
The Legacy of Camp David: 1979-2009

A Special Edition of *Viewpoints*

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Historical Context for the Egyptian-Israeli Treaty

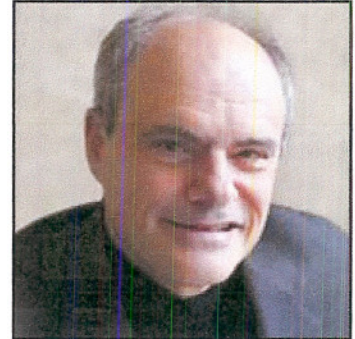
Kenneth W. Stein

President Anwar Sadat was the diplomatic engine that drove Egyptian-Israeli agreements. Without him there likely would not have been an Egyptian-Israeli Treaty and subsequent relationship as we have come to know it. Sadat and Menachem Begin continuously tested each other's readiness to negotiate with one another. Sadat even admonished President Jimmy Carter in early October 1977 not to do anything that would get in the way of direct negotiations between them. It is fair to say that the Carter Administration's role was important in narrowing differences, in charting procedural courses, and in forcing the sides to agree to disagree at the September 1978 Camp David summit. However, Sadat emerged as the "Most Valuable Player."

Before the October 1973 war, Sadat and Israeli leaders tested each other's intentions about reaching a diplomatic agreement that was much less than a peace treaty. Those exchanges produced mutual awareness that there was an intention to reach a non-belligerency agreement. In 1976 and 1977, Cairo and Jerusalem continued their private exchanges, sometimes through third parties. From the middle of 1977 through the signing of the treaty in 1979, they picked up the pace of exchanges, engaged in a deeper probing of each other's intentions, and carried out dozens of direct and indirect talks, some through Morocco and Romania. They used the Carter Administration as a vehicle to exchange ideas. There is no doubt that in the 60 days prior to Sadat's November 19, 1977 visit to Jerusalem, Sadat and Begin had established an open and direct channel apart from Washington.

After the Jerusalem visit, the frequency, intensity, and detail of their exchanges grew. With and without American presence, direct talks took place between high Egyptian and Israeli officials in Washington, Egypt, Israel, and at Camp David. Both sides were willing to use American mediators as conduits for offering new or revised ideas to the other side, so that whatever concession might be offered would ultimately be granted to Washington as mediator, and not embarrassingly to the other side. Along the diplomatic path, Sadat sought to protect Egypt's place in inter-Arab politics by covering himself with language that suggested he was not making a separate peace with Israel. And where he could, Sadat squeezed Israel for as many concessions for the Palestinians as possible. Nevertheless, he did not let the Palestinian cause get in the way of his objective of recovering all of the Sinai.

At major turning points in Egyptian-Israeli negotiations, Sadat's vision, will, courage,



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and impatience were critical to making agreements happen. In 1972 and 1973, Sadat, acting through National Security Adviser Hafez Ismail, engaged in secret talks with Henry Kissinger. Sadat floated an idea to Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan to have the Israelis withdraw from the Suez Canal with Egyptian police placed in Sinai. This was to evolve into a non-belligerency agreement. It never happened.

No one disagrees that Sadat went to war in October 1973 to regain Egyptian honor, restore a portion of Sinai, and initiate a diplomatic process stewarded by Kissinger. He did that. After the war, Sadat eagerly pushed for the private meeting of Arab and Israeli generals 101 kilometers from Cairo. That meeting resulted in an agreement with maps which Kissinger's negotiating team used as the basis for the first Egypt-Israeli disengagement signed in January 1974. Sadat encouraged Kissinger to take control of the diplomatic choreography by going to the very public December 1973 Middle East peace conference in Geneva. Sadat needed the conference as a fig leaf to communicate to the Arab world that he was not moving separately with Israel. But it was an agreement already negotiated; Meir wanted to use the Geneva conference to bolster the Israeli public's support for her Labor Party in the December 1973 parliamentary elections.

In the late spring of 1975, an impasse developed about how the next Egyptian-Israeli agreement would be monitored. President Gerald Ford tells us in his memoir, *A Time to Heal*, that "if that the proposal to station civilian technicians in a Sinai buffer zone had come originally from Sadat, they [the Israelis] might have rejected it out of hand; ...if Sadat's proposal could be perceived as an American — or even better, an Israeli — plan, it would have a far greater chance of acceptance. In order to retain 'face' in the Arab world, Sadat would have to deny that he had offered any peace plan to the Israelis." Ultimately this idea was the key to making the second disengagement agreement operative.

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In 1976, Sadat broached the idea of a treaty or an agreement with then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. According to Abrasha Tamir, head of Strategic Planning in the Israel Defense Force, Rabin had the copies of treaties in hand, but said "no thank you" to Sadat. In early 1977, Rabin and Begin remained eager to reach another agreement. Recalled Shlomo Avineri, the Director General of the Israeli Foreign Minister's office, the Romanian government wanted Rabin to come on a visit; there was a message from Sadat. Rabin turned down the invitation. What is certain is that Rabin mentioned the notion of a treaty with Egypt to Carter in their private discussions during Rabin's otherwise "dreadful" March 1977 visit with the latter. According to Israel's number two diplomat in Washington at the time, Hanan Bar-On, Rabin told Carter that "the next step [with Egypt] is a 'treaty' between us." In his first meeting with Carter in April 1977, Sadat said — as Carter told me in an interview — that he would "if necessary sign a treaty with Israel." In a July 17, 1977 *al-Ahram* interview, Sadat also said that he would sign a treaty with Israel. Coincidentally, the interview was published the day that Menachem Begin landed in Washington for his first meeting with Carter. Sadat also addressed the issue of a treaty with Israel at a meeting of the Arab Socialist Union. A month later, when US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was traveling through the region, Sadat asked him to obtain draft treaties from the Israelis. According to William Quandt,

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the assistant to the National Security Adviser for the Middle East, who was traveling with Vance, Sadat told Vance: "collect them and you 'stitch' them together." And in September, Egyptian Deputy Minister Hassan Tuhami and Dayan met in Morocco, preceded by secret meetings between other national security officials from both countries.

And so it progressed, while the Carter Administration was consumed with convening an international Middle East conference, focused on bringing the Soviet Union into the diplomatic process as a co-convenor of a conference that neither Sadat nor Begin really wanted. Sadat and Begin sought each other out. It had taken more than four years of Sadat's probing and Israeli willingness to take a chance that eventuated in his visit to Jerusalem and all that transpired in 1978 and 1979 to reach the historic treaty.

The treaty cleared the path for Palestinian-Israeli mutual recognition and for the 1994 Jordanian-Israeli Treaty. It created a diplomatic category whereby Arab states could recognize Israel's existence and physical presence but not yet fully accept the political legitimacy of a Jewish state. Like no other diplomatic document in the Middle East in the 20th century, the Egyptian-Israeli treaty demonstrated that local national objectives and not foreign powers can transform regional politics and international relations.

Critical lessons are to be learned from the Egyptian-Israeli negotiating experience. First, local leaders and their people must be ready for an agreement. Leaders must demonstrate courage and will, and clearly articulate the defense of national interests. Exclusive of the first two axioms, no amount of external cajoling will create a durable agreement; it is the parties who have to shape their agreement. Fourth, outside parties can assist respective sides cross the negotiating finish line, but not pre-empt or dominate the details negotiated. Fifth, it is only an agreement or series of understandings arrived at between the parties, and most likely through protracted pre-negotiations, that will make a durable agreement possible. And sixth, the same national interests that made an agreement possible can be bolstered by outside powers with monitoring, financial assistance, and a means to adjudicate disputes.

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