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**Avi Raz. "The Generous Peace Offer that was Never Offered: The Israeli Cabinet Resolution of June 19, 1967." *Diplomatic History* 37:1 (January 2013): 85-108. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dhs004.**

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The two-day meeting of the Israeli Cabinet on 18-19 June 1967 was a historic event. For the first time in its history, the Cabinet convened to decide the future of the Arab territories that Israel occupied in the war that had ended only eight days earlier. It was also the last meeting of its kind. Since then it has never convened for such a discussion. The Cabinet approved the return of the Sinai to Egypt following the signing of the Camp David accords in 1978 as well as Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza strip in 2005. But a discussion concerning the most critical issue to the fate of the Jewish state had never taken place in the Israeli cabinet since June 1967.

The decision made by the ministers on 19 June, known as Cabinet Resolution 563, consisted of five parts: (a) the annexation to Israel of the Jordanian sector of Jerusalem; (b) keeping in Israeli hands the Gaza strip which was part of *Eretz Yisrael* (the "Land of Israel") and was held under Egyptian military rule since the war of 1948; (c) offering a withdrawal to the international border with Egypt in exchange for peace and security arrangements, which would include the demilitarization of the Sinai Peninsula, and guarantee of freedom of maritime passage in the Straits of Tiran, the Gulf of Aqaba and the Suez Canal, as well as of over flight rights in the Straits of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba; (d) offering a withdrawal to the international border with Syria in exchange for peace and security arrangements, which would include the demilitarization of the Golan Heights and an absolute guarantee for noninterference with the flow of water from the sources of the River Jordan to Israel; and (e) continuing discussions of the future of the West Bank.

Avi Raz's point of departure in his well-done study is the third article of this decision, which offered the return the Sinai to Egypt in exchange for peace. The questions he asks are two: First, was this, indeed, a 'generous peace offer' as it is often described? And second, what happened to it after it was made?

Raz concludes that the claim that this was a 'generous peace offer' is wrong. His analysis of the text shows that its formulation allowed Israel to demand changes in the international border, so that segments of both the Golan and the Sinai would remain in Israeli hands (88). But this claim is not solid enough. The text of the November 1967 UN Resolution 242, the basis for peace negotiations between Israel and its neighbors in the post-1967 era, called in its English version for "Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict."<sup>1</sup> Although the French text of the resolution called for a withdrawal from "the territories,"<sup>2</sup> the binding text is usually considered as the English one. The Hebrew text of the third article in resolution 563 seems to be closer to the French rather than the English version. Furthermore, as we will later see, when policy changed, the Cabinet passed another resolution that made the return to the international border an invalid option.

But Raz bases his claim that the 'generous peace offer' is only a myth, not only on his analysis of the Hebrew text of the decision, but also on the fact that Egypt had never received the Israeli proposal. This argument is far more convincing.

By trailing the fate of the alleged Israeli peace offer, Raz does an excellent job of refuting common wisdom, which was based on the claims made in 1967 by Abba Eban, Israel's Foreign Minister, that the Arabs rejected the generous Israeli offer. Using primary and secondary sources, he shows that in his contacts with the Americans Eban presented the government decisions as merely "preliminary thoughts" (93) rather than concrete peace proposals. Moreover, in contrast to Eban's narrative, the American diplomats did not express "deep appreciation of the Israeli largesse" (93). Even more important, Eban did not ask them to pass the Israeli proposal to the Egyptians. Hence, the claim which was later made by him and others, that the Arabs rebuffed the generous Israeli proposal, was simply untrue. The Arabs could not rebuff an offer they had not received. This conclusion, as Raz shows at the end of his article, is supported also by a few modern students of the subject, including Shlomo Ben Ami, who was both a history professor at Tel Aviv University and Israel's foreign minister in 2000-2001 (107-108).

Although Raz meticulously refutes this myth he leaves some other related issues untouched. One involves the rather dovish stand taken by the Cabinet with regard to the future of the Sinai and the Golan. It is true, as Raz notes, that the decision was motivated by a fear that history would repeat itself. In 1956 Israel had to withdraw from the Sinai without any formal security achievements and the Cabinet Ministers feared that international pressures would lead to a similar outcome now. This fear led the Ministers to

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<sup>1</sup> *United Nations Website*, Security Council Resolutions – 1967, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NRo/240/94/IMG/NRo24094.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

offer more and demand less. Indeed, in the course of the discussion and in the decisions themselves, the Cabinet Ministers avoided demanding diplomatic, economic, touristic, or any other forms of a normal relationship with Egypt as a condition for a complete withdrawal from the Sinai. As the protocol shows, many of the Ministers concluded that they would have to be satisfied with the end of the state of war and formal security arrangements since the Arabs were not yet ready for a comprehensive peace settlement. It seems, then, that if Egypt and Syria agreed to meet Israel's demands in 1967, they could have gotten back their lost territories at a lesser cost than the cost that was demanded later.

Although the articles concerning the future of the Sinai and the Golan were not limited in time, the dynamics of the following months turned them into invalid ones. On 17 October 1967, less than four months after Resolution 563 was made, the Cabinet passed another resolution that called for the reinforcing of Israel's positions in the occupied territories "by taking into account its security and development needs." On 30 October the Israeli Parliament approved this decision. On the same day the Cabinet cancelled Resolution 563 and replaced it with a resolution that demanded "secure borders."<sup>3</sup> The Americans were not informed about the new development.<sup>4</sup>

The main justification for the retreat from Resolution 563 had usually been the public resolutions of the Arab League's Khartoum Summit (28 August-2 September 1967) that were interpreted in Israel as a proof of the Arab adherence to the traditional rejection of Israel's right to exist. In reality, Israel started its settlement policy already in June – a clear indication of its intention to retreat from its original commitment shortly after it was taken. This policy change was probably driven by the realization that the present situation was very different from that of 1956. Then brutal pressures by the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration compelled Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to announce that Israel would completely withdraw from the Sinai, twenty-four hours after he implied in a speech in the Knesset that Israel was not ready to take such a move. In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson said, on the same day that Resolution 563 was accepted, that the demand for an immediate return to the pre-war borders "was not a prescription for peace, but for renewed hostilities." <sup>5</sup> This statement, as well as lack of effective American pressures to stop Israel's settlement policy at its embryonic stage, contributed to the realization in Jerusalem that this time Israel's room of maneuverability was far wider. The fact that Egypt did not respond to the original message of 19 June, as well as 'the three NO's' of Khartoum -- "no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it" -- enhanced the policy change.

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<sup>3</sup> Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall* (New York: Norton, 2001), 259

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Reuven Pedatzur, *The Triumph of Embarrassment: Israel and the Territories after the Six-Day War* (Hebrew, Tel Aviv: Bitan, 1996), 71-73.

What the Egyptian response would have been to Israeli readiness to return to the international border in exchange for peace is a matter for speculation. In the immediate run it seems that the humiliation that Egypt suffered in the war would have prevented a positive response. But in the longer run the outcome would certainly have been different. In February 1973 Egypt delivered to the U.S. its own proposal for a political settlement. It was almost a copy of the Israeli proposal of June 1967: in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian territory, Egypt was ready to end the state of war and accept Israel's existence, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. In addition, Egypt was ready to accept Israel's right for free passage in the Gulf of Aqaba, the Straits of Tiran, and the Suez Canal as well as to demilitarize large segments of the Sinai and promise that Egyptian soil would not be used for hostile acts against Israel.<sup>6</sup>

By this stage, however, Resolution 563 was long forgotten. On 18 April 1973, less than two months after the Egyptian proposal was delivered, Israel's top leadership convened to discuss the likelihood of a new Arab war initiative. Prime Minister Golda Meir, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, and Golda's closest advisor, Minister without Portfolio, Yisrael Galili, estimated that the threat was a real one. Although Galili said in the meeting that the Egyptian proposal of February gave Israel everything it required and that it was an alternative to a coming war, none of the three was ready to accept it as a basis for diplomatic negotiations that might lead to a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the irony of history is that an Israeli return to the principles of Resolution 563 could have prevented the Yom Kippur War of 1973. The refusal to do so had made the war that would break out less than six months later, and that would cost Israel dearly, unavoidable.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Memorandum of Conversation' between Mr Muhammad Hafiz Ismail, Egyptian Presidential Adviser for National Security Affairs and additional Egyptian delegates, and Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and additional American delegates, 25 February 1973 and 26 February 1973, *Nixon Presidential Materials Project*, NSC Files, Henry Kissinger Files, Country Files, Middle East, Box 25.

<sup>7</sup> Uri Bar-Josef, "Last Chance to Avoid War: Sadat's Peace Initiative of 1973 and Its Failure," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Volume 41(3), 553.