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“ 25 Years Later: Revisiting the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty”
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Do you remember where you were when the clasping of hands took place on the White House lawn? Perhaps you were watching the news in your kitchen, preparing dinner while your children played with blocks on the floor. Perhaps you cheered with other Atlantans at a community-wide celebration at The Temple.

Wherever you were, it is remarkable that after a quarter century, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty remains intact.

A multitude of compelling events should have made the treaty break by now. But preservation of national interests—the very cause for the initial negotiations and agreement—has kept Egypt and Israel from sliding uncontrollably toward another war. Despite the tension, anger, mistrust and cultural distance that have characterized the relationship between these countries, scrapping the treaty is not an option.

The Players

We can credit then Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin for sacrificing core ideologies to promote their respective national interests.

Each understood the absolute necessity to remain politically and economically tethered to Washington. Both benefited from the American connection and from President Jimmy Carter’s dogged belief that an agreement between their two nations, no matter how flawed, was better than no agreement at all.

Prodding all three nations forward was American Cold War competition with the Soviet Union where the common strategic interest was the long-term reduction of Soviet presence in the Middle East.

If Sadat and Begin were to look at the Middle East today, they probably would not believe that the treaty they signed—after excruciating negotiations and considered not only an aberration but an abomination by virtually every Arab state—is now accepted almost as routine.

Neither of them would have predicted the region’s current state of affairs or the changes that have affected the region; the end of the Cold War; the Arab world’s collective helplessness and despair; the strong security relationships between a dozen or more Arab states and the United States and other Western powers; an American war on terrorism focused in

large measure in the Middle East; an Israeli gross domestic product of more than \$100 billion; dissipated Arab oil revenues; Arafat clinging to power; and an American foreign policy of no longer tip-toeing around the Arab world.

Sadat had to entice the United States into negotiating between Egypt and Israel. Today, the Arab world is confronted with a physical American presence that Sadat would not recognize and the rest of the Arab world would not have anticipated.

Through hostile times, vitriolic exchanges and dramatic regional and international changes, Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, and seven Israeli prime ministers have sustained the treaty. We can credit four U.S. presidents for maintaining the Egyptian-Israeli relationship with varying degrees of commitment and for choreographing, supporting and underwriting additional Arab-Israeli agreements.

Peace with Washington

It took 16 months after Sadat's visit to Israel in November 1977 for the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty to be signed on March 26, 1979, on the White House lawn. The treaty contained nine articles, a military annex and a Sinai withdrawal schedule, along with Israel's requirement that it take precedent over any and all other Egyptian diplomatic commitments.

It was the fourth agreement Egypt and Israel signed since the end of the October 1973 War. After Egypt and Arab allies participated in the June 1967 and October 1973 wars, Israel insisted that Egypt scrap its collective defense commitment to support another Arab state that might be in conflict with Israel.

Agreement about the proposed but stillborn Palestinian autonomy talks were contained in a Carter letter to Sadat and Begin. In a separate Israel-U.S. Memorandum of Agreement, the United States spelled out its commitments to Israel in case the treaty were violated. It enumerated explicit future military assistance, economic aid and oil supply to Israel.

Egypt and Israel interpreted the treaty differently. In the months after the October 1973 War, Sadat told his chief of staff that "Egypt was making peace with the United States, not Israel."

His country's primary objective in reaching an agreement with Israel was the return of the Sinai and—secondarily—Israel's full withdrawal from the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jerusalem and the Golan Heights taken after Israel was surrounded in June 1967.

For Egypt, the treaty was an interim agreement before full normalization

with Israel could be contemplated. Sadat knew that Israel would not easily relinquish the other territories, but that neither Syria, Jordan, nor the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) were prepared to recognize Israel.

Sadat obtained the Sinai Desert and American support without it ever being Cairo's intention to embrace Israel. Cairo's operative policy vis a vis Israel was to do just enough in its treaty relationship to assure the flow of American economic and military aid to Egypt.

Egyptian leaders were highly pragmatic. Sadat and Mubarak were more concerned with meeting the water, food and infrastructure needs of a huge Egyptian population than in promoting tourism to Israel. A foreboding abyss of domestic implosion kept Egypt from channeling sparse resources toward war preparation with Israel. Egypt had to be more concerned with its relations with African states astride the precious water source of the Nile than tune to a warm embrace of Israel.

Israel did not fully comprehend that Egypt's priority at that time—and in the future—would be more concerned with its relations with the Arab and Islamic world than in making its peace with Israel a warm and cordial.

While Israeli leaders remained constantly skeptical of Egypt's true intentions, they embraced Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and the treaty as breaking psychological barrier with the Arab world. They saw it as the beginning of the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict and of the realization of Israel's legitimacy as a Jewish state in the middle of the Moslem heartland.

The effect of taking Egypt out of the Arab-Israeli military conflict with Israel was a crucial strategic success. Moreover, Israeli leaders felt that a peace with Egypt meant that Israel could have its way with neighbors populating the territories, annexing the Golan Heights, and building voraciously in and around Jerusalem.

Egypt's Evaporating Dominance

Ten years after Sadat's Jerusalem visit, Palestinians in the territories rebelled in their first uprising against Israeli control. In retrospect, Sadat's treaty forced Israel to consider how to accommodate the Palestinians politically, a process that is still unfolding. Egyptian officials made it abundantly clear that the relations between Cairo and Israel would not reach a stage of full normalization—quantitatively and qualitatively—unless a comprehensive settlement of the Middle East crisis materialized.

For Cairo this definition remains Israeli withdrawal from all the territories taken in the June 1967 war and the establishment of an independent

Palestinian state.

Almost immediately after the 1979 treaty was signed, a series of positive exchanges occurred between high-ranking Egyptian and Israeli officials.

Sadat wanted to show to Washington that his commitment to his treaty with Israel was sincere. After Israel bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor in June 1981—three days after a Begin-Sadat summit—Egyptian-Israeli cultural, trade, tourist, and commercial relations were put into a deep freeze. Other events unfolded which created a negative atmosphere in Egyptian-Israeli relations: Begin's re-election as prime minister in June 1981; Sadat's assassination in October of the same year; Israel's invasion of Lebanon in June 1982; the bombing of PLO headquarters in Tunis in 1986; the expansion of settlements; and the outbreak of the 1987 Intifada.

Israel pursued a security axiom toward the rest of the Arab world by implementing their twist on the "golden Rule"—to do unto others before they do unto you.

For Israel, the peace treaty essentially ended the threat of Egyptian participation in a future war with Israel. A cold peace it remained; the treaty lacked substance.

Israel's former Air Force Major General David Ivri said in 1993 that the "peace with Egypt is not a peace, it is actually a cease-fire that has continued for 15 years; Mubarak has not created any Egyptian interest in Israel's continued existence."

Over the last several years, the Egyptian media have called Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a Nazi and described Israel's policy as both "racism running amuck" and "genocide being carried out against the Palestinian people."

Angry Arab condemnation of Cairo's recognition of Israel resulted in Egypt's isolation from inter-Arab politics. Some Arab states saw Egypt's evaporated dominance in Arab politics as a chance to impose their own will on neighbors. Iraq attacked Iran, Syria embraced Lebanon, Libya strong-armed Chad, all while Israel enmeshed itself deeper in the territories and in southern Lebanon.

Land grabs were everywhere in the Middle East. Among Arab states, the question remained as to who would succeed Egypt in leading the Arab world. The answer was no one. Pan-Arabism based on destroying Israel was a hollow shell.

While the Egyptian government did the minimum to normalize relations with Israel, Egypt has tried on every occasion to be the bridge for negotiations between the United States, Israel and the PLO.

Then Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, was repelled, and the United States used the opportunity to push for more Arab-Israeli agreements.

Egypt felt vindicated when, after the 1991 Gulf War, the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference reinitiated bilateral negotiations between Israel and Syria, Jordan and the Palestinians. Those negotiations resulted ultimately in the signing of the 1993 Palestinian-Oslo Accords.

Where They Go From Here

Egyptian relations with Israel today remain tied directly to any Israeli policy toward the Palestinians, including implementation of the so-called road map to peace, building the security fence, withdrawal from Gaza, isolation PLO leader Yasser Arafat in Ramallah or last weeks killing of Hamas founder Sheik Ahmad Yassin.

Egypt announced this week it would not participate in celebrations marking the treaty's 25th anniversary. "What peace? The world's on fire," said Mubarak after the killing of Yassin.

Moreover, Arab states are in the early stages of interim political reform—brought on in part by Sadat's promotion of the national interest when he focused first on Egyptian interests in seeing Sinai's returned to Egyptian sovereignty.

Israel is, of course, the beneficiary of a peace with Egypt, no matter how cold. And, Israel is still confronted with resolving its relationships with Palestinian neighbors and whether it can or should exchange tangible land for the elusive sought after peace.