

ROMANIA'S POSITION TOWARDS THE ARAB – ISRAELI WAR OF 1973

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By the time of the outbreak of the fourth Arab-Israeli war, on October 6, 1973, Romania was one of the most familiar with the complex situation in Middle East, among the countries of Eastern Europe. Bucharest was in good relations with the Arab countries in this region (Egypt, Syria, Jordan) and Yasser Arafat, the leader of the Organization for the liberation of Palestine, was one of the close friends of Nicolae Ceausescu.

The relations with Israel had witnessed a positive evolution, Romania's position during the six days war influencing favorably the bilateral relations. A very important moment was the rising of bilateral relations to the level of embassy, on August 17, 1969. This attitude annoyed some Arab countries, which either withdrew their diplomats from Bucharest (Iraq, Egypt) or broke the diplomatic relations (Sudan, Syria). On its turn, Moscow, seconded by some allies in the Warsaw Pact, conceived the attitude of Bucharest as a breakage of its peace efforts in Middle East¹. During his talks with Nicolae Ceausescu, on May 19, 1970, Leonid Brezhnev regarded the raising of diplomatic representation at the level of embassy

¹ *Romania – Israel; diplomatic documents*, Sylvy Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000, p.XXII.

between Romania and Israel as a "stimulation of the aggressor"².

With all those restrictions, Romania did not change her position towards Israel, and their bilateral relations followed an ascendant path. Among the most significant moments we recall the meeting of Nicolae Ceausescu, the leader of the Communist regime in Bucharest, with Ms. Golda Meyer, Prime Minister of Israel, in October 1970, in the context of the jubilee session of the General Assembly of the United Nation and her visit to Romania from 4 to 7 May, 1972.

The outbreak of Yom Kippur war, a moment chosen by Arabs for the beginning of their military actions is well known³. It is sure that the outbreak of the conflict was not a tremendous surprise for Romania either. However, the first official reaction followed three days latter, on October 9, 1973, during a visit of Nicolae Ceausescu in Braila. At the "popular meeting" from this city, the communist leader considered the beginning of hostilities in Middle East as "a critical danger for peace, not only in this area, but in the whole world"⁴. In the same day, the official press agency "Agerpres" gave a declaration in which it is showed that "Romania is for a

² Paul Niculescu Mizil, *De la Comintern la Comunism National* [From Comintern to National Communism], Evenimentul romanesc Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001, p. 525.

³ See for example among other documents, the book of Mose Dayan, *The History of my Life*, Encyclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002, p. 421.

⁴ Nicolae Ceausescu, *Romania pe drumul construirii societatii socialiste multilateral dezvoltate*, [Romania on the path of building the socialist, multilateral developed society], vol. 9, Political Publishing House, Bucharest, 1974, p. 378.

political solution for the situation in Middle East in order to reach a fair peace, ready to guarantee 'the recognition of the right for sovereign existence of every state in the region'.⁵

Nicolae Ceausescu revealed the emergency of stopping military actions and declared his attachment to the objective of political solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict. In fact, Nicolae Ceausescu was in line with the UN decisions, especially the Resolution of November 2, 1967. Romania had a direct contribution to the drafting of this document through its Foreign Minister Corneliu Manescu, elected president of the 22nd session of the UN Security Council.

The same ideas can be found in the speech of Nicolae Ceausescu, delivered four days latter (October 13, 1973) in Targu Mures, with the occasion of inauguration of the state theatre in that city. Furthermore, the Romanian leader affirmed his availability to get actively involved in solving the crisis.⁶

It was not a simple metaphor as far as under the curtain, the Romanian diplomacy pursued to action. On October 14, Nicolae Ceausescu, as state leader, delivered messages to the presidents of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Syria and Israel, document that invited the three countries to abandon the hostilities and to engage in negotiations. Bucharest insisted

⁵ Petre Barladeanu, Ion Calafeteanu (ed.), *Relatiile Politice internationale postbelice (1965-1980)* [The post-war international relations], vol. II, Politica Publishing House, Bucharest, 1980, p.235.

⁶ Nicolae Ceausescu, *Romania pe drumul construirii societatii socialiste multilateral dezvoltate*, [Romania on the path of building the socialist society, multilateral developed], vol. 9, p. 412-413.

once again for a global political resolution of the problems in the Middle East, with Israel abandoning the territories gained during the six days war, and the Arab states giving up the slogan of destroying the Jewish state.⁷

The momentum of the Romanian course synchronized with the launch of the Israeli army counteroffensive, which changed the course of this war. In this context, in his speech of October 16, 1973, the Egyptian president Anwar el Sadat declared his commitment for the end of military actions. On October 18, Moscow, which created an air bridge between Egypt and Syria as a response to that of USA for Israel, suggested to president Sadat to accept an immediate cease of fire without further claims.

In the meantime, in Moscow and Washington there was a febrile activity intended to reach any solutions for the limitation of the conflict and, finally, to end it. On October 20, 1973, Henry Kissinger, following a Kremlin suggestion, paid a visit to Moscow in order to reach a common position towards the cease-fire. From the Soviet capital city, the American state secretary went to Israel in order to convince the authorities to accept this fact. Following those efforts, on October 22, 1973, the UN Security Council adopted the Resolution no. 338, which stipulated the cease-fire. Egypt, which had its 3rd Army isolated and surrounded on the Eastern shore of Sinai peninsula, asked for immediate dispatch of troops, including

American and Soviet troops, in order to determine the observance of UN Security Council Resolution.

On October 23, 1973, it adopted a new resolution, no. 339, where it was provided the immediate cease-fire. Regarding the request for troops, Americans refused to provide them, but the Soviet Union announced that, in case the hostilities continue, they reserve the right to act unilaterally. The perspective of Moscow's direct involvement in this conflict generated a moment of great tension in the international relations. President of the United States, Richard Nixon, decided on October 25, 1973 to call on alarm the whole military units, including the nuclear component.

In those conditions, Bucharest had a prompt reaction. On October 25, the Army's Day, the Romanian government issued a declaration that restated in part the ideas exposed by Nicolae Ceausescu. The document appreciated the cease-fire, accepted by the belligerent parties, represents "an important step towards the creation of conditions for political settlement of the conflict and the setting up of peace in this part of the world". The Romanian executive revealed the necessity to start as soon as possible the negotiations provided by the UN Security Council resolution and to pursue to the organization of peace conference under the UN aegis. The belligerent countries as well as other countries (big, middle or small states) with interests in the region were expected to take part in this

⁷ "Scanteia", October 25, 1973.

conference too⁸. One day later, on October 26, there was the meeting of the Permanent Presidium of the central Committee of the Romanian Workers' Party, the operational working organ composed of 7 members. There were invited Cornel Burtica and Stefan Andrei. Nicolae Ceausescu informed on the intention of the Soviets to send troops in the area, even though the Security Council decided those permanent members to abstain from this engagement. From this point of view, the Permanent Presidium positively appreciated the American abstention towards the implication with troops in the Middle East, abstention explained by some participants (Gheorghe Radulescu, Cornel Burtica, Manea Manescu) on the experience in Vietnam.

Nicolae Ceausescu referred to the Declaration of the Romanian government, received, in his opinion, with good confidence by the international community. He decided that Bucharest is to address Moscow for the organization of a summit with the Soviet leaders, and with the whole Warsaw Pact, if they wish so.

The topics to be addressed concerned the situation in Middle East, especially the dispatch of troops in the area. A survey of documents shows that, by the organization of this summit, Nicolae Ceausescu wanted to put on guard the Soviets on the risks of direct involvement in the region, but especially

⁸ National Historical Archives, C.C. of R.C.P. Records Group, Chancellery, file no. 152/1973, p. 2-19.

on the difficulty in reaching the agreement of the leader of the Warsaw Pact for sending military units in a future multinational force. According to Nicolae Ceausescu this thing was perfectly possible, as far as "we are the only country accepted by both parties and, in this way the troops of the socialist countries would be present in Middle East".⁹

In parallel with the discussion with the Soviets, Romania had to address the UN Secretary General and the Americans, to present this offer.

A third direction of action for Bucharest was to continue the contacts both with the Israeli counterparts and the Arabs in order to contribute to the settlement of the conflict, to the cease-fire observance and, finally, to find a political solution for the problems in the region.

But the serious tension between the two great powers did not lasted more than 24 hours and the fear of "a new Cuban crisis" vanished. Neither USA nor USSR wished to have direct confrontation on the moving sands of the Middle East and, therefore cooperated for reaching the cease-fire. On October 26, 1973 the UN Security Council adopted a new resolution, no. 34, which decided the dispatch of a UN emergency force to the front lines across the Suez Channel. The first contingent of this force comprised 800 Austrian, Swedish and Finnish

⁹ National Historical Archives, C.C. of R.C.P. Records Group, Chancellery, file no. 149/1973, p.4.

militaries, from Cyprus. The Finnish General, Silaasvuo commanded this contingent.

One of the ideas entrenched by the Permanent Presidium did not finalized – the Soviets did not agreed to organize a summit of the Warsaw Pact, Moscow motivating that it is difficult to prepare and host such a meeting in short time. Furthermore, the Romanian militaries did not participate to the multinational force. Romania committed itself to reaching and observing a cease-fire agreement and getting to a political solution.¹⁰

Bucharest conformed to this behavior, continuing its own political endeavors to reach a political settlement. Upon a request from some Arab leaders, Romania received between 4 to 7 of November 1973, the visit of Israeli Foreign Minister, Abba Ebban, during which the Israeli authorities could know better the adversaries' points of view.

According to the dialogues with the Israeli official, the Romanian part draw the conclusion that Israel wanted a political solution for this problem, accepting even to cease the territories gained after the war of 1967. Even more complicated seemed to be the Palestinian problem, among the Arabs exising different opinions on how to create a Palestinian state. Moreover, following this visit, between 14 to 28 November 1973, Romanian delegations went to Egypt, Syria, Jordan,

¹⁰ Nicolae Ceausescu, *Romania pe drumul construirii societatii socialiste multilateral dezvoltate*. [Romania on the path of building the socialist, multilateral developed society], vol. 9, p. 514-515,

Morocco, Sudan and other countries, in order to contribute to the settlement of this conflict.¹¹

During the meeting of the Executive Committee of November 13, 1973, Nicolae Ceausescu spread information on Romania's position in the Middle East conflict. The conclusion was that Romania had an interest to take part in the future international conference, together with other states, and will continue its role of mediator between different parties. In fact, during the crisis period as well as afterwards, the leadership in Bucharest had contacts with Palestinian leaders. According to the custom, the Executive Committee approved Romania's position during the crisis, acknowledging the activity of Nicolae Ceausescu.

As it is well known, during the conflict the Arab countries used the "petroleum weapon" to impose its objectives.

On October 17, 1973, during a reunion at Sheraton Hotel in Kuwait, the Arab countries imposed an "embargo" to those countries that, according to their opinion, supported Israel. The price for petroleum increased considerably, and the world confronted with "petroleum shock", dramatically felt by the world economy.

The consequence of this real earthquake influenced Romania too, a country that could not cover petroleum needs from its own production, especially because Nicolae

¹¹ National Historical Archives, C.C. of R.C.P. Records Group, Chancery, file no. 166/1973, p. 99-100.

Ceausescu, ignoring the opinions of specialists, pursued an aberrant development of the industrial branches using petroleum as raw material. Measures were taken immediately, both the Executive Committee and the Plenary of the Central Committee of November 28, 1973, adopting a plan for saving fuel and electrical energy.

To conclude, on the basis of the studies documents we may appreciate the following:

- there were elements of continuity in Bucharest's policy towards the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, Romanian having good relations with belligerent parties; basically, in this conflict Romania adopted a neutral position;
- this status allowed Bucharest to play a mediator role during the conflict, Romanian capital being one of the channels used by the belligerent parties and great powers for the limitation and resolution of the conflict.

This role will increase in the following years, Romania having an important contribution to the achievement of peace process, and Camp David accords.

- Probably, less visible than the six days war, during the Yom Kippur war Bucharest was in disaccord with Moscow regarding positions and actions to pursue. This time, having in mind the weakness of its positions in Middle East, Moscow did not organize a meeting of the Warsaw Pact to show the solidity around the Alliance.

Romania's position and the position of its leader during the Yom Kippur war regarded Washington as well. Nicolae Ceausescu has been seeking for long time to obtain the most favored nation clause, and his behavior during this crisis was to serve this goal.

The expectations of Nicolae Ceausescu were right, the American administration, even involved in "Watergate" scandal, agreed with the visit of Nicolae Ceausescu in Washington, between 4-7 December 1973. On this occasion, important bilateral documents were signed. In the following year, Romania got the most favored nation clause.¹²

During his visit in the USA, in an interview to the Romanian and American mass media, Nicolae Ceausescu responded that he is for a gradual removal of the two military blocks. But the very question shows, in my opinion, that Romania was perceived as having a distinct position inside the Warsaw Pact. In the Yom Kippur war, Romania behaved according to the principle of George Macovescu: "Romania does not pursue its policy towards Israel through Arab eyes, but analyses its relations with the Arab countries and with Israel in accordance with its interests".

¹² For this visit see Joseph F Harrington, Bruce J. Courtney, *Relatiile romano - americane. 1940-1990*. [Romanian - American Relations], Institutul European, Iasi, 2000, p. 336-342.