

Anwar Sadat at the National Press Club, February 6, 1978



*Anwar Sadat with Frank Aukofer, February 1978.
National Press Club Archives*

To try to break a stalemate in the negotiations between Egypt and Israel that eventually led to their 1979 peace treaty—the first such agreement between Israel and an Arab state—President Jimmy Carter invited Egyptian President Anwar Sadat (1918-1981) to his retreat at Camp David, Maryland, over the weekend of February 3-5, 1978. The following Monday, Sadat delivered a speech and answered reporters' questions at a National Press Club luncheon in Washington.

Less than three months earlier, Sadat had embarked on a dramatic, historic visit to Jerusalem in an attempt to break through what he termed a "psychological barrier" that prevented resolution of the long-standing Arab-Israeli conflict, "that huge wall of suspicion, fear, hate, and misunderstanding that has for so long existed between Israel and the Arabs," as he wrote in his autobiography. Disillusioned, however, by what he called the "ridiculous" response of his Israeli counterpart, Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Sadat, according to Carter's notes of their Camp David meeting, "informed me that he is going to announce to the National Press Club Monday that [the Egyptians] will discontinue their participation in the military and political talks, that they've given Israel everything they possibly could have dreamed of a year ago, that he had 100 million Arabs with him—90 percent of the Arab world." Carter cautioned that such an action "would be a very serious blow; would make Begin look good and Sadat look like an obstacle to peace." Carter and his advisers proposed a "secret strategy," in the words of

National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, to break the deadlock. The subsequent Press Club talk reflected Sadat's revived faith in the peace process.

Israel and its Arab neighbors had fought four wars since 1948, when Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, along with a small number of forces from other Arab countries, attacked Israel after it founded a new state on territory allotted for that purpose under the 1947 UN General Assembly Partition Resolution that the Arab states had declared invalid. Israel gained additional territory before an armistice was signed. During the 1967 Six-Day War that Israel launched in response to planned attacks by Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, Israeli forces took control of the Sinai peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt; the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, from Jordan; and the Golan Heights from Syria. Sadat, who assumed the presidency of Egypt on September 28, 1970, proposed a peace initiative in February 1971 to reopen the Suez Canal if Israeli troops would withdraw from the east bank of the canal as the first step in an agreement to be based on UN Security Council Resolution 242, which had been passed after the 1967 war. The resolution required Israel to withdraw "from territories occupied in the recent conflict" and demanded that all involved nations respect and acknowledge "the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force." Resolution 242, in addition, recognized "the necessity . . . for achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem." Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir rejected linking a withdrawal from the canal area with a commitment to withdraw from pre-1967 controlled territories.

Deciding that he must go to war to force Israel's withdrawal, Sadat, along with Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, sent forces to attack Israel in October 1973 in what became known as the Yom Kippur War. Israelis suffered heavy casualties and acknowledged their vulnerability, while the war restored pride and confidence to their Egyptian enemies. In the three years that followed, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy between enemy leaders who would not meet face-to-face achieved disengagement agreements and averted new outbreaks of war, but failed to reach a comprehensive solution. On October 1, 1977, the U.S. and the Soviet Union issued a joint communiqué calling for the convening of a Geneva peace conference to solve the Middle East conflict "in its entirety." Preparations for the conference, however, soon became bogged down with procedural issues.

Sadat shocked the world when he traveled to Jerusalem on November 19, 1977, to seek, as he told the Israeli Knesset in a speech broadcast around the world, "the radical solution that would steer us to permanent peace." Acknowledging that "we used to reject you," Sadat now announced to Israelis, "In all sincerity I tell you we welcome you among us with full security and safety." At the risk of alienating other Arab nations, Sadat proposed a peace agreement based on Resolution 242 that would guarantee the right of Israel to live in peace within secure borders and the right of self-determination to the Palestinian people, "including their right to establish their own state."

Begin's coalition, the Likud, had come to power in May 1977 on a platform that proclaimed Israel's sovereignty should extend "between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan," an area including West Bank territory controlled by Israel that Jordan had annexed in 1950. The Likud considered the land an integral part of the traditional Jewish homeland. An ardent Zionist since his adolescent years in Poland, Begin, whose parents and brother died in the Holocaust, remained staunchly opposed to Palestinian statehood. He questioned Egyptian motives for wanting "to establish a terrorist state on their (the Israelis') doorstep, so that it could massacre women and children," as Egypt's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohamed Ibrahim Kamel, recalled in his memoir. Begin argued that Resolution 242 did not necessarily apply to the West Bank, Gaza, and Golan Heights, and that the pre-1967 border was not a secure one.

Begin wished to limit negotiations with Sadat to a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement not linked to the Palestinian situation. In response to Sadat's initiative, Begin traveled to Ismailia, Egypt, in December 1977 and offered his own plan for a phased withdrawal from the Sinai—without dismantling settlements Israel had built there since 1967—and limited "home rule" in the West Bank and Gaza, granting inhabitants "administrative autonomy" that would insure Israeli military and police control. Although each leader vowed never to give up "a single inch" of "sacred" land, they did agree to set up political and military negotiating committees.

When the Israelis began on January 4, 1978, to build four new settlements in the disputed Sinai region, Sadat was furious. Following a divisive speech by Begin on January 18 to the political committee then meeting in Jerusalem, Sadat recalled his delegation. As the Israelis prepared for a possible war, Carter invited Sadat to Camp David to consider ways to pressure Begin. When Sadat insisted that the U.S. become the "arbiter" in the dispute and that Israel would only take seriously an American proposal, Carter and his advisers suggested that Sadat first propose an initiative that included elements the Israelis likely would refuse. The U.S. later would submit a compromise proposal emphasizing the positive aspects of Begin's autonomy plan, but limiting it to a transitional phase, with a permanent agreement to be negotiated later. Domestic and international pressure, they hoped, would force Begin to agree to the modification and allow negotiations over the Sinai to proceed without impediment.

Although the plan never came to fruition, William B. Quandt, the National Security Council expert on Arab-Israeli affairs who took part in the meetings with Sadat, surmised that the talks had induced Sadat to shift gradually to the idea that a bilateral framework for peace between Egypt and Israel could be separated from a framework for overall peace in the Middle East. "The seed of the idea," Quandt wrote, "seems to have been planted at Camp David in February, and it came to fruition seven months later, again at Camp David, this time with Begin present to remove any last doubts about the possibility of linking progress on Sinai to the larger Palestinian question." Quandt also believed that the February meeting "forged a genuine friendship" between Carter and Sadat that facilitated later negotiations.

Sadat and Begin signed the Camp David Accords on September 17, 1978, after thirteen days of intensive negotiations brokered by Carter. Consisting of two separate frameworks, the Accords did not make the framework for an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty dependent on its framework for a comprehensive Middle East peace. The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of March 26, 1979, achieved through Carter's vigorous mediation and guarantees, officially brought an end to the state of war between the two countries as Israel agreed to withdraw all forces and civilians from the Sinai and Egypt recognized Israel's sovereignty. As historian Benny Morris has noted, the Camp David Accords served as the basis for the Israel-PLO accords signed in Oslo, Cairo, and Washington in 1993-95 and also influenced the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty.

Sadat and Begin jointly received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978. (Carter was ineligible as he had not been nominated by the February 1 deadline, though the Norwegian Nobel Committee attempted unsuccessfully to add his name. He ultimately received the prize in 2002 "for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts," in the words of the committee.) In response to the treaty, all other Arab states, with the exception of Sudan and Oman, severed diplomatic ties with Egypt until the mid-1980s. On September 3, 1981, seven months before Israel was set to withdraw completely from the Sinai, Sadat ordered mass arrests in Egypt of more than 1,500 individuals, including opposition leaders and those who had publicly criticized the peace treaty, so that the Israeli evacuation could proceed without disruptions. On October 6, as he viewed a military parade celebrating the anniversary of Egypt's October 1973 victory over Israel, Sadat was assassinated by jihadists angered at the arrests and intent on inciting a revolution and establishing an Islamic regime.

The final Israeli withdrawal from Sinai proceeded as planned on April 25, 1982, even though talks begun in May 1979 to implement autonomy for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza failed and Israel embarked on an extensive new settlement-building policy in those territories. While hostilities between Israel and Egypt have not again erupted into war, historians use the term "cold peace" to describe the subsequent antagonistic relationship between the two countries.

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