

REFLECTIONS ON CAMP DAVID AT 40

*How the Camp David Accords became a limited
Egyptian–Israeli peace effort that ultimately transformed
Arab–Israeli relations across the Middle East*

By William B. Quandt

When President Jimmy Carter and his foreign policy team began to address the Arab–Israeli conflict in early 1977, they had several important reference points in mind. First was the vivid memory of the 1973 October War and the threat it had posed to international security as well as economic prosperity. No one wanted to see a repeat of such a dramatic and dangerous conflict. In addition, there was the beginning of a serious diplomatic process begun under the careful guidance of Henry Kissinger, secretary of state for both Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. Three agreements on the disengagement of military forces had been reached, two between Egypt and Israel, and one between Syria and Israel, which set the stage for Carter’s own diplomatic efforts in the Arab–Israeli arena. Finally, the United States had good working relations with most of the key parties in the conflict, other than the Palestinians, and Carter was eager to deepen those relations in pursuit of peace in the Holy Land, something that was particularly appealing to him as a devout Christian.

All of this meant that the team around the president, which included several participants in the Brookings Report of 1975, were predisposed to support a U.S.-led effort to achieve a comprehensive solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict, including some form of self-determination for the Palestinians—the main goals identified by the report. Carter signed on to this broad strategy, but also wanted to make sure that he was personally acquainted with the key leaders. During the first several months of his administration, he met with leaders from Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Without directly meeting any Palestinian representatives, he sent a strong signal to them by speaking openly of the need for a Palestinian “homeland.”

There is no reason to doubt that Carter and his advisors saw the strategic benefits of a comprehensive Arab–Israeli peace. The question in their minds, however, was whether or not it was achievable. Based on Carter’s early meetings with regional leaders, as well as those of his secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, the goal did not seem beyond reach. For example, during a somewhat stiff meeting with Israeli



Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in March 1977, Carter pressed for Israel's view on the future of the West Bank. Rabin, who was facing a hard election in May of that year, said that he was not about to reveal his bottom line in public, but that he could tell Carter his only interest in the West Bank was security, not Israeli sovereignty. I was at this meeting, and recall thinking that if that were really Israel's position, there would be a chance that the "land for peace" formula of UN Resolution 242 could be realized.

△ The three leaders of Camp David at the U.S. presidential retreat in Thurmont Maryland, Sept. 6, 1978. *Karl Schumacher/ CNP/ZUMAPRESS*

Setting the Stage for Camp David

Even during our most hopeful moments early in 1977, we knew that there would be difficult times ahead in trying to reach a comprehensive Middle East peace. Already some of Carter's domestic aides were warning him about the reaction of the American Jewish community to some of his early statements, especially his call for a Palestinian homeland. There were also obvious problems of getting the Arab parties to agree on how to proceed toward actual negotiations. Egypt's president Anwar Sadat was eager to move quickly and without too much encumbrance from the demands of the other — and in his mind lesser — Arab leaders. In his view, Egypt would set the pace and they should follow. The practical issue of how, or who, would represent the Palestinians was unresolved.

The United States also tried to communicate with the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) through various Arab intermediaries, since the government was prohibited by former U.S. commitments to Israel, as well as more recent legislation, from having direct contacts with the PLO. The result of these communications was confusion, as each Arab intermediary gave its own spin on the PLO position. Eventually Carter sought out a trusted American—Landrum Bolling, an educator and peace activist—to deal directly with PLO leader Yasser Arafat, but the result was not particularly encouraging, and came at a time when optimism about moving forward with the comprehensive approach was fading in Washington.

The main reason for the shift away from Carter's initial hope that progress could be made on a broad Arab-Israeli peace was the election in May 1977 of Menachem Begin as Prime Minister of Israel—an event unforeseen in Washington. Since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, American statesmen had only dealt with leaders of Israel's Labor Party—David Ben-Gurion, Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, and others—and Begin's Likud (formerly Herut) party was seen as an extremist remnant of Zionism's militant early days. No leading official in Washington at the time seemed to know Begin or his closest advisors. And when we began to read up on him and his views, the result was not encouraging.

Begin was clearly a man of strong convictions, especially about the integrity of all of the so-called "Land of Israel." He had been a member of the wall-to-wall governing coalition in Israel formed in 1967, but had resigned in 1970 when the government of Israel had formally acknowledged that UN Resolution 242 of November 1967 did, in fact, call for the withdrawal of Israeli forces on all fronts in exchange for peace. In short, if Israel were to make peace with Jordan and/or the Palestinians, it would be expected to relinquish all or most of the West Bank. Begin, who always referred to the West Bank as Judea and Samaria, and called the Palestinians the "Arabs of Eretz Israel," was adamantly opposed to such an interpretation, so he quit. Now he was prime minister and nothing suggested to us that his views had mellowed over the past seven years. As we prepared Carter for his first meeting with Begin, some of us were worried about what Begin's election meant for our comprehensive peace strategy.

Begin's first meeting with Carter on July 19, 1977, did not go well. Begin lectured us as if we were uneducated schoolchildren, showing us—Carter and the rest of the American diplomatic team—simplistic maps of the Middle East with all the Arab countries colored in red and tiny Israel standing out in blue as the only reliable democracy in the region. How, Begin seemed to be saying, could we ask him to make peace with such big and threatening (and probably pro-Soviet) neighbors? Begin told us there were no such people as Palestinians. If anyone had the right to be called Palestinian, it was the Israelis, stated the prime minister, since the land had been promised to them by God. (Moshe Dayan, Begin's foreign

minister, who, unlike Begin, had actually been born in Palestine, told us wryly that his identity as a Palestinian instead of an Israeli was news to him.)

In a private meeting during this visit, Begin asked Carter not to repeat his view that Israel should withdraw to the 1967 lines in return for peace, with only minor, mutually agreed modifications. Carter, in return, said that he wanted Begin to stop building more settlements in the Occupied Territories. He thought Begin had agreed, but within days of their meeting, Begin announced that new settlements would be built. Carter felt that Begin had reneged on his solemn word and never fully trusted him thereafter.

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Our initial hope for a comprehensive peace had never meant that each party to the conflict would necessarily march in lockstep toward a final agreement. We knew from the outset that the substantive issues between Egypt and Israel were likely to be more easily resolved than the tangled problems of the West Bank, Jerusalem, Palestinian refugee rights, and so forth. It was also clear that Sadat was motivated by his desire for a new strategic relationship with the United States in a way that Syria's Hafez Al-Assad was not. If in the new Begin period we still had hope that something of a comprehensive framework could be preserved, it would have to be based on a fairly general set of common principles—that is, commitment to UN Resolution 242, plus a recognition of some form of Palestinian rights, along with security and recognition for all parties.

While the State Department still felt that some form of initial multilateral conference should be held to launch the negotiating process, even there it was not expected that the actual negotiation would take place in Geneva. Incidentally, the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference was close to what we thought was possible—an initial plenary session with all the leaders, including non-PLO Palestinians, followed by a series of bilateral and multilateral committee meetings to begin working on specific parts of an agreement. It was with this model in mind that Vance, in early October 1977, sought and received Soviet agreement for the convening of a conference by the end of the year, setting off a full-scale crisis with Israel and its supporters in the United States over our alleged failure to consult with them.

October–November 1977 was the timeframe when we began to realize that our initial plan was in real trouble and that both Sadat and Begin were beginning to look for alternatives. We knew that in September Moshe Dayan had met in Morocco with an emissary of Sadat's, but the Morocco meeting did not seem to have led anywhere. Later in October, Sadat told us that he had an idea of calling for a big conference of all the parties, including Arafat, in Jerusalem. We could

not imagine Begin saying yes to anything of the sort and tried to persuade Sadat to stick to the original plan of holding an initial meeting in Geneva with an Arab delegation that would include non-PLO Palestinians chosen by the PLO.

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Around this time, we began to ask ourselves if we had been wrong in thinking that Sadat would not be prepared to make a separate peace with Israel. We had felt, based on what he had told us, that Sadat would insist on some “cover” in the form of verbal commitments to a comprehensive peace and to

something for the Palestinians so as to make Egypt’s peace with Israel palatable domestically in Egypt and across the Arab World. However, we had clearly underestimated the degree of animosity between Sadat and Al-Assad, and as the prospect of a Geneva meeting came nearer, Sadat’s fear of being constrained, or “overbid” by a more hardline Syrian delegation became more of an issue.

Then, in early November, Sadat surprised us, and many of his closest colleagues, by saying publicly that he would go to Jerusalem to meet with the Israelis himself to prove that he was sincere in his quest for peace. And within weeks, there he was, smiling, embracing his former enemies, and acting as if peace was at hand. The reaction in much of the Arab World was one of shock, if not horror. In Washington, we were both pleased and puzzled—did Sadat have a sequel in mind? He seemed to think that Begin would reciprocate his generous gesture by returning all occupied Arab land to its owners with no further haggling—or at least that is what he told us should happen.

In Washington we realized within weeks that we had to reassess our core assumptions. Sadat was clearly impatient and wanted to move quickly. We were still not sure how much “cover” he would insist on to disguise what was likely to look very much like a “separate peace.” We had our own reasons to hope for more than just a bilateral Egyptian–Israeli agreement, but we also did not feel that we could tell Sadat to hold out for an increasingly unrealistic comprehensive, or even semi-comprehensive, framework.

From a Comprehensive to a Separate Peace Process

It has become common in recent assessments of the Camp David Accords to argue that the United States should have pressed harder for its original plan of bringing on board the Palestinians or Jordanians, if not also the Syrians. Or, the argument goes, if they could not be persuaded to join the actual Camp David negotiations, there should at least have been some clear incentives provided for other Arab leaders and organizations to join the negotiating process in due course. This assessment is outlined in books like Rashid Khalidi’s *Brokers of Deceit*, Jørgen Jensehaugen’s *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, Seth

Anziska's *Preventing Palestine*, and Nathan Thrall's *The Only Language They Understand*. The core argument of these books often comes down to a judgment that the United States could have, and should have, pressed Begin harder for concessions. I have some sympathy for this view, since I agree that it was primarily Begin's intransigence on the issue of territorial concessions in the West Bank that was the biggest obstacle to a broader peace. Yet, there is no clear answer to the question of whether we could have gotten more had we tried harder. In practical terms, I do not think Carter could have pushed Begin much more than he did. Carter was not, after all, a president with an overwhelming degree of support, even within his own party.

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My impression is that Carter early in 1978 came to realize that a comprehensive peace was unreachable in the near future. I think he came to this conclusion for several reasons. First, Begin was difficult to deal with and showed no signs of budging on the key issues of the meaning of UN Resolution 242 (that is, Israel's obligation to withdraw from all or most of the territories occupied in 1967 in return for Arab commitments to peace, recognition of Israel, and security) or of the need to provide Sadat with some cover for the criticism and pressure he was experiencing in the Arab World due to his peace overtures to Israel. Carter also had seen no real indications that Al-Assad or Arafat were ready to take any moderate moves to open the way for their eventual participation in negotiations. When specifically asked in September 1977 if he could accept UN Resolution 242 with a reservation that it did not address the Palestinian issue, Arafat said that he could not do so, blaming pressure from Syria. Finally, King Hussein of Jordan was no more of an acceptable party to negotiations over the West Bank or Jerusalem, in Begin's eyes, than was Arafat. As such, there was not much rationale for Carter to cling to his initial idea of a comprehensive negotiating framework.

Early in 1978, Carter met with Sadat at Camp David. The two spent a couple of days alone, and then were joined by their advisors. I was present when they summarized their private discussions and had the sense that Carter had reached two conclusions from his private talks with Sadat. My first impression was that Carter believed Sadat was frustrated by the slow pace of events and was insisting on a U.S. initiative; and, second, that Carter felt Sadat was not asking for much more than the most modest of "fig leaves" as cover for what was bound to look like a separate Israeli-Egyptian peace. Carter himself seemed to also show impatience with the slow pace of diplomacy.

By the summer of 1978, Carter was ready to push forward on his new idea of a three-way summit meeting at Camp David with Begin and Sadat to begin on September 5 of that year. In preparation for the meeting, we wrote a long paper

for him on the issue of “linkage,” arguing that Sadat would want some degree of linkage between a bilateral Israeli–Egyptian agreement and something for the Palestinians. In contrast, we argued, Begin would resist any such linkage, insisting that an Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty would have to stand firmly on its own foundation and not be made dependent upon progress on any other front. One of Carter’s biggest challenges, we wrote, would be to find the balance between too much and too little linkage.

Carter read the paper and told us that he thought we were wrong. We were going to get an Egyptian–Israeli agreement out of the summit as well as a statement of principles that would address the Palestinian issue. And he made it clear that he

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was counting on the historical drama of the summit to get each of the other leaders to rise to the occasion and show evidence of statesmanship. Carter said he thought the whole process would take just a few days. I recall thinking that he was about to be in for a big surprise.

Camp David: The Accords That Changed a Generation

Indeed, the summit did not go quickly or smoothly. Sadat and Begin did not trust one another. Begin was unwilling to make any concessions whatsoever on the Palestinian issue and also insisted that the Israeli settlements in Sinai should remain under Israeli control. We were fairly sure that this latter demand would be bargained away but Begin’s initial stance on Israeli settlements in Sinai was enough to convince Sadat that Begin had no intention to make peace.

Over the thirteen days of the summit, Carter devoted most of his time to the drafting of the Egyptian–Israeli peace framework. The rest of us on the U.S. team were left to develop the broader framework, which went through some twenty versions, and involved complex and virtually incomprehensible language designed to disguise the profound differences between the Israeli and Egyptian delegations. For example, Egypt wanted explicit mention of the Palestinian right of self-determination and reference to Israel’s obligation to withdraw from the Occupied Territories in exchange for peace, as called for in UN Resolution 242. Begin and his team would have none of this, finally agreeing to much vaguer and non-binding language that implied Palestinians would have a role in determining their own future, and that all the principles of UN Resolution 242 could form the basis for negotiations between Israel and its other Arab neighbors, but without specifying withdrawal as one of those principles.

By September 17, 1978, there were just a few remaining issues, so late at night Carter met with Begin to try to resolve them. Begin finally agreed to let the Knesset vote on whether or not to abandon the settlements in Sinai, knowing that it would if that was the price of peace with Egypt and then had a long and inconclusive

discussion with Carter about freezing settlement activity on the West Bank. Carter insisted on a freeze that would last for up to a year in order to give Palestinians and/or Jordanians an incentive to join the negotiations. For Begin, this looked all too much like the dreaded “linkage” that he was determined to avoid. He finally said something like, “I will give my answer in writing tomorrow.”

Carter apparently understood this as meaning that he would get the answer that he, Carter, wanted from Begin in writing the next day. The more cautious Vance told me as the meeting broke up that it was still not clear how long a settlement freeze Begin would agree to, and that we needed to get that clarified the next day. As it turned out, we never got the clarification that we hoped for on the last day of Camp David. Instead a huge argument erupted over how the issue of Jerusalem would be addressed in the final document. Begin wanted no mention; Sadat wanted to make it clear that East Jerusalem was occupied territory and should be returned to the Arabs. Sadat also wanted Carter to reiterate the longstanding U.S. position that the future of Jerusalem could not be decided by Israeli unilateral action and was an appropriate topic for future negotiations.

For a while it looked as if the whole summit might fall apart over this issue, and that fear kept us from focusing on the unresolved settlement freeze issue. Indeed, Begin did send a letter stating his views, saying that Israel did not plan to build more settlements in Judea and Samaria during the three months in which the final peace treaty with Egypt would be negotiated. Carter read the letter, told us it was not what Begin had promised him the previous night, and said that we should insist on a new letter from Begin. Then he turned his attention back to the Jerusalem uproar.

Late on the thirteenth day, Carter met with Sadat and told him what the final agreement would consist of. Carter included the supposed concession that Begin would not build more settlements in the West Bank for a period of about one year, giving the Palestinians and the Jordanians a chance to join the negotiations without seeing the outcome visibly compromised by ongoing Israeli settlement activity. Sadat was hardly a stickler for detail. Carter had told him he had done all he could to get a good agreement and Sadat accepted his word. It turned out, of course, that the next day Begin sent us the exact same letter on settlements that Carter had rejected. However, by then the Camp David Accords had been formally signed at a highly publicized White House ceremony.

At the time, I thought the failure to get a clear commitment from Begin on the issue of freezing settlements was a serious mistake, and it made us look both weak and incompetent when Begin refused to budge. I now think there was another mistake made on the American side at Camp David. To provide Sadat with the cover that we felt he needed, and to keep up at least a slight hope of broadening the negotiating process beyond the bilateral Egyptian–Israeli front,

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we had engaged in a long and complex negotiation with Israelis and Egyptians in an effort to lay out a roadmap for the Jordanians and Palestinians to join the negotiations. In early drafts, we had tried to introduce a formula that would make it clear the key elements of UN Resolution 242, “peace for withdrawal” on each front of the conflict would be the basis for any negotiated agreement. Begin succeeded in watering this down to a vague formula that said little more than that UN Resolution 242 would be a basis for negotiations—but not necessarily for an agreement. It may not sound like much of a difference, but for Begin it meant that he had made no commitment to ever return the West Bank to anyone. Sadat’s professional staff all understood these nuances, but Sadat himself did not pay much attention, counting on Carter to get him the best deal possible.

When it became clear that Begin would not budge on these issues, I now think we should have accepted the fact that we did not have a credible plan for anything beyond the Egyptian–Israeli peace, which had its own intrinsic value and its own justifiable purpose. We should have simply said in the preamble to the Egyptian–Israeli framework agreement that all of the parties remained committed to the idea of a comprehensive peace and that at some point in the future negotiations based on UN Resolution 242 should be organized with the participation of the relevant parties. Of course, the other Arab parties would have denounced the accords as nothing more than a plan for a separate Egyptian–Israeli peace, but they said that in any event.

Also had we proceeded with what we really had, which was only a framework for an Egyptian–Israeli peace, then other Arab leaders would not have been able to point to a document which seemed to assign them specific roles in future negotiations about which they had never been consulted. I am not sure that it would have made much difference in the end, but it would have saved us a lot of time and energy trying to explain to skeptical Arab audiences that we had really achieved much more on their behalf than they were seeing in the unclear text of the Camp David Accords.

Of course, the Camp David Accords did not lead immediately to an Egyptian–Israeli treaty. It took another six months of difficult diplomacy, including a last-ditch trip by Carter to the Middle East in early 1979. By then developments in the region were alarming in the extreme. Iran was caught up in revolution and the Shah had fled his country. Islamic revolution was in the ascendant and Begin was getting cold feet about making peace with an Arab leader who might face the same fate as the Shah. Sadat likewise could not ignore developments beyond his borders. The new Iranian regime was intensely anti-Israeli and was quick to

accuse Sadat of selling out the Palestinians. In the end, neither Sadat nor Carter was prepared to give up on the idea of a peace agreement. Begin as usual played his hand skillfully, but in the end Begin also agreed to the final peace terms.

Looking Back Forty Years On

The question still hangs over the Egyptian–Israeli agreement: could it have turned out differently and better for the overall prospects of regional peace? I have no clear answer. I also have no apology for working hard on behalf of Egyptian–Israeli peace. The result of these efforts was a historic agreement that served the interests of both countries and of the United States. Of course, I would have liked to have seen a broader framework that could have included the other Arab parties as well. Yet, Carter did not have the clout to force concessions from Begin. Carter had no voting base or support in the United States which would have allowed him to go to bat for the Palestinians, to say nothing of the Syrians. And by 1979 with the region in tumult, there was a great fear that if the bilateral treaty were not signed soon, it might never be signed.

In conclusion, I share the obvious frustration of those who think that Camp David and its aftermath complicated the chances for an overall peace in the Middle East. I did not believe that the framework for Palestinian autonomy would lead anywhere, and in the summer of 1979, I left the administration, feeling that I had done all that I could to advance U.S. interests in the region. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, hoping to annihilate the PLO and redraw the map of the Middle East, I acknowledged the Israeli action was, in part, an unintended consequence of Egypt having made a separate peace. Israel—and especially its ambitious Defense Minister Ariel Sharon—would have been much more reluctant to engage in such an audacious military adventure were Egypt still a belligerent.

Yet, I also think that Sadat had a clear sense that peace with Israel was a necessity. Egypt could not count on support from a declining Soviet Union and Sadat knew firsthand that war is incredibly costly and that the 1973 “victory” had been a near defeat. So, Egypt made peace with Israel to put an end to its preoccupation with war and in order to open the door to a new relationship with the United States and other Western countries. It is hard for anyone to say that Sadat was wrong to pursue his country’s national interests as he saw them. I think that Carter eventually came to that same realization. Perhaps had Carter been re-elected he would have tried to do more for the Palestinians, but in the spring of 1979, Carter had to make a decision. Should he push forward with a bilateral Egyptian–Israeli peace, or put everything on hold until the political storms of the Middle East had passed and perhaps a new leader in Israel would show more flexibility in addressing the overall regional conflict in a constructive way? Under these circumstances, I think now, and I thought at the time, that Carter made the right decision in pushing forward with the Egyptian–Israeli peace agreement. (R)