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"Sadat set standard for Arab ties with U.S., Israel"

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By Kenneth W. Stein

Twenty-five years ago tomorrow, in a 45-minute flight from Cairo to the outskirts of Tel Aviv, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat dramatically altered the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Simultaneously, he deepened Arab-state closeness and discomfort with the West. Sadat's outreach to Israel opened the way for additional agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors; however, his recognition of Israel did not bring the conflict to conclusion. His primary intention was to retrieve Egyptian land -- Sinai -- which was won by Israel in the June 1967 war.

When Henry Kissinger, Jimmy Carter and their successors nurtured Arab-Israeli agreements, no attention was paid to changing Arab public disdain for Israel as part of the negotiating package. Likewise, no insistence was made to stop Israeli settlement activities. In essence, American foreign policy was more interested in getting the deals done than in controlling potential deal breakers. Not until 2001 did an American president officially lay out the geographic framework for a Palestinian-Israeli two-state solution to the conflict.

A quarter-century ago, Palestinians, Israelis and the rest of the Arab world were not ready for a two-state solution. For that matter, Sadat's trip to Jerusalem was singularly aimed at restoring Washington's focus on providing for Egypt's territorial requirements. Sadat did not like the Carter administration's fixation with a comprehensive peace; that induced delay by recalcitrant Arab peers such as the Syrians, Jordanians or Palestinians. Keeping American diplomacy aimed on Sinai's liberation was his sole objective.

In front of Washington, Sadat dangled the unbelievable prize of weaning Egypt from the Soviet Union. At the height of the Cold War, how could any American administration not salivate at such an opportunity? In playing to Israel's most cherished dreams of recognition and full normalization, Sadat and his successor, Hosni Mubarak, reluctantly provided Israel with contractual recognition but kept it devoid of substantive normalization -- hence, a cold peace.

Sadat paid the ultimate price when he was assassinated in October 1981; the ostensible reason given by his killer was Sadat's acceptance of

the Jewish state's presence in the middle of the Arab-Muslim Middle East. Egypt as a country also paid a heavy price of suffering a decade-long pariah status from the Arab world: Sadat's abandonment of pan-Arab unity against Israel was touted as the supreme blasphemous act.

Yet, Sadat's policies set the standard for future Arab state relationships with the United States and Israel. He realized he could not make or force U.S. abandonment of its support for Israel. Instead, he interposed Egypt in the special U.S.-Israeli relationship. After 1977, American foreign policy traveled a parallel path in dealing with Israel: continued support for its qualitative strategic edge over any array of Arab adversaries, but regular disagreement with Israel about management of the other territories (Gaza, the West Bank, Golan and East Jerusalem) that were also won in the June 1967 war.

By mooring Egypt's economic future to the United States, Sadat made it acceptable for the American people to embrace an Arab leader. A quarter-century later, Egypt has all of Sinai under its sovereignty, a huge annual economic and military assistance package from Washington, much of its debt forgiven for its support of the 1991 coalition that drove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, and its place at the center of inter-Arab politics restored. Last week, Mubarak persuaded Syria to vote for the U.N. resolution reintroducing inspectors into Iraq while it persuaded, at least for the time being, Iraq's Saddam Hussein to allow U.N. inspectors to check for the elusive weapons of mass destruction.

An unforeseen result of Sadat's initiative brought Arab states uncomfortably closer to the United States and more quickly to the adoption of Western norms of international and political behavior. Events in the Persian Gulf in the late 1970s and 1980s, the end of the Cold War, the technological revolution, globalization, the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, and Saddam Hussein's actions catalyzed cultural proximities and deepened American physical involvement in the Middle East.

When the confrontation with Iraq concludes, additional intimacy will be generated, with inevitable socio-cultural consequences, unexpected economic outcomes and political implications. A new map of the Middle East will not likely be drawn; new internal configurations of Arab states may be anticipated.

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