

Reprinted From the Jerusalem Post, May 10, 1976

Ford: It's Time to Talk About Broader M-E Settlement

by Trude B. Feldman

WASHINGTON — President Ford says that the U.S. has "gone about as far as we can in the step-by-step process" that culminated in the Egyptian-Israeli interim agreement last September, and the time has now come "to be doing some serious talking about a broader settlement — and that, of course, means peace and recognition of Israel."

In an exclusive interview with this reporter last week in his White House Oval Office, Ford said that he believes "significant headway" toward a Middle East settlement has been made since he became President. Now he wants to bring the parties to the negotiating table "so that we can achieve what everyone wants — a permanent, equitable peace in that very complex area."

"The key point is that the United States is the only country that has the trust of both the Israelis and the Arab nations. We're trying to build on that trust because in that way we can be of positive help in moving both sides closer, and make still more progress towards a lasting settlement."

During the interview, Ford made these other points:

* The U.S. "ought to think seriously about providing defensive arms for Egypt."

* It was "inaccurate" to suggest that his Administration was "tilting" — as I put it to him in a question — towards the Arabs. "The mere fact that we have recommended such substantial funds for Israel in the last two years ought to be the best evidence," he answered, adding: "I don't think Israel has any reason to worry that the Ford Administration will do anything to weaken Israel's military security."

* Regarding the question of additional assistance to Israel during the three-month transitional quarter running from July 1 through September 30, "the technical people in the Defense Department and other departments, who spend all their time on these matters," has advised him that the U.S. was "being fair and proper in regard to the amount Israel needs for its security and its survival, both economically and militarily." Ford has opposed the additional aid.

The President ducked a question about whether he would veto a smaller appropriation bill for the transition quarter calling for, say, only half of the \$550m. for Israel passed by the Senate. "Or do you think you'd have to veto that one also?" I asked. "I don't think I should make that judgment during this interview," he replied.

Ford said his Administration has been "both generous and fair" to the Jewish state. "As President, I have been very firm in indicating my support for the survival and security of Israel. I think the record will show that in terms of United States funding of economic and military support for Israel, the figures are very, very impressive.

"I recommended to Congress, and Congress has approved, more economic and military aid for Israel during my two years than any other President in American history.

"As a result, we have good relations with the Rabin govern-

ment. We don't agree on every detail and we have to negotiate, but we almost always wind up having the same position, whether it's the Sinai agreement or any other Middle East problem."

Regarding the present controversy arising from the President's opposition to the transitional funding for Israel, he said: "I'm glad to clarify that. I never made any commitment to give economic aid or military aid during the transitional quarter. I did agree, and carried through, a recommendation for \$1.5b. in military assistance to Israel in fiscal 1976 plus \$800m., as I recall, for economic assistance during the same period.

"I also indicated to the Israel Government that I would recommend \$1b. in fiscal 1977 for military assistance and \$700m. in economic aid. Those were the two commitments. There was never a commitment by me to anyone for any funding during the transitional quarter."

Ford added that he has "taken a very firm position that the foreign assistance funding I have recommended was ample. Anything above that puts me in a very untenable position because I'm trying to hold the line on domestic programmes to reduce our deficit and have the substantial tax reduction I've called for," he said. "For me to agree to anything above the very generous amounts I have suggested would be most inconsistent."

I asked Ford if he would like to be the President who went down in history as having made a "dent" in the Middle East problem.

"It's more than a 'dent' as you put it," he answered. "It would be one of the most significant achievements of any leader in the world today — the hallmark of any President's term. Yes, I hope it will be mine.

He said that "the Sinai pact has proved to be a highly positive development ... but we have to be doing some serious talking about a broader settlement — and that, of course, means peace and recognition of Israel. If we can achieve that, the problem will be solved for a long time to come."

President Ford defended his controversial proposal to end the 20-year embargo on arms sales to Egypt, asserting that such supplies were essential for further progress toward peace in the region.

"In the last 18 months," he said, "Egypt has changed very dramatically from its dependence on Soviet Russia to a willingness to work with us and also to negotiate an excellent settlement with the Israelis in the Sinai. I believe it is in the national interest of the United States to sell Egypt six C-130 transport planes. No one argues that this sale will upset the Mideast military balance.

"But beyond that, we must remember that since President Sadat has broken with the Soviet Union, which provided Egypt with all of its military hardware, he has turned to us. We ought to think seriously about providing defensive arms for Egypt."