

**Sadat and His Legacy: Egypt and the World, 1977-1997**  
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**"Sadat's Journey"**  
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Anwar Sadat's trip to Jerusalem in November 1977 represented the remarkable confluence of a fertile environment for diplomatic progress and a leader who saw how he could use that environment to achieve his goals. I will discuss below three characteristics of the negotiating environment, and three decisions Sadat made to capitalize on that environment.

The first characteristic was that the Arab countries wanted Israel to return the land it had taken in the 1967 war. Since 1967, all Arab-Israeli peace negotiations have centered on the fundamental issue of land for peace. It was clear to Sadat and to a few other Arab leaders in the early 1970s that for Egypt to regain the entire Sinai peninsula, it would have to do so in the context of a negotiated settlement with the Israelis.

The second characteristic was a high degree of American interest and involvement in a peace process. The United States interjected itself, interceded--intruded, one might say--into the Israeli-Egyptian disengagement negotiations right after the October 1973 War and has played a dominant role in Arab-Israeli diplomacy ever since. Leadership in this endeavor came straight from the White House: first from President Richard Nixon through Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and, later on, from President Jimmy Carter, at least through the end of 1977.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the United States took a paternalistic interest in this negotiating process. Washington considered it "our baby." America sought to "shoehorn" the Soviet Union out of the Middle East, and it did so successfully. It did so hesitantly, it did so haltingly, it did so repeatedly, and it did so with two disengagement agreements, but it happened. The Sinai II agreement in September 1975 was probably the most important, because it physically placed 200 Americans in the middle of Sinai. That, more than anything else, assured that if the Egyptians and the Israelis wanted to go to war, they were going to have to do it over American bodies. U.S. presence was a physical restraint against going to war.

Toward the end of Gerald Ford's administration, the United States began talking about a more comprehensive peace. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Harold Saunders appeared before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in November 1975 and made comments about how the Palestinians had to be part of the negotiating process. The Brookings Institution issued a report in December 1975, entitled "Toward Peace in the Middle East," that discussed the timeliness of a comprehensive settlement. Zbigniew Brzezinski and Cyrus Vance participated in the preparation of that report, and they later became part of the Carter foreign policy team. After the 1975 disengagement agreement, even Henry Kissinger spoke about Palestinian political autonomy in his testimony before the Senate. Thus, the process leading toward a peace settlement was relatively well-defined well before the personalities that one speaks about with such lovingness and candor entered into the scene and became the primary participants.

U.S. policymakers' increasing engagement in an Arab-Israeli peace settlement coincided with a convergence of remarkable personalities, and this is the third important characteristic to remember. The fledgling peace process happened to have, at that particular moment in time, a rather incredible triad of individuals whose ideas, passions, personalities, styles, and characteristics permitted an interlocking--an interconnectedness--that allowed this process to proceed in 1977. This is the negotiating environment's third characteristic--the personalities.

It was extraordinary that Jimmy Carter would find himself able to accept and understand Anwar Sadat; both were farmers, men of religion. Sadat was a man of vision, a man whom Carter felt he could truly trust. In return, Sadat had an incredible reservoir of goodwill for Jimmy Carter. The relevance of the commitment that the two gentlemen had to one another cannot be understated. This is what Carter said about their relationship:

I think that the faith that he [Sadat] put in me was to protect Egyptian interests. No matter what I

did, he felt that I would never lie to him. He felt that, if I told him something that the Israelis said or the United States would do, he could depend on it. And it was not something that I had to build or orchestrate. It was kind of an immediate sharing of trust. And when somebody puts implicit faith in you, you are just not going to betray them. And I felt the same way with him.

And so I thought, after meeting, that as far as the long-term war between Egypt and Israel was concerned, I had a card to play in my pocket, and his name was Anwar Sadat, and when the time came when I really needed some help, that I could depend upon him. Sadat was acting under the duality of the pressures that were interconnected but conflicting. He saw me as his ally; I saw him as my friend.

"And I think," Carter said, parenthetically, afterward, "Begin was jealous of it." <sup>1</sup>

That was probably very true: Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin was jealous of the relationship Carter had with Sadat. That jealousy came into play in the relationship that Carter developed, ultimately, with Begin, and Begin with Carter. Begin and Carter developed a working relationship; Carter came to understand Begin and Begin's commitment to the Land of Israel, but Carter's relationship with Sadat was special.

Sadat also sensed that Begin could be trusted. He sent out feelers to test Begin and his advisers to see if Israel was prepared to trade land for peace. He sent messages to Israel via Romania and via Iran, and through direct discussions in Morocco--all of those played a role in Sadat's assessment. These three men, with their respective strengths of character, intersected at a very peculiar moment, and at a very significant time. Because of it, an agreement was possible.

Carter's relationships with Sadat and Begin were not replicated throughout his administration. In particular the Israelis placed less trust in National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. In addition, the Israeli leadership was never able to establish the close relationship with Carter that Sadat had. Between Israel and the Americans, there was a crustiness in the relationship. Carter's relationship with Sadat lacked that friction and tension.

The long-term impact of the Americans' relatively closer relationship with Anwar Sadat than with his Israeli counterparts was that Sadat used Secretary of

<sup>1</sup> Quotations for this presentation were taken from the author's longer project and completed book manuscript, which focuses on U.S. involvement in the peace process in the 1970s.

State Kissinger and later President Carter as "ambassadors" of Egypt to Israel, in a real sense of the word. Anwar Sadat was very capable of using the U.S. secretary of state, and then the U.S. president, to plead his case to Israel. In that way, Anwar Sadat forever intruded himself and Egypt into the special relationship that had existed for many years between Israel and the United States.

With this context in mind, why did Sadat go to Jerusalem? Sadat made three judgments. The first was that surprise could be a highly useful tool in international diplomacy. Sadat loved surprises; he had made surprising moves before in regional and international relations. He surprised Henry Kissinger in 1972 when he kicked the Soviets out of Cairo, with no warning and with no quid pro quo requested in return from the United States. He surprised the Syrians, his coconspirators in war, the next year during the October War, when Egyptian troops suddenly stopped advancing after gaining ten kilometers east of the Suez Canal. Then, Sadat went to Jerusalem, and he surprised everyone. Yet, one has to understand his visit to Jerusalem in the context of his political predilections. As Sadat was pursuing one option, often times he was simultaneously preparing the ground to pursue another. He would talk about a comprehensive peace and going to Geneva while sending his deputy prime minister, Hassan al-Tuhami, to meet secretly with Israeli foreign minister Moshe Dayan in Morocco.

According to Carter, Sadat told him privately during a visit to the White House in April 1977, "I'll even be willing to sign a peace treaty with them." Carter kept that to himself. He never told Brzezinski. He never told Vance. He never told anyone in his administration that this was a promise that had been made to him. No one but Carter could conceive that Sadat would make such a dramatic move as going to Jerusalem.

The second judgment was that the multilateral negotiating process underway in Geneva would drag on and ultimately end unsatisfactorily. Sadat said in April 1978,

The road to Geneva got lost amongst all the papers...Had we continued to discuss going to Geneva or any other country, the shape of the table we would sit around, whether there would be one or more tables, the flag under which we would sit, and the form of the Arab delegations, all these things would have taken a long time, without us achieving a single solution.<sup>2</sup>

Sadat went to Jerusalem to move the process forward. Sadat also wanted to avoid negotiating a settlement in Geneva. He did not mind thinking about going to Geneva, and he did not mind thinking about a comprehensive peace. But by August or September 1977, when he had already tested the waters secretly with Israeli leaders, he began to develop the notion that the time had come for him to take his destiny back into his own hands.

Part of Sadat's reservations about going to Geneva or about advancing a comprehensive peace arose from his determination that Syria was a major obstacle. He did not like Carter's visit with Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad in May 1977, during which the concept of a joint Arab delegation to a Geneva-type conference was seriously discussed. He did not like the fact that, in September 1977, the United States was spending an

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enormous amount of time trying to figure out how to get the Syrians involved and how to untie the troublesome knot of Palestinian representation. Sadat knew that Mustafa Talas had made a speech in October 1977 in which he said that the creation of Israel in Palestine constituted an unprecedented aggression against the Arab nation. Sadat thought the speech was dreadful. Sadat knew that Syria was not about to embrace any kind of serious negotiation with the Israelis; thus, the process of going to a conference with Syria was an obstacle to regaining Sinai for Egypt.

In addition, Sadat did not want to go to a multilateral conference in which the negotiations would center on issues extraneous to Egyptian national interests. Sadat's goal was to have all of Sinai returned expeditiously, and he was not sure he could get that out of multilateral negotiations in Geneva. Nicholas Veliotis, who was at the State Department in the late 1970s and ambassador to Egypt from 1983 to 1986, told me, "Sadat possessed the fundamental and unalterable preference to keep control of all negotiating decisions in Cairo's hands, and not let them fall into the Syrian preference for concerted action by a unified Arab delegation." Sadat did not want Asad involved in detailed negotiations with Israel in 1977 for the very same reason that Asad and Sadat did not tell Jordan's King Hussein about the 1973 war. Sadat did not want Hussein to participate in the diplomatic aftermath of the 1973 war, because he feared that King Hussein's involvement would cause negotiations to get bogged down over issues like the future of the West Bank and Jerusalem, and Sadat would not get back Sinai. Sadat had gone to war to get back Sinai and to harness the United States. Historians now know that Sadat did the same thing in 1977. He did not want to be bound by Syria or the Palestinians or any other Arab interest that would inhibit Egypt's ability to get back Sinai.

Finally, Anwar Sadat understood his strengths and weaknesses in terms of the regional environment. He understood first and foremost the central importance of Egypt in the region. Anwar Sadat was an Egyptian first, and he made no excuses about his national pride. As he became further and further isolated--after his trip to Jerusalem, and after the Camp David Accords, and after the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty--he was more and more an Egyptian.

According to Ambassador Roy Atherton, people would say to Sadat, "You're going to isolate Egypt in the Arab world if you sign a peace treaty with Israel." Sadat's reaction was, "The Arabs cannot isolate Egypt; they can only isolate themselves." Sadat was confident of his character and confident of Egypt. The correctness of his assessment was proved by the fact that Egypt was isolated officially for only five years, until 1984, and then gradually over the following five years it brought itself back to the Arab world. After all, what was the first Arab country that Yasir Arafat went to when he left Lebanon in 1984? He went to Greece and then to Cairo. He did not go to Syria. He did not go to Jordan. He went to Egypt. Jordan reestablished diplomatic relations with Egypt in 1984. The Arab world needed Egypt, and Anwar Sadat knew that.

Sadat's expectations for the results of his Jerusalem initiative were extraordinary. He really believed that the Israelis were going to give him something unique. He thought that Begin would declare right after Sadat's address to the Knesset, "Because you've done this, because you've recognized us, we're going to withdraw from all of Sinai." Obviously, it did not happen, and Sadat was enormously disappointed that the Israelis never reacted in kind to what Sadat believed to be an extraordinary act of vision and courage, by going to Jerusalem. Former National Security Council aide William B. Quandt told me, "Sadat talked as if, once he'd broken the psychological barrier, the Israelis will have no excuse, and that once they have done this, he's not going to need even the Americans anymore, because he'd get back all of Sinai." Sadat had inflated expectations. The reality, of course, was something else.

In addition, there was an asymmetry to the consequent negotiations--an asymmetry that has not gone away. Begin and Sadat had different goals. They both had goals of reaching an understanding that their countries would not go to war anymore. Egypt wanted land; Israel wanted a changed psychological outlook. Israelis wanted to remove the existential fear. Egypt sought to preserve its dignity and its honor and to have its land back. Israelis never doubted the legitimacy of Egypt before the negotiations began. They never doubted the legitimacy of Egypt after negotiations ended. But according to Israelis, Egyptians still continued to doubt Israel's legitimacy. And those asymmetrical viewpoints have not yet disappeared.

Egypt--and particularly Sadat--saw all of this. Sadat saw the negotiations as a series of phases, a series of steps by which Sinai would be returned to his control, by which Egypt would lead the Arab world, by which a comprehensive peace would be achieved and eventually the territories taken in 1967 would be returned to Arab control. The Middle East is in the midst of what he saw. He knew that he would prove to be the catalyst by way of his trip to Jerusalem.