One Way Out of the Israeli-Egyptian Deadlock

By Amitai Etzioni

TO KEEP afloat the hope for peace negotiations between Egypt, Jordan and Israel, several devices have been suggested, all of which, thus far, are designed to cost Egypt more than it is willing to pay. Among the options discussed—"remove the missiles deployed after the cease fire," "demilitarize the whole zone," or "tolerate one quick Israeli strike to wipe out the extra missiles and then there will be peace talks." While these alternatives may seem fair in view of the

Egyptian cheating on the cease-fire, they also seem impractical, dangerous, or both. To wait for the Egyptians to reduce their missile force or to agree to demilitarize their side of the Suez may prove a wait longer than the 90 days set aside for the cease-fire. To bomb the missiles (or otherwise wipe them out) may well make the peace negotiations the first victim of the interrupted cease-fire, and may result in considerable Israeli casualties.

There may be a way out. Israel could make a limited concession and turn the present deadlock into a test of Soviet intentions, Egyptian posture, and regain world's support, which Israel has been losing. The Israelis could move the Bar Lev line—a string of fortified bunkers which presently constitutes the Israeli frontline—some 30 odd miles from the Suez bank. Although the line would still be in Egyptian territory held by the Israelis, it would be out of the range of the Egyptians new artillery (203m guns; range 18 miles) and the SAM 2 missiles (25 miles range). Thus this would allow for the vitally needed Israeli air cover for the line, a protection now threatened.

United Nations peacekeeping units should be positioned in the buffer zone which would be thus created to avoid Egyptian troop landings on the east side of the Suez and to prevent the positioning of artillery or missiles there. For such a U.N. force to be acceptable to the Israelis it would have to be understood from the outset that the consent of both sides is needed before the force can be removed, in order to avoid any new fiasco when Nasser unilaterally removed the U.N. forces which stood between him and the Israelis at the Gaza Strip.

The U.N. force could also help assure that the Suez Canal, sure to be opened to shipping if the Israelis draw back, will serve all comers. The Egyptians could, if they desire, "blame" the U.N. for having to tolerate the passage of Israeli ships in the canal.

SHOULD a U.N. force be unavailable for policing the zone, the redrawing of the Bar Lev line would be much less attractive for the Israelis. However, it still could serve to test the Soviet intentions. Is the introduction of the SAMs Indeed a first slice of a salami made of Israel? Would the Russians encourage the Egyptians to gradually force Israel to give up its 1967 acquisitions without a viable peace, or "throw" it into the sea? Or—despite whatever the U.S.S.R. would prefer in its daydreams—are its goals, in practice, limited to making Egypt more defensible, to making it seem less helpless and allyless, and to reopening the Suez to Soviet shipping?

The chief reason the U.S.S.R. may aim to pursue only more limited goals despite its hostility to Israel is that it cannot but realize that the broader goals will inevitably lead to a military confrontation with Israel which—if the U.S.S.R. is not to suffer a humiliation a la Finland—would require committing a very large Russian force (200,000 men or more) to fight far away from their home bases.

As to the Egyptians, the Israelis tend to believe that the only way to hold them at bay is to strike them hard every time they scratch or jump. Would an Egypt, following a limited victory—as it would conceive a redrawing of the Bar Lev line—and feeling less vulnerable (due to the missiles) be more belligerent and less willing to negotiate than it is now? The answer to this question is too often assumed: it could here be tested without undue risk.

Not least, the Israelis could demonstrate their keen commitment to peace, and their willingness to make reasonable concessions, while indicating the aggressive nature of Egypt—all qualities often referred to but increasingly belied by frequent Israeli preemptive strikes (in 1957, 1967, and after), by its scorched-earth policy on the west bank of the Suez, east of the Jordan River and north of the Golan Heights. The need for such a demonstration by Israel is evident by the increasing questioning of her intentions not only by foes but by her friends as well. (These lines, which will not be cheered in Jerusalem, are authored by a former Israeli commando, who represented Israel at UNESCO meetings, and who is represented in Israel by two sons.)

The dangers of return to the war with Egypt, of confrontations with the U.S.S.R., and of triggering a superpower clash are such that a calculated risk for peace seems to be called for.