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## **Commemorating or Forgetting? Sadat's Peace Initiative As Reflected in the Egyptian Press**

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A nation, wrote Ernest Renan in his famous 1882 essay "Quest-ce qu'une nation?", is a group of people that learns to remember together the same things but at the same time learns to forget things together".

This past November marked the 30th anniversary of Anwar Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem. The treatment of the anniversary by the Egyptian press reflects not only the current state of Israeli-Egyptian relations but also, and even primarily Egypt's own self-view of its past and present. At the very same moment that most Egyptian commentators were minimizing the achievements of Sadat's peace initiative and emphasizing its shortcomings, a presidential decree announced that the house that had served as Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser's residence was to be turned into a museum. Concurrently, the Higher Council for Culture hosted a three-day conference to commemorate the 90th anniversary of Nasser's birth, at which 38 speakers discussed the life, thoughts, virtues and shortcomings of Sadat's predecessor. "History is the memory of the nation; it is the summary of our experiences, declared Rauf Abbas, Cairo University professor and president of the Egyptian Society of Historical Studies. When we embark on a new era, we must look back and make use of its achievements and learn from its mistakes." In effect, this emphasis on the Nasserist era seeks to diminish Sadat's historical importance, if not make people forget him entirely.

Dina Ezzats *al-Ahram Weekly* article, Sadat and Anapolis was particularly representative of the predominantly hard line adopted by Egyptian journalists and commentators. She categorically criticized Sadat's peace initiative by quoting the editor-in-chief of the Lebanese daily *al-Safir*, Talal Salman, who declared that after 30 years I still think that Sadat's visit to Jerusalem was more than a crime. It was a huge political miscalculation that was based on a shockingly shallow understanding of the nature of the Israeli enemy and that caused among other things the destruction of any future collective Arab standing on the Palestinian cause....Annapolis is only another stop on the endless road of open-ended (Arab) defeats." Ezzats/Salmans terminology, referring to Sadats crime and the Israeli enemy, is an integral part of the prevailing discourse in Egypt when it comes to Arab-Israeli relations.

A few Egyptian journalists dared to counter this tendency and defend Sadat's courageous leadership. Salah Muntasir (*al-Ahram*, November 18, 2007) quoted from the memoirs of Ibrahim Kamel, Sadats minister of foreign affairs, who had strongly opposed the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, but reversed his position just before his death. Ibrahim Sa'adeh (*al-Akhbar*, November 20, 2007) scornfully declared that 99.99% of Arab journalists and writers had attacked Sadat's peace initiative and were still doing so 30 years later. Those who bucked the trend, he said, such as the Yemeni writer Nasser Taha Mustafa, were courageous and worthy of praise. *Nahadat Masr*, an independent journal that provides a platform for liberal voices in Egypt, also contained a number of pieces favorable to Sadat.

The prominent journalist and former editor of the weekly *October*, Anis Mansour, who was Sadat's right-hand man and personal adviser, chose to publish his views in the London-based *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, and thus partially shield himself from the criticism of Egyptian colleagues and readers alike. In three articles between August and November 2007 treating the various aspects of the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, Mansour praised Sadat as a visionary leader who acted for the sake of his people. By focusing on Sadats leadership, Mansour indirectly criticized his successor, Husni Mubarak.

In one of his articles entitled, "How Do Children Perceive the Peace between Egypt and Israel?", Mansour wrote of an Israeli educator who had showed him drawings of 100 Israeli children describing their understanding of peace between Egyptians and Israelis. The Israeli educator, Mansour wrote, had asked him to carry out the same project with Egyptian children, and he did so, after receiving Sadat's approval. Mansour found no difference between the drawings of the Israeli children and those of the Egyptians. They all revealed hope and optimism. For example, while an Egyptian girl drew trees as brides in their wedding dresses as a symbol of

life, love and happiness, an Israeli girl wrote that peace will certainly come as soon as President Sadat and Prime Minister Golda Meir get married. In another article, "Flowers on the Grave of a non-Unknown Soldier," Mansour called Sadat the "dreamer of all dreamers", someone who had done his utmost to make his dreams come true. The assassination of Sadat, Mansour said, not only tore his dreams to pieces but proved that "we Egyptians weren't mature enough for peace, even amongst ourselves."

Abd al-Moneim Said Ali, head of the influential al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, sided with Mansour, criticizing the Arab countries for their "passive approach" towards the peace process with Israel. In his *al-Sharq al-Awusat* article, "Peace, Normalization and Apricot (*Mishmish*)," Said defended strongly the Arab initiative "that includes some of the characteristics of Sadat's peace initiative." Abd al-Moneim claimed that whenever Egyptians relate to the idea of Arab-Israeli peace, they say "*fil-mishmish*", i.e. that real peace and normalization are actually impossible. This contrasts sharply with Sadat's philosophy, he said, which held that the mere act of peace negotiations between Egypt and Israel, let alone their peace agreement, had restored the nations honor. He concluded by stating that peace with Israel didn't have to be "hot" right from the beginning: it could be hot, lukewarm or even cold, depending on the price Israel was ready to pay in returning Arab territories. The most important thing was that Arab leaders were required not only to discuss peace but also to practice it. Unlike Mansour's articles, which constituted a straightforward positive approach toward Sadat's initiative, Abd al-Moneim's attitude to peace was basically instrumental, i.e. he did not emphasize peace as a value in itself but as a means to achieve concrete goals.

In a recent lecture at Tel Aviv University, the independent US-based journalist Mona Eltahawy discussed "the Children of Camp David" and their attitudes towards Sadat's historic visit to Israel and the signing of the peace treaty. These children, ages 30 and under, have no real memory either of Sadat's visit or of the peace treaty. According to her research, most of them, apart from Islamists and leftists, agreed with the propositions that Sadat was a very courageous leader", that it took a lot of boldness and courage to come to Israel at that time," and that "it saved Egypt from more wars with Israel".

If under the current political circumstances in Egypt, where the voices of radicalism and confrontation are much louder than those who call for reconciliation and peace, then the answers of young Egyptians to Eltahawy's questions provide room for hope and optimism, the 30-year cold peace notwithstanding.

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