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“Sadat in Israel – 10 Years Later”

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Forty years ago today, the United Nations voted to partition British-controlled Palestine. Separate Arab and Jewish states were to be created. Zionists who worked relentlessly for international sanction of a Jewish state were euphoric; the Arab world, in the throes of removing Western colonial presence from the Middle East opposed partition. Unlike the United States and the Soviet Union, who voted for partition, the Arab world perceived a Jewish state as an illegitimate extension of continued Western colonialism.

For the next 30 years, Israel enjoyed sovereignty but no recognition from its Arab adversaries. Through economic boycott, diplomatic isolation and all-out war, the Arab world sought to injure and destroy the Jewish state. Nonetheless, Israel persevered through four wars, Arab oil embargoes and regular attacks against institutions and civilian population.

Then, 10 years ago this month, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat did the thoroughly unexpected. He visited Israel and altered the course of modern Middle Eastern history. His actions and the subsequent diplomatic aftermath had an extraordinary impact upon individual Arab states, Israel, American foreign policy and the prospects for a durable Arab-Israeli peace in the region.

Today, the reverberations of his bold and courageous undertaking are still echoing throughout the Middle East.

Before Sadat, the Middle East peace process involved prolonging the inevitable: Sadat’s visit to Israel made peace in the Middle East achievable in our time.

In effect, Sadat told the Arab world that Egyptian national interests would no longer be sacrificed for the pan-Arab goal of liberating Palestine.

Unaccustomed to Sadat’s focus on Egypt, Arab capitals tried to punish Egypt by isolating her from economic and political engagement in

regional affairs.

But a decade after that isolation, the Arab world now seeks Egypt's powerful presence to protect Arab interests far to the east of Israel in the Gulf War.

Just as Sadat emphasized sovereign Egyptian interests, the recently completed Arab summit conference in Amman, Jordan, emphasized the sovereign act of each Arab state to decide without pan-Arab constraint whether to renew diplomatic relations with Egypt.

Sadat removed Egypt as a confrontation state with Israel. By granting direct recognition to the existence and legitimacy of a Jewish state in the predominately Moslem Middle East, he forced Israel to turn from merely focusing on issues of security to problems and issues associated with the nature of Israel's relations with her Arab neighbors.

Sadat's action signaled a profound turning inward of Egypt's national direction. The most powerful, most populous and culturally dominant Arab country chose to place the preference of domestic betterment on an equal footing with the aspirations of the Palestinian people.

As compared to his predecessor Nasser, who rose to power in the 1950s and 1960s by encouraging dislike of the West and by seeking Israel's destruction through a pan-Arab ideology, Sadat courted the United States and made peace with Israel.

Sadat took aim at bettering the lifestyle of the individual Egyptian. Though he was only marginally successful in that endeavor, Sadat's reorientation inaugurated a precedent for other Arab leaders. He validated a priority concern for national rather than pan-Arab interests: economic solvency, housing, food and shelter for a population that increased at a rate of a million every nine months.

In part, Sadat was motivated to go to Israel because he feared that any Arab group effort aimed at solving the Arab-Israeli conflict would compromise, limit, or constrain Egypt's desire to determine its own future.

Sadat feared subordinating Egypt's role and his own personal zest for leadership to a forum like a Middle East peace conference.

Today, as an international peace conference format is considered as a mechanism to restart direct Arab-Israeli negotiations, each Arab leader vigorously protects the prerogative that Sadat held so dear – absolute independence in deciding what is in one's own national

interests.

By seizing the initiative then, Sadat gambled that he would receive the backing of the West and particularly the United States.

Sadat placed his faith in President Carter, and Egypt was rewarded personally and financially. In subsequent negotiations with Israel, Carter became Sadat's spokesman, especially at Camp David in 1978 and prior to the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in March 1979. Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, has maintained the American connection and annual access to more than \$3 billion dollars in economic and military assistance.

If Middle East peace negotiations emerge from their current state of semi-dormancy, Jordan will expect to receive financial support from the United States as Sadat did. Despite the constraints upon our federal budget, Jordan's legitimate request for aid should be handled positively.

In essence, King Hussein can benefit from Sadat's precedent of receiving appropriate injections of American economic and military assistance to undergird Jordanian stability and security.

Very adroitly, Sadat wedged himself in the middle of the heretofore sacred American-Israeli relationship. Sadat's actions demonstrated that Arab leaders and countries could be overt in their friendship with Washington.

Ten years later, the U.S. has regular military planning exercises with Egypt, has logistical understandings with other Arab states and is physically present in the Persian Gulf. As compared to a decade ago, American foreign policy now views the Middle East as an area of regional friends, not an exclusive focus on one ally, Israel.

Sadat's bold action recognized Israeli legitimacy; he redirected attention from the question of Israeli existence to the nature of that existence with her Arab neighbors.

Israel used its freedom to maneuver within the Middle East without concern for an Egyptian military reply.

Israel invaded Lebanon twice, in 1978 and in 1982; bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor in June 1981; attacked the PLO headquarters in Tunis in October 1985; continued to place settlements in occupied territories; and put a variety of restraints on the Palestinians and other Arabs living in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and Golan Heights.

No one set limits on Israel's actions until Israelis themselves realized almost a decade later that imposition of their will on their Arab neighbors would not provide Israel the normalized existence it had been seeking since its establishment in 1948.

Sadat hastened the pace of defining two aspects of Israel's future: her relationship with the Palestinians and other Arabs, and the disposition of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Golan Heights. That internal Israeli debate remains rancorous and not yet resolved.

Now at peace with its most potent Arab adversary, Israel would prefer cultural and economic relations with Egypt like the U.S. enjoys with Canada. That is probably not likely to occur because Egypt's cultural, religious and historical affinities lie with the Arab Moslem world not Israel.

Thus, in the diplomatic aftermath of Sadat's visit, Israel was wary of a pronounced U.S. shift to a more balanced outlook of the Middle East.

To assure Israel of its continued friendship, in a new environment in which Egypt was squired by American administrations, wide-ranging assurances were provided to Israel by both the Carter and Reagan administrations.

Israel was liberally compensated for withdrawing from the strategically important Sinai airfields; Israel was guaranteed a provision for the supply of oil in the eventuality that her sources would be interrupted; Israel was a signatory to an understanding of strategic cooperation and a free trade zone agreement with Washington, and Israel remains a recipient of a large annual allocation of economic and military assistance from the U.S.

For the Arab world, Sadat legitimized Arab political discussion of a peace with Israel. The King of Morocco met publicly with the Israeli prime minister in July 1986, and there were few Arab protests.

Arab capitals, after the recent Arab summit meeting in Amman, sanctioned renewal of diplomatic relations with Egypt, a course taken by Iraq, Kuwait, Morocco, and other Arab states just days after the summit ended.

Reports of Jordan's King Hussein meeting with Israeli leaders over the last two years are too numerous to chronicle. Many Israeli parliamentarians have met with either leaders of the PLO or Palestinians who sympathize with the PLO.

Sadat's visit to Israel and the warm reception accorded him by

Israelis was a crucial beginning. But without U.S. prodding, encouragement and relentless determination, no agreements such as Camp David or the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty would have emerged.

The ideological gaps, absence of trust and personality differences needed to be bridged by Washington. Since then, in 1980 and often time subsequently, when Washington stayed aloof from the active negotiations, no voluntary and lasting agreement emerged between Israel and her Arab neighbors.

In the late 1970's, many in the Arab world were diametrically opposed to Washington's participation in, or definition of the peace process.

A decade later, terms like "Camp David" or commemoration of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem still are held in disdain in the Arab world. Yet, there is a grudging acknowledgment in most Middle Eastern capitals that without Washington's engagement no additional steps in the negotiating process are possible.

Sadat's 38-minute flight to Israel changed the political landscape of the Middle East. But his visit has only an indirect effect on the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the turbulence in oil prices, the shah's fall from power, the Iranian revolution, the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, the outbreak of the gulf war and Iranian-inspired attacks on the Moslem holy city of Mecca.

These issues which threaten the security of the states in the Arab east inspired the convocation of the recent Arab summit conference.

Insecurity of the Arab Gulf states, not primarily Israeli actions or defense of the Palestinian cause has forced an otherwise fragmented Arab world to have its leaders reconsider Egypt's appropriate weight and presence in the inter-Arab system.

But significantly, Egypt is not willing to abrogate its peace treaty with Israel and a price for official re-engagement with its Arab brethren.

What remains to be resolved is an equitable, voluntary and viable means to reconcile Israeli and Jordanian sovereignty and security concerns with Palestinian aspirations.

For the time being, Sadat's peace initiative leaves a lasting and vindicated legacy.