

# Rocky road to Morocco

**T**he mystery over the Moroccan visit of Israel's Prime Minister, Shimon Peres, continues to deepen. Why, knowledgeable observers are asking, did Morocco's wily King Hassan get himself involved in a dangerous and apparently unrewarding venture that only seemed to benefit Israel?

First, the obvious. For Israel, the public visit to Morocco was all to the good, another chink in the stony wall of Arab rejection surrounding it. Just as New York City politicians tend to junket off to the "three Is" — Israel, Italy and Ireland — before elections, Peres' trip to Morocco was clearly aimed at Israel's largest single voting bloc (not counting voteless Palestinians), its 350,000 Moroccan Jews.

Peres may still try to break the coalition agreement with the Likud bloc before its leader, Yitzhak Shamir, is due to become prime minister this fall. If elections do come, a quick trip to Morocco won't hurt Peres' Labor Party which has never been popular with Israel's Moroccan community. Israelis are hardly strangers to Morocco: Peres has visited secretly at least twice before and so did the late Moshe Dayan — eyepatch concealed by dark glasses — and former PM Yitzhak Rabin.

Fine for Peres. But what about Hassan? He needs more American money badly to fuel his endless war in the western Sahara against the Polisario Front. Being nice to Israel, as many Third World nations have lately found, is a proven way to get more money from Congress — and to avoid irksome human rights investigations. Still, was more money worth the abuse suffered by Morocco from its fellow angry Arabs, which led to Hassan's resignation as head of the Arab League?

On the surface, no. Peres ostensibly repeated Israel's refusal to budge from its occupation of Arab land or to deal with the PLO. Hassan knew this before the visit and could not have expected

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any nice surprises — especially from a lame duck prime minister shortly to be replaced by Israel's hard-right Likud Party that often seems to want to bomb the Arabs back to the stone age.

The biggest clue to the secret agenda of the Moroccan meeting came, I suspect, from the modulated reaction of the Arabs when informed of the event. Syria broke relations. Libya sputtered but not too loudly; the PLO did the same. Algeria and Iraq remained quiet. And Jordan, the key player in any Arab-Israeli agreement, grumbled a little and then fell silent. Only debt-ridden Egypt, which must jump to Washington's tune, applauded Hassan.

Such muted Arab response, a sort of half-hearted, for-the-record protest, strongly suggests that a lot of people knew in advance of Peres' trip and many unofficially approved.

What I think some of the Arab states were trying to do was promote a last-minute effort to shore up moderates among the Israelis and Palestinians before the Likud Party takes power in Jerusalem. When that happens, chances of a peace settlement between Palestinians and Israelis will become remote.

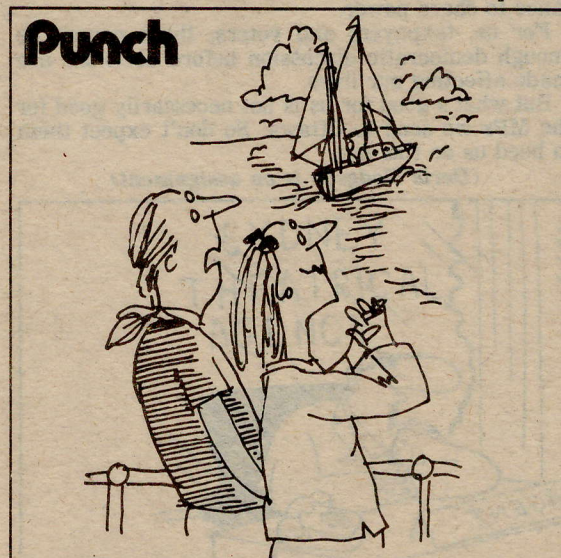
Likud is adamant about holding on to the occupied West Bank and Gaza; it is sworn to maintain Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and to keep a foot in Lebanon. To Likud, and its rising star, Gen. Ariel Sharon, Palestinians are terrorists to be bombed and blasted until they somehow go away for good and leave Israel alone.

Among the fragmented Palestinians, extremists are also gaining ground. The relatively moderate Fatah of Yasser Arafat is losing out to radical groups backed by Syria and Libya who are determined to fight against Israel for another 100 years if need be. If and when Likud gets back into power in Israel, these PLO extremists will probably gain ascendancy over Arafat's men who generally favor negotiations.

So the Moroccan meeting may well have been an effort by Hassan and other sensible Arab leaders to get Palestinian and Israeli moderates talking together before militants on both sides take charge.

If this scenario is correct, who knows what Peres said to Hassan? Perhaps Yasser Arafat may even have been party to the talks at the end of a phone line. Stranger things have happened in the Mideast.

Whatever the outcome, the Moroccan meeting was a step forward. But a very small one, perhaps only a tiptoe. The King of Morocco can make the other Arabs listen but he cannot forge a peace. That can only be done between Israel and the Palestinians.



"He's setting out to prove that a person can sail single-handed across the Atlantic without any sponsorship."