

# THE SINAI FIELD MISSION:

## A STEP TOWARD PEACE

### IN THE MIDDLE EAST

by

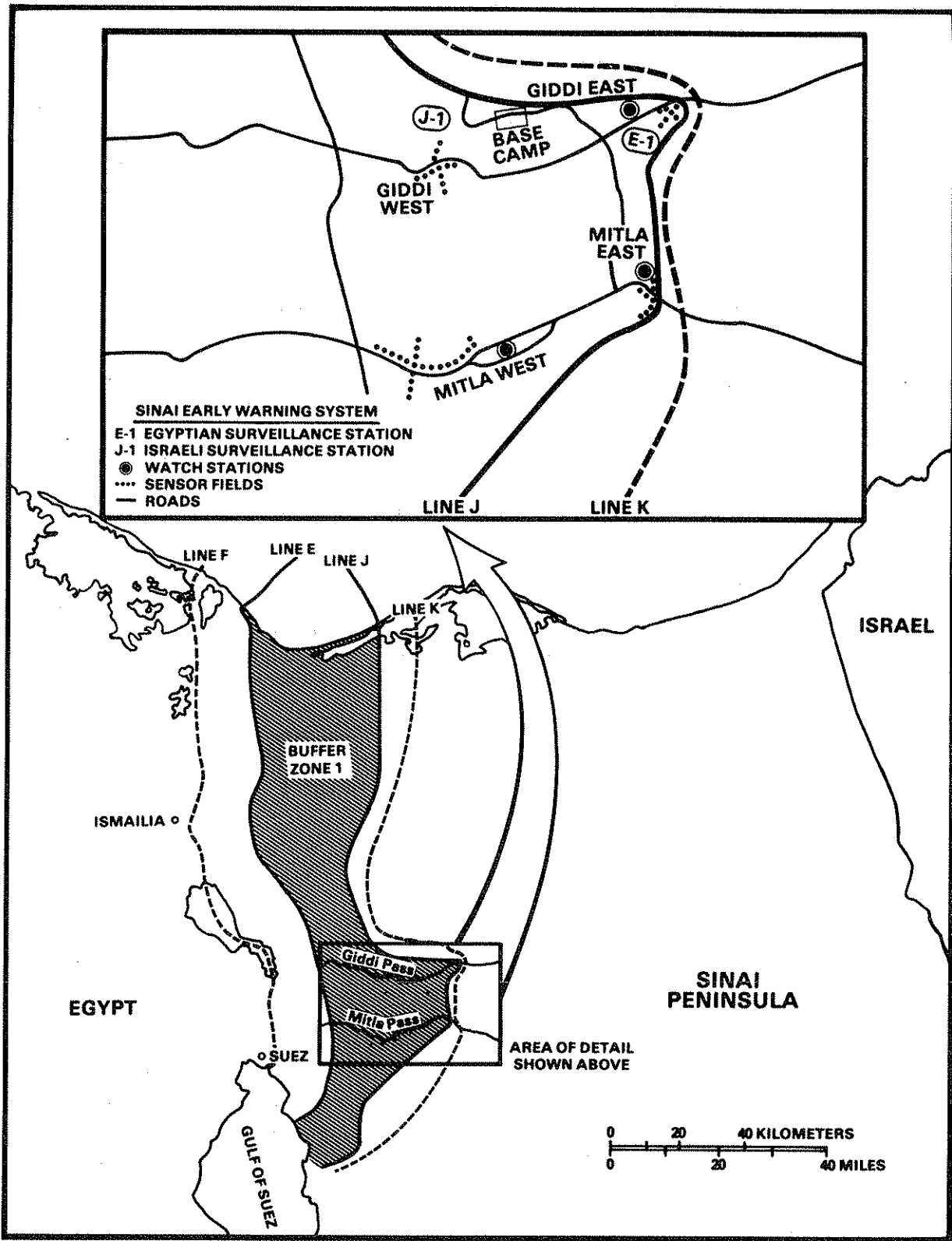
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**T**he war began on 6 October 1973—Yom Kippur—along the eastern bank of the Suez Canal and along the entire cease-fire line of the Golan Heights. From the first hours of Operation Badr it was apparent that the Arab forces were not going to be dealt with as handily as in 1967. However, by 11 October, Israel had regained the initiative on the Golan Heights and had cracked the Syrian defenses. Damascus was then within range of Israeli artillery. In the Sinai, the Israelis suffered early losses, as five Egyptian divisions penetrated three miles during the first day of the war.<sup>1</sup> With the arrival of reserve forces and stabilization on the Golan, however, Israel was able to blunt the Egyptian attacks of 13-14 October and go over to the offensive. By the time of the ceasefire on 24 October, Israeli forces had reached the west bank of the Suez Canal, had threatened the city of Suez, and had a stranglehold on the Egyptian Third Army, which was encircled on the eastern bank of the canal.

An interim accord, the Sinai I Agreement, was signed at the conclusion of the Yom Kippur War, providing for the disengagement of forces and the establishment of a UN-controlled buffer zone between the belligerents. Efforts to conclude a second-stage agreement began in early 1975; however, by March the talks had stalled. One of the critical reasons for the impasse was the issue of the strategic Giddi and Mitla Passes through the central Sinai.

Both the Egyptians and the Israelis were aware of the significance of the two strategic Sinai passes. The Giddi and Mitla Passes guard the historic east-west invasion routes through the Sinai and have been the scenes of bloody battles of previous wars between the two Middle East adversaries. The roads in the passes are choked with the hulks of Egyptian vehicles destroyed during one or another retreat over the past quarter century. In 1973, the Israelis operated a sophisticated electronic surveillance facility, J-1, at Umm Khasheib near the western end of the Giddi Pass, which afforded an unobstructed view of the Suez Canal from Suez to Ismailia and of the territory to the west. The strategic potential of the installation was obvious; consequently, any long-term peace solution had to address both Egypt's demand for the evacuation of the Sinai passes and Israel's desire to retain the J-1 surveillance site. Additionally, both parties placed considerable importance on a continuing US involvement in the area. However, as Secretary of State Kissinger's step-by-step diplomacy ground to a halt, the positions of the belligerents solidified. President Sadat explained: "The Israelis should be under no illusion that they will remain in the passes."<sup>2</sup> The position of the Israelis was expressed by their Minister of Defense, Shimon Peres:

It is a question not just of the passes, but of our military [intelligence] installations that have no offensive purpose and are necessary.



The previous government couldn't overcome the psychological blow—that the Syrians and Egyptians launched a surprise attack. We need an early warning system. We need twelve hours of warning. Under the proposed agreement, we'd only have six.<sup>3</sup>

Egypt moderated its position in late May after President Ford met with President Sadat in Salzburg: Sadat announced that he could countenance American technicians in the buffer zone of the Sinai. The following month, President Ford and Secretary Kissinger met with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to discuss continued Israeli intransigence. As a result, Israel agreed to resume negotiations while aspiring to retain at least a foothold in the passes. For the next two months, the Israeli Government haggled with Kissinger over the trace of the front line of its defenses in the Sinai.

On 20 August 1975, Kissinger began his 12th major mission to the Middle East, which culminated on 4 September with the signing of the Sinai II Agreement. The agreement included a further withdrawal of Israeli forces, the creation of a new UN-controlled buffer zone, and a direct US presence in the strategic passes.

To achieve this latter provision, a US proposal added to the disengagement agreement provided for US operation of an early warning system in a 250-square-mile area of the new buffer zone, including the Giddi and Mitla Passes and the Israeli J-1 site. According to the proposal, the system would consist of two elements. First, there would be two surveillance stations to provide strategic early warning to each nation. The Israeli station would be the existing J-1 site. The Egyptian site, E-1, was to be constructed with US assistance under the terms of a separate Egyptian-American agreement. The new site would provide Egypt with a surveillance capability comparable to that of the Israelis.<sup>4</sup> The national stations would be manned by a maximum of 250 personnel and would contain only small arms for personal protection. The second element provided tactical early warning to both parties and verified access to the two strategic stations.

To accomplish this, watch stations and sensor fields would be established in the Giddi and Mitla Passes. A maximum of 200 US Foreign Service personnel and civilian contractor employees would operate the warning system. The Americans would monitor the operations of the two strategic surveillance sites, as well as all movement into and out of each of them. Any operational violation would be immediately reported to the parties to the agreement. Similar reports would be made in the event of any military movement into either pass or any preparations for such movement.

Since the agreement required implementation by 22 February 1976, it was imperative that the US act promptly to meet its obligations. To accomplish this, the US Sinai Support Mission was established and charged with carrying out American responsibilities. The Support Mission took form by Presidential direction on 14 November 1975, following congressional enactment and Presidential approval of the joint resolution authorizing the execution of the US proposal. The Support Mission was instructed by Executive Order 11896, dated 13 January 1976:

...to ensure that the United States role in the Early Warning System enhances the prospect of compliance in good faith with

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the terms of the Egyptian-Israeli Agreement and thereby promotes the cause of peace.<sup>5</sup>

In carrying out these responsibilities, the Support Mission was subject to broad policy guidance through the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and to the continuous supervision and general direction of the Secretary of State pursuant to Section 622(c) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended. The Support Mission consisted of a Washington-based staff of 15 experts in contracting, engineering, planning, logistics, and administration. The operational arm was the Sinai Field Mission, responsible for operating the installations in the passes.

On 2 December 1975, a site-survey team left for the Sinai to engage in planning discussions with the parties to the agreement and to locate the site for the Field Mission.<sup>6</sup> Concurrently, the decision was made to seek a private contractor to build and operate the Field Mission under the direction of a small number of US Government personnel. Within seven weeks, a contract was awarded for the construction, operation, and maintenance of the Sinai Early Warning System.<sup>7</sup> Still, only 37 days remained before the transfer of the Giddi and Mitla Passes from Israeli to United Nations control. In that time, the operations center, communications network, three watch stations, and four sensor fields had to be installed. Perhaps indicative of the operation's subsequent success, the Field Mission achieved full operational capability on 19 February, three days ahead of schedule.

#### FIELD MISSION OPERATIONS

The first function of the Sinai Field Mission, to verify the nature of the operations of the Egyptian and Israeli surveillance stations, is performed solely by 23 US Government Liaison Officers. These officers are detailed to the Field Mission from the State Department, the Agency for International Development, and the United States Information Agency.<sup>8</sup> Positioned at the entrances to E-1 and J-1, they inspect all

vehicles entering and departing to assure that prohibited materiel is not being transported into the sites. Additionally, unscheduled inspections are conducted "to verify the nature of the operations of the stations."<sup>9</sup>

The second function, monitoring the passes in the early warning area, is accomplished through the use of three manned watch stations, four unattended ground sensor fields, and a remotely controlled day-and-night imaging system.<sup>10</sup> The sensor fields, emplaced at critical positions near the approaches to the passes, detect the movement of personnel or vehicles. When the sensors are activated, signals are sent to the watch station monitoring that field, and the intrusion is investigated. Watch station operators are also equipped with high-powered binoculars and telescopes, which enable them to observe the sensor fields and military activity deep within both Egyptian- and Israeli-held territory. A remotely controlled imaging system also permits operators at the Giddi East Watch Station to observe activity at the Giddi West Sensor Field, where no manned watch station exists.

The third function is to report any movement of armed forces. Reports of agreement violations are transmitted simultaneously to the Ministry of War in Cairo, the Ministry of Defense in Tel Aviv, the United Nations Emergency Forces (UNEF) Commander in Ismailia, and the Chief Coordinator of UN Peacekeeping Missions in the Middle East, headquartered in Jerusalem. American authorities in Washington and at the US Embassies in Cairo and Tel Aviv are then notified.

Although it is not an official function of the Mission, the Field Mission also serves as a communications link between the opposing military forces located in the Sinai. This capacity is exercised when the actions by one party might be misconstrued by the other. Both the Egyptian and the Israeli military commands have shown a willingness to advise each other, through the Field Mission, of artillery training, small arms firing, and other training exercises planned within the vicinity of the separation lines. This notification, coupled with the confirmation capability of

the Field Mission, decreases the tension and doubt between the parties, and defuses potential confrontations before they can reach the crisis stage.

From the outset, the Field Mission recognized that in order to implement successfully both the letter and the spirit of the agreement, it needed to gain the confidence of the parties involved. To that end, the Field Mission adopted, with minor modification, the operating philosophy used by Lieutenant General Ensio Siilasvuo during his tenure as the UNEF Commander. The Mission would be "firm, fair, friendly, and fast."<sup>11</sup>

To be firm, the Field Mission would adhere to a strict interpretation of the rules, since once a discretionary decision was made it would be difficult if not impossible to set new limits and standards of enforcement. Field Mission decisions would be unequivocal—either a violation had occurred or it had not. Additionally, once a determination had been made concerning a violation, all parties would be notified immediately, and under no circumstances would the decision be changed.

The terms of the Sinai II Agreement would be fairly applied to both parties. Decisions would be governed by the rules of the agreement plus any additional rules established through experience and local agreements. Both parties were to be treated identically, with no display of partiality toward either side. At the same time, the Mission's relationship with both nations would be governed by a friendly attitude to promote an atmosphere of cooperation rather than one of confrontation.

The one change made to the UNEF philosophy was the addition of the requirement to be "fast." The American Early Warning System had to be constantly alert and capable of providing accurate reports of violations. However, because of the volatile nature of the situation and the destabilizing potential of even the slightest incident, violations had to be processed and the parties advised as rapidly as possible without sacrificing accuracy.

In addition to indicating the cooperation of Egypt and Israel, the fact that there have been few violations of the agreement reflects the

success of the Field Mission and demonstrates the respect of the parties for the capabilities of the Early Warning System. Since the Field Mission began operations in February 1976, only 87 violations have occurred, and these are believed to have been merely technical violations rather than willful attempts to circumvent the agreement.<sup>12</sup>

Under the terms of the agreement, each side is permitted daily reconnaissance flights over the median line of the UN buffer zone. Violations are reported when the aircraft deviate from the median line or make more than one pass over the zone. Vehicle violations take place when a party introduces more than the authorized number of vehicles into the surveillance station site or when vehicles cross into the early warning area. Bringing weapons other than small arms, or small arms in excess of the authorized number, into the national stations also constitutes a violation of the agreement. Personnel violations include allowing personnel to enter the early warning area or having more than 250 people in the E-1 or J-1 sites. The following table reflects the source and nature of observed violations from the establishment of the Field Mission to 21 October 1979:

	Israel	Egypt	Unidentified	Total
Aircraft	50	0	19	69
Vehicles	12	0	0	12
Weapons	2	1	0	3
Personnel	1	0	2	3
Total	65	1	21	87

This summary of violations is misleading without considering the location of the Early Warning System. The eastern end of the early warning area is contiguous with the J-Line, the western border of the Israeli Limited Forces Area established by the Sinai II Agreement. However, the E-Line, the eastern limit of the Egyptian Limited Forces Area, is approximately eight kilometers west of the early warning area. Therefore, even shallow penetrations by the Israelis intrude immediately into the early warning area and are readily detected. Similar shallow penetrations by the Egyptians intrude into the buffer zone and are beyond the detection capability of the Field Mission. Since the

UNEF lacks the sophisticated equipment used in the early warning area, such Egyptian violations would not be detected.

In spite of the violation imbalance, the important fact remains that the offenses have been minor ones. The assurance of detection and the publicity given a violation within US Government circles have contributed to that situation. In addition, fair and impartial treatment of both parties by the Field Mission has contributed to the essential atmosphere of trust.

### A SUCCESSFUL PRECEDENT

As a peacekeeping operation, the Sinai Field Mission has contributed toward stabilizing a situation which has defied solution for decades. From the inception of the American Early Warning System, the idea was viewed as "a viable, continuing form of diplomacy."<sup>13</sup> Throughout the final stages of the Sinai II negotiations, both parties were determined to have an American presence in the Sinai and were willing to support it. Nicholas Thorne, the Field Mission's first director, observed that "more than all our sensory equipment, it is our physical presence here that is important, and which, we hope, will help keep the two sides from fighting."<sup>14</sup> His remark not only acknowledges the desires of Egypt and Israel, but also recognizes the realities of the Sinai. Should another war break out while the Field Mission is in place, the Mission's presence would complicate the situation because the aggression would constitute an attack on the US as well. Additionally, the Mission would be capable of identifying who started the fighting.

The public law establishing the Mission set the maximum number of Americans in the Sinai at 200; however, Congress has encouraged the reduction of the actual number through efficient personnel management and technological substitution. Additionally, the US has repeatedly sought approval to convert the Field Mission to a multinational organization, but the Egyptians and Israelis "have reaffirmed their confidence in the manner in which the US has been carrying out its responsibilities in the

Sinai," and are "strongly opposed to suggestions that the American civilians be replaced by representatives of other nations."<sup>15</sup> The Mission's current director, Leamon Hunt, summarized the success of the American effort: "It works because both sides want it to work, and because we do a good job. It's something we as a nation can be proud of."<sup>16</sup>

Another factor in the Mission's success has been the recognition by the parties that its purpose was "essentially political and psychological, albeit stated in military terms."<sup>17</sup> The American installation was to provide accurate tactical early warning; it was not expected to provide strategic warning of impending attack. The latter function would be accomplished by national intelligence systems supplemented by aerial reconnaissance provided by the US.

Also beneficial was the fact that the Field Mission was tasked to monitor adherence to an agreement entered into by Egypt and Israel which the US had not signed. The Mission has therefore been able to respond to criticism of the rules by pointing out that they were established by the parties themselves. The provision for a Joint Commission within the Sinai II Agreement permits the negotiated resolution of rules disputes. In addition, the agreement permits the Field Mission to exercise some flexibility in executing its responsibilities, stating that "if experience suggests changes in locations or procedures, the U.S. shall be able to work out such changes in consultation with the Parties."<sup>18</sup>

Linking the Field Mission to the broader UN responsibility and establishing it within the area controlled by the UNEF reduced the number of issues which the Mission had to address in its dealings with the Egyptians and Israelis. The Americans could concentrate on their more limited responsibilities, and senior UN officials could be used as mediators in cases in which they would be useful. This linkage was a positive factor for the Mission and the cause of peace, and it helped bolster the UN's credibility as a Middle East peacekeeper, especially after the events which preceded the Six Day War.

The Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty

concluded on 26 March 1979 calls for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the eastern end of the Giddi and Mitla Passes to the recognized international boundary between Egypt and the former mandated territory of Palestine by 25 January 1980. At that juncture, the task of the Sinai Field Mission will have been completed and the Mission will be terminated. Other elements of the surveillance and peacekeeping system's cessation include the dismantling of the J-1 surveillance site and the expiration of the UNEF mandate. As a result of the latter, the Ghanian security force for the Field Mission was redeployed from the Sinai on 31 August.

The reestablishment of Egyptian sovereignty over the Sinai does not imply that the Field Mission experience will be relegated to the history books, however. The need to satisfy Israeli demands for secure frontiers and the continued emphasis on a direct American involvement in the Middle East makes the establishment of a similar mission an option in any future peace agreements. The inclusion of an early warning system as part of a treaty in which territorial compromises have been made has definite possibilities, and it has been discussed with the government of Israel, which appears to recognize that some type of warning system would be an essential part of providing secure borders. However, Israel has expressed reservations about the sufficiency of an early warning system employed as the sole means to meet her security requirements. "Regardless of how effective a warning system is," an Israeli spokesman has pointed out, "it does little good to have a warning if there are no forces to take the first shock of an attack."<sup>19</sup> This observation is not intended to impugn the value of such a system, but rather to emphasize Israel's insistence that her armed forces shall bear the burden of her defense. Therefore, Israel's acceptance of another tactical warning system will not be at the expense of degrading its military capability, nor will it look to the introduction of foreign military forces. The US agrees with the latter provision; however, there is some indication in Congress that "if boundary monitoring is included in an agreement, it

should include, in all respects, a multinational effort."<sup>20</sup> In light of previous attempts to alter the national composition of the Field Mission, it seems unlikely that such an objective would be carried out.

If a similar warning system is employed elsewhere in the Middle East, its success may depend on the application of lessons learned during the Sinai Field Mission's experience. This experience shows that an outside presence with the support of the adversaries can stabilize a border region "by deterring incidents and building confidence that the terms of an agreement are being observed."<sup>21</sup> Additionally, if the mission has only surveillance and reporting responsibilities, it is less likely to cause controversy than if it were involved in enforcing the terms of an agreement. Thus, the parties to a future treaty must determine at an early date the amount of enforcement authority, if any, to be exercised by the mission. It is equally essential that the tasks assigned to a mission be technically feasible and that all parties fully understand the capabilities of the installation. They must also establish from the outset the acceptable standards of performance. A corollary of these lessons is recognition that the early warning system must be a supplement to the intelligence capabilities of the adversaries, not a substitute for them.

The operators of a future mission must realize that their professional competence and resolve will be challenged by the separated parties. The test will be intentional and may evolve out of a routine incident or a deliberate act. Therefore, the mission must consciously and continuously work to develop credibility. If the mission fails in this effort, its presence will make little or no contribution to stability in the area. The likely consequences of such a failure will be increased tension and the continuation of the "no war, no peace" climate.

The nations of the Middle East can ill afford perpetuation of a state of confrontation. With consummation of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty, the remaining Arab confrontation states have little to offer their people for their continued belligerency.

The Egyptians, on the other hand, can point proudly to the return of the Sinai Peninsula to their control. The presence of the Field Mission in the area of the strategic Sinai passes and the unprecedented success of its peacekeeping role cannot be ignored in any historical evaluation of the progress toward peace between Egypt and Israel. An exciting aspect of that evaluation is the real potential for using similar missions elsewhere and for obtaining equally impressive results. Negotiators of future agreements should recognize the lessons learned in the Sinai and look for the opportunity to apply them to the problem at hand. Undoubtedly, one of the most promising prospects for the successful use of a similar mission is on the Golan Heights, where exist many of the conditions which contributed to the accomplishments of the Field Mission.

Although such suggestions are speculative at this point, an acceptable agreement between Syria and Israel might well include the establishment of a new border which would have to be monitored. Since the terrain of the Golan will not accommodate an extensive UN buffer zone manned by sizable peacekeeping contingents, a small force and an early warning system might be appropriate. An early warning system so employed would supplement the existing strategic surveillance facilities of Syria and Israel in the area, although there might be a question of comparable capability. In that regard, the Syrians might need to relocate their facilities or technologically improve them.

As in the Sinai, the purpose of such a mission would be essentially political and psychological. Because of the geographical closeness of the parties, any territorial solution devised would not lessen the threat posed to the populations. However, the interjection of a major third party between Syria and Israel would create additional consequences for an aggressor, as was the case in the Sinai. The parties have been favorably disposed, in varying degrees, to the concept of an early warning system in their common border area, although its form and nationality would be the subject of considerable debate. Such a system thus

represents a real prospect for peace in the area, a prospect made greater by the success of the Sinai Field Mission.

The Sinai Field Mission created an atmosphere of trust between Egypt and Israel and helped open the path to substantive negotiations leading to the present Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty. In addition, the Mission has demonstrated to other Arab nations America's willingness to become involved in the cause of peace. In accomplishing these tasks, the Sinai Field Mission has made a substantial contribution to peace in the Middle East.

#### NOTES

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