

EMBASSY OF ISRAEL

BRUSSELS

Policy Background :

THE RAFAH SALIENT

Israeli settlements in Sinai.

*" No rhetoric can change the indisputable fact that the Sinai Desert served as a staging ground to attack Israel and to threaten it with destruction five times in thirty years. "*

Prime Minister Menachem Begin  
to the Knesset, 23 January 1978.

In his address to the Knesset on 20 November 1977, President Sadat expressed an awareness and understanding of Israel's concern for security. In so doing, he touched upon the central motif of Israeli sensitivities. This apparent Egyptian acknowledgment that peace could be built only on the removal of the threat to Israel's security is central among the elements necessary for a successful conclusion of the Egyptian-Israeli negotiations.

Since the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel has established a number of villages in the vital strategic area known as the Rafah Salient. While Israel stands steadfastly by the crucial principle of demilitarization of the Sinai Peninsula from the western passes to the "international frontier", it believes that these settlements cannot be abandoned or left without self-defence.

The reasons for this are anchored deep in the geography and history of this area.

#### GEOGRAPHICAL PARAMETRES

The Rafah Salient comprises less than 2 per cent of the area of the Sinai Desert, a virtually uninhabited region which itself covers only about 6 per cent of Egypt as a whole. In other words, the territory in question comprises only about one-tenth of one per cent of the total area of Egypt.

To the west, the Rafah Salient is bounded by the town of El-Arish, to the east by the town of Rafah, to the south by drifting sand dunes, and to the north by the Mediterranean Sea.

#### CLASSIC INVASION ROUTE

Historically, the Rafah Salient straddles the famous *Via Maris* ("Way of the Sea"), along which all land traffic between the Nile Valley and the Fertile Crescent has had to pass. In other words, the natural route from El-Arish - the easternmost town in Egypt - and Ashkelon - the westernmost town in Israel - traverses the towns of Rafah and Gaza, in the Gaza district. Militarily, therefore, the Rafah Salient commands the major invasion route from Egypt into Israel. No less than 45 armies have passed through this historic no-man's land - from the Pharaohs of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty to the armies of President Nasser in 1956 and 1967.

#### RECORD OF AGGRESSION SINCE 1948

With the severance of the Gaza district from Israel in 1949, Egyptian control of Rafah and its approaches also meant control of the volatile and densely populated Gaza district, and immediate access for Egypt to Israel's coastal plain and to its major centres of population. The direct and unhindered contact between Egypt and the Arab population of the Gaza district was used unremittingly by Egypt, until 1967, to supply Arab terrorists there with arms, funds and other forms of support and encouragement for their sabotage and murder infiltrations across the armistice line with Israel.

In the thirty years of warfare that the Arab states have imposed upon Israel, the Rafah Salient has been the site of some of the most crucial and fiercely fought battles the Middle East has witnessed.

1948-1949

In 1948, the El-Arish-Rafah-Gaza-Ashkelon road - as so many times before - served as the main invasion route for the Egyptian army. Under the 1949 Israel-Egypt Armistice Agreement, the Gaza-Rafah area was placed under Egyptian control, in the hopeful belief that the Armistice Agreements between Israel and its four Arab neighbours would, as their preambles stated, be swiftly transformed into a permanent peace settlement.

1951-1956

In the years that followed, however, Gaza and the El-Arish-Rafah area came to serve as a permanent base for repeated terror raids into Israel, made possible by logistic support from Egyptian army posts in the towns of Rafah and El-Arish. Between 1951 and 1956, hundreds of Israeli civilians were murdered in these raids. Moreover, beginning in 1954, fortifications and supply depots were built by the Egyptians in the Rafah area, in order to strengthen the invasion approaches. These were major factors leading up to the 1956 Sinai Campaign, in which Israel was compelled to occupy the Sinai Desert.

At the urging of President Eisenhower, Secretary of State Dulles and UN Secretary-General Hammarskjöld, Israel withdrew from Sinai and the Gaza district in March 1957, with the understanding that Egyptian troops would never return to this area. Within 48 hours of that withdrawal, however, Egyptian military forces - and not the promised civilian administration - were back.

1967

By June 1967 the Egyptian army was once again mobilized to launch a war of annihilation from its bases in Rafah and Gaza. Again Israel was forced into a decisive war of self-defence, resulting in the recapture of the Gaza district

and the Sinai Peninsula, and the establishment of an Israeli administration in these areas. Again casualties were heavy, and again the decisive battles were fought in the Rafah Salient, where the Israel Defence forces struggled to cut the supply lines of the intended Egyptian invasion route.

### 1973

It is no coincidence that, with the Rafah Salient (and, indeed, all of Sinai) under its control in October 1973, Israel was able, for the first time since 1948, to allow itself to suffer a first strike by the Egyptian army, despite confirmed intelligence reports of the impending onslaught. Should Israel again lose control over this vital area, it would be left with little alternative but to mobilize its reserves and pre-empt should the Egyptian army ever again assume an aggressive posture in Sinai, as it has done repeatedly in the past; despite similar guarantees and security arrangements to those being suggested today.

### NATURAL BARRIER TO TERROR AND INVASION

It is hardly surprising, in view of the above record, that Israel showed considerably more reluctance, after the Six-Day War of 1967, to agree to a unilateral withdrawal than it did after the 1956 Sinai Campaign. Since 1967, Israel has made it clear to all concerned that it harbours no territorial ambitions as such, but that any future Israeli withdrawal would have to be part and parcel of a comprehensive, full-fledged peace settlement which, among other things, would determine, in the words of UN Security Council Resolution 242 of 22 November 1967, "*secure and recognized boundaries*" between Israel and Egypt, as between Israel and its other Arab neighbours, to be agreed upon in negotiations between the parties (Resolution 338).

Whatever the ultimate agreed location of these borders is to be, however, Israel is determined, this time, to create a natural barrier which will prevent both logistic support for any possible terror activity that might again develop in the Gaza district, and any future large-scale invasion move along the *Via Maris*. The only feasible and logical place for such a barrier is the Rafah Salient. For this reason, during recent years, a number of Israeli civilian settlements have been built in this area, on the southwestern fringe of the Gaza district.

#### AN AID TO PEACE

Maintaining these settlements, even on Egyptian soil, serves another highly important function: they will help stabilize peace, by preventing a gradual deterioration of the situation, which so often in the past has led to the outbreak of war. Egypt's War of Attrition against Israel in 1969-70 was brought to an end - to cite one example from the fairly recent past - by means of a "standstill cease-fire agreement" between Egypt and Israel, negotiated in August 1970 through the good offices of the United States. There was nothing to guarantee the standstill except the agreement itself - no physical safeguards on the ground, that is.

What happened, of course, is history. Within hours of the agreement coming into effect, the Egyptians, in open violation of it, began to advance their missile sites to the banks of the Suez Canal. Israel registered a vehement protest but, beyond that, could do nothing to counter this violation - which turned out to be the first of a series of preparatory steps leading, eventually, to the Egyptian attack on Israel on 6 October 1973.

The existence of a cluster of Israeli civilian settlements in the Rafah area, therefore, with suitable security arrangements, constitutes an important

deterrent not only to a full-scale invasion of Israel by this favoured route, but to any kind of erosion that some future Egyptian administration might be tempted to cause in a peace agreement with Israel, such as a gradual infringement of the demilitarization provisions of such an agreement.

An Israeli physical presence in the area, which needs be neither large nor formidable, must nevertheless be ensured, even under Egyptian sovereignty as proposed, to deter any such future temptation, and thus to help de-fuse, in advance, potential future conflagrations between Israel and Egypt.

#### MAJOR CONCESSION

Considering the wording of Resolution 242 ("*withdrawal from territories*" to "*secure and recognized boundaries*"), and in conformance with countless precedents the world over under international law and practice in wars of self-defence such as the war of 1967, Israel is fully entitled, in the present negotiations with Egypt, to demand the establishment of new boundaries, providing it with a greater degree of security.

Israel could, for example, have proposed the inclusion of the Rafah Salient within its sovereign territory, and the rectification of the pre-1948 international boundary line accordingly. Instead, in deference to President Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem last November, Israel decided to forego this right and to agree, at the outset of the negotiations, to an "*ultimate Israeli withdrawal to the international boundary*" (Ismailiya communique, 25 December 1977), thus recognizing the principle of Egyptian sovereignty over the entire Sinai Peninsula.

This was a most substantial concession to Egypt on Israel's part, and it is no less substantial for having been made at the start of the talks, rather than after a great deal of haggling. It is paradoxical, indeed, that the

vary magnitude of this concession should have caused Israel to find itself, now, in a situation where it stands accused of seeking to maintain Israeli settlements on the "wrong" side of the border! There are, in fact, international precedents for this kind of arrangement. Some political scientists, for example, have pointed to the case of the Egyptian-Sudanese border, where an area the size of the Nile Delta is under Egyptian sovereignty - yet is, by agreement, under Sudanese administrative jurisdiction.

#### NO TURNING BACK

In his Knesset speech on 20 November 1977, President Sadat freely admitted that, for thirty years, the Arab nations had carried on an unremitting war against Israel - a war that took on many forms in addition to its military manifestation - and that, so far as he was concerned, he was now prepared to alter this situation. Surely, President Sadat must understand that this long period of hostility and war against Israel compelled it to create certain facts on the ground, so as to enhance its security, and that one cannot - even with the best of peaceful intentions - now simply undo all these facts, as if to say: "All right, let's go back to Square One, thirty years ago", as if nothing had happened in the interim.

Time does not stand still; it moves on. Action produces counter-action, and one party's moves invoke counter-moves. Having reached the present point, we must now deal with the situation that, over the past generation, has been created by both sides in this long-standing conflict. We must deal with realities as they are today, not as they might have been had the Arab states never made war upon Israel.



CONCLUSION

The RAFAH Salient holds no strategic importance for Egypt if her intentions are truly peaceful. The distance to the Suez Canal is 200 kilometers. To Israel, whose densely populated centers are almost on the doorstep, a continued civilian presence in the Salient gives defensive advantage, crucial to its future security. Israel's absence from there would inevitably present a would be aggressor with a major offensive asset of tempting proportion.

Président Sadat acknowledgment of Israel's need for security can have real meaning only if it finds concrete expression in the field.

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