

# THE PEACEMAKERS' WAR

*After forty years, the Camp David summit continues to be the seminal shaper of the modern Middle East. However, it was an effort fraught with challenges for the peacemakers that could have resulted in its collapse*

*By Bahgat Korany*

For a well-rounded analysis of such a transformative event as Camp David, it is important to reread memoirs and listen closely to those who have actually shaped the course of history. However, it is equally important to bring in detached analysts to look back and assess its wider impact forty years after the event. Repeated assertions about the “New Middle East,” even if sometimes exaggerated, attract attention to the importance of shunning static analysis of the region. In the few studies that have avoided such analysis, war has figured prominently as a means of change. This is logical, since war—old (between states) or new (within states)—in this conflict-ridden region is dominant.

Statistics have it that the Middle East constitutes 5.2 percent of the world population but has contributed over 17 percent of the globe’s violent conflict zones over the last ten years—more than three times as much as its population percentage. While it might be compelling to ask why there is this discrepancy between population and conflict, the more important question is how to further peace efforts in the region.

Yet, peacemaking as a means of change—though rare in the Middle East context—does exist, as exemplified by the Camp David Accords. While the accords have proved to be controversial both when they were signed forty years ago and today in such texts as Seth Anziska’s *Preventing Palestine*, the 1978 accords initiated by the Jimmy Carter administration are an example of transformative peacemaking in praxis.

Washington felt obliged, following Anwar Sadat’s 1977 visit to Jerusalem, to mobilize huge resources at the highest level in September 1978 to bring the Egyptians and Israelis together. Against most expectations, the Camp David summit succeeded, and building upon these accords Carter, through rushed shuttle diplomacy, managed to bring about the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty that was signed six months later.



An indicator of the importance and impact of Camp David is the degree of its coverage in the published memoirs of the period, not only by Israelis and Egyptians but also by Americans. As my counting of explicit references indicates, Carter devotes ninety-two pages of his memoirs *Keeping Faith* (1982) to Camp David; his secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, sixty-one pages in his book *Hard Choices* (1983); and Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, seventy-seven pages in *Power and Principle* (1983). Even First Lady Rosalynn Carter devotes her thirty-five-page chapter 9 to "Summit at Camp David" in her autobiography *First Lady from Plains* (1984). William Quandt, an academic but at the time a National Security Council staffer, devotes an excellent analysis to the event in his *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (1986 and 2015), as does journalist Lawrence Wright in *Thirteen Days in September* (2014).

△ Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski play a game of chess at Camp David, Sept. 9, 1978. *The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum*

The famed conference appears throughout Sadat's autobiography, *In Search of Identity* (1978), referring frequently to his 1977 "sacred mission" to Jerusalem. Camp David is also found in many volumes by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, acting Egyptian foreign minister at the time and later secretary-general of the United Nations. Former secretary-general of the League of Arab States, Nabil Elaraby,

as well as the current secretary-general, Ahmed Aboul Gheit—both of whom were Camp David participants and later Egypt’s foreign ministers—devote long chapters to the event. Egypt’s foreign minister in 1978 Mohamed Ibrahim Kamel (who resigned his post in protest after the accords had been signed) devotes his own book to Camp David, revealingly titled *Lost Peace* (1987). Israel’s then-foreign minister, Moshe Dayan, titled his personal memoir *Breakthrough* (1981) in reference to Camp David and Israel’s defense minister of the time, Ezer Weizman, called his own memoirs *The Battle for Peace* (1981).

Meanwhile, Arab political and media pundits have written countless volumes on the conference and the resulting accords, much of which is intensely judgmental, both for and against what happened at Camp David. This was to be expected and attests to the significance of the accords.

Firstly, in the controversial debate about the “New Middle East” and regional transformation generally, both historians and theorists of international relations emphasize the impact of wars. The Camp David Accords, however, provide an alternative case where peacemaking is a milestone and a threshold for transformation. As known, the Arab–Israeli conflict and its many destructive wars have been a characteristic prism in analyzing the Middle East. The Camp David Accords reversed this one-sided analytical process.

Secondly, these peacemaking efforts, however, were neither smooth nor easily achieved. Contrary to expectations, Sadat’s 1977 visit to Jerusalem led to a series of meetings but no settlement and the frustrating deadlock continued. The Camp David conference was intended then to save the peace process and was

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planned for two or three days. It continued for thirteen intense days with the Egyptian and Israeli delegations packing up more than once to quit the conference before they could reach an agreement. In fact, William Quandt was advised on day eleven to prepare a draft to be read at Congress on why Camp David failed! As we know now, Camp David succeeded against all odds . . . but at a cost. Sadat lost his foreign minister

who resigned on the eve of signing the accords—the second foreign minister to resign over this issue. Sadat was, then, assassinated three years later by Islamists who were against Camp David. We can give multiple examples but the point is clear; peacemaking can be as challenging and costly as war-making.

### **Initiating the Historical Process**

The official announcement of the trilateral summit came from Washington on Tuesday, August 8, 1978, right after Secretary of State Cyrus Vance had secured

the acceptance of Prime Minister Menachem Begin and President Sadat during private meetings in Jerusalem and Alexandria on August 6 and 7, respectively.

Yet, the United States' decision to hold the meeting had been in the making since January 1978. It was conceived to break the stalemate that had characterized Egyptian–Israeli communications, even after Sadat's mission to Jerusalem in November 1977—a stalemate that culminated in the fiasco of the Egypt–Israel summit in Ismailia in December 1977. The first time the idea for a trilateral summit was mentioned between Carter and any of his staff was on January 20, 1978. What Zbigniew Brzezinski jotted in his journal on that day reveals the administration's motivation behind such high-level and intense diplomatic involvement as would be required from the coming Camp David conference. Brzezinski wrote, "I think it [the trilateral conference] might help the negotiating process and it certainly would be a very major accomplishment for the President if he were to generate some genuine progress through such a direct meeting in which he would be playing the central role."

The final decision to turn the idea of a trilateral summit into concrete action was made by Carter after the failure of the Israeli and Egyptian foreign ministers' conference at Leeds Castle, England in July, 1978.

On July 20, Carter formally reiterated the idea of a conference at a breakfast with Brzezinski, but was still debating its venue. The intention was to have "a dramatic meeting," and Morocco seemed to be a good possible location. The reasons for this, Brzezinski wrote in his journal, were, "The fact that [King] Hassan needs a boost, that he had secret dealings with the Israelis, and that there are the precedents in Casablanca of Roosevelt and Churchill having attended a major and historically significant . . . meeting."

However, ten days later on July 30 at the Camp David retreat, a more detailed meeting on the location and the structure of the upcoming conference occurred in which Carter brought together Vice President Walter Mondale, Cyrus Vance, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, and Brzezinski, among others. That meeting resulted in Carter and his delegation turning away from the idea of holding the conference in Morocco and finalizing Camp David as the location for the meeting. Rosalynn Carter herself writes that at the July 30 Camp David meeting she was impressed with the idyllic surroundings of the presidential retreat, which she thought could help melt the tension between the Israelis and the Egyptians.

Besides its natural setting, Carter and his officials chose the president's retreat because Camp David provided all leaders with the necessary privacy and secrecy needed to pursue the peace negotiations. Carter personally believed that after Watergate, the presidency was being plagued by deliberate leaks, and every

functionary wished to be a “deep throat.” He hoped that given Camp David’s remoteness, there would be no leaks out of the summit.

In terms of organizing the upcoming meeting, Carter did not want to impose a time limit on the negotiations. “Our plans called for three days,” Carter wrote years later on the summit, “but we were willing to stay as long as a week if we were making good progress and success seemed attainable.”

Yet, despite Carter’s claims that he could have stayed longer than three days, his own officials including Vice President Mondale were uneasy with the president spending even three days away from the White House. Meanwhile, the Israeli

delegation believed Camp David would last only two days, and that nothing would come of it.

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Members of the Egyptian delegation accompanying Sadat were themselves divided. Some were concerned about a possible mobilization of the “Jewish lobby” leading to consensus between the Israeli and U.S. delegations to put pressure on Egypt.

Other members, including Sadat himself, believed in Carter’s friendship and good faith. In this case, the Camp David conference would be a good follow-up on Sadat’s 1977 visit and show to the world who was actually working for peace and who was obstructing it.

But like the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the conference ended up lasting thirteen days, with ups and downs, the quest for peace becoming akin to a movie thriller. Several times the Israelis felt a stalemate had been reached, and there were also times that the Egyptian delegation packed up to leave. Over the course of the thirteen days, Rosalynn Carter described the impact of this on-again, off-again diplomatic circus and the summit’s effect on a sleepless President Carter. An important lesson then from this conference is that the perils of peacemaking are as tenuous and nerve-racking as war-making.

### **The Perils of Peacemaking**

Each of the parties had its misgivings about the summit and approached it with caution. The Israelis feared it most. They suspected a trap by the Americans and Egyptians to sandwich them, either to get concessions or to blame Israel for the summit’s failure. Sources reported to Begin that Boutros-Ghali had said, “At Camp David Egypt will supply Israel with a very long rope and with that rope she can hang herself.” Carter’s meeting with the leaders of the Jewish community in the United States where Begin’s status was deteriorating underscored these fears.

The White House was worried about how failure at Camp David would be viewed by the American public. Administration officials were conscious of Carter's poor standing in the polls and feared that a failure at the Camp David summit would end all chances of his reelection.

The Egyptians were worried too. They felt they were in a no-win situation. Either Sadat was going to be pressured into giving the necessary concessions to get out of the stalemate, or he would have to admit to his countrymen and his fellow Arabs the error of his initial November 1977 decision to offer an olive branch and visit Jerusalem. Some members of the Egyptian delegation, apprehensive of close U.S.–Israeli relations, felt that Camp David could be a conference of one against two, mirroring the same fear some in the Israeli delegation had of a possible U.S.–Egypt gang-up on Israel.

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Given the complexity of the issues, the diversity of individual objectives and interests, and the type of relationships (both real and perceived) between the parties, the initial odds seemed pitted against success at Camp David. Since the atmosphere was expected to be tense, heads of delegations were urged to bring their wives along for needed support. Both Rosalynn Carter and Aliza Begin came, but Jehan Sadat had to stay with her grandson in a Paris hospital.

Yet, in spite of the initial fears of the different sides, the conference as we know ultimately succeeded. As a venue, Camp David was able to keep the delegations together until all sides signed the accords. These accords were two documents: A Framework for Peace in the Middle East (a general document concerning the establishment of Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza) and A Framework for the Conclusion of a Peace Treaty between Israel and Egypt. The Egyptian–Israeli treaty was much more of a specific and detailed document which resulted in the signing of a formal peace treaty in March 1979.

The summit succeeded for a number of reasons. The first reason was the style of seclusion and intense conversation held during the thirteen days, something that Prime Minister Begin dubbed as “a concentration camp de luxe.” In fact, the pressure was so acute that some participants feared one or more of the delegates might have a heart attack during the course of the talks. A second reason for Camp David's success was that the Egyptians and the Americans lowered their expectations that the final Camp David-inspired treaty would tangibly address the Palestinian issue and the status of Jerusalem. The Egyptian and American delegations both came to understand that other than the normalization of relations between Israel and Egypt and a return of Sinai to Egypt, the greater

issue of peace in Palestine would have to wait until later. The third reason for Camp David's success was the focused and tireless efforts of President Carter and the U.S. administration. The final agreement, for example, was based on

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an initial U.S. draft that was reworked twenty-three times. In fact, Camp David settles some of the controversies in international mediation theory about the role of the third party at summits like Camp David. We see that more important than the perceived impartiality of a mediating third party are the resources and pressure that this third party possesses and can apply to the negotiations.

The country most vulnerable to this third-party pressure, and whose signature was most crucial to the success of the Camp David Accords, was Sadat's Egypt. For instance, toward the end of the conference, Vance informed Carter that Sadat was packing up and ordering a helicopter to leave. Carter put on a tie and formal jacket—instead of the usual tee shirt—and explicitly threatened Sadat of the harmful impact on U.S.–Egyptian relations if ever he dared to leave. Sadat backed down.

### **From the Accords to Legal Obligations**

The Camp David framework was formalized in the legally binding Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty. This treaty was signed in Washington six months after the Camp David Accords on a breezy but sunny day in late March and was written, “in English, Arabic, and Hebrew languages, each text being equally authentic. In case of any divergence of interpretation, the English text will prevail.”

The text of the treaty is relatively short, nine articles in all. It has some annexes, including maps relating to lines of military withdrawal and demilitarization and the stationing of peacekeeping forces. The treaty also includes the exchange of five letters between Carter and Sadat, and between Carter and Begin regarding the establishment of full diplomatic relations between Egypt and Israel. Resident ambassadors were to be in place one month after the completion of the first stage of Israeli troop withdrawal, almost two years before the evacuation of the whole of Sinai.

The eight articles of Annex III are devoted to the gamut of bilateral relations other than military: diplomatic and consular (Article 1), economic and trade relations (Article 2), cultural relations (Article 3), freedom of movement (Article 4), cooperation for development and good neighbor relations (Article 5), and transportation and telecommunications (Article 6). It is important to stress that—as with the exchange of ambassadors—these multifaceted relations were supposed to be “normal,” that is, in full operation, after the

first stage of the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai. Article 5, item 6, is typical in this respect stating that, "Upon completion of the interim withdrawal, normal postal, telephone, telex, data facsimile, wireless and cable communications and television relay services by cable, radio and satellite shall be established between the two parties."

Of course, the establishment of full and normal relations in issues of "low" politics—such as trade and cultural exchanges rather than the "high" political realms of security issues and diplomatic affairs—was a principal Israeli demand from the start. And some of the items in Annex III reveal the organic link between "high" and "low" politics as envisioned by the treaty signers. For example, in item 3 of Article 6 we see that, "Egypt agrees that the use of [military] airfields left by Israel near El-Arish, Rafah, Ras el-Naqb and Sharm el-Sheikh shall be for civilian purposes only, including possible commercial use by all parties." The insistence here is not only on the demilitarization of Sinai but also on the non-military use of these airports. In addition, the phrase "commercial use by all parties" is of interest especially to Israel, given the airports' proximity to Israel itself. There is even in this annex a vision and a program for the development of future relations: as item 5 of the same article puts it, "The parties will reopen and maintain roads and railways between their countries and will consider further road and rail links. The parties further agree that a highway will be constructed and maintained between Egypt, Israel and Jordan near Eilat."

As such, the Israeli view of no separation between so-called political and non-political relations (or high and low politics) is respected internally and in full, and its stipulation is not limited to the annexes. This is why Article 3, item 3, of the treaty itself states, "The parties agree that the normal relationship established between them will include full recognition, diplomatic, economic and cultural relations, termination of economic boycotts and discriminatory barriers to the free movement of people and goods and will guarantee the mutual enjoyment by citizens of the due process of law."

While acknowledging the importance of low politics to operationalize normalization of relations, the treaty had, as its *raison d'être*, issues of diplomacy and security. It starts by giving satisfaction to some Palestinian demands about a just and comprehensive peace according to 1967 UN Security Council Resolution 242 and 1973 Resolution 338, and the treaty affirms that the conclusion of the Egyptian–Israel agreement was an important step in attaining the comprehensive peace and "the settlement of the Arab–Israeli conflict in all its aspects." Yet, in retrospect, these stipulations ring empty, and the treaty seems to have achieved prime strategic significance only for Israel. As Prime Minister Begin expressed in his speech opening the debate for approval of the treaty in the Knesset, "This treaty is very significant for



Israel because it is the first time Israel is signing since its establishment as an independent state. . .after five wars and 12,000 dead.”

Indeed, the treaty contains detailed military stipulations about withdrawal, position of troops, and demilitarization, and also provides guarantees specifically of U.S. intervention if the stipulations are not carried out. Importantly, there is no time limit specified. It seems to be an eternal treaty. Any possibility of revision is limited in scope, and is mentioned in Article 4/4 only, which reads, “The security arrangements provided for in paragraphs 1 and 2 of this Article may at the request of either party be reviewed and amended by mutual agreement of the Parties.” So the possibility of revision is limited to the security aspects (of prime importance to Israel) while the treaty’s other provisions seem to be excluded.

There is also an issue in the treaty of linkage with other treaties and organizations. Article 6/2 stipulates that “the Parties undertake to fulfill in good faith their

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obligations under this Treaty, without regard to action or inaction of any other party and independent of any instrument external to this Treaty.” As such, Egypt’s obligations under other treaties (for example, on Arab collective self-defense) are not to be respected if they affect in any way Egypt’s obligations under its agreement with Israel. In other words, Egypt has to make up its mind which is primary: its partnership with Israel or its fellowship with brother and sister Arabs.

Even more important to the entire process of negotiations and the final treaty was the *priority issue*. We see this issue in Article 4/5 which reads, “Subject to Article 103 of the United Nations Charter, in the event of a conflict between the obligations of the Parties under the present treaty or any of their other obligations, the obligations under this Treaty will be binding and implemented.” Thus, Egypt’s obligations toward Israel take precedence, in case of conflict, over all its other obligations. This is why Prime Minister Begin said in his speech to the Knesset that he and Foreign Minister Dayan considered the non-linkage and the priority items “rightly . . . the essence of the Treaty.” Indeed, Israel was so insistent on the priority issue that Article 4/4 even dictates future behavior, “The Parties undertake not to enter into any obligation in conflict with this Treaty.”

### **A Camp David Regional Order Confirmed**

From a legal point of view, the treaty is of course the most formal aspect of the

Egyptian–Israeli rapprochement, for it includes the obligations that are legally binding on the signatory parties. However, from a wider political point of view the treaty was an act of coronation and formalization of the Camp David Accords. The treaty then could not have happened without the conference.

However, in retrospect, the impact of Camp David goes far beyond this treaty, initiating what we can call the “Camp David regional order.” Despite several partial Arab–Israeli wars (for example, 1982, 2006, 2009), general regional war, with Egypt’s participation, has not taken place since 1973. In 1993, the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the Palestinians came to pass and then after a series of secret negotiations the Jordan–Israel peace treaty was announced in 1994. Even Damascus agreed to go through formal and public negotiations with Israel at the end of the 1990s. Moreover, Egypt’s and Israel’s relations have gone far beyond the “cold peace” stage. Presently, there is a tacit Egyptian–Israeli alliance in Sinai, with extensive intelligence coordination.

More unexpected in recent years has been the increasingly close relations between Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf countries, especially following U.S. President Donald Trump’s recognition in December 2017 of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Following the announcement, Bahrain sent a delegation to Israel, a visit that could not have happened without Riyadh’s approval. Moreover, rumors have it that during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s visit to Jordan in June 2018, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman attended the meeting. Moreover, this Israeli–Gulf connection is no longer a rumor as Netanyahu visited Oman in October 2018 and during the Israeli leader’s visit to the Arab nation, there was no attempt to discourage widespread international and Arab media coverage of the visit, including the meeting with the head of state, Sultan Qaboos. Such a visit is the latest demonstration—by no means the last—that despite its contestation at the time, the Camp David regional order is here to stay.

Indeed, forty years later, Israel’s regional partnership with many Arab countries seems not only a fact, a public one, but also multifaceted. It was Shimon Peres, former head of the Labor Party and president of Israel, who expressed Israel’s vision of the new Middle East when he said: “Peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors will create the environment of a basic reorganization of Middle East institutions. . . . It will change the face of the region and its ideological climate. . . .” Regional transformation is undeniably the characteristic of the Middle East forty years after the Camp David Accords. The Middle East is no longer primarily viewed through the prism of the Arab–Israeli wars, but more through debates on “nuclearized Iran” and/or the “New Wars” and fragile states such as Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. (R)