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## **The Question of Arab Territorial Continuity as a Cause of a Conflict in the Middle East**

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A surprising publication appeared at the beginning of August 1997 in the Arab weekly *Al-Wasat*, which is published in London and considered to be reliable. The article claimed, among other things, that the President of Egypt had recently called into question Israeli sovereignty over Eilat. The article in *Al-Wasat*, that appeared under the title, "Umm Rashrash is Conquered and Its Area is Larger than the Golan," raises the question whether there is a guiding hand in Egypt interested in resurrecting anew the old Egyptian demand for territorial continuity in the Arab east. From the map appended to the article, contributed by the weekly's reporter in Cairo, it would seem that Egypt has a claim to land in the Israeli Negev which forms a long and narrow triangle, referred to as the "Umm Rashrash Triangle." On its western side this triangle coincides with the international border. Its apex is in Rafah, and its base connects Taba on the Israeli Egyptian border with a point on the Jordanian-Israeli border in the east. One may conclude from this map that Egypt is in fact claiming the entire area of the Eilat shore. If this territory were given over to Egypt, Israel would be cut off from the city of Eilat and the Red Sea, and Egypt would be endowed with territorial continuity connecting it with Jordan.

In the history of the Arab-Israel conflict the question of Arab territorial continuity has played a central and sometimes decisive role. This claim, in its different versions, was one of the factors that influenced the intensification of the Arab-Israel conflict, bringing it to a peak in the War for Independence in 1948, the Suez-Sinai War in 1956, and the 6 Day War in 1967. It even had some influence over the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

The following survey and analysis describe the various manifestations of the continuity question, or in its other name, the Negev Wedge Affair, and bring historical proofs of the central role that this affair has had in the Arab-Israeli conflict. This survey is also intended as a warning against underestimating the influence of this issue on the positions Egypt might take in regard to the development of peace settlements in the region and regarding the possibilities of diplomatic or other conflicts on this question in the future.

### **The Historical and Ideological Roots of the Continuity Question Conflict**

The question of the Negev Wedge and territorial continuity arises first and foremost from the geographical structure of the region and from the fact that the Negev - the southern, desert area of the State of Israel - is the land link between the Sinai Peninsula held by Egypt and the Kingdom of Jordan. The Red Sea and its extension - called the Gulf of Eilat by Israel and the Gulf of Aqaba by the Arabs - separates Egypt from Saudi Arabia and Jordan; therefore the only land passage, which is also the shortest possible one, is through the southern Negev.

The Land of Israel is located at the meeting point between Asia and Africa, and it is also influenced by its close proximity to the meeting point with Europe. The history of the Land of Israel has been determined in a decisive fashion by the fact that it served as a necessary passage between two fertile valleys and two of the largest and oldest civilizations in the Middle East - the Euphrates Valley and the Nile Valley - as well as a necessary land passage between Africa and Asia and between Europe and Africa.

The strategic importance of the Land of Israel during the first half of the 20th century derived, among other things, from the fact that it served as a transit area for the British between their bases in Egypt and their positions in Transjordan and primarily in the Persian Gulf. Its strategic importance also derived from its proximity to the Suez Canal and from the fact that during the Cold War it was a transit area needed for defending the canal from a possible Soviet attack. Thus, for example, at the beginning of 1948 the British army Chiefs of Staff concluded that the territory encompassing the Land of Israel, southern Syria, and Lebanon was the only region able to be used as an effective defensive position in case of a ground attack on Egypt from the north and northeast. For this reason they demanded that Britain keep the right of free passage through the territory of the Land of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

The position taken by the British government at that time on the question of control of the Negev was most extreme. The British Foreign Minister, Ernest Bevin, who was a dominant figure in formulating the British government's stand on the Land of Israel question during the years 1945-1951, was unequivocal in his stance that the Jews must be denied control over the Negev. Under the conditions of the bitter struggle the West was then waging against the Soviet Union, Bevin viewed Israeli control over the whole Negev up to Eilat as a development helpful for the Soviet Union. This was because it would block Britain from developing a continuous land belt under its control from the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. The American State Department agreed to this stand, especially during the time General George Marshall was Secretary of State.

Against this firm stance aimed at preventing the Jews from controlling the Negev stood David Ben-Gurion, with a stance no less firm. He demanded that the whole Negev be included in the boundaries of the Jewish state. Ben-Gurion's outlook was based on a strategic and settlement conception that viewed the Negev as an area vital to the Jewish state, without which it could not survive. In a bitter debate that took place among the Yishuv leadership in February 1948, during the first phase of the War for Independence, when Arab irregular forces forcibly tried to prevent the implementation of the UN resolution to establish the Jewish state, Ben-Gurion demanded that 5,000 fighters be sent to the defense of the Negev. This constituted a third of the military force that then stood at the disposal of the Jewish settlement authority, on the eve of the declaration of the State. In that period the Negev was almost completely empty of Jews, and only about 400 resided in 11 tiny settlement points that had been established in 1946.

On the other hand, in the territory north of the Negev there were at that time about 600,000 Jews under harsh attack from Palestinian irregular units, volunteers, and disguised soldiers from the Arab countries. Every Jewish fighter was needed to protect the Jewish population. The military experts tried to prevent Ben-Gurion from sending to the Negev the large force he demanded, thereby weakening the defense of the north. Ben-Gurion answered them as follows: "A Jewish country without the Negev is almost not a Jewish country, in a double sense: it is almost not a country and almost not Jewish. For I do not believe that a Jewish Carthage is possible, and without the Negev there will be a kind of Carthage that will be called Tel Aviv."<sup>2</sup>

Ben-Gurion was concerned that if the Negev were not included in the State of Israel, the state would be so tiny as to constitute no more than an expanded city-state, such that the destruction of Tel Aviv would be enough to bring about Israel's demise. Even worse, according to the partition plan this area would also contain many Arabs, and hence his expression that this country would almost not be Jewish. According to the UN partition plan the Negev desert was intended to double the area of the Jewish state, or more, but its greatest benefit was in the fact that the territory was almost empty of Arab population.

The Yishuv leaders of the Labor movement, with Ben-Gurion at its head, began to formalize their ideas regarding the borders of the Jewish state 28 years beforehand, in the period after War World I. This position

was based on a complex perception that took into consideration two ideological concepts: the national viewpoint and strategic settlement. The leadership gave very serious consideration to the influence of cultural traits on the Jews, primarily to the influence of the Diaspora and the ghetto spirit, and from here arrived at a clear stand against Jewish settlement in areas having a dense Arab population.

This position was expressed in a comprehensive and profoundly detailed document from 1920, prepared with the idea that it would be part of the Great Plan for the Establishment of the Jewish state. A precise evaluation of Ben-Gurion's political actions, particularly in regard to settlements during the many years of his leadership, and primarily between 1935 until his retirement from the office of the Prime Minister in 1963, shows an almost obsessive attachment to values embodied in the Great Plan of 1920.

It is important to understand the unique stand taken by the Zionist leadership, in contrast to the accepted colonialist concept of taking advantage of the local population as a work force. The Labor movement leadership demanded maximum separation of Jewish settlements from the Arab population and reliance on an independent Jewish work force throughout the economy.

In the early 1920s the worker's leaders saw a threat concealed in the ghetto spirit of the Jews. They feared that due to the great Arab majority in Israel, Jews who came on aliyah would continue the behavior patterns that had characterized them as a minority in the Diaspora for the past 2000 years.

In a chapter of the Great Plan of 1920, jointly written by Ben-Gurion and his teacher and friend, Shmuel Yavnieli, it is written:

The question of the majority and the minority is a question that includes the entire and comprehensive content of the Diaspora concept: Are we so desperately yearning for it that we are willing to curse our future lives with our terrible past? Will every city and settlement in Israel be an appendage to the majority or should we shape our life in this country based on political and economic considerations and build a chain of fortified Jewish centers in different corners of the land.<sup>3</sup>

The settlement leadership of the Labor movement, with Ben-Gurion as its leader, derived its strategic and political outlook from this idea. This decision had far-reaching political, social, and territorial results, and determined to a great extent the settlement area of the Jews in the Land of Israel, Ben-Gurion's stand on the Negev, and, ultimately, the borders of the country.

Yavnieli and Ben-Gurion suggested, in a continuation of the article from 1920, that Jews purposely refrain from settling in areas with dense Arab population, and choose to build their settlements in a section of the land where there were either sparse Arab settlements or almost none, at least until creating a Jewish majority in Israel. They also suggested that Jews not settle in the mountainous areas of the land with dense Arab settlements, and that they keep away from Arab cities. Instead, they recommended settling in the Coastal Plain, the Lower Galilee, the Jordan Valley, the Negev - and Transjordan, where there were sparse Arab populations; and the Jerusalem area, where there had been a Jewish majority since 1840. Since the southern part of the Land of Israel was so large and almost empty of inhabitants, they suggested designating it as the most important area for settlement, for a central Jewish city, and for major harbors.

Only in the southern part of the land do enormous free areas extend, from the coast to the center of the country. Therefore, our coastal city, the main base, will be built in one of the areas between Ashdod and El Arish. A second harbor should be built simultaneously with the onset of widespread settlement of the Negev, where King Solomon broke a path to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean - in what was once Eilat and is today Aqaba.<sup>4</sup>

The settlement chapter is part of the "Great Plan," which was prepared by an impressive group of leaders, including Nachman Syrkin, Nachum Neer, Yitschak Ben-Zvi, Berl Katznelson, and David Ben-Gurion - leaders who were destined to have central roles in the creation of the Jewish state. This plan was very influential during the relatively short period between 1920, when it was formed, to 1948, the year the State was created. During this period Jewish settlement grew tenfold, from approximately 60,000 in 1920 to 600,000 in 1948. Indeed, during these years, perhaps from the power of this plan, or from the power of reality, the mountainous areas with dense Arab population remained almost empty of Jews, who preferred

trying to create continuous settlement blocks in areas with sparse Arab population, where land could be purchased.

The Jewish preference for separating their settlements from the Arabs' and the effort to prevent creation of a bi-national state, were prominent aspects of the Zionist socialist central stream headed by Ben-Gurion and his colleagues who formulated the "Great Plan." This was in contrast to the revisionist right-wing stand, on one side, and the radical left, on the other side, neither of whom wanted partition - each for their different reasons. The ideological, political, and programmatic directions formulated in "the Great Plan" had great influence not only in Ben-Gurion's day, but also afterwards. Actually, the argument over this subject between the Labor movement and the so-called "national camp" continued until the Hebron agreement signed by Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, in 1997.

The intention of the Labor movement settlement leadership not to harm the Arab inhabitants or displace them from their land was sincere, even though subsequently it did not succeed. Thus, for example, at the end of 1917, shortly after the Balfour Declaration was publicized, young Ben-Gurion wrote an article in the spirit of the position that was later expressed in the "Great Plan." Ben-Gurion noted that Israel on both sides of the Jordan River was an extensive area with much uninhabited land, and with only small parts of the area being cultivated by the Arabs who lived there. Under these circumstances he concluded that the Jews, who now had finally received recognition of their right to build a national home in Israel on both sides of the Jordan, could settle in the land without displacing the Arabs. Ben-Gurion wrote at that time:

However, we must remember that these rights [meaning the rights of settling the land] also pertain to the inhabitants who already live in the country - and we must not impair these rights. The vision of social justice and equality of nations which the Jewish nation has upheld for 3000 years, and the essential interests of the Jewish people living in the Diaspora, and even more so in Israel - require us to be scrupulously responsible in honoring and preserving the rights and interests of the land's non-Jewish inhabitants.<sup>5</sup>

It seems that the idea that millions of Jews could be settled in the Land of Israel without harming the Arab inhabitants began to break down as early as 1921, a year after Yavnieli and Ben-Gurion published their joint article. Britain decided at that time not to include Transjordan within the borders of the Jewish National Home and to grant it to the Emir Abdullah, since 250-300,000 Arabs, some of them nomads, dwelled there. In 1922 the Emirates were founded in Transjordan, and the area that was allotted to the establishment of the Jewish National Home was reduced solely to the western side of Israel, where there was a relatively large Arab populace of approximately 750,000 people.

Although Transjordan was detached from the National Jewish Home, there was no fundamental change in the Labor movement settlement leaders' stand. The principle of not settling in areas with dense Arab population remained a guiding ideal. These leaders never became reconciled with the separation from Transjordan, but they did not make their demand an issue they would fight for - as did the right-wing Revisionists, led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky. Thus, for example, Ben-Gurion expressed this position in his report on a conversation with Musa Alami that took place on August 27, 1934. In answer to Alami's question whether he would agree to Iraq, Transjordan, and the Land of Israel becoming one state, Ben-Gurion said that the Jews wanted the existence of only two countries: "the Land of Israel, including Transjordan, and the State of Iraq."

On August 14, 1934, in a conversation Ben-Gurion held with the British High Commissioner in Israel, the Commissioner mentioned that the status of eastern Transjordan could not be the same as western Jordan, and that the articles of the Mandate regarding the Jewish National Home did not hold for Transjordan. Ben-Gurion answered him thus: "Our settlement in Transjordan is a condition for the agreement, and the fact that the articles on the National Home have not been applied in Transjordan is not definite and only temporary as is stated specifically in section 25 of the Mandate."<sup>6</sup>

After Ben-Gurion was chosen as Chairman of the Zionist Executive and the Jewish Agency (Sochnut) in 1935, and became the head of the political leadership of the Jewish settlement in Israel, he strengthened his position and demanded including the whole Negev, together with Eilat, in the boundaries of the Jewish state.

In a tour that he organized in the Negev, he arrived at Eilat for the first time, then a desolate beach with a small police station called Umm. Many years later, in his diary entry for June 9, 1949, Ben-Gurion described how much this visit influenced his policy: "The sight of the Negev changed my whole Zionist perception. This trip has a part in the conquest of the Negev this year."

In 1935, on his first visit to the Israeli shore of the Red Sea, Ben-Gurion internalized the political and strategic meaning that Eilat could have for the emerging Jewish state. He understood at that time the significance that the Negev has as a land bridge between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, which would allow creating an alternative to the Suez Canal and an outlet to the Far East. Ben-Gurion began to work for the establishment of a Jewish settlement in Eilat. However, the British, who well understood the strategic value of the Negev for them as a necessary connecting link between the Suez Canal and the Persian Gulf, were careful to forbid Jewish settlement in the area.

In a visit that he made that year to the United States, Ben-Gurion called upon a group of Jews with important political and economic standing, headed by the American Jewish Supreme Court Judge, Louis Brandeis, to promote the development of the settlement in Eilat. He tried to convince the group to contribute money to assist in implementing the idea and to help in applying pressure on Britain to permit Jewish settlement in the area. He presented to Brandeis' group a long memorandum dealing with the importance of the Negev to Jewish settlement. It followed the line of the joint article he had written with Yavnieli in 1920. However, this memorandum placed emphasis on the importance of the Eilat area. Ben-Gurion explained that it was easily possible to block the Suez Canal by sinking one ship; thus, an Eilat-Haifa line was important as an alternative to the canal. According to Ben-Gurion, Britain would sooner or later have to leave Egypt, and then the land bridge the Negev creates between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea would become even more important.<sup>7</sup>

In August 1935, Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharett met with the British High Commissioner and tried to convince him to allow Jewish settlement in Eilat. But the Commissioner, loyal to British policy on this issue, refused.<sup>8</sup>

Britain clarified its stand on the question of Jewish settlement in the Negev in the Peel Commission suggestions for dividing the Land of Israel. Britain recommended on July 7, 1937 that the empty Negev not be included in the Jewish state, but rather the state should include in its borders the Galilee, that is, a region relatively densely populated by Arabs.

In 1943, in the midst of W.W.II, a special committee of the British cabinet discussed the question of the Land of Israel. This committee also recommended denying the Negev to the Jews, contrary to the stand expressed by Winston Churchill in the Cabinet meeting of July 2, where he suggested opening the Negev to Jewish settlement.<sup>9</sup>

Only on October 6, 1946 did the vision of settlement of the Negev begin to be implemented, in a secret maneuver, an 11 tiny settlement points were established. This move was made by the settlement leadership in part in retaliation to the new British suggestion to found in the Land of Israel two autonomous regions - one Jewish and one Arab, with Jerusalem and the Negev areas remaining under direct British rule.

### **The Peak of Israeli-British Conflict over the Negev and Eilat**

On January 13, 1947, Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Minister, suggested in a memorandum that the UN should resolve the debate over the Land of Israel. This suggestion, that was acted upon some months later, raised both the Arab-Jewish conflict as a whole and the Jewish-British conflict over the Negev to a higher level.

In the difficult political campaign that took place at the UN on the subject of the partition of the Land of Israel, the Negev question became a central issue, primarily in the days prior to the UN assembly resolution of November 29, 1947. UNSCOP, the special committee, established by the UN, offered two proposals on

August 31, 1947. The majority proposal was that the Land of Israel be divided into a Jewish state and an Arab State, and that the Negev, from the Gulf of Eilat, be handed over to the Jewish state. The minority proposal was to establish a federal state that would actually be under Arab control. In discussions in a new committee that the UN established to examine both UNSCOP proposals, the American State Department put heavy pressure on the Jewish delegations to relinquish the demand to include the Negev in the boundaries of the Jewish state. On November 12, 1947 the pressure reached its peak, when American Secretary of State George Marshall, sent a secret message to Warren Austin, the head of the American delegation to the UN, instructing him to apply the whole weight of the American delegation to pressure the Jews to relinquish the inclusion of the Negev in their state. Marshall's reasoning in denying the Negev to the Jews was: the Negev is settled by Arabs; it is an arid area, useful for agriculture only on its perimeters; therefore it is useless for Jewish settlement; and perhaps the most significant point of all: the recommendations of the majority would abrogate the historical connection between the Arab countries in Asia and Africa by way of the land bridge created by the Negev.<sup>10</sup>

American pressure on the Jewish Delegation caused concern that the Americans might abstain from voting for the proposal to establish a Jewish state in the UN General Assembly, and thereby succeed in preventing the proposal's approval. To prevent this from occurring, the elderly Chaim Weizmann was called to a meeting with President Harry S Truman on November 19, 1947, during which Weizmann discussed with Truman only one subject: the question of the Negev and Eilat. Weizmann succeeded in convincing the President to instruct the American delegation at the UN to remove the pressure from the Jews and to vote for the majority plan; he used arguments similar to those Ben-Gurion had raised in his memorandum to Brandeis 12 years before.

The majority proposal was indeed adopted by the UN General Assembly vote, after undergoing some amendments. It was decided that two states would be established in the Land of Israel, a Jewish state and an Arab State, united in an economic union. According to this decision, the Negev up to the Red Sea was left in the hands of the Jews, while Greater Jerusalem was established as an international area under the auspices of the UN.

The fact that the UN had taken a decision on dividing the Land of Israel and had defined the borders, did not prevent Britain and the American State Department from continuing to oppose the inclusion of the Negev in the boundaries of the Jewish state. Their decisive stand on this issue was one of the factors that shaped pivotal military and diplomatic moves that took place during the war the Arabs initiated with Britain's encouragement following the UN partition resolution.

The political struggle over the Negev peaked in the war of 1948 in connection with the mission of Count Folke Bernadotte, who was appointed by the UN as a mediator in May 1948. He not only received a mandate to achieve a armistice in the area, but was also given authority to reach political and territorial solutions to the conflict.<sup>11</sup> Extending the mediator's written mandate to include the territorial question actually meant a UN retreat from the position it had taken regarding boundaries, as determined in the partition plan the UN General Assembly had confirmed.

On June 27, 1948, Bernadotte submitted to both the Jews and the Arabs an initial proposal, which reflected the military balance in the area - a balance that was the result of the Arab regular army attacks on Israel on May 15. In this trial proposal Bernadotte recommended that the entire Negev and Jerusalem be transferred to the Arabs, and the Galilee to Israel.<sup>12</sup> But both sides rejected the plan and fighting was renewed.

On September 16, Bernadotte placed on the table of the UN Secretary General, Trygve Lie, a final report that included his proposals for a solution. The Count demanded, on principle, that the suggested solution not be open to discussion and negotiation between the fighting sides, but be forced upon them. In his territorial suggestions regarding the permanent borders, the Count suggested transferring the whole Negev to Arab control, and the Galilee to the Jews. The report also proposed that a Palestinian state not be established. Rather, the area ordained for the Arabs in the Land of Israel should be transferred to the control of Transjordan.<sup>13</sup>

Bernadotte's proposals completely paralleled the British plan that Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin had suggested a few weeks earlier, on August 24, in a secret memorandum he had submitted to the Cabinet. The plan suggested that the whole Negev be transferred to Arab control, in exchange for the Galilee, which had already been captured by Israel and would thus remain in Israel's hands. It was also decided, in light of the mutual animosity, more as an excuse than as a deliberate move, that there could be no economic union between the State of Israel and the Palestinian state, and therefore such a state could not exist economically. Therefore Bevin made a proposal that corresponded with British interests at that time, not to establish a Palestinian state, but to transfer areas that were destined for it to the control of Transjordan. Bevin decided that the UN should force the proposals on both sides with the assistance of Britain and the US.

The British Foreign Minister explained that his plan would be implemented by mutual agreement with Bernadotte and the US, and that Britain would attempt to get support from other members in the UN. He added: "The most convenient way to present our ideas on the kind of settlement which we should wish to see, is in the form in which they would appear if the Mediator agreed to sponsor them".<sup>14</sup>

As mentioned the Mediator agreed with these ideas. But on September 13, 1948, one American and one British, came to visit him at his Rhodes headquarters to verify that the draft report he had prepared did indeed match the ideas of the British and American Foreign Offices.<sup>15</sup>

Bernadotte was murdered in Jerusalem on September 17, 1948 by the Lehi Underground, a day after he handed the report on his mission and his suggestions to the UN Secretary General. The British and the State Department attempted to implement the mediator's recommendations, but their efforts failed due to Israel's resistance and, primarily, because of President Truman's adherence to the obligations he had undertaken regarding the partition borders and the inclusion of the Negev in the Jewish state. Thus, during October 1948 Ben-Gurion initiated the first stage of military moves needed in order to remove the Egyptian siege and conquer the Negev.

At the beginning of 1949, Israel and Egypt began formulating agreements leading to a armistice. On February 9, 1949 Ben-Gurion complied with the Egyptian demand for a demilitarized area near Uja, that would lie on both sides of the international border between Egypt and Israel, on condition that Israel would have freedom of action in the southern Negev. Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary that day: "This morning we consulted Moshe [Sharett], Shabbtai [Rosen], Reuven [Shiloah], and Yaakov [Dori] on Bunche's and the Egyptians' proposals. In my opinion we should yield on the Uja issue - if this concession will bring us an agreement with Egypt giving us freedom of action in the southern 'triangle' - up to Eilat, as Yigal [Yadin] suggested."

The Israeli-Egyptian armistice agreement gave Israel the opportunity to operate freely in the Southern Negev. Israel's moves in the Negev were discussed in the Security Council on the 4th and the 16th of November, 1948, and decisions were taken in the Council primarily due to pressure from Britain. Their purpose was to pressure Israel into withdrawing its forces behind the line that was held prior to October 14, 1949, that is, before Israel succeeded in breaking Egypt's siege on the Negev. The possibility given to both sides, in the resolution taken on the 16th of November, to negotiate the armistice lines between themselves or through the use of a mediator, allowed them to determine borders other than those that existed before the 14th of October. Israel and Egypt, the two parties' of the armistice treaty, that was signed on February 24, 1949, agreed to an accepted border in the Gaza strip sector and in the neutral area in the Uja sector, and as section 2 of the agreement stated: "And elsewhere shall not violate the international frontier."<sup>16</sup>

The purpose of the armistice lines mentioned in the agreement was not to set territorial or political boundaries, but to ensure that no armed forces of either side would move beyond them. The agreement also determined in which areas the sides would be allowed to hold defensive forces only. Egypt recognized that these limitations could only be imposed on those parts of the Negev adjacent to the Egyptian international border. Therefore a line was drawn that cut across the entire length of the Negev. In the area between Beer Asluge to the Eilat Gulf, for example, it was decided: "And from point 402 down to southernmost tip of Palestine, by a straight line marking half the distance between the Egypt-Palestine and Transjordan-Palestine

frontier.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, there is no basis in any map for the triangle that appears in the article in *Al-Wasat* - whose southeast part touches the border with Jordan. There is no basis even in the map of the Israeli region where military limitations were in force. For the “western front,” where Israel was permitted to maintain against Egypt defensive forces only, according to the armistice agreement, extended, on the Gulf of Eilat shore, only from west of the line whose middle crosses the distance between the border with Jordan and the border with Egypt. The base of the triangle appearing in *Al-Wasat*, which reaches to the Jordanian border, thus, is a completely imaginary invention. Egypt does not have, and never did have, any basis for demanding any ownership over territory in the southern Negev that would give it territorial continuity with Jordan.

The fact that according to the armistice agreements only the western part of the Negev was defined as an area where Israel was limited in its military capability, while the “eastern frontier” was excluded from these restrictions, is what enabled Israel to take advantage of the time gap between the signing of the armistice agreements with Egypt, on February 24, 1949, to the day of the signing of the armistice agreements with Jordan, on April 3, 1949, and to capture the whole southern Negev up to the Gulf of Eilat, in the Ovda operation, completed on March 10, 1949.

The Egyptian demand for the southern triangle has no basis in reality also due to the fact that when the armistice agreement with Egypt was signed, small forces of the Arab Legion of Transjordan were positioned in the southern triangle. John Glubb Pasha, commander of the Arab Legion - the army of Transjordan - commanded his forces to retreat in front of the advance of the Israeli army, almost without any armed resistance, on the night between the 9th and 10th of March.<sup>18</sup> When the armistice agreement with Transjordan was signed, the armistice line in the area of the southern Negev was drawn in general outlines according to the international border separating Transjordan and Mandatory Israel. Thus, the area of the southern Negev and Eilat were defined as Israeli territory.

### **Nasser’s Battle for Territorial Continuity**

The British leadership continued its opposition to the inclusion of the Negev in the State of Israel until 1956 – that is, even after Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power in Egypt. The development of the Pan-Arab concept and Nasser’s “three circles theory” made Egypt aware of its need for territorial continuity. During the years 1953-1956 Egypt continuously demanded, using all possible channels, Israeli relinquishment of the Negev, thus allowing Arab territorial continuity, on condition that it would be a wide dry strip and not just a corridor.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry prepared a document that summed up the direct and indirect contacts that the Israeli and foreign representatives had with Egypt during that period, and then passed it to the Foreign Minister on January 19, 1956. The document details the many Egyptian requests for Israeli relinquishment of parts of the Negev. Gideon Raphael, a senior Israeli diplomat, wrote in the document’s summary:

It is possible to see an amazing consistency in the Egyptian leaders’ attitude to an agreement with Israel: In every essential conversation the Egyptian representatives made **territorial demands in the Negev** [bold in the original] aimed at creating a continuous expanse between Egypt and the Arab countries.<sup>19</sup>

At the end of 1954 Anthony Eden, who was still the British Foreign Secretary at the time, and the American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, decided to begin a political move to achieve a settlement in the Middle East. They worked under a heavy cloak of secrecy, concealing it mainly from Israel, using the code name, “Alpha Operation.”<sup>20</sup> Britain placed responsibility for coordinating the move in the hands of Evelyn Shuckburgh, Eden’s personal secretary, and the US assigned Francis Russell, Dulles’s aide at the time on issues related to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and before this, the second most important man in the American Embassy in Israel.

In March 1955, the coordinated move produced a detailed Anglo-American plan to solve every aspect of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the chapter of the plan that discussed territorial subjects it was suggested that Israel allow the creation of Arab territorial continuity through the Negev, by cutting two triangles out of its area in

the south of the Negev. One would be based on the Egyptian border, which would be handed over to the Egyptians, and the other on the Jordanian border, which would be transferred to Jordan. The apex of each would meet at a passage point, which would allow free Arab movement from east to west and Israeli movement to Eilat from north to south.<sup>21</sup>

During the contacts that the British and Americans made afterwards with Nasser, in order to get his agreement to a settlement of the conflict on this basis, it was clarified to them that Nasser opposed a corridor solution to the conflict and that he demanded a much wider strip. The more contact was made with Nasser, mainly by the British and American embassies, the more it became clear that the continuity question would be the subject upon which the agreement would stand or fall.

For example, on November 14, 1955, the British Foreign Office summarized the Arab stand thus:

We know that the official Arab demand is for a return to the 1947 United Nations frontiers. We also know that the Egyptians and others would be willing to write-off Western Galilee if that Arab world could obtain territory in the Negev (which was not allotted to them by the 1947 resolution). From the point of view of Egypt, the problem boils down almost exclusively to the Negev.<sup>22</sup>

In contacts that the US and British embassies made in Cairo with Nasser and his Foreign Minister, Mahmud Fawzi, primarily in the first half of 1955, it was clarified to them that the Egyptians had a “desperate” need for a land connection with Jordan.<sup>23</sup> Thus, when Egyptian Foreign Minister Fawzi paid a visit to Washington on June 24 to talk with Dulles and George Allen, he reduced the question of whether the agreement would stand or fall to the territorial continuity question, and to a demand that Israel relinquish the Negev. The establishment of Israel, according to him, divided the Arab world, by creating a physical separation. For example, he said, if he wanted to travel by car from Cairo to Damascus, he would have to receive permission from Mr. Sharett (then the Israeli Prime Minister), and this situation was unacceptable to the Arabs.<sup>24</sup>

The Anglo-American pressure on Israel to concede on the subject of the Negev increased after September 27, 1955, when Nasser published the details of the arms transaction he had signed with the USSR. Part of the American and British moves were public knowledge. Israel was principally shocked by the speech that Anthony Eden gave in Guildhall, London, on November 9, 1955. Eden called for a territorial solution to the conflict based on a compromise be made between the partition borders and the armistice lines, clearly suggesting an Israeli concession in the Negev.

The Anglo-American move failed for a great many reasons, one of which was Ben-Gurion’s absolute resistance to any concession in the Negev. But Nasser was the one who actually foiled the initiative by his inclination towards the USSR, by his lack of faith in the West, by the special position that he began to acquire in the eyes of the Arabs, by his becoming one of the leaders of the bloc of non-aligned states then being established, and possibly also because of his assessment that there was no chance of taking the Negev from Ben-Gurion. The fact that the US entered an election year in 1956 weakened President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s ability to pressure Israel, and thus the “Alpha Operation” initiative was also lost.

Ben-Gurion learned a lesson from the enormous pressure that Britain and the US placed on Israel on the Negev question. He was concerned that Nasser’s efforts to obtain the Negev would become even more aggressive after he accumulated the massive amount of arms arriving from the USSR. This affair was one of the major considerations that made Ben-Gurion decide to act against Nasser in the Suez-Sinai War. Two months before it, in his diary, he expressed the concerns that were behind his decision to participate in an initiated military move against Egypt:

If Nasser succeeds on the canal issue, and it is very likely that he will, because the British will probably not do anything against him, and without the use of force, Nasser will not surrender. Increasing Nasser’s prestige will make him want to destroy Israel, not by a direct attack, but initially by a ‘peace attack’ and an attempt to cut boundaries, especially in the Negev, and when he receives a refusal - he will attack us.

The Egyptian attempt to take the Negev away from Israel was closely connected to the blockade that the Egyptians placed at that time on navigation to and from Eilat through the Straits of Tiran, that connect the

Red Sea with the Gulf of Eilat. Placing the maritime blockade on Israel was initially an Egyptian and pan-Arab move of economic boycott. The blockade was begun immediately upon the Arab invasion of Israel, beginning on May 15, 1948. During the Egyptian attempts to take the Negev from Israel, beginning in 1953, the maritime blockade on Eilat was tightened by blocking the Straits of Tiran, positioned at the southern tip of the Gulf of Eilat.

The passage from the Red Sea to the Gulf of Eilat was through a narrow strait lying between the Egyptian shore of the Sinai Peninsula and the Tiran and Snapir Islands, captured by the Egyptians at the end of 1949. The coral reefs in that area leave a narrow channel, 500 meters wide, for ship passage. Following the capture of the two Islands, the Egyptian government, on January 18, 1950, clarified to the Americans, and supposedly to other governments, that the capture of the islands was for the purpose of realizing Egyptian sovereignty over them and would not result in Egyptian interference in the innocent passage of ships through the strait. However, Egypt did disrupt the passage of ships to Eilat. At first it did not allow the passage of strategic produce to Eilat and, later on, not even food. In practice, maritime movement to Eilat was paralyzed. At the end of 1955 Egypt tightened the blockade even more.

On May 18, 1951 Egypt justified the maritime blockade on Eilat by claiming that Israel had no right to ship passage to Eilat, since Israel controlled Eilat and its shore illegally, and since its presence there was a violation of the Egyptian-Israeli armistice agreement. Another Egyptian memorandum, dated July 12, 1951 also justified Egypt's right to disrupt navigation.<sup>25</sup>

The Israeli leadership saw clearly the direct connection between the blockade on Eilat and Egypt's desire to control the southern Negev. On December 5, 1955, Moshe Dayan, the Israeli Chief of Staff, wrote to David Ben-Gurion, the Prime Minister, that in his opinion, "blocking the strait was part of a plan to take the Negev from us."<sup>26</sup>

In a secret session that Ben-Gurion had with part of his government, on September 25, 1956, which was concealed from the rest of the government members, Ben-Gurion demanded, as one of the three conditions for Israel joining France in a military act against Egypt: "That we receive the shore of the Straits of Tiran, and thus have freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and in the Indian Ocean, and Eilat will truly become a harbor."<sup>27</sup>

During the Suez-Sinai War, that broke out on October 29, 1956, Israel conquered most of the territory of the Sinai Peninsula and the Straits of Tiran area, but due to heavy pressure from the USSR and the US, Ben-Gurion was forced to announce, on November 8, 1956, Israel's willingness to withdraw. He placed on Abba Eban, who was Israel's ambassador in Washington, the responsibility of directing the political battle to find some way to leave in Israel's hands any possible achievements from the operation.

After difficult confrontations Eban succeeded in obtaining an American guarantee of free Israeli navigation in the Straits of Tiran. This promise was anchored in a declaration read by Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir before the UN General Assembly on March 1, 1957. In a secret note that Abba Eban passed to the Israeli Embassy staff in Washington on March 9, 1957, he revealed that the wording of the declaration had actually been drafted by the American and French Foreign Ministers, and that the Americans had formulated the section of the declaration stating that any assault on Israeli shipping in the Straits would allow Israel the right to defend itself.<sup>28</sup>

In order to strengthen the American obligation to unrestricted Israeli navigation in the Straits, officials in the State Department suggested to Abba Eban that Israel send a ship carrying an American flag, with Eilat as its destination. Thus, on April 4, 1957, the Israeli Foreign Ministry announced to the Washington embassy that a tanker carrying an American flag was about to pass the Straits of Tiran on its way to Eilat. The Embassy was asked to report this to the State Department, without revealing that the ship was carrying Iranian oil.<sup>29</sup>

The Israeli successes in the Sinai campaign were evident in the following achievements: The opening of the Straits to unrestricted Israeli navigation to and from the port of Eilat, and international recognition of Israel's right to such navigation and Israel's the right to self-defense in case of attack. There was additional

significance for Israel inherent in this achievement: Israeli sovereignty and shore rights over Eilat were now recognized by the Western super powers. Consequently, they stopped the pressure on Israel to give up parts of the Negev in order to allow continuous Arab territory.

Immediately after the Sinai battles ended Ben-Gurion became anxious to prove to the United States and the West the strategic importance of a passage alternative to the Suez Canal, that is, the possibility of passing from the Red Sea and the Straits of Tiran to Eilat and from there by land bridge to the port of Haifa on the Mediterranean coast. On November 29, 1956, while the Israel Defense Forces (IDF, Zahal) still controlled the Straits of Tiran in the Sinai, Ben-Gurion declared that the world needed an alternative to the Suez Canal, since Nasser or whoever might replace him, might block the canal again in the future. He hoped at that time to ensure that Israel would remain in Sinai and continue to have control in the Straits. In order to gain the support of the Western countries he emphasized the importance of the possibility of transferring oil from the Persian Gulf via the Gulf of Eilat, and from there by pipeline from Eilat to the Mediterranean coast. There was much logic in his argument, particularly after Egypt gradually came under Soviet influence, since the Suez Canal passed through Egypt's borders. In this connection Ben-Gurion stated:

We will emphasize to the world the importance of these Straits. And I don't need to explain the importance of fuel. Fuel is necessary for every economy, also for a war economy and also for a peace economy. And it is possible to transfer fuel from the east of Suez by way of Eilat to the Mediterranean, without the use of the Suez Canal.<sup>30</sup>

One can assume that the United States' willingness to stand behind Israel's UN declaration of March 1, 1957, regarding Israel's right to unrestricted shipping, and the UN's agreement to place UN forces to secure this, were not only for altruistic reasons. It is very likely that they too understood the importance of an alternative to the Suez Canal in case of attack.

President Eisenhower, who disclosed his new doctrine for the Middle East in the American Congress on January 5, 1957, clarified that "international communism" could endanger the regimes in the area. In his diary entry for March 8, and in a message to Secretary of State Dulles dated March 10, the American President estimated that if the United States succeeded in isolating Egypt from its neighbors, and if Egypt remained without any allies, it would quickly return to the bosom of the West in search of a peace settlement. In order to isolate Egypt, Eisenhower instructed Dulles to attempt to bring Libya and Saudi Arabia closer to the American camp, while at the same time giving Israel suitable guaranties. In this way, the President thought, "problems in the area will be reduced."<sup>31</sup>

The solution chosen by the American government after the Suez-Sinai War, to pressure Israel to evacuate Sinai and the area of the Straits while promising unrestricted shipping to the port of Eilat, was the maximum the US government could do under those circumstances. The Eisenhower administration was confronting pan-Arab resistance, including that of Saudi Arabia, not to allow Israel any advantages from joining the attack on Egypt.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, it is also possible to assume that he understood not only the significance of an alternative route to the Suez Canal, but also the fact that the Negev forms an obstacle to Egyptian expansion eastward, and thus had importance as a tool in isolating Egypt until it returned to its Western orientation.

What began to be clear to the Americans in the first months of 1957 had not been clear to them at the end of 1955, when they still had hopes of keeping Nasser under western influence. Consequently, they put heavy pressure on Israel to agree to the Egyptian demand for continuity with the Arabs of the east. Israel tried at that time to ease this American pressure by stressing the importance of the Negev wedge for the West, since it helped to prevent Egyptian and Soviet expansion to the Arabs in the East. At a meeting Abba Eban had with Allen Dulles, the head of the CIA, on November 8, 1955, he said, "Every day the West should bless the absence of this continuity." According to Eban, a land connection between Egypt and the other parts of the Arab world in the Middle East would allow free passage of "Communist technicians and Soviet arms to the whole Arab world. This situation would have allowed Egypt to establish its authority over all the Arab countries."<sup>33</sup>

## The Continuity Question during the Six Day War

The Negev wedge and the new rules of the game that were decided upon after the Suez-Sinai War, which included recognition of Israel's right to unrestricted navigation in the Straits of Tiran and the Gulf of Eilat, had a decisive effect on the events that brought about the Six Day War in June 1967.

The Eisenhower Doctrine, which included an attempt to isolate Soviet influence in the Middle East exclusively to Egypt, succeeded only partially. In the decade between the Suez-Sinai War and the Six Day War Iraq and Syria became USSR's client-States. From 1962 There was also a struggle against Egyptian-Soviet attempts to take over the Arabian Peninsula. In the attempts to undermine the regime in Saudi Arabia, and particularly in the Yemen War, the Egyptians and the Soviets tried to gain control on the oil States and Emirates of the Persian Gulf.

The almost complete lack of disturbances that existed on the Israeli-Egyptian border between 1957-1967 stood in contrast to Egypt's attitude towards Israel. Egypt was developing a stance that actually preached Israel's destruction, but even more weight was given to the fact that Israel was a geographic barrier between Egypt and the Arab east. Thus, for example, the national covenant, which was the main national declaration of Egypt during those years,<sup>34</sup> contained a specific section dealing with the continuity question. The section's significance to Egypt was very realistic, primarily in view of Egypt's attempts to create a union with Syria, which collapsed in September 1961.

The idea that stood behind the Egyptian demand for continuity during those years was that the Imperialists were using Israel "to beat the back of the Arab struggle." The imperialists' main purpose in establishing Israel was to use it as a means to split the Arab nation geographically and weaken it politically, militarily, and economically.

The emphasis on the continuity question stands out in the anti-Israel and anti-Semitic Egyptian barrage of those years. Thus, for example an indoctrination document intended for the Egyptian army, written in 1965 or 1966 by Hassan Sabri Al'huli, Nasser's personal representative on Arab-Israel issues, opens with the continuity problem:

From a quick glance at the Palestinian map it becomes clear:

That Palestine is the continuation of the Arab area that spreads from east to west, since it is a link that connects between the Arab countries in Asia and those in Africa.

The borders of Palestine today are unnatural; even more, they are only geometrical lines. There is no justification for stretching them southward to the Gulf of Aqaba, unless it be in order to reach the Red Sea, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to complete the partition dividing the Arabs in the east from the Arabs in the west.<sup>35</sup>

Hassan Sabri Al'huli's practical conclusion, presented in this document in the clearest possible way to the Egyptian soldier was: "Removing the Zionist cancer that is Israel is a must for the Arab homeland, after Israel has forced upon us the geographic split, sucked our blood, and evicted the Palestinian Arab nation from its land and home."<sup>36</sup>

The connection the Arabs make between their economic weakness and backwardness and the geographic split caused by the Negev Wedge is one of the most important factors in the Egyptian stand towards Israel in that period and afterwards. Understanding this subject is necessary in order to understand Nasser's moves that brought on the Six Day War in 1967.

Muhamad Heikal, journalist and, one may add, strategist and statesman, was, and may still be today, the great high priest of Pan-Arabism and preacher of a return to Arab territorial unity. His views had great influence on Nasser, and also on Sadat at the beginning of his rule. The development of a deep economic crisis in Egypt, that emerged in all its strength from 1965, sharpened even more Nasser's and Heikal's economic outlook and stand on Egypt's lack of continuity with the Arab east, which was wealthy in resources and also sparse in population.

Sadat's description in his memoirs of Egypt's economic condition on the eve of the Six Day War was very

gloomy: “During the first days of 1967 Egypt was wrapped in sorrow and grief. The land was bankrupt, the economic development plan was too ambitious, and there was no funding to back it.”<sup>37</sup>

Nasser’s and Heikal’s political-strategic position during that period can be better understood when relating to what Heikal wrote in 1972. This reflected a desperate political perception that he believed in during that period. And this perception was also relevant for the days before the Six Day War. It envisioned a difficult future for Egypt if it could not somehow unite with the Arab countries in Asia:

In the era of giant super powers, the era when Britain sees itself forced to seek its future in a united Europe, Egypt - taking into consideration its reality and its interests, both historically and for the future - cannot create a future within its present borders. Those who wish to convince it or force it to do so are its enemies.<sup>38</sup>

On January 7, 1966, Heikal, in his weekly article in *Al-Ahram*, suggested dividing the confrontation with Israel into two phases. Instead of destroying Israel in a direct war, he suggested concentrating at first on breaching the Israeli wedge in the Negev, and only in the second phase, after creating territorial continuity, to destroy it. In the historical analysis he presented in this article he took to an extreme the Egyptian position apparent in Al’huli’s article, principally in his relation to the question of the Palestinian people. While Al’huli mentions the damage that the establishment of Israel caused to the Palestinian people only in third place, after the damage caused to Arab continuity and the weakening of Arab strength, Heikal does not emphasize the Palestinian question at all. This is clear from the fact that he wrote: “The saddest thing“ that happened to the Arabs in the war of 1948 was ”the advancement of the Israeli military forces in 1948 [should be 1949, I.A.], after the armistice agreements were signed, to Aqaba and their deployment in the gulf that looks out onto the Red Sea.”

The necessity of abolishing the Israeli wedge stemmed, according to Heikal, not only from the split of the Arab front, but also from the fact that “it occurred together with the results of the political and social frictions among the Arab countries surrounding Israel.”

Heikal's conclusion in his article of January 7 was that the first target of the Egyptian army should be the destruction of the Israeli wedge in the south of the Negev, or in his words: ”opening the partition gate.”

From the succession of events that led to the Six Day War it is almost certainly to conclude that the Egyptians already knew on May 18, 1967 that the Soviet information regarding an Israeli military concentration for attacking Syria was incorrect. But despite this, Nasser decided not to withdraw his army from Sinai. Rather, he would attempt to execute a move compatible with the suggestion Heikal had made a year and a half before. The Egyptian air force received orders that day to prepare for a move to conquer the southern Negev and Eilat.<sup>39</sup> It is logical to assume that these orders were based on backup plans of the Egyptian army that were now taken out and put into operation.

The expulsion of the UN forces from Sinai and the Gaza Strip on May 18 and Nasser’s announcement on May 22 of the closing of the Straits to Israeli shipping and any other ships carrying strategic cargo to Eilat, were moves that fitted into Egypt’s political and military situation insofar as it related to the continuity question. The moves were meant to cancel Israel’s achievements in the Suez-Sinai War on this issue.<sup>40</sup>

Meir Amit, head of “Mossad” during that period, testified about the Egyptian position regarding the continuity question at the time of the Six Day War and maintained that the Arab nations, and especially Egypt did indeed “see Eilat as a thorn stuck in their throats and were willing to take advantage of any opportunity to extract this thorn and **create a land bridge** [ bold in the original, I.A.] between Egypt and the Arab world.” Amit notes that if Israel had not become involved in the process that began on May 15, and had not started the Six Day War, ”it was very likely that after entering Sinai and closing the Straits, the Egyptians would have tried to ‘cut off’ the south of Israel and connect with Jordan territorially.”<sup>41</sup>

### **The Continuity Question and the Yom Kippur War**

Israel’s conquest of the Sinai Peninsula in the Six Day War widened the barrier between Egypt and Jordan

by hundreds of kilometers. This did not stop the Egyptian rulers from continuously aspiring not only to return the whole area of Sinai, but also to achieve continuity with the Arab east.

Sadat continued to believe, at least during his first years of rule, in the Nasser-Heikal perception of there being no future and no existence for Egypt without uniting with the Arab world. At different opportunities Sadat repeated this demand and presented Egypt's isolation from the Arab east as a conspiracy meant to isolate Egypt and weaken it: Thus, for example, he said in a speech in May 1972:

The enemy wishes to create a rift in the Arab world. The US, Israeli imperialism, and the Zionists - all wish to cut off and isolate Egypt from the Arab east till it will be separated from it... A basic element in Israeli policy - beginning with Herzl's plan in 1897, in the last century - was that there must be no unity or consolidation between the Arabs.

Sadat reached a very aggressive conclusion in this speech, for he announced that in the coming campaign with Israel he would not accept merely the liberation of the Sinai Peninsula. He did not reveal what he intended to do to Israel, but said: "There is no escape from the fact that Israel's impertinence, that has been continuing for 23 years, and its wild behavior, all this must stop and have an end."<sup>42</sup>

Muhamad Heikal was apparently the person who formulated the principles of the strategy that Egypt adopted in the Yom Kipper War. He publicized them in March 1972 in his newspaper *Al-Ahram*. In a series of articles, Heikal suggested choosing a middle path, in order to escape the mental and cultural trap that forced the Arabs to move from extreme despair over their political and strategic situation to baseless enthusiasm that brought them to the illusion that they could reach great achievements.

In an article on March 10, Heikal rejected two proposals for a solution that reflected this trend. He rejected the approach he described as diplomatic, which he saw as defeatist, since it meant accepting the forced isolation of Egypt from the eastern Arab countries and signing a peace agreement with Israel only in exchange for a retreat from Sinai. He also rejected the opposite approach, the purely military route, which alleged that Egypt could ultimately and completely defeat Israel on the battlefield, conquer its whole territory, and destroy it. Instead of these extremes he suggested a political method that would include a series of steps, which were likely to include "military action appropriate to the circumstances of the period."<sup>43</sup>

In his article of March 10, Heikal referred to a statement the elderly Ben-Gurion made at that time to a French newspaper, "that he sides with those who believe in returning the **whole of Sinai to Egypt** [bold in the original] in exchange for peace with them." The Egyptian journalist stated that in his opinion this was the actual Israeli position. Israel's demands at that time to control Sharm el Sheikh in Sinai and the coastal road that leads from there to Eilat were, in his opinion, only bargaining cards. Taking into consideration the fact that Egypt was strong and had a dense population, and the ability to be a real challenge that could endanger Israel, Israel would need security from the direction of Egypt. And with regard to the weak and divided Arab east, the Israeli interest was to expand, Heikal decided

He surmised that Israel had an interest in separating the Egyptian position from that of the other Arab peoples, and on this point Israel was "in accord with the US and the rest of the many international powers that wish to separate Egypt from the Arab world." Egypt's isolation would give Israel, the US, and the other powers unlimited freedom in this sensitive area "and will shatter forever the united Arab dream of creating a super power in this area."

At this point in his article Heikal wrote that Egypt cannot "create the future within its present borders." in an era when even powerful and advanced Britain was being forced to seek its future in a united Europe.

Heikal, therefore, completely rejected the possibility of a peace agreement with Israel under conditions that would result in Egypt's increasing isolation from the rest of the Arab world. This would occur not only because the Israeli territorial wedge would continue to exist, but also because Arab alienation from Egypt would result from a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement.

The importance of this stand was heightened in light of the reality that Sadat faced in the years 1972-1973, after Israel rejected his offers for a partial settlement of the Israeli-Egyptian conflict. Sadat did not hold any

cards with which to counter Heikal's more extreme stand.

On March 24, 1972, two weeks after he rejected an agreement with Israel in exchange for the return of all of Sinai, Heikal published his weekly article in *Al-Ahram* under the title, "Possible and Necessary Type of War." In this article he presented a detailed plan of what he described as a war of unlimited forces against a limited target. In the plan he determined that if Egypt "liberated" in this war even 100 square kilometers of its lands in Sinai, and succeeded in defending them against all Israeli counter-attacks, this would bring about a far reaching revolution in Egypt's military, political, and economic condition. If one compares the plan suggested in Heikal's article to the Egyptian military moves in the Yom Kippur War, one finds them to be strikingly similar.

When the war broke out in October 1973, it caused a double surprise in Israel. On October 17, 1997 Alex Fishman, military correspondent of *Yediot Aharonot*, published an extensive survey about the fear of a new Arab surprise attack. He wrote:

Both in 1973 and 1996 Israeli Military Intelligence was unsuccessful in detecting in time the enemy's intention. In 1973 it caused all the systems to crash. Not only did it not detect the Egyptian war intent, but it also did not understand the object of the Egyptian plan. Israeli Military Intelligence thought that it was only about conquering Sinai and advancing in the direction of the Negev. Subsequently it became clear that the plan, which Sadat concealed even from his top officers, was one of quick seizure – the conducting of a war of limited objectives in Sinai. This lack of understanding of the Egyptian plan created one of the greatest tragedies ever for the IDF: the counterattack of October 8.

Israel was not sensitive enough to understand the deep and strong undercurrents that influenced the Egyptian position on the eve of the Yom Kippur War. These included such issues as the continuity question, namely, Egypt's isolation from the Arabs of the east, the influence of economic and demographic problems over the behavior of the Egyptian leadership, and, most importantly, the influence of the connection between these two phenomena. This lack of sensitivity was part of a series of failures that made Israel unable to understand Egypt's intentions and moves, although they were published ahead of time in the *Al-Ahram* newspaper.

### **Sadat's Demand for Continuity via a Palestinian state**

Sadat never forgot the question of territorial continuity with the Arabs in the east, even after he changed from a Soviet orientation to a Western one, after Egypt's achievements in the Yom Kippur War. But now he used a different method. From May 1975 through at least April 1977 he repeatedly demanded, as a condition for Egypt's agreement to settle the conflict, not only Israeli withdrawal from all lands conquered in the 1967 war, but also the establishment of a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank, with a corridor under Arab sovereignty to unify its sections.

Thus, for example, Egyptian Foreign Minister Isma'il Fahmi announced on June 6, 1975 that Egypt would not be satisfied with an Israeli withdrawal from all areas. Israel must be reduced in size, Fahmi said, and a corridor must pass between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.<sup>44</sup> On June 19, 1975, at Salzburg, Austria, this demand caused the meeting between Sadat and President Gerald Ford to explode. The *Ha'aretz* newspaper revealed this affair and wrote: "The United States has finally abandoned the idea of an overall settlement, after Sadat's explanations to Ford in Salzburg. The President of Egypt said that in the final settlement Israel must agree to a corridor that will connect the two parts of Palestine."

Sadat repeated this idea in an interview with NBC on November 5, 1975; at a meeting with American senators in December of that year,<sup>45</sup> at a press conference at Blair House in Washington on April 6, 1976<sup>46</sup> at press conference on the 25th of the same month, in an interview with *Readers Digest* at the beginning of July 1976, in an interview with *Newsweek* on December 13, 1976, and during his visit to the United States in April 1977.

Yaakov Cruz, deputy head of the Mossad until the mid-seventies, related to these demands of Sadat in an article in *Yediot Aharonot* on December 1, 1976. He pointed out the similarity between Sadat's demands for

a corridor between the two parts of the Palestinian state and Nasser's demands for territorial continuity via the Negev, which Nasser made during talks with Robert Anderson, President Eisenhower's emissary to the Middle East, at the beginning of 1956.

The Israeli-Egypt peace treaty signed on March 26, 1979 supposedly put an end to the chapter on the Egyptian demand for continuity, at least by way of the Negev. In section 2 of the peace treaty it was determined that "the permanent border" between the two countries was "the internationally recognized border between Egypt and the territory of the formerly mandatory Land of Israel." In addition it was determined there that "both sides recognize that it is forbidden to attack this border" and that each of the sides "will honor the integrity of the other country's area." By signing this document Egypt recognized for the first time the sovereignty of Israel over all of the Negev up to Eilat. In the peace agreement signed with Jordan at the end of 1994 the permanent and recognized border between the two countries was determined in general lines according to the international border that was valid between Transjordan and the formerly mandatory Land of Israel. As a result of these two agreements, the sovereignty of Israel over the southern Negev and the coast of Eilat is fully recognized today from both sides of this area.

In the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement, the subject of the land connection between Egypt and Jordan was not forgotten. Appendix no. 3 of the agreement, section 6 (subsection 5) states:

The sides further agree that a road will be paved and maintained between Egypt, Israel, and Jordan near Eilat. Free and tranquil passage of people, vehicles, and goods between Egypt and Jordan will be secured, without infringing upon the sovereignty over that area of the road included in the area of any of the sides.

In other words, Israel agreed to assist in connecting between Egypt and Jordan, as long as the paved road for this connection not be used to infringe upon Israel's complete sovereignty over the part of the Negev it was paved on.

The fact that the Egyptians have not yet taken advantage of the opportunity that became accessible to them in the peace agreements, and that they prefer to continue to maintain connections with the Arab east by air and sea, and not pass through territory under Israeli sovereignty, is not an encouraging sign. It reflects the spirit of their stand regarding Israeli sovereignty over the south of the Negev, as derived from the peace agreement.

Emmanuel Sivan, of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, published an article in *Ha'aretz* on August 8, 1994, identifying distinctly pan-Arab attitudes among Egyptian secondary elite. He reached his conclusions on the basis of research that analyzed essays written by students at Ein Shams University in Cairo. These students used extremely antagonistic expressions against Israel, describing it as a "knife in the heart (or back) of the Arabs," "a tool of imperialism," and other such "compliments" as these. It was possible to conclude that Egyptian students were still characterized by classic Nasserite-Heikalite positions. They asserted in their essays that "Israel's role, in the eyes of the American masters is to wear down Arab power, disrupt the Arabs' collective security, and break their geographic continuity."

The article that appeared on August 4, 1997 in the *Al-Wasat* newspaper in London reported that President Mubarak said on April 25, 1997 - the Egyptian "Sinai Independence Day" - that "Umm Rashrash is Egyptian land and we will not give it up." According to this source, President Mubarak revealed that in 1982 the Egyptians had requested to talk with Israel about the return of the Umm Rashrash triangle, but Israel did not acquiesce to this demand. The *Al-Wasat* correspondent in Egypt claimed that the president's statement came to emphasize that Egypt was leaving open the triangle affair, which would allow Egypt "to request by legal means" its return, just as Taba had been returned to Egyptian control.

From the survey presented above it is obvious that Egypt has no legal basis to demand this territory today. The question is, Why was this demand published, and Why now?

In an article in *Nativ* (Vol. 5/97), Yossef Bodansky discusses the *Al-Wasat* publication affair. He claims that Egypt is actually entering the path of confrontation and possible war with Israel. According to Bodansky, the purpose of describing Mubarak's demand for territory in the Negev, as though it had been stolen from Egypt, is to give legitimacy to this extreme change in Egyptian policy towards Israel. Bodansky further claims that

the very fact that the Egyptian demands were published in a paper owned by Prince Haled ben Sultan, son of the Saudi Arabian Defense Minister and brother of the Saudi Arabian Ambassador in Washington, shows that they are supported by the most senior echelons in Riyadh, and especially by those most pro-American.<sup>47</sup>

It is possible to reach a conclusion opposite to Bodansky's on this issue, since historically the Israeli wedge was used as a shield to defend the rich Arab oil states from the expansionism and threat of poor and hungry Egypt. Therefore it is possible that the purpose of the publication in a newspaper owned by the Saudi leadership is to warn against an Egyptian move, to awaken the guards, and to undermine the move while it is still in its early stages.

If the information from the Saudi newspaper can be relied upon, it would seem that Egypt intends to demand territory that is under complete Israeli sovereignty, territory that even Egypt itself recognizes as such. And Egypt, it would seem, does not even intend to do the minimum customary for countries at peace to do in such situations – namely, to propose a cession by way of exchange of territories. There is by no means any certainty that Israel would agree to this, but it would be appropriate, out of politeness at least, for Egypt, to suggest it.

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## ENDNOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> PRO, FO, 371/68402, E29.
- <sup>2</sup> David Ben-Gurion, *Uniqueness and Destiny* (Tel Aviv, 1971), p. 25.
- <sup>3</sup> "Principles for Settlement," Poalei Zion Delegation in the Land of Israel, 1920, part 2 - The Complete Report, editor: Haim Golan (Ramat Efal, 1989), p. 76. The article was published as one of the chapters from the report and was written primarily by Yavnieli, who was Ben-Gurion's friend, and in a greater degree, his teacher, based on an article published by Yavnieli a year earlier. Ben-Gurion's name was added to Yavnieli's since Ben-Gurion wrote the appendix that appears at the end of the article, and we can assume from this that Ben-Gurion agreed to everything stated in it.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.
- <sup>5</sup> David Ben-Gurion, *Meetings with Arab Leaders* (Tel Aviv 1967), p.11.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- <sup>7</sup> Central Zionist Archives (CZA), S25/9945.
- <sup>8</sup> *David Ben-Gurion's Diaries*, August 7, 1935.
- <sup>9</sup> G. Cohen, *Churchill and the Question of the Land of Israel, 1942-1943* (Jerusalem, 1973).
- <sup>10</sup> From Marshall to Austin November 12, 1947, FRUS, 1947, p. 1251.
- <sup>11</sup> A. Ilan, *Bernadotte in Palestine* (Oxford 1989), p. 57.
- <sup>12</sup> P. Bernadotte, *To Jerusalem* (Tel Aviv, 1952), p. 107.
- <sup>13</sup> Progress Report of the UN Mediator on Palestine, September 1948, UNGA OR, Third Session, Supplement, no. 11.
- <sup>14</sup> PRO, CAB 28/13, (C.P.48) 207.
- <sup>15</sup> From McClintock to Marshall, September 15, 1948, FRUS, 1948, vol. 5.
- <sup>16</sup> *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel*, vol. 3, p. 688, Israel State Archives, Jerusalem 1983.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.700.
- <sup>18</sup> From Sharett to Namir in Moscow, March 12, 1949, Israel State Archives, 2453\4. In the map that Glubb appended to his biography, the southern triangle of the Negev is marked as an area that was under the control of the Legion forces when the Transjordan delegation was sent to the armistice agreements talks in Rhodes. J.B. Glubb, *Soldier With the Arabs* (London 1957), p.228.
- <sup>19</sup> From Raphael to Sharett, "Summary of the Lessons Learned from Contacts and Negotiations with Egypt, 1949-1955," January 19, 1956, Israel State Archives, 2454/2.
- <sup>20</sup> FRUS, 1952-1954, Vol. 9 (915), November 5, 1954.

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- <sup>21</sup> FRUS, 1955-1957, Vol. 14 (48). See also "Alpha Operation" files in PRO FO 371/115866, VR 1076.
- <sup>22</sup> From the British Foreign Office to Macmillan, November 14, 1955, *ibid.*, VR 1076/369.
- <sup>23</sup> See for example the report of Henry Byroade, the American Ambassador, on a meeting with Nasser, dated April 4, 1955, PRO, FO 371/115866, VR 1076/54.
- <sup>24</sup> Report on a conversation between Fawzi and Dulles and George Allen, June 24, 1955, FRUS, 1955-57 (Vol. 14) 138.
- <sup>25</sup> PRO, FO 371/90167, JE1083/1; FO 371/91063, JE 1082/4.
- <sup>26</sup> M. Dayan, *Sinai Campaign Diary* (Tel Aviv, 1966), p. 98.
- <sup>27</sup> *David Ben-Gurion's Diaries*, September 25, 1956.
- <sup>28</sup> According to a top secret memorandum dated March 15, 1957, Israel State Archives, 2401/13.
- <sup>29</sup> From the Israeli Foreign Ministry to the Washington Embassy, April 4, 1957, Israel State Archives, 2452/5.
- <sup>30</sup> David Ben-Gurion, *Uniqueness and Destiny*, p. 280.
- <sup>31</sup> Quote from the President's diary, March 8, 1956, FRUS, 1955-57,(177), vol. 14. See also Sayed-Ahmed, *Nasser and American Foreign Policy 1952-1956* (London 1989).
- <sup>32</sup> On February 28, 1957 the American Embassy in Cairo reported the Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister's statements against the passage of Israeli ships in the Gulf of Aqaba: "Any country assisting Israel to receive rights of this type will be considered as in the same situation as Britain and France when they attacked Egypt." FRUS, 1955-1957, vol. 17, (171).
- <sup>33</sup> From the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem to the Israel Embassy in London, November.11, 1954, Israel State Archives, 2592/25.
- <sup>34</sup> Y. Harkabi, "How the Arab Position against Israel Was Explained in the Egyptian Army," General Staff Publications, p. 41.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19. Hassan Sabri Al'huli was in those years the personal representative of President Nasser and was primarily in charge of Land of Israel and Syria issues. Al'huli stressed another two artificial components that, according to him, inhered in the Mandatory borders of the Land of Israel, and both relate to water sources. The northeast border of the Land of Israel, called the Galilee Extremity, included all the territory of the Sea of Galilee and the Hula Lake. According to him, these boundaries were determined by the British in order to include all water sources in the Land of Israel. Al'huli's negative reference to the inclusion of these water sources in the area of Israel derived from the fact that these waters are transferred to the Negev and used for strengthening Jewish settlement in an area that Egypt viewed as vital to itself.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- <sup>37</sup> A. El-Sadat, *The Search of Identity* (Jerusalem, 1978), p. 134.
- <sup>38</sup> M.H. Heikal, weekly article, March 10, 1972, *Al-Ahram*. It seems that in this matter Heikal did not waiver from Nasser's ideas or from his own ideas dating to the 1950s.
- <sup>39</sup> S. Yitshaki, *In the Eyes of the Arabs – the Six Day War and Afterwards*, p. 233.
- <sup>40</sup> Heikal, *Al-Ahram*, May 26, 1967.
- <sup>41</sup> From Meir Amit to Ilan Asya, January 3, 1987.
- <sup>42</sup> A special report, 246/5, May 1972, p. 5.
- <sup>43</sup> M.H. Heikal, weekly article, March 10, 1972, *Al-Ahram*. Heikal formulated the strategic concept of unlimited war on a limited target, which was implemented by the Egyptians in the Yom Kippur War. He published these concepts in a series of weekly articles from March 2, 1972 to April 7, 1972. The analyses brought here are based on this series of articles.
- <sup>44</sup> *Israeli Television News*, June 7, 1975.
- <sup>45</sup> *Yediot Aharonot*, December 23, 1975.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, April 7, 1976.
- <sup>47</sup> Y. Bodansky, "Mubarak's Wedge - The Negev as an Excuse for War." *Nativ*, vol. 5/97.