”⁵⁵ It

⁵¹ Kissinger, Henry. *Crisis: The Anatomy of Two Major Foreign Policy Crises*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003. 2.

⁵² Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 78.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. XXV, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), Doc. 325.

⁵⁵ Howard, Personal Interview.

seems clear that these contextual factors had a significant impact on the President's ability to truly effect change and deal with the situation appropriately.

As the President fought back against his challenges domestically, struggling to stay afloat in the storm that was Watergate, he left his National Security Adviser and new Secretary of State (as of September 22nd, 1973), Kissinger, to take control, trusting him to guide the country with the best possible approach to the Middle East conflict. Because Kissinger played such a monumental role in the months leading up to, including, and following the war, it is important to look at the man's experience in the administration and his pre-conceived notions on the region and of the conflict in general.

In particular, historians have pointed to Kissinger's struggle with Secretary of State Rogers and the State Department as an important factor in understanding Kissinger's position in the Nixon White House and his actions in the October conflict. As stated earlier, Kissinger and Rogers seem to have been on opposite sides when it came to Middle East policy. Kissinger saw the region through the broader lens of the Cold War struggle. Fighting between Israel and her neighbors was more a skirmish between super-power-armed proxies. Sweeping policy changes could best be brought about through linkage, connection with other global issues of concern to the super-powers.⁵⁶ Rogers and the State Department advocated a more localized understanding of the conflict. In his struggle with the State Department, Kissinger's frustration sometimes became personal, once angrily stating that "our problem is . . . the Secretary [for] . . . he operates independently of the White House, won't carry out orders and won't do the work, the preparation of his own materials. The Department is torn between [its] loyalty to the Secretary versus the

⁵⁶ Quandt, *Peace Process*, 60.

White House.”⁵⁷ He was not alone in his distrust; he had a close and powerful ally. President Nixon came to office having a great disdain for the department. Historian Craig Daigle argues that Nixon “believed that the department was riddled with Ivy League liberals who voted Democratic, were prone to leaks, and had no loyalty to him.”⁵⁸ He was on a mission “to ruin it—the old Foreign Service—and to build a new one.”⁵⁹ This sat well with Kissinger as it prompted the President to grant his National Security Adviser a broader than normal range of issues to oversee. As Kissinger’s relationship with the President grew, too, he was entrusted more and more with maintaining important backchannels and informing the President of information outside of the normal channels of the State Department. It eventually became clear that, in dealing with the Middle East situation in particular, Kissinger was the man to talk to. In his work on the 1973 War, Historian Richard Parker describes how “Sadat gave up on the Department of State [for] . . . communication directly with national security adviser Henry Kissinger”⁶⁰ just as “Golda Meir [was assured] that she should take Nixon’s and Kissinger’s statements as representing the true US policy, regardless of what the State Department declared.”⁶¹ Rogers was being sidelined. It was clear that “by ’73 when Kissinger was involved in negotiations it lent weight and seriousness to what the administration was doing.”⁶²

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. II, *Organization and Management of US Foreign Policy, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), Doc. 347.

⁵⁸ Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, 24.

⁵⁹ U.S., *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 347.

⁶⁰ Parker, *The October War*, 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶² Daigle, Personal Interview.

Secondly, it is important to realize that as Kissinger was addressing the conflict in the Middle East, talking with representatives from Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other states he was doing so with very real preconceptions of each party's strengths, abilities, and tendencies. These notions, I would argue, had a serious impact on Kissinger's ability to foresee the conflict in October and to draw from the discussions and writings exchanged between the involved parties the feelings and intentions that he might otherwise have noticed. The two most significant examples of this exist in Kissinger's understanding of the Israelis' military strength and of Sadat's intentions and overall mindset.

As for the Israelis, it is clear that Kissinger did not consider them to be in an extremely dangerous situation. After the 1967 War and its complete victory, Israel appeared quite sure of its ability to not only resist the Arab states but to crush them militarily if need be. This confidence, after 1973, appeared to have actually been an overconfidence, and it spread to Washington. In the instance that a war did occur, Kissinger appears to have been "convinced as are most American intelligence and policy makers that Israel would win in a day or two. They'd just wipe the floor with these guys," the Arabs that is.⁶³ A perfect example of Kissinger's overconfidence in the Israelis is apparent in a meeting held on the third day of the war with Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz, Israeli General Mordechai Gur, and General Brent Scowcroft. In it, Dinitz laid out the current situation on the Egyptian front, citing up-to-date Israeli losses. Kissinger frantically interrupted him: "500 tanks! How many do you have?" he said. After the conversation moved on to Arab aid to Egypt, Kissinger returned to the statement from before, saying, "explain to me, how could 400 tanks be lost to the Egyptians?" in seeming disbelief. Much later he states "I don't understand how it could happen. . . . I thought the whole Egyptian

⁶³ Howard, Personal Interview.

army would be wrecked.”⁶⁴ Kissinger’s inability to perceive of Israeli vulnerabilities and shortcomings in their intelligence blinded him.

Similarly, Kissinger made two serious miscalculations of Sadat and his thought processes. First, as stated previously, Kissinger did not accurately perceive Sadat’s very real sense of urgency before the war. Early on, he saw Sadat as a weak leader, someone who had little chance of remaining in power and who, if he were able to retain control, would not be able to dramatically shake up or alter the political landscape of the region.⁶⁵ Kissinger was not ignorant, though, of Sadat’s actions while in office, and he repeatedly recognized that Sadat was moving in the right direction. Nevertheless, whether out of egoism, simple neglect, or something else, Kissinger failed to encourage Sadat’s effort as the urgency of the situation, unfortunately, evaded him. In his May 20th, 1973, meeting with Egyptian National Security Adviser Hafiz Ismail, less than five months before the war, Kissinger boldly warns Ismail, in an almost condescending tone, that “it is conceivable that at some point you may decide, because we are not making any progress, you assume no progress is possible at all. If a military action took place . . . in this context. . . that of course would inspire a certain caution” on the part of the United States.⁶⁶ Kissinger seemed to think that American “caution” in moving forward with already-stalled negotiations would frighten the Egyptians away from war. It is as if he saw the Egyptians’

⁶⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Vol. XXV, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), Doc. 134.

⁶⁵ Parker, *The October War*, 37.

⁶⁶ U.S. White House, “Memorandum of Conversation [Memcon] between Muhammad Hafez Ismail and Henry A. Kissinger.” *The National Security Archive*. 20 May 1973. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB98/#docs>.

sense of urgency but chalked it up to exaggeration. Kissinger, writes in his memoirs that, frankly, it was “the strategy I favored, . . . a prolonged stalemate that would move the Arabs toward moderation and the Soviets to the fringes of Middle East diplomacy.”⁶⁷ Secondly, Kissinger missteps in assuming that any war against Israel would be a conventional war for territorial gain, so any movement by the Arab states in this direction would be irrational. He says as much to the President.⁶⁸ Kissinger failed to look at alternative perspectives on the utility of war, once stating that it was “the practical reality that they [the Arabs] could not alter the status quo except through some form of diplomacy.”⁶⁹

Unfortunately, these assumptions appear to have had an effect on Kissinger’s decision-making before the war. His relationship with the State Department and the Secretary, his preconceived notions of Israeli capabilities, and his apparently ill-formed impression of President Sadat may have caused him to miss significant opportunities for the United States and for Egypt. For these opportunities may have proven to be openings in securing peace while simultaneously denying the Soviet Union a victory and the support of one of its most important allies in the Middle East.

The last of these influential American leaders, Secretary of State William Rogers, had a very different experience in the pre-war years than did Kissinger, his successor. While he, too, certainly bore his own political calculations and perceptions of the actors involved in the Middle East conflict, Rogers, nevertheless, presented quite a different response to the events of the

⁶⁷ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 196.

⁶⁸ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. XXV, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), Doc. 58.

⁶⁹ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 197.

period and the overtures for peace and a change in the status quo coming from Egypt. In the end, though, the failure of the Rogers Plan, the Secretary's support for a middle path embracing a step-by-step approach, and the lack of confidence coming from the White House all had their effects on Rogers' ability to influence policy and effect positive change in the conflict and in Egyptian-American relations.

The political situation on the ground in Egypt and throughout the Middle East during President Nixon's first term was markedly different from that of his second term. In the first term, when Rogers was Secretary of State, Nasser still led Egypt and the political ramifications of the 1967 war were still fresh. In this environment, in 1969, Rogers and his staff proposed a settlement between Israel and Egypt to end hostilities in the Sinai and set the groundwork for peace; this proposal later became known as the Rogers Plan. Unfortunately, the conditions of the day appear to have made the proposal "premature and just too far reaching."⁷⁰ Joseph Sisco, the then-Assistant Secretary for Near East and South Asian Affairs, argued that Israel "was flush with victory and military superiority" while Egypt "was mired in inferiority and defeat," and, in the end, neither "Egypt nor Israel was ready for [the proposal]."⁷¹ This was compounded by the fact that from within the administration, "Kissinger actively opposed the plan," and President Nixon appeared unwilling to fully support Rogers.⁷² At the same time, President Nasser proved a quite different political animal than Sadat would. Still the leader of the Pan-Arab movement, the charismatic, fiery speaker with a rejuvenated disdain for Israel, was not the leader to deal with. It was an untenable situation for Rogers, and when the plan ultimately failed, it further undermined

⁷⁰ Parker, *The October War*, 29.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Quandt, *Peace Process*, 69.

his leadership of American foreign policy in the eyes of the US and, more importantly, Egypt and other state actors. It meant that when Sadat wanted to deal with the US directly, he would look elsewhere, to Kissinger or to Nixon himself.

America and Egyptian Outreach

When Sadat came to power in 1970, he exhibited to the world a mindset quite different from that of his predecessor who had ruled Egypt for more than a decade and a half. Through a number of efforts in his first three years in office, Sadat signaled that he was interested in reorienting his nation away from the old Soviet-dominated system and to a more open and Western approach. Perhaps, as Historian Adam Howard has suggested, even before being President, Sadat's mindset was, "better to go with the Americans than with the Soviets."⁷³ These efforts were all done peacefully. Unfortunately, it appears that Sadat's numerous overtures to the United States fell on deaf ears. By looking at these different offers, these openings to the West that Sadat put forth and the reciprocal American responses, one can see how Sadat inched closer and closer to war and how the United States moved closer and closer to realizing the opportunities inherent in Sadat's efforts.

On the event of Nasser's funeral, Sadat had suffered a heart attack. The soon-to-be new President, lying in bed on his back, "insisted on seeing the United States delegation," and when the Americans arrived he simply stated, "I want to open a new page with the United States," remembers long-time Ambassador to the US, Ashraf Ghorbal.⁷⁴ A few months into his presidency, Sadat was already showing promising signs of seeking greater engagement with the

⁷³ Howard, Personal Interview.

⁷⁴ Parker, *The October War*, 36.

US. In a letter received by the White House in December of 1970, Sadat made clear his interest in restarting the Jarring Talks that had become stalled.⁷⁵ Israel, though, feeling much more confident about its position, conceded little in these talks and even demanded in its proposal that it be allowed to continue its occupation of the Bar Lev line along the canal and that the Egyptian forces be thinned out on the west bank.⁷⁶ This frustrated Sadat to no end, and President Nixon was becoming “equally frustrated by Israel's reluctance . . . [and] began to question America's continued commitment to Israel.”⁷⁷ As an agreement seemed unattainable, Nixon seemed to lose interest. Rogers, however, felt that an opening existed, and so he pushed the State Department on, further out into the conflict where Nixon, at the moment, would not lend him the full weight of his support.

The opening did come, though. On the morning of May 6th, 1971, Rogers and Sisco sat down to talk with Sadat in Cairo. For them, for the United States, the best outcome from any talks would be an agreement to pursue a peaceful solution of the conflict and the opening of the Suez Canal. In the ideal, Egypt would start to scale down the influence it gave to the Soviet Union. In this May meeting, Sadat cut through the diplomatic talk early and stated clearly to Rogers and Sisco, “I know what’s uppermost in your mind. . . . I don’t like the fact that we have to depend on the Soviet Union as much as we do. If we can work out an interim settlement . . . I promise you, I give you my personal assurance that all the Russian ground troops will be out of

⁷⁵ Quandt, *Peace Process*, 88.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷⁷ Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, 129.

my country at the end of six months.”⁷⁸ Further in the conversation, Sadat detailed this settlement as including a negotiated peace with Israel and a staged withdrawal from the Sinai. This was just what America wanted. Nevertheless, Israel turned it down flat. Unfortunately, despite its expression of frustration, “the White House was not prepared to put its shoulder behind the interim settlement proposal and to pressure Israel to take a more positive stance.”⁷⁹ Kissinger, years later in detailing the lead-up to the October War in his book *Crisis*, states that “the United States had no incentive to use pressure” in this instance.⁸⁰ He thought nothing would come of it. He thought that Sadat was a weak leader who couldn’t actually deliver on his promises, and he disapproved of Rogers’ leadership in the conflict.⁸¹ In the end, “Sadat gave up on the Department of State” as the US missed its first chance to bring the Egyptians over to its side and made the eventual October War all the more likely.⁸²

At the same time that Sadat was reaching out to the West, he also had to deal with the complicated relationship between his country and the Soviet Union. Herein, it appears that another opening existed for the United States. Relations with Moscow were not at their best, and, defined by the Cold War’s détente and arms balance in the Middle East, the status quo perpetuated by the Soviets and the Americans bound Sadat’s hands and stymied his objectives. Sadat, as is clear enough from the conversation with Rogers mentioned earlier, was frustrated by the Soviets. They had refused to sell him their MIG-23s, which would have allowed Sadat’s

⁷⁸ Ibid., 132.

⁷⁹ Parker, *The October War*, 3.

⁸⁰ Kissinger, *Crisis*, 12.

⁸¹ Parker, *The October War*, 37.

⁸² Ibid., 3.

troops to strike within Israel from Egypt.⁸³ Whether Sadat wanted these weapons for their tactical benefits or for the effect they would have had, frightening the Israelis into a belief that the status quo was unacceptable, is uncertain. Regardless, he did not get them. This trend continued as, throughout Sadat's presidency, Soviet-promised arms rarely ever arrived at Egyptian ports, and, when they did, they came too few and too late.⁸⁴ In a joint communiqué between the Soviet Union and the United States released on the 29th of May, 1972, Nixon and Brezhnev made clear that their number one priority in the Middle East was the perpetuation of détente. The communiqué clearly reads that "in the view of the USA and the USSR the achievement of such a settlement [as was suggested in 1971] . . . would permit, in particular, consideration of further steps to bring about a military relaxation in [the Middle East]."⁸⁵ In his biography of Sadat, Raphael Israeli argues that "the wording of the communiqué was the last straw, it was the epitome of betrayal," and "Sadat could endure no more."⁸⁶ Shortly after, in July of 1972, Sadat called the Soviet Ambassador to his office. He calmly read the Ambassador his message: "I reject your attitude and behavior toward me. I reject your methods. Your experts will have to leave within a week. . . . The deadline is set, and our War Minister will be informed in this respect."⁸⁷

As the Soviets were forced out, it appears that there may have existed an opportunity for the United States to fill the void, potentially staving off a war that appeared highly-motivated by

⁸³ Kohler, *The Soviet Union and the October 1973 Middle East War*, 34.

⁸⁴ Israeli, *Man of Defiance*, 70.

⁸⁵ "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics"

⁸⁶ Israeli, *Man of Defiance*, 70.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

a desire to engage the West in the Middle East conflict. Historian Craig Daigle agrees, arguing that “for Sadat the Soviet removal was the most overt way he could tell the United States that he was serious in wanting to change their existing relationship.”⁸⁸ However, the expulsion seemed, at the time, to be unconnected with other events and any demands on the part of Sadat. A CIA bulletin prepared on the 28th of August, not long after the expulsion, makes this notion evident, stating that “Cairo seems to expect that its action will somehow serve to bring movement to the situation, but it does not appear to have in sharp focus a concept of how this could be accomplished.”⁸⁹ Further along, the same document makes note of a comment by a leading Cairo reporter of the day, Ihsan Abd al-Quddus, in which he says that “Moscow had no right to forestall any attempt Cairo may make to regain its occupied territories.”⁹⁰ Comments like these, which appear to underline an assumption of the possibility for war, always seem buried in lengthy briefs and shortened to single thoughts, as if the possibility were so inconsequential. As time went by, though, these sort of comments began to attract attention. Nevertheless, the Americans, namely Nixon and Kissinger, neglected to take the lead after Sadat’s dramatic action, preferring to wait for a discussion with Egyptian National Security Adviser Hafez Ismail not scheduled until February of 1973.⁹¹ It was an unfortunate miscalculation. Assumptions that Sadat was acting out of a fear of his own domestic standing, and that he would not be foolish enough to initiate war with Israel, again appears to have clouded these leaders’ minds.

⁸⁸ Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, 133.

⁸⁹ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, “Central Intelligence Bulletin.” Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room. 28 Aug. 1972. <http://www.foia.cia.gov/best-of-crest/CIA-RDP79T00975A022600100001-9.pdf>.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Israeli, *Man of Defiance*, 97.

Shortly after the failure to reach an interim settlement with Israel and a new level of dialogue and engagement with the United States through Rogers back in 1971, Sadat initiated what Ambassador Richard Parker describes as his “second peace initiative.”⁹² It wasn’t a lofty promise or an emotion-filled public address or a grand gesture like before. Recognizing from the earlier events of 1971 that “Kissinger, and not Secretary of State William Rogers, held the key to Middle East policy in the Nixon Administration,” Sadat proposed opening a new backchannel of communication directly between Kissinger and his Egyptian counterpart, Hafez Ismail.⁹³ From Sadat’s early suggestion of the backchannel in April of 1972, the two men did not sit down in front of each other until their meeting on February 23, 1973, when Ismail and his aides visited the President at the White House and later Kissinger, privately in Washington and New York.⁹⁴

On the day before the scheduled meeting, Kissinger called Nixon: “Rogers called. He says he sees a great breakthrough coming here with Egypt, which is total nonsense. And he wants you to tell . . . the Egyptians that he, Rogers, is authorized to speak for you, to make a strong pitch to them.”⁹⁵ Nixon then agreed with his National Security Adviser that Rogers would not be entrusted with any sort of new deal. By this time, it appears Kissinger and Nixon’s relationship had become much closer and that Rogers’ chance to reclaim some of his legitimacy had shrunk a good deal. Kissinger would be in charge from then on.

⁹² Parker, *The October War*, 3.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 210.

⁹⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. XXV, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), Doc. 24.

This first meeting is significant for revealing the development of Kissinger's and the President's position on a settlement between Egypt and Israel. In preparation for the first meeting with the President, Kissinger drafted a memorandum to provide Nixon with background. In it, he suggested three possible ways forward for the US: inaction, a full, public reengagement by the State Department, or a private backchannel establishing a framework for a settlement. In his first suggestion, that the US could simply stay the course, Kissinger notes "the danger that hostilities would be renewed at some point" but writes also that "it is difficult to argue that another few months' delay in moving toward a negotiation would be disastrous for US interests."⁹⁶ Kissinger seems conflicted, though, his doubt of a real and eminent possibility of war appears clear. After the meeting, in talking with Nixon, Kissinger seems much more optimistic, much more willing to reengage in the conflict than he had previously. He tells Nixon that "we [can] have two things going: an interim settlement and direct negotiations between the Arabs and the Israelis. And it will look lovely, and it will be a tremendous boon."⁹⁷ Nevertheless, in his own retelling of this meeting ten years later in *Years of Upheaval*, Kissinger appears to cover his original enthusiasm, stating that Ismail "never clearly explained . . . what would happen if such an agreement was not reached by the deadline."⁹⁸ Perhaps Ismail did not make his and Sadat's position as clear as it could have been. Perhaps Kissinger should have paid more attention to Ismail's warning of the need for urgency. Either way, it shows that, before the October War (now only about 7 months

⁹⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. XXV, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), Doc. 25.

⁹⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. XXV, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), Doc. 28.

⁹⁸ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 215.

away), Kissinger and Nixon still did not understand the true context for Sadat's efforts at this time (including sending Ismail to Washington).

Throughout the following months, events, messages, and conversations like these continued, but the administration remained unconcerned of the possibility of the impending war and the impact such a war would pose to US-Egyptian relations. On May 31st, 1973, came, what I would argue, was the boldest and most frank estimate of the possibility for war from within the administration. In a memorandum written by Roger Merrick, a staff-member on the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, and presented by Ray Cline, the Bureau's Director, to Kissinger, Merrick writes that "the resumption of hostilities by autumn will become a better than even bet."⁹⁹ He continues, arguing that "[Sadat] is becoming ever more strongly tempted to resort to arms" and that "it is not very relevant to weigh the credibility of any particular military scenario. From Sadat's point of view, the overriding desideratum is some form of military action . . . to activate Washington and Moscow."¹⁰⁰ This estimate is remarkable mainly because it goes against the generally-accepted notion (and one that Kissinger firmly held) that Sadat would not seek war with Israel knowing full-well that he would lose. It also goes against the argument that Sadat would fight (if he ever did) in order to physically regain his lost territory in the Sinai, not for some long-term goal of attracting the global community's attention to break the status quo.

When this memo reached Kissinger, Merrick claims that "Kissinger asked Ray Cline and Joe Sisco, then assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs, to reconcile their different

⁹⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. XXV, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), Doc. 65.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

positions on the likelihood of major hostilities.”¹⁰¹ Such a review, one would think, would have triggered Kissinger himself to look more closely at the possibility for war later in the year. The evidence at this point was lining up: the previous offers by Sadat for peace, Sadat’s questionable domestic standing, the outreach by Ismail, this very INR memo, and other events and discussions that had been signaling the desperate political situation Egypt found itself in. What is even more peculiar than this, though, is that, in his memoir, Kissinger writes that “strangely enough, INR abandoned its prediction as war actually approached.”¹⁰² However, in 2001, Merrick claims that “the dispute between INR and NEA continued throughout the summer and fall until hostilities erupted.”¹⁰³ These two statements are contradictory at best and appear to show a desire in one party to tweak the facts. Kissinger, in particular, appears to take a defensive posture, stating later in his memoir that “Mr. Cline is one of our nation’s most distinguished intelligence experts. This does not make him infallible.”¹⁰⁴ It seems clear that Kissinger was not happy with the INR’s estimate because of the fact that it challenged his larger understanding of Sadat and of the conflict between Egypt and Israel. Kissinger would not accept the possibility of war until it was upon him.

On October 6th, 1973, fast asleep in his room at the Waldorf Hotel the morning of the UN General Assembly’s meeting, Kissinger was awakened by his alarmed Assistant Secretary, Joe Sisco. The Egyptians were about to launch a coordinated strike with the Syrians on Israel. He

¹⁰¹ Parker, *The October War*, 115.

¹⁰² Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 462.

¹⁰³ Parker, *The October War*, 115.

¹⁰⁴ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 464.

had to do something. The war was about to start, and it was coming as a shock to Kissinger.¹⁰⁵ All of his conceptions of Sadat had told him that the man would not actively seek out war. He knew he couldn't win against Israel let alone push back his enemy through the entirety of the Sinai to reclaim his stolen land. With the coming of the war, Kissinger was finally forced to reevaluate the Egyptian leader. In the first few days, the cognitive dissonance this shock left in Kissinger's mind made him say and send some contradictory messages, but, eventually, "in those three weeks in October [and] early November, 1973, . . . Kissinger completely changed his mind on Sadat and understood that he was a serious figure."¹⁰⁶ The President, vacationing in Florida, was not much involved in the heavy lifting of the first few days of the war as Kissinger took the lead contacting all the necessary players, the Soviets, the Israelis, the Egyptians, the Jordanians, etc..¹⁰⁷ In conversations with the President upon his return to Washington, Kissinger did not have to convince Nixon of this image of Sadat. Nixon, so caught up in the events of Watergate, was by now highly dependent on Kissinger's advice, and he appears to have accepted this shift without much questioning.

As Kissinger and Nixon dealt with this new perception of Sadat, they also began to realize the opportunity that lay before them. Sadat had given the United States the opening to play a constructive role in the negotiating of a settlement between Egypt and Israel without significant Soviet intervention. This had been the main thrust, the main objective of US policy

¹⁰⁵ Kissinger, *Crisis*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Daigle, Personal Interview.

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. XXV, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), Doc. 106.

for some time before the war, and now it was coming to fruition. In a conversation with Nixon's Chief of Staff, Alexander Haig, Kissinger states that "after we get the fighting stopped we should use this [the war] as a vehicle to get the diplomacy started."¹⁰⁸ Nixon, expressing a similar strain of thought, states to Kissinger two days later that "we must not get away with just having this thing hang over for another four years and have us at odds with the Arab world. We're not going to do it anymore."¹⁰⁹ After all these months and years of working with the Egyptians, through backchannels and official correspondence, it finally dawned on the Americans that Sadat was not who they thought he was and neither was Egypt. Accepting this new reality, "as the peacemaking effort got underway, Nixon and Kissinger dispensed with any pretense of US-Soviet cooperation [, and] in a deliberate effort to seize the opportunity," began to lay the groundwork for America's "preeminence in the Middle East."¹¹⁰

Conclusion

The shift in the American-Egyptian relationship that took place in this period was, in fact, a very dramatic turnaround. Perhaps it is unfortunate that it did not come earlier, that the Americans did not seize Sadat's offers of peace before the war, but, maybe, as Kissinger suggested, the time might not have been ripe. Nevertheless, within these first three years of Sadat's presidency, the new Egyptian President accomplished much. He solidified his domestic rule, cast out his Soviet backers, completely reshaped his image in the eyes of the Americans, brought down the Israelis' inflated sense of military superiority, and refocused the world's

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, Vol. XXV, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), Doc. 132.

¹¹⁰ Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*, 268.

attention to issues of peace and sovereignty in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Of course, the official peace with Israel did not come until 1979, and the full return of the Sinai to Egypt took many years as well, but the path had been laid before Egypt. And this was not simply a victory for the Egyptians, for America had seen its greatest foe, the Soviet Union, repulsed from the region, its influence greatly damaged, as America was able to assert itself as the most powerful actor in the Middle East. Both states achieved their objectives, and, in so doing, ushered in a new period of cooperation that would last for decades to come.

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