

**How did the United States manage to broker a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt
in the Camp David Accords?**

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INTRODUCTION

In the years after Israel obtained independence, it had been at war with most of its neighbors multiple times. By the 1970s, Israel had fought its neighbors in four wars, but there was not a peace agreement between the two sides. The Camp David Accords were a vital step towards mutual peace and recognition between Israel and Egypt. In it, both agreed to an armistice and to set up a demilitarized zone between both nations, as well as other initiatives to normalize the relations between Egypt and Israel.¹ This ensured that neither would infringe upon the other's Westphalian sovereignty and that they could reach a peace. While it did not cease the tensions entirely, it played an integral role in lowering them from a breaking point. Moreover, the Camp David Accords determined the state of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, two incredibly contentious regions known jointly as Palestine. It set a path for self-determination for the Palestinians with help from Egypt, Israel, and Jordan.² However, this treaty did not come into existence without any caveats. The year leading up to the agreement was especially contentious as Jimmy Carter, the United States' president, mediated and tried to get the leaders of Israel and Egypt to come to a compromise. In doing so, Carter needed to ensure both states' conflicting demands were met in a way both could agree on. Eventually, Carter brokered a peace agreement between the two by working towards a compromise between Israel and Egypt, and ensured it would work by enforcing and specifying the terms.

¹ Camp David Accords, "Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs", 17 September 1978, <https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/camp%20david%20accords.aspx>, 7-9.

² Camp David Accords, "Israel", 3-5.

BACKGROUND

By this point, Israel had fought all of its neighbors multiple times, and because of this, was incredibly distrustful and defensive. Israel's wars with its neighbors made it extremely vital that their borders were secure and their sovereignty was well-established. The first occasion of Israel at war with its neighbors was when the British Mandate expired in May 1948 and civil war broke out in Palestine, with Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Syria joining to fight against Israel.³ This began relations with mutual hatred. The Israelis wanted a state for themselves and felt the Arabs wanted to deny them that, and the Arabs felt the Israelis were encroaching on their territory and wanted them out. The armistice was also relatively incomplete, addressing an end to the fighting but not focusing on the underlying issues or the boundaries between Israel and the Arab states.⁴ So, once Israel gained independence, it was immediately attacked on all sides, which began a distrust of their neighbors and a drive to secure their borders. Without doing so, Israel could easily be overrun by the surrounding states.

The mutual hatred and fighting between Israel and its neighbors would only continue with the Suez Crisis in 1956, the Six-Day War in 1967, and the Yom Kippur War in 1973, where Israel and its neighbors fought over the status of Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula.⁵ In these conflicts, Israel occupied all of these territories, and the Arab states had decisively been defeated on multiple occasions. In fact, after losing the Six-Day War, the Arab states met in Khartoum and stated that they would have “no recognition of Israel, no peace and no negotiations with her.”⁶ Within only twenty-five years of Israel's

³ Alan Dowty, “The Arab-Israeli Conflict,” in *Essential Israel*, ed. S. Ilan Troen and Rachel Fish, Essays for the 21st Century (Indiana University Press, 2017), 97, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1zxxz6s.8>.

Note: Lebanon joined in with the other Arab states in 1948, but was more of a symbolic participant than an active participant.

⁴ Dowty, “Conflict,” 97-98.

⁵ Dowty, “Conflict,” 98-104.

⁶ Dowty, “Conflict,” 103.

existence, it had fought most of its neighbors four times, and its neighbors were not looking for peace. This was complicated by the Cold War, by which the United States supported Israel immensely, but also supported Egypt after the Yom Kippur War.⁷ Hence, the history of Israel has been rife with conflict between Israel and its neighbors, and it seemed as if peace would be near-impossible without some external power stepping in.

Because of the state of affairs at the time of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Camp David Accords can come as a shock to both sides. On one hand, Israel withdraws from the Sinai Peninsula, giving up its largest military gain in return for normalizing its relations with Egypt.⁸ The trade-off can be seen as unfair to Israel, for it gives up most of its leverage for not much in response. However, Israel was also perceived as a belligerent power, occupying Egyptian territory and refusing to concede it until it was forced to. Both sides have their arguments, but in the end, it is clear that both sides compromised by extensively negotiating to find an agreement.

CASE STUDY

During these wars, the UN passed Resolutions 242⁹ and 338¹⁰, which called on all sides to lay down their arms and begin working towards an agreement. Resolution 242 became an integral part of UN policy towards the Arab-Israeli wars. This is part of the UN trying to set norms for dealing with conflict, and asking for both to come to an agreement. In turn, that became some of the United States' core objectives in working towards a deal: to ensure the Arabs and Israelis stopped fighting and compromised with each other.

⁷ Dowty, "Conflict," 104.

⁸ Camp David Accords, "Israel", 7-8.

⁹ United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Resolution 242," 22 November 1967.

¹⁰ United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Resolution 338," 22 October 1973.

What Each Side Wanted

In the year leading up to the Camp David Accords, the United States worked to get the Israelis and Egyptians to compromise and come to a deal. In the earliest conversations, it is clear both Israel and Egypt were steadfast in their opinions. Both nations knew what they wanted and both knew what they were not willing to concede. The Israelis wanted recognition of their right to exist, an answer to the Palestinian Question, and defensible borders.¹¹ The realist school would argue that Israel is looking for survivability in its own self-interest, and if Israel can ensure that the nations surrounding it agree that it has a right to exist and Israel can defend its borders, then it will have made significant gains in its position. Moreover, Israel wanted to display a positive image on the international stage as one who was willing to come to an agreement for mutual benefit. In addition, Israel wanted a demilitarized zone in addition to defensible borders to ensure that it would not be attacked, as well as to secure its own borders.¹² Once again, Israel wanted to secure its position once and for all with these agreements so that it could help itself. Also, the Israelis suggested to put the demilitarized zone outside of the borders because the Arab states had more land than Israel did. This is likely because Israel wanted to give as little land to the demilitarized zone as possible. Israel's demands are looking to help itself, and at the point of this conversation, they were unwilling to budge. However, the Americans needed to make an agreement not just on Israel's terms, but Egypt's terms as well.

At the time of the meeting between Egypt and the United States, Egypt had turned to the United States for help, even though the Americans supported Israel. Much like Israel, Egypt was also looking to help itself, abiding by a more realist agenda. One of the first things they ask for is equality in the amounts of weapons sold to both Israel and Egypt, with the Egyptian delegation

¹¹ Memorandum of Conversation in Jerusalem, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume VIII, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1977-August 1978", 16 February 1977, 28-31.

¹² Memorandum of Conversation in Jerusalem, "Foreign Relations", 31.

citing that the US had given about \$5 billion in weapons to Israel, and narrowing that gap would make Israel more willing to move on its goals.¹³ Because the Americans were supplying more weapons to the Israelis, Egypt's Foreign Minister argued, the Israelis assumed the United States would be more favorable to them when reaching a deal.¹⁴ The Egyptians likely also thought this, for they wanted a fair deal on their end as well. Moreover, Egypt saw the Israelis as a belligerent state, as they were unwilling to come to an agreement as of that point, for Israel saw enemies all around itself.¹⁵ Egypt wanted the following: a withdrawal from Sinai, a demilitarized zone, and a joint Gaza-West Bank state with ties to Jordan.¹⁶ Much like Israel, Egypt wanted peace, and it wanted to solve the Palestinian Question in a way that favored itself. Moreover, it also wanted a demilitarized zone, trusting that the UN would be a neutral arbiter. However, neither side saw the other as willing to budge, making it all the more difficult to compromise.

Negotiations

During negotiations, both the Egyptians and Israelis needed to consider both the international and domestic reactions. Israel's Prime Minister Menachem Begin needed to balance his own personal interests with what the Egyptians and Americans wanted as well as what Israel's parliament, the Knesset, wanted. While not as explicit, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt dealt with much the same issues, albeit with a greater focus on the international level. Hence, negotiations were complicated by these competing interests. This is especially significant when Carter updated Sadat on the negotiations with Begin: "The public handling of the talks was such that the public [...] in Israel knows that these were difficult meetings where the issues were

¹³ Memorandum of Conversation in Cairo, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume VIII, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1977–August 1978", 17 February 1977, 59-60.

¹⁴ Memorandum of Conversation in Cairo, "Foreign Relations", 59-60.

¹⁵ Memorandum of Conversation in Cairo, "Foreign Relations", 62-63.

¹⁶ Memorandum of Conversation in Cairo, "Foreign Relations", 64-65.

squarely joined.”¹⁷ Because the public knew what the meetings contained, it could put pressure on Begin to go with their demands, shifting his stance. Moreover, he had to balance that with what he personally wanted and what would make Israel look the best on the international stage. One such instance was that Begin was unwilling to withdraw from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and completely let them determine their own path.¹⁸ By conceding to all of Egypt’s demands, Israel would look submissive, which would allow for future agreements to take advantage of this. It would also make Begin look like he was caving to American and Egyptian demands, thus destroying his reputation. Hence, Israel is the holdout in Egypt’s eyes, refusing to concede anything. The Americans know this, and updated the Egyptians in a manner that shows Israeli progress while still showing Israel as the holdout rather than Egypt.¹⁹

However, Egypt also acted relatively steadfast in its beliefs, with President Sadat unable to see a way there could be a compromise. While Israel believed that its terms were the best resolution to the issue, Egypt disagreed, stating that its terms were the best to solve the situation. Egypt’s, or more specifically Sadat’s, position can be seen when he discusses why Egypt’s terms are better: “[Egypt’s] plan, as you know, is based on a true interpretation of Resolution 242, and of the obligations of all the parties as spelled out in that Resolution”.²⁰ Egypt believed that its interpretation of the UN Security Council Resolution 242 was the only correct interpretation, meaning that a different interpretation would be inherently incorrect in the eyes of the Egyptians. Moreover, Sadat referred to Begin’s position as an old and obsolete one, invoking it as such in his letters to President Carter.²¹ To Sadat, Israel was clinging onto the old ideas and thus being

¹⁷ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Egypt, “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume VIII, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1977–August 1978”, 24 March 1978, 1095.

¹⁸ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Egypt, “Foreign Relations”, 1095.

¹⁹ Note From President Carter to Egyptian President Sadat, “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume VIII, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1977–August 1978”, 23 March 1978.

²⁰ Telegram From the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume VIII, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1977–August 1978”, 26 July 1978, 1246.

²¹ Telegram From the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, “Foreign Relations”, 1246-1247.

incredibly intransigent, complicating the peace process. In order for there to be a compromise in Egypt's eyes, Begin and the Israelis must reconcile with the perceived fact that their ways are old and they must welcome a new future by giving in to Egypt's proposal. However, neither side got entirely what they wanted, as seen in the Camp David Accords itself.

The Camp David Accords

Going into the conference, the terms were generally set, but both the Egyptians and Israelis were wary of the other. The United States needed the conference to be a success because it would boost its domestic and international prestige and broaden its role as a mediator, but both sides could not be satisfied in full.²² So, compromise was of utmost importance. With this in mind, the Americans had a strategy: try to compromise with both, but at the very least, give Egypt what is minimally acceptable while giving Israel what it wants.²³ This would be favorable to the Israelis, but they were not as willing to budge as the Egyptians were. Moreover, if someone left angry, Egypt would be less of an issue than Israel, for it would seem as if the Americans are betraying their allies if they did not give Israel what they wanted. The U.S. also identified that the main issue would be Palestine, for the Arabs needed to agree to give a five-year transitional period in Palestine, which was not exactly what they wanted.²⁴ However, it was the closest thing to a compromise between the two. In the end, this is what was agreed upon: the Israelis would occupy the West Bank and the Gaza Strip until it could govern itself, then had five years as a transitional period.²⁵ Egypt wanted to come to an agreement on these territories,

²² Paper Prepared in the Department of State, "Constructing Frameworks for Peace: The Camp David Summit, August 8–September 17, 1978", undated, 14.

²³ Paper Prepared in the Department of State, "Constructing Frameworks", 14-16.

²⁴ Paper Prepared in the Department of State, "Constructing Frameworks", 13.

²⁵ Camp David Accords, "Israel", 3-5.

and got a provisional agreement. Israel also got what it wanted because it could further negotiate this.²⁶

The other major issue was of Sinai, in which the United States thought it had an advantage to have success with Egypt: no prior Israeli government was willing to return the whole of the peninsula.²⁷ This change in Israeli policy could be used as a jumping-off point for a solid conclusion on the issue of Sinai, and Egypt would have one of its main issues fulfilled because Israel would return Sinai to them. Moreover, this is the clearer half of the treaty, for it has specific locations; in contrast, the parts regarding Palestine are a bit less specific, with no date for Israel to withdraw if Palestine does not freely elect a “self-governing authority” or how to determine if that authority was freely elected.²⁸ This is generally a compromise, for both sides got most of what they wanted, but the United States gave the Israelis more of what they wanted. The Israelis got recognition, a quasi-solution to Palestine, and security on the Egyptian border, including a demilitarized zone. Egypt got some of what it wanted, for the Israelis left Sinai and the demilitarized zone was established, and while the agreement regarding Palestine was not what the Egyptians were entirely looking for, the Accords had a plan for Palestine’s future.

CONCLUSION

After working towards a compromise between Israel and Egypt, Carter was able to broker and sign the Camp David Accords, ensuring that it had characteristics of a strong agreement by enforcing mutual interests and attempting to be precise. However, it was not entirely precise in its manner, for there were some details left vague. From this case, it can be inferred that there were pathways to obtain an agreement between two states with vastly different attitudes toward a

²⁶ Briefing Paper Prepared in the Department of State and the National Security Council, “Constructing Frameworks for Peace: The Camp David Summit, August 8–September 17, 1978”, undated, 22-23.

²⁷ Briefing Paper, “Constructing Frameworks”, 23-24.

²⁸ Camp David Accords, “Israel”, 3-9.

situation. In this case, Israel and Egypt were drawn toward an agreement because they both wanted peace and the United States was a partially neutral arbiter. With institutions like the International Court of Justice, differing nations had access to a near-completely neutral arbiter to give a final decision on international issues. This would likely be made easier if the differing nations had interests for peace like the Egyptians and Israelis had.

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