An Evaluation of the Camp David Negotiations of 1978

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Negotiations

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SYNOPSIS

This paper is the evaluation of the events leading up to and during the Camp David Accords of 1978. The paper maintains that given the opposing demands of both Egypt and Israel, it was the ability of the United States—and in particular the remarkable tact of President Jimmy Carter as key mediator—to mitigate the differences of two diametric nations and to encourage the forward progress toward peace that ultimately resulted in a transformational framework for peace in the Middle-East.
INTRODUCTION

In evaluating the outcome of the Camp David Accords of 1978, it is imperative to consider the complicated history that precluded the 13 days of negotiations that resulted in a framework for peace in the Middle East. From the historical context of Arab-Israeli conflict, the possibility of an agreement contravenes the fundamental cultural beliefs of two faiths. Regional security in the Middle East prior to the Camp David Accords appeared a fantasy. However, considering the events that culminated in the signing of the Accords, it becomes evident that the resulting framework for peace was the product of the balanced and artful mediation talents of President Jimmy Carter. His ability to create mutually beneficial terms between Sadat and Begin, combined with a more thoughtful consideration of the bargaining position of two parties who despite their cultural inclinations both had a desire to make peace, resulted in a peace negotiation not even the United Nations could ensure.

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATING FACTORS

As stated in the preamble to the 1978 Camp David Accords, it had been 30 years and 4 wars that led to the need for some progress between Egypt and Israel regarding land disputes, settlements and the pre-eminent issue of secure and normalized relationship between the two Mid-East countries. From a socio-cultural perspective, thousands of years of history were leading to a new engagement between Egypt and Israel and it was critical for the U.N to lay the groundwork for directing that future.
The pre-amble to the Framework For Peace in the Middle-East states that the “cradle of civilization and the birthplace of three great religions…yearns[s] for peace so that the vast human and natural resources of the region can be turned to the pursuits of peace.” While this presents a noble truth regarding the decades of conflict—from the early days of Israel’s Independence and the 7 Days War to the Yom Kippur War and subsequent annexation of lands from neighboring Arab nations—the path to creating that peace was essentially directed by the authority of the United Nations. Now, it was time to hold the two contestant countries of Egypt and Israel to the agreement set forth by U.N. resolution 242. 10 years had passed since that resolution and now with Western attention turning from the conflict in Vietnam, the Middle-East was set to take the world stage as a new field for diplomacy.

Israel had for the past 30 years made every attempt to legitimate its existence among the wholly Arab Mid-eastern Subcontinent; an initiative that would not be tolerated by the Arab League—a strategic alliance of Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan and Yemen—and despite 20% of the population of Israel being Arab, no credibility had been given to the recognition of Israel as a nation by its neighbors. Not only taken as an offense to legitimacy, the disregard by its neighbors promoted violence, invasion and territorial disputes between Egypt and Israel in particular. Of central importance was the failure of the U.N. or Britain—who was the imperial authority before the U.N. was formed—to recognize or create a separate state for Arab Palestinians. To this day, the issue of the legitimacy of both Israel and Palestine is questioned.
On Israel’s behalf, the past 30 years had resulted in great strides in territory acquisition as the spoils of war—Israel occupied in the Gaza, the West Bank of the River Jordan, the Golan Heights area of Syria, and the Sinai Peninsula as a response to being invaded by its neighbors. Of these occupations, the most valuable land in terms of natural resources was the Sinai Peninsula with its oil wells. Israel had capitalized on the defense of its nation, and Israel’s relationship with the United States by 1978 was one of mutual benefit—the United States having a central platform in the region from which to monitor and influence politics and economy, and Israel given credibility by the strength of Western alliances.

Egypt had been in close communication and received political and financial support from the Soviet Union; though that relationship was proving ever-more ineffective; and given the disgrace of land acquiescence to Israel after the 1967 War, Egypt began to redirect its focus internally, resulting in widespread political and governmental reforms within Egypt and political distancing from the League of Arab Nations. This progress was considered highly controversial as the League felt that the only way to motivate Israel to relinquish control over the West Bank and other Arab territories was through direct threat; only Egypt was considered capable of making that threat. The pressure from the League and the failing financial and military support from an ineffective Soviet Union led Sadat to finally consider negotiation as a channel for pursuing Egypt’s needs.

Fortunately the United States took initiative early in President Jimmy Carter’s term, to work on Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s desire to get Egyptian lands annexed
in the prior wars returned to Egypt. Sadat expressed, partially out of basic need, a desire to form a stronger relationship with the United States. Carter was able to present the desires of Egypt to Israel’s Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who agreed to consider the possibility.

**KEY PLAYERS**

A factor of great importance to the success of the 1978 Camp David Accords is the fact that whereas all decisions to this point regarding peace between Egypt and Israel were made through global alliances such as the League of Arab Nations or the United Nations, the Camp David Accords brought together only the key players from each country to work out a framework for progress toward peace. While each party to the negotiation consisted of the major political figures of that country including Secretaries of State, Ministers and Advisors; these individuals were essentially only accessory to the engagements between Carter and Sadat, and Carter and Begin.

Jimmy Carter faced a critical challenge: how to get two leaders with such ingrained animosity—with historical emotional responsibility for two diametric faiths and cultures—to actively listen, synthesize and engage each other? The answer was, as opposed to openly allowing direct engagement, Carter would be forced to mitigate any exchange and re-frame each side’s position so as to make continual forward progress toward the tenets (laid out by each party in the weeks leading up to Camp David).

Support from the United States Senate in a letter dated June 28, 1977 reiterates the President’s view that: “peace cannot be imposed from the outside, and that the United States does not intend to present the nations involved with a plan or a timetable or a
map.” (U.S. Senate, 1977). Therefore while President Carter would with all his faculty mediate the process of negotiations, he served no intention of injecting his own nation’s design for the path to peace.

Anwar Sadat had developed in a relatively short time quite an amicable relationship with President Carter, as can be witnessed in the hand-written memorandums exchanges leading up to the Camp David meeting. Carter’s personal appeal for Sadat’s support in an October 21, 1977 letter ends with “best wishes to you and your family.” (White House Declassified, 1984). And return correspondence from Sadat to Carter ends with “I pray to God Almighty to give you the strength and support you are entitled to in the discharge of your awesome responsibilities.” (Office of the President of the Arab republic of Egypt, 1978). Such a trust was unprecedented at the time between a Western and an Arab leader. Sadat was opening himself and his nation up with a great amount of courage against presumed fears of Western enforcement in the Middle-East, a risk that could derail the work of the League of Arab Nations to date; such risk was not under-appreciated by Carter. The mutual respect and admiration that had been growing over the past years lay the foundation of the negotiations to follow.

Menachem Begin, however, was well familiar with the arena of Western politics. His fledgling Israel had revolted against Western control and won. As an active member in this revolt, both Begin’s personal belief—and that of his nation Israel—was one of Independence, and engagement with Western powers through politics, economy and partnership only in a strategy of self-determination. With a background as a militant Zionist, any discussion of conceding lands back to Egypt after Egypt invaded Israel
would have to come with definite assurances. Fear of further invasion, the withdrawal from settlements in occupied territory and the release of access to natural resources were all major threats to even considering Sadat’s desire for peace; that peace in Israel defined by security, international recognition of its legitimacy and the right to govern its own affairs. It may be said that Begin on behalf of Israel, while open to “considering the possibility”, was much less a willing participant in relinquishing control over occupied territory. In a letter from Zbigniew Brzezinski to President Carter dated May 1, 1978 it is made clear to President Carter that Prime Minister Begin needs to begin clarifying his intentions to agree to Sadat’s demands or offer alternatives; and there would need to be an Israeli commitment to “withdrawal in exchange for peace, recognition and security.” (White House Memorandum, May 1, 1978)

**CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE CAMP DAVID NEGOTIATIONS**

The Camp David Negotiations were to be held privately and therefore much of the discussion and the events of the meeting would need to be confidential. Leading up to the selection of a date and time, President Carter engaged Sadat and Begin via Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who delivered hand-written messages that explicitly detailed the necessity of confidentiality. (White House Unclassified, August 1978).

While letters requesting forward progress on electing a date and time for peace talks did not demand they be held in the United States, it was suggested that Camp David is available. The selection of Camp David offered a neutral grounds for discussion. As well, the geography of Camp David could be used to allow President Carter to control the flow of communication. Each nation has its own cabin, and therefore its own comfort
zone. This gave each party a neutral, private retreat from the day’s discussions away from the exposure to worldwide media coverage.

**OPPOSING DESIRES/MUTUAL NEEDS**

Both parties to the talks had a distinct set of demands. Israel demanded the security along its borders from Arab invasion. However, withdrawal from settlements established in annexed territories was not completely on the table, and in fact was not an option according to Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan. Other demands by Israel included the free passage in the Straits of Tiran and the use of the Suez Canal. Israel’s desire was to reinforce the integrity of the Israeli economy and security. Egypt had a more specific list of demands. This included Israeli “withdrawal form all occupied territories, with some minor modifications in the 1967 line on the West Bank” and complete sovereignty of the West Bank/Gaza as a Palestinian state. (White House Unclassified, May 1, 1978)

The needs of each party can be seen in terms of either economic or cultural security. The withdrawal of Israel from the Sinai Peninsula would return control over highly productive oil wells to Egypt, along with the former land rights. Israel, however, would not benefit from this withdrawal financially. Furthermore, the demand for autonomy for the West Bank/Gaza would culturally appease the Arab League and the popular support of the Egyptian people. However, this too would result in withdrawal of Israel from settlements and a reduction in territory. From a strictly economic and cultural perspective, Israel would by these demands be making great concessions with very little guarantee of future security. In addition, while Egypt was able to ensure the peace along its border with Israel, Sadat was clear in stating that no lasting peace can be achieved
without the subsequent support of other Arab nations such as Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, from the Israeli perspective, the benefits of a peace accord were overshadowed by the perpetual threat of war.

Fortunately the United States had much in the way of financial incentive, and military might to offer in an effort to keep both parties moving forward on a peace agreement. By assigning a financial or military value to each of the demands and concessions possible in the peace agreement, and acknowledging that the United States can and would guarantee the financial assistance in exchange for brokering a peace agreement, the stigma of any economic losses was offset and the focus of the talks was directed toward non-economic issues of security and normalized political relations.

**CARTER’S ROLE AS A MEDIATOR**

President Carter’s role as a mediator cannot be understated; it is unlikely that in his absence any negotiation would take place considering the antipathy between Egypt and Israel. Each party was given their accommodations—separate and equal—and delved into the work of confirming each party’s position.

On September 5, 1978, in conference with Begin from 8:30 to 10:53 P.M. wherein Carter reaffirmed his commitment to acquiring clear guarantees in the forthcoming negotiations. Begin reaffirmed his priority as the security of Israel, especially the importance of the current occupied lands as a buffer zone to prevent another attack. This indicated that Israel had remained inflexible despite Carter’s encouragement to reconsider the occupation stance.
The next day, during a meeting with Sadat, Carter was given two very different documents from the Egypt camp. One was a hard-line proposal called “Framework for the Comprehensive Peace…” outlining Egypt’s demands in terms of Israel’s withdrawal on all fronts. The other document was a long list of concessions Egypt was willing to make, to which Sadat gave Carter permission to invoke these concessions when Carter felt it beneficial. This was an absolute vote of confidence in Carter’s ability to determine the best course of negotiation, an “extreme gesture of good faith.” (Jewish Virtual Library, Camp David Day By Day). By the time of these negotiations, Carter’s constant relationship building and trust building had apparently paid off.

Later that evening Carter met with both Sadat and Begin together to discuss Sadat’s “Framework…” and in particular three points: the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank/Gaza, and Palestinian self-government. Of course, Begin invoked the practice of immediate refusal to these terms. However, Carter was able to make light of the situation and neutralize perceived hostilities by joking that it would save a lot of time if Begin just agreed to Sadat’s terms. This not only endeared Sadat to Carter, it also diffused Begin’s unreasonable and inflexible demeanor by drawing attention to the alternative: complete concession.

By the next day, September 7, 1978, the cordiality had worn off. The day was filled with heated dialogue between Sadat and Begin, reverting to historical arguments on both sides. However, Carter—sitting in on and facilitating discussions—used a simple technique to maintain open communication between Sadat and Begin. He would attend to one or the other’s remarks, as often Sadat and Begin only communicated to Carter
directly, merely referring to the other party in third person. Carter took notes, and when appropriate, removed himself from discussion by keeping his head down in his notepad, thereby forcing Begin and Sadat to face each other in direct communication. This technique initially escalated the conversation; however, it also was a pivot point. Until this time, Sadat and Begin were figures as opposed to authentic individuals. This refereed conflict allowed both individuals to emerge as human, and the argument was personal. Carter later admitted to the first lady that the discussions were “mean.”

Considering the brutal nature of the day’s discussions, the evening’s performance of the Marine Drum and Bugle Corps accompanied by a silent, 10-minute rifle-drill with no verbal commands, perhaps reminded both parties of the sort of persistent, vigilant, practiced and unwavering dedication it really takes to convey real power: thoughtful action, not just active words.

September 8th, 1978 was on the surface a regression. Both parties were not on speaking terms. In separate talks, Carter eased the frustration of Sadat over Begin’s refusal to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula, by reminding Sadat that Begin was only stating his starting position; nothing more. He urged Sadat to be “more forthcoming on security issues.” (Brzezinski Notes) Then Carter met with Begin’s delegation and reminded Begin that as opposed to arguing the unreasonableness of Sadat’s proposal, to look at making a new set of terms. He also took the time to inform Begin that Sadat has already confided in him a lengthy list of concessions Egypt was willing to make in coming to an agreement. Just at a point when parties were most divided, this offer was an olive branch that at least neutralized the refusal of Begin to communicate.
At this point, both parties were open to the possibility of an American draft of a peace proposal; the next day was the Sabbath and no formal activities were held; however, the American contingency worked on a draft that considered both Israel and Egypt’s demands.

After a day of non-negotiation activity that included a visit to the Gettysburg National Military Park, both parties resumed independent talks with the United States on September 11th, and continued to work out the details of the American proposal or peace throughout September 12th, 1978. These separate-party discussions combined with Carter’s own personal views on a solution and culminated in the “Framework for a Settlement in the Sinai…” The proposal, while generally approved by Sadat, was wholly disputed by Begin. However, as Begin left that night, he did mention that Israel would not want settlements in the West Bank or settlement in Sinai for the first 5 years of a peace agreement. This, Carter saw, was an admission that Begin was still open to a resolution; though Begin continued to affirm he was willing to walk away from negotiations as opposed to concede lands and settlements to Egypt.

The next few days, Carter continued to meet with both Sadat and Begin separately, and the United States envoy began to meet with each party as well, to work out the details of a peace proposal. Ultimately, despite Carter’s artful balance of each party’s tensions and his ability to diminish the threat of abandoning the talks, there existed one crucial point of contention. The issue of Israeli settlements in the Sinai had to be removed from the peace talks. Finally, on September 16th, Begin agreed that if the Knesset—Israeli Parliament—agreed to withdraw from Sinai settlements pending
agreement on all other terms of the agreement, he would allow the withdrawal from the Sinai.

On September 17, after 13 days at Camp David, Carter and his staff were able to use a “one-text” policy to meet with each envoy from Egypt and Israel, make and incorporate edits, draft changes and finally, after a careful balance of the emotions, history and demands of each party, create binding words that became the framework for the conclusion of peace between Egypt and Israel, as well as a framework for peace in the Middle East. The Camp David Accords were signed.

THE PROMISE TOWARD A LASTING PEACE

Carter’s resolve in taking whatever steps necessary to continue progress on a Middle-East peace agreement cannot be denied. He resorted to unexpected tactics, relying on his strength as a consensus-maker and his dedication to the goal of global peace, in every effort to negate the influences of two diametric cultures, two warring nations, two stubborn yet human individuals in the personages of Sadat and Begin. The Camp David Accords are largely considered a success and are historically the first time an Arab nation engaged in an open diplomatic relationship with Israel. While the lasting effects of the Camp David Accords are widely disputed as to their efficacy in resolving the violence, terror and cultural conflict in the decades to follow, it cannot be denied that no future discussions regarding peace in the Middle-east are possible without this first forward progress and ultimate agreement. In fact, the fundamental power of the Camp David Accords is not what was agreed to; it was that an agreement was made in fact.
This transformed the entire conversation of what is possible in the dialogue of peace.
This, more than words on paper, is Carter’s greatest legacy.

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