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"Twenty Years After Camp David: A Look Back into the Future"

By Kenneth W. Stein

With suddenness, Egyptian President Sadat did the unexpected. On November 19, 1977, he flew to Israel. Speaking from the Knesset podium with Herzl's picture behind him, he accepted Israel as a reality. He told an attentive world that if Israelis wanted peace, they had to withdraw from all of the territories taken in the June 1967 Middle East war.

Sadat's primary goal was the return of Sinai to Egyptian sovereignty. That had been his objective since going to war in October 1973. Half of it was returned via diplomacy, but the process of getting it all was stalled.

During Carter's first year in office, he tried to resolve the Israeli conflict with bare fists not velvet gloves, in public view, not behind closed diplomatic doors. Those efforts frustrated, shoved, threatened, befriended, and alienated Arabs and Israelis alike. After Kissinger's successful step-by-step diplomacy, Carter tried to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict in a comprehensive manner. He invited the Russians to be co-conveners at a Middle East conference and defined a way for low level PLO members to be part of a unified Arab delegation.

Though impressed with Carter's commitment. Sadat grew impatient with the details involved in arranging for a conference and especially the dilly-dallying of his Arab contemporaries. In going to Jerusalem he wanted to create diplomatic momentum.

Five weeks later, on Christmas day, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin made a return visit to Egypt. He brought with him a proposal for Palestinian autonomy. Begin shifted the focus. He wanted to exchange Sinai for the right of the Palestinians to have self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Several dozen areas of Palestinian municipal prerogatives were to be exchanged for a peace treaty with the most powerful Arab state. Judea and Samaria would not be put under a foreign sovereignty.

In an angry reaction to Begin's visit and offer, Sadat told the American ambassador in Cairo, "This was the most insulting meeting. He

was my guest so I had to be polite to him, but don't ever expect me to talk to him again. I will talk to the Americans, but not to him, because he's a shop keeper-- a nickel and dime here and there. He has these little proposals about self-rule and so forth. I just offered him peace and no more war. I've gone to Jerusalem, and he comes here, and he gives me this lousy piece of paper."

That visit proved that Begin and Sadat could not make substantive progress. Sadat wanted Begin to withdraw from Sinai, but Begin was in no hurry. They talked passed each other. Their personalities clashed. There was no chemistry between them. Begin the lawyer, the man of detail; Sadat the president, interested in the grand gesture.

During the next eight months no formal agreement was reached between them. Carter, his comprehensive peace idea thrown off course, remained determined to find an Egyptian-Israeli agreement. Carter invited Sadat and Begin to the presidential retreat at Camp David. Engineer, wordsmith and problem solver that he was, Carter believed that he could put these square political leaders into the same diplomatic round hole. He did that in September 1978.

The Camp David Accords were not perfect. One part outlined the contents of a future Egyptian-Israeli treaty relationship, the second was a fleshed-out version of Begin's autonomy plan. Disagreements and distrust that pre-dated the Camp David Accords were not removed in document signing ceremonies. Bad feelings carried over to the definition of their subsequent non-belligerent relationship. In his memoirs, Carter admitted that one of his mistakes at Camp David was allowing Sadat to persuade him that he could speak on behalf of Jordan and the Palestinians.

Then when all avenues of additional progress failed, Carter gambled with a brief presidential trip to Egypt and Israel, tying-up the last loose ends for the March 1979 Egyptian-Israeli Peace treaty. It was vintage Carter; he had faith in his ability to solve the problem and knowledge that he was dealing with two leaders who wanted to make a deal. Subsequent further progress in Arab-Israeli negotiations stalled because of disagreements over the definition of Palestinian autonomy, the building and expansion of Israeli settlements, and America's Middle East focus aimed at events in and around the Persian Gulf. But the process of separating Palestinians from Israelis was set in motion; it was upheld in the 1993 Oslo Accords.

For the United States in the 1970s, Washington was helping two very strong political leaders who knew what they wanted. Twenty years

after Camp David, in order to achieve diplomatic progress, the U.S. has to persuade weaker political leaders. Arafat and Netanyahu are more sure of what they do not want than what they require. Both understand compromise but only in so far as it relates to their personal power and continuation in office. Rather than alienating opponents and standing on principles, each specializes in political expediency. Both are masters at making compromises of temporary convenience. Also, there is an absence of dedicated and determined leadership at the White House. If there is political will and political courage, it is aimed at domestic affairs.

No matter how much he alienated Israelis, American Jews, or Arabs, Jimmy Carter's presidential contribution to winding down the Arab-Israeli conflict was unprecedented. In foreign policy matters, the Oval Office still has enormous political clout. It is sitting there waiting to be fully used. The Camp David Accords are a vivid reminder of what can be done when there are leaders who want to make a deal for the next generation and not just satisfy either personal needs, the next succession, or a future election.

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