

## INTRODUCTION

The Camp David Accords, signed by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin on September 17, 1978, were a significant turning point in recent Middle East history. Praised by some for laying the foundations for peace between Egypt and Israel, the accords have also been criticized for failing to achieve a comprehensive settlement, including a resolution of the Palestinian question. But supporters and critics alike recognize the importance of what happened at Camp David, and both groups acknowledge the vital role played by the United States in reaching an agreement.

As time passes it becomes easier to assess the legacy of Camp David, though no final verdict can be rendered. For example, the essence of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel has been respected by both sides, but the full promise of peace and normal relations has not been achieved. A cold peace best describes Egyptian-Israeli relations in the mid-1980s, and some still fear that a resumption of a cold war cannot be precluded.

It is also clear that Camp David had a profound effect on inter-Arab relations, resulting in strains between Cairo and many Arab capitals. But Egypt cannot be isolated from the mainstream of Arab politics for long, and by the mid-1980s Egypt had resumed diplomatic relations with some Arab countries and had expanded its informal ties with others, without having to renounce the peace with Israel.

With hindsight, one can also see that the Camp David Accords were successful only in resolving the bilateral dispute between Egypt and Israel, and even there some minor problems remained unsettled. The

elaborate formula for addressing the Palestinian question through the establishment of an autonomous regime for the West Bank and Gaza has remained a dead letter, even though the general principle of establishing transitional arrangements that would allow Palestinians to join in negotiating a final agreement with Israel has been widely accepted.

At the time of Camp David it was generally believed that Egypt was the key to war and peace in the Middle East. If Egypt chose peace, other Arab states would eventually follow. If they did not, at least there would be no further wars. But the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 showed the limits of the slogan of “no more wars” that had grown out of Anwar Sadat’s dramatic visit to Jerusalem in November 1977.

Furthermore, the three main architects of the Camp David Accords, Anwar Sadat, Menachem Begin, and Jimmy Carter, all became disillusioned by some of the events that took place after the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Sadat was frustrated by the lack of progress in carrying out the provisions of Camp David concerning the Palestinians. He also confronted staggering domestic problems for which peace was supposed to have been a solvent. On October 6, 1981, while commemorating the 1973 war with Israel, Sadat was gunned down by Islamic extremists. Among their many charges against him were the Camp David Accords. Sadat’s successor was considerably less enthusiastic about peace with Israel.

Menachem Begin had every reason to believe in 1981 that his vision of a powerful Israel, in permanent control of Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza, would be the historical legacy of Camp David. But the Lebanon war of 1982 created great controversy within Israel and raised questions about Begin’s leadership and his dream. The casualties were high, and the effect on the fragile economy was devastating. Political cleavages deepened. Begin’s health was poor; his wife, and lifetime companion, died; and in late 1983 Begin announced that he felt obliged to relinquish the office of prime minister.

The once proud and feisty Israeli leader, who had fought for every word of the Camp David Accords as if his country’s survival depended upon it, retreated into seclusion, making no effort even to ensure the victory of his party in the 1984 elections. In the end the Labor party returned to power on a platform that rejected much of what Begin had fought so hard to achieve. Although Prime Minister Shimon Peres

presided over an awkward coalition that included many Begin supporters from the Likud bloc, clearly Labor, if able to rule without Likud, would be willing to cede control over some of the West Bank in return for peace with Jordan.

Jimmy Carter's fate was less dramatic than that of the other two Camp David protagonists. Carter received wide praise for his achievement in promoting peace between Egypt and Israel.<sup>1</sup> Even his harshest domestic critics gave him high marks for Camp David, and history will probably remember his role in promoting peace between Israel and Egypt as his finest achievement. But this apparent success was not enough to ensure his reelection in 1980, nor was it sufficient to maintain a strong bipartisan commitment to the Camp David Accords. By the mid-1980s few Americans seemed to feel that a solution to the Palestinian problem was either possible or necessary, and few showed concern that the Egyptian-Israeli peace might unravel.

American indifference to the Middle East may not, of course, mean that progress toward peace in the region is impossible. It may be that Israel and its Arab neighbors can reach agreements without help from the United States. Indeed, this would be a welcome development in Washington. But the experience of Camp David provides little evidence that the American role can be diminished without jeopardizing the prospects for peace. A review of the past may offer some thoughts about the prospects for future negotiations.

Looking at the Camp David record, some have argued that by 1977 Egypt and Israel were well on their way to making peace without the assistance of the United States. They cite as evidence secret meetings between Egyptians and Israelis that the Americans did not participate in and supposedly knew nothing about. And they also point out that both parties periodically ignored American advice.

Others maintain, however, that peace between Egypt and Israel was only possible because of the role played by the United States. Of the four agreements negotiated between Egypt and Israel from 1974 to 1979, each involved intense participation by the United States at the highest levels. No formal agreements were reached in this period or subsequently through any other means.

Neither of these perspectives is adequate. Successful Arab-Israeli negotiations clearly require more than an act of American will.

Certain preconditions are needed, especially a predisposition on the part of the Middle East parties to settle their differences through negotiations. At the same time there apparently needs to be an intermediary between Israel and its neighbors to help overcome deep distrust and historically rooted antagonism. And the United States, with its vast economic and military resources, can help to change the calculus of benefit and risk for the parties to the conflict by making bilateral commitments to them.

For Egypt and Israel, it is fair to say that peace was possible, but not inevitable, after the October 1973 war. Each party saw merit in resolving the dispute through negotiations under American auspices. But the two sides still had fundamentally different approaches to peace. Left to themselves, they would probably not have found their way to agreement.

The U.S. role became crucial because both Egypt and Israel wanted American involvement and hoped to win Washington to their point of view. Neither wanted the United States to be an entirely neutral intermediary. Neither expected the Americans to content themselves with the role of postman. Both hoped that the United States would advocate their views in their adversary's capital and would be generous in rewarding any of their concessions made in the course of negotiations. This expectation gave the United States considerable influence, but Washington was never in a position to impose terms of settlement on either Egypt or Israel.

In the course of the negotiations that led first to the Camp David Accords in September 1978 and then to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of March 1979, the United States did not resort to heavy-handed pressure on either side. Threats were rarely uttered. On most issues the United States did not have clear preferences. Whatever the parties could agree on would generally be acceptable to Washington. But the Americans did have judgments about what might be acceptable to each side, what trade-offs were possible, and what the reactions of other regional parties might be. As a result, the Americans were not shy about putting forward ideas of their own, though they were rarely wedded to them as matters of principle.

The Camp David negotiations involved the president and his secretary of state, Cyrus R. Vance, to an almost unprecedented degree. The

closest comparison was former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy in 1974–75, also in pursuit of a Middle East accord. Why the Americans were prepared to devote so much time and energy to this issue is still something of a mystery, but the memories of the October 1973 war, the threats of Soviet intervention, and the oil price shock of that year were still vivid in 1977. Although Carter did not have to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict as an actual crisis, he was aware it could quickly become one.

The United States found itself in an unusual role as a broker for an Egyptian-Israeli agreement. Only on rare occasions was Carter called on to commit the United States to a specific course of action. Mostly he was trying to urge two very strong-minded men, Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin, to make commitments to each other. To this end, Carter found himself in the role of psychotherapist, gently trying to explain to each man the problems of the other in the hope of overcoming fears and distrust. He also acted as messenger, conveying positions and impressions back and forth. On other occasions he was more the arbitrator, pressing for agreement along lines that he had determined were fair. In the end Carter tried to persuade Sadat and Begin, and through them their respective political systems, to reach a peace agreement.

All the while Carter had to pay heed to the effect his Middle East diplomacy was having on his own political position. Perhaps more than any other foreign policy issue, the Arab-Israeli conflict can take its toll on the standing of a president. Domestic politics quickly becomes intertwined with strategic analysis. Presidents rarely tackle Middle East issues with much enthusiasm, knowing they will invariably be controversial, and often intractable as well.

The record of the Camp David negotiations shows much about the power of the United States as a mediator in complex international disputes. But it also reveals serious limits on that power, limits that are deeply rooted in the nature of the American political system. Both these themes—of presidential power and the constraints on it—will be seen as the Camp David story unfolds. Central to this analysis is the idea that presidents must function within boundaries set by the electoral cycle. In practice, these political realities limit the time that a president can devote to any foreign policy issue.

By looking at American foreign policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict with domestic political realities clearly in mind, I hope to paint a convincing picture of how a president makes decisions on fateful and usually controversial matters. After setting the stage with an analysis of the American political cycle and its characteristic impact on policy-making, I turn to a detailed reconstruction of the events that led to the Camp David summit in September 1978, and eventually to the negotiated peace between Egypt and Israel the following spring.