

Jimmy Carter's Role in Securing Middle East Peace

Written by Shahin Berenji

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SHAHIN BERENJI, APR 21 2016

March 26th 2016 marked the 37th anniversary of the signing of the *Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty*, a landmark agreement that formally ended the state of war between two longstanding enemies. On that day in 1979, the world watched as Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, and U.S. President Jimmy Carter gathered outside on the White House lawn for the signing of this peace accord, the first one between Israel and a neighboring Arab state. After fighting five times in less than thirty years, the two regional powers in the Middle East – Egypt and Israel – had, with the help of U.S. mediation, finally made peace.[1] In what would become an iconic moment in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the three leaders at the end of the ceremony joined hands and shared broad smiles, symbolically concluding sixteen months of negotiations.

The peace between Egypt and Israel was a major diplomatic accomplishment and it is one that would not have been at all possible without the tireless and heroic efforts of Jimmy Carter. During the negotiations, talks between the Egyptians and the Israelis had on multiple occasions reached an impasse and it was at these critical junctures when Carter personally intervened to ensure progress resumed. This was a herculean task but it was one that Carter handled deftly given the complexity of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the political constraints he was operating under at the time.

In spite of this crowning achievement, Republicans and to a lesser extent Democrats have caricatured Carter's Presidency, particularly his foreign policy, as a failure. Carter's response to the Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan paint a picture of a President who was ill-equipped to diagnose and respond to global challenges. These events have overshadowed the Carter administration's notable foreign policy successes, including the negotiated handover of the Panama Canal to Panama, the normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China, and finally, the establishment of peace between Egypt and Israel. All these accomplishments were made in just a single term, which is all the more impressive given that Carter was a Washington "outsider" who entered office with little experience in foreign affairs.[2] Instead of shying away from the controversies associated with each of these undertakings, Carter pushed ahead, often ignoring the personal and political costs of doing so.

Of the three impressive feats mentioned above, the last warrants more attention because Carter accomplished something in the Middle East that had eluded six previous administrations.[3] While Carter's predecessors helped negotiate interim measures like ceasefires and disengagement agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the seeming intractability of the Arab-Israeli conflict had made U.S. Presidents wary of committing their time, political capital, and prestige to resolving this issue. Carter, however, made the peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict a central priority for his administration.[4]

As soon as he entered office in January 1977, Carter worked to reconvene the Geneva Middle East Peace Conference, a multilateral forum co-chaired by the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The purpose of holding this conference was ostensibly to bring all the parties involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict – Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, and the Palestinians – together so that they could negotiate a comprehensive peace. From March to July, Carter met with each state's decision-makers to better understand their positions and to completely immerse himself in the details of the conflict. These exploratory meetings were supposed to help Carter reach some agreement between the parties but it instead highlighted their fundamental and almost irreconcilable differences. The parties spent months wrangling over the procedure and form of the conference, debating questions such as who would represent the Palestinians?

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How would the conference be structured? And, which issues would be placed on the agenda?[5]

By the end of the year, the peace process was stalemated. It was under these circumstances that Sadat made the surprising decision in November 1977 to travel to Jerusalem. In one dramatic stroke, Sadat broke the Arab taboo over negotiating with Israel and he conferred recognition upon the Jewish state, acknowledged its security needs, and promised “no more war.”[6] Frustrated by the efficacy and slow pace of multilateral negotiations, Sadat decided to circumvent Geneva by taking the diplomatic initiative and negotiating directly with Begin. The Carter administration was sidelined for much of this period when Egypt and Israel conducted bilateral talks but it very soon became apparent that without U.S. mediation, the two sides (if left alone) would be unable to reach any agreement. By the end of January 1978, Egyptian-Israeli talks had suddenly ended and each side began blaming the other for this failure, resuming an all too familiar pattern of mutual recriminations.[7]

With tensions escalating and negotiations in crisis, Carter invited a despondent Sadat to visit Camp David the next month. At the retreat, Sadat expressed his disappointment with Begin’s response to his peace initiative and argued that the peace process he had started by visiting Jerusalem had now reached a dead end.[8] Expressing sympathy for Sadat, Carter promised that the U.S. would use its influence to persuade Israel to modify some of its positions. In return for this assurance, however, the United States obtained Sadat’s word that he would continue negotiations and would cease delivering any diplomatic bombshells, or shocks, so that the U.S. could lead the talks.[9] While it would have been politically expedient for Carter to withdraw from the Middle East altogether (especially after his failure in reconvening the Geneva Conference), he ignored such advice from his aides and chose to firmly commit the United States to trilateral negotiations. Far from working towards the comprehensive peace he had initially sought, Carter had now resolved to mediate between Egypt and Israel but still held hope that others could be brought in later if a broad framework for peace could be negotiated.

Talks continued on and off until July 1978 when Sadat became so frustrated over the progress of negotiations that he suspended all future talks and contacts with Israel. At this critical time, Carter made the consequential decision to invite Sadat and Begin to join him at Camp David for a tripartite summit.[10] This was a risky decision because Carter not only exposed himself to the costs of engaging in the controversy of the Arab-Israeli conflict but he placed his prestige and political future on the line for a summit that may have ended in complete failure. Convening the Camp David Summit was therefore a daring act of statesmanship because Carter “finally decided it would be best, win or lose, to go all out” for a meeting that would be an “all-or-nothing gamble.”[11]

From September 5th-17th 1978, the Egyptian, Israeli, and American delegations met at Camp David in a final attempt to reach some sort of agreement. By bringing Begin and Sadat together in the serene, mountaintop retreat of Camp David, Carter believed the Egyptians and Israelis would be able to conclude negotiations since the two principals would be leading the talks and they would be doing so in an environment where they would be sheltered from the scrutiny of the public and the media.[12] His optimism was a little misguided because Sadat and Begin personally disliked one another and this animosity manifested itself in their meetings with Carter on day three of the summit. The heated and angry exchanges between the two leaders revealed to Carter that direct, face-to-face talks were actually counter-productive and from then on Carter and the U.S. team separated Begin and Sadat for the rest of the summit.[13]

With the talks about to break down, Carter suddenly changed the United States’ role so that instead of merely facilitating negotiations, the American delegation would now lead them.[14] Following a one, or single negotiating, text procedure, the U.S. would separate the two sides, offer an American draft proposal to each leader, receive comments, and revise their proposals until a suitable text could be mutually agreed upon.[15] This undoubtedly was an exhausting exercise but Carter was indefatigable and exhibited “bulldog-like persistence” throughout the entire process, shuttling back and forth between the Egyptian and Israeli delegations.[16] Carter involved himself head-on in some of the most serious arguments and problems that had for so long hindered progress. Throughout the summit, he effectively used the prospect of American aid and friendship as leverage to induce the parties to offer concessions and maintain diplomatic flexibility. At certain moments, Carter’s personal involvement rescued the peace process as when, for instance, he persuaded Sadat to stay at Camp David after Egypt’s President threatened to walk away on day three and day eleven.[17]

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Whatever challenges emerged, Carter kept the parties together and managed to see the negotiations through because he worked tirelessly by playing “the role of draftsman, strategist, therapist, friend, adversary, and mediator.”[18] For thirteen days, Carter did something that was quite unprecedented whereby he set aside his other responsibilities and duties to work exclusively on the Arab-Israeli conflict. The outcome from this remarkable adventure in summitry was the grand bargain – the Camp David Accords. The Accords involved two framework agreements that were very weakly linked to one another. One accord offered general guidelines on how to resolve the Palestinian issue whereas the other was specific and would serve as the basis for the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty.[19] While the outcome of Camp David was a far cry from the comprehensive peace Carter had sought, it was a diplomatic breakthrough.

Carter’s contribution to the peace process continued well after Camp David as Egypt and Israel continued negotiations to translate the text of the Camp David Accords into detailed agreements. The post-summit phase involved numerous obstacles as each side attempted to revise the terms of the Accords after being criticized back home for the concessions they had made at Camp David.[20] By the end of 1978, the prospects for peace once again looked bleak; as Carter remarked in his diary, “it is obvious that the negotiations are going backwards” and that both Israel and Egypt are “intransigent and quibbling over details.”[21] While Carter had initially sought to delegate responsibility for this phase of the negotiations to Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, he stepped in once negotiations had reached a standstill. His involvement climaxed when he led a U.S. delegation to Egypt and Israel in March 1979 to resolve the remaining differences and conclude the peace treaty between the two states.[22]

It is well past time we give Carter the full credit he deserves for helping to bring an end to the vicious cycle of violence between Egypt and Israel. Since 1979, the peace Carter helped negotiate has not only endured but it has withstood countless tests, including Sadat’s assassination in 1981, the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982, the Arab Spring in 2011, the election of President Mohamed Morsi in 2012, and the recent spate of terrorist attacks in the Sinai Peninsula. And so, despite flare-ups in Arab-Israeli tensions and Egypt’s changes in leadership and political unrest, the peace treaty has held after almost four decades, representing a stabilizing force in a region that is too often marred by turmoil and volatility.

While Carter has been often perceived as weak and politically inept, this image belies the leadership he exhibited during his presidency when he led negotiations to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Carter’s extended involvement in peace negotiations was an act of extraordinary political courage given that he had many domestic and international problems at the time to address, including midterm elections, his own presidential re-election, high inflation, sluggish economic growth, soaring oil prices, and later, the Iranian Revolution.[23] Nonetheless, his willingness to continue negotiating a peace agreement under these difficult circumstances makes Carter an inspiring and bold leader. His accomplishment serves as a model for how American leadership can successfully be used to mediate and resolve seemingly intractable issues in the Middle East and in other parts of the world.

Notes

[1] Between 1948 to 1979, there were four major wars (in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973) and a prolonged, violent conflict known as the War of Attrition between 1969 and 1970

[2] Betty Glad, “The Real Jimmy Carter,” *Foreign Policy* (January 2010), accessed March 1, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/01/21/the-real-jimmy-carter/>; William B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Washington, D.C.: the Brookings Institution, 1986), 30-32. Also see Stuart E. Eizenstat, “Jimmy Carter’s Unheralded Legacy,” *New York Times*, August 25, 2015, A19.

[3] Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America’s Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 376, 379-380.

[4] *Ibid.*, 317-320.

[5] Quandt, *Camp David*, 38-95; Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the*

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Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace (New York: Routledge, 1999), 187-221.

[6] Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 222-229; Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process, 1977-1982: In Search of Legitimacy for Peace* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 35-60; Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 448-455.

[7] Quandt, *Camp David*, 163-165; Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 344-346; Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 244-247.

[8] Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 307-308.

[9] William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 194-197; Quandt, *Camp David*, 165-176.

[10] Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 315-318; Quandt, *Camp David*, 201-205.

[11] Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 316, 318.

[12] Lawrence Wright, *Thirteen Days in September: Carter, Begin, and Sadat at Camp David* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 98, 114-115, 285.

[13] *Ibid.*, 83-84, 89-92, 97-102; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 350-359.

[14] Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 114-117, 284-286; Quandt, *Camp David*, 224-225.

[15] *Ibid.*, 152-153.

[16] Ezer Weizman, *Battle for Peace* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 362-3.

[17] Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 100-02, 116, 232-34; Quandt, *Camp David*, 238-40.

[18] Quandt, *Camp David*, 258. Stein states that "Carter displayed an extraordinary command of detail and stamina. His dogged determination and faith pushed him to find compromises when others might have willingly and easily relented. Without those qualities, the Camp David Accords would not have been signed." See Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, 252

[19] Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 361; Quandt, *Camp David*, 254-257; Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 264.

[20] Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 407-415; Quandt, *Camp David*, 263-298; Quandt, *Peace Process*, 206-228.

[21] Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 409, 412

[22] *Ibid.*, 415-426.

[23] Carter noted in his memoirs, "I realize that I spent more of my time working for possible solutions to the riddle of the Middle East peace than on any other international problem." *Ibid.*, 429. Hamilton Jordan, Carter's confidante and later chief of staff, noted in a late 1978 news interview, "there's not a single issue, domestic or foreign policy, that the President has spent more of his time and energy and resources on than his quest to bring peace to the Middle East." Hamilton Jordan, *Face the Nation*, CBS, November 12, 1978.

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Shahin Berenji is a Ph.D candidate in the Political Science Department at the University of California, Los Angeles. In his research, he applies theories and approaches from political psychology to understand why, and the conditions under which, leaders undertake peace initiatives in strategic rivalries. He studies qualitative methods, foreign-policy decision-making, diplomacy, conflict resolution, and the international relations of the Middle East