

Menachem Begin at the National Press Club, March 23, 1978



Menachem Begin, March 23, 1978. Photo by Brian Alpert-Keystone. National Press Club Archives

Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (1913-1992) came to Washington in March 1978 for his third set of talks with President Jimmy Carter since Begin's election in May 1977, negotiations that eventually led to the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, the first such agreement between Israel and an Arab state. Begin had described his first visit to the White House in July 1977 as "one of the best days in my life, having met the President of the United States, having learned that this is a man, a great friend of humanity, a man of great understanding and feeling and, therefore, as I can say now wholeheartedly, a great friend of Israel." In contrast, after the March 1978 meetings with Carter and his advisers, Begin told a gathering in New York of some 700 leaders of Jewish organizations, "The last three days in Washington were the most difficult days in my life." A few weeks prior to the meetings, Begin had announced that the requirement stated in UN Security Council Resolution 242 for Israeli armed forces to withdraw from territories occupied in the 1967 Six Day War did not apply necessarily to the West Bank—which Begin referred to by the biblical names Judea and Samaria—or the Gaza Strip, as these were "liberated," not conquered or occupied, territories. In response, Carter, the first U.S. president to support publicly the creation of a Palestinian "homeland," charged that Israeli settlements in occupied territories were "illegal" and "an obstacle to peace."

Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan noted the "fury in [Carter's] cold blue eyes" as he spoke with Begin. *Newsweek* quoted a U.S. participant in the talks

who described Begin as sitting “with his eyes downcast, his hands clasped in front of him, not speaking very much.” Before leaving town, Begin gave a luncheon speech at the National Press Club that was identified by the *Washington Post* as Begin’s “major address during his current trip” and perceived by the press as an opportunity for Begin to take his case to the American public. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that in the speech, Begin “struck a combative note, bluntly defending Israel’s right to build new settlements on the West Bank of the Jordan River and his nation’s refusal to yield the West Bank.”

Begin argued that the disputed areas were crucial for Israel’s security. He called attention to the Palestinian National Charter, created in 1964 by the nascent Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) that called for the destruction of the Jewish state through armed struggle. He reminded his audience of the PLO terrorist incursion and bus hijacking on March 11 that resulted in more than 30 civilian deaths. Israel’s response, an invasion into southern Lebanon to destroy PLO bases and create a buffer zone along the Israeli border that Christian militia would control, was thought by Carter to be “a terrible overreaction,” as, he wrote in his autobiography, “more than a thousand noncombatants were killed and more than a hundred thousand left homeless.”

After meeting with Begin, Carter told members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that “the diplomatic process has come to a halt.” Rumors spread that the U.S. was trying to force Begin to resign. Begin’s defense minister, Ezer Weizman, who prior to the talks himself had threatened to resign unless Begin ordered a freeze on the building of new settlements, now issued a call for a “national peace government” to include members of the opposition Labor party in order to “show President Carter a united people and a united government.” The fledgling “Peace Now” movement held the largest political demonstration in Israel’s history on April 1, attracting 40,000 protesters. By the end of May, some 100,000 people had signed the group’s petitions calling for a shift in the government’s policies.

Begin’s Peace Proposals

The Begin-Carter disagreement marked a nadir in the 1977-79 peace process that had begun four months earlier when Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat embarked on an historic visit to Jerusalem to try to break through what he termed a “psychological barrier” that prevented resolution of the long-standing Arab-Israeli conflict. In response to Sadat’s visit, Begin brought two detailed peace proposals—one covering withdrawal from the Sinai, the other presenting an autonomy plan for West Bank and Gaza inhabitants—to Carter in December 1977 to obtain his support prior to Begin’s second meeting with Sadat. The first proposal stipulated that Israel would withdraw from the Sinai on the condition that existing Israeli settlements could remain there. The second proposal abolished the existing Israeli military government in the West Bank and Gaza and granted

self-rule to Palestinian Arabs living there. An elected administrative council would operate departments dealing with internal affairs, though Israel would remain responsible for security and public order. Residents could choose to become Israeli or Jordanian citizens. Any Israeli would be entitled to settle in the administered areas. Israeli sovereignty would extend only to the 1967 borders, he told Carter, a stipulation that would change before the proposal was presented to Sadat to read that while "Israel stands by its right and claim of sovereignty," the question of sovereignty would remain open in the interests of agreement and peace. The whole plan was to be reviewed after a five-year period. Begin argued that the autonomy proposed for Palestinian Arabs was unprecedented historically. "They have been ruled all the time, by the Turks for generations, by the British for decades, and by the Jordanians for twenty years. And to tell the truth, by us as well," he stated. "Now they will really receive their self-administration."

Carter reacted positively to the Sinai proposal, but found the autonomy plan inadequate. His national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, however, suggested that if it was viewed as an interim agreement, it "could provide the point of departure for constructive negotiations," as he stated in dictated notes documenting the meetings. Brzezinski believed that Begin was "torn by two conflicting pulls: one, that of a religious and historical zealot, who really wants to hang on to what he calls Judea and Samaria; and the other by a sense of history and opportunity, perhaps even eternity, in the sense that he now has the genuine chance to create peace, which would be monumental in scope."

Brzezinski himself was motivated by a sense of history. According to William B. Quandt, the Arab-Israeli affairs expert on Brzezinski's National Security Council staff, Brzezinski "clearly hoped to achieve the stature of his predecessor and academic rival, Henry Kissinger." He saw the Sadat-Begin talks fundamentally in terms of Cold War strategic maneuvering and emphasized to Begin that "peace right now would exclude the Russians from the Middle East and therefore would have far-reaching positive consequences both for Israel and for the United States from the Cold War political standpoint." Brzezinski recommended flexibility to Begin and a shift in terminology to facilitate acceptance by the Egyptians and other potentially amenable Arab leaders.

The White House statement following the December 1977 meetings adhered to Brzezinski's outlook, noting, "The President expressed his appreciation for the Prime Minister's constructive approach and his conviction that Prime Minister Begin and President Sadat, together, are taking important steps down the road to a just and comprehensive peace." In an end of the year televised interview with broadcast journalists, Carter remarked, "I think Prime Minister Begin has taken a long step forward in offering to President Sadat, and indirectly to the Palestinians, self-rule." In his autobiography, however, Carter added a note of foreboding: "Begin sounded much more flexible regarding the West Bank than I had expected, but I was to discover that his good words had multiple meanings,

which my advisers and I did not understand at the time.”

Begin and Sadat held their second meeting on December 25 at Ismailia, Egypt, but failed to reach agreement on substantial issues, although Sadat did accept Begin’s proposal to convene political and military negotiating committees. On January 4, the Israeli government began work on four new settlements in the Sinai, angering both Sadat and Carter. Two weeks later, Sadat recalled his delegation from the political committee meeting in Jerusalem after Begin delivered a divisive speech that offended the Egyptians. To revive the peace process, Carter invited Sadat to Camp David for talks in February 1978 to consider ways to pressure Begin. Carter and his advisers urged Sadat to submit a tough counterproposal so that a more moderate U.S. plan later could be offered to Begin as a compromise. The U.S. proposal would employ elements of Begin’s autonomy plan during a transitional period, with a commitment to forge a permanent agreement later.

Background

Begin’s insistence on retaining military control of the West Bank and Gaza, and allowing Israeli settlements to remain stemmed from the traditional Jewish religious belief that *Eretz Yisrael*, the biblical Land of Israel—which included those areas—had been promised to the Jewish people in a covenant with God as the place for them to build a society in conformance with God’s law that would serve as an example for other nations. In the late 19th century, modern Zionism emerged as an international political movement when religious and secular Jewish adherents, alarmed by the rise in virulent anti-Semitism in Europe, created institutions to foster a national feeling among Jews, lobby world opinion to support the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine—which had been part of the Ottoman Empire since the early 16th century—and encourage Jewish immigration there. Many Zionists doubted that full assimilation of Jews into European societies would ever occur.

Following the defeat of the Ottoman Turks in World War I, Britain received a mandate from the Allied powers to oversee the administration of Palestine and Transjordan, an area east of the Jordan River consisting of 80 percent of the mandated land. British Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill separated the two areas administratively and recognized Abdullah Ibn Husayn as emir of Transjordan. During the war, Sir Henry McMahon, the British high commissioner in Cairo, had promised the sharif of Mecca that Britain would support the goal of Arab independence within certain areas of the Ottoman Empire in exchange for a military alliance against the Turks. The Arabs later contended that those areas included Palestine. British Foreign Secretary Lord Arthur James Balfour, however, had issued a “declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations” in November 1917. The Balfour Declaration stated: “His Majesty’s Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish

people and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.” Britain issued the declaration for a host of reasons. Balfour and Premier David Lloyd-George sincerely believed in the Zionist cause. A “strong, free Jewish state,” Churchill had stated earlier, would be “an immense advantage to the British Empire.” Britain conformed its policy to an earlier declaration by France that promised to assist with “the renaissance of the Jewish nationality in that land from which the people of Israel were exiled so many centuries ago.”

In July 1922, the League of Nations approved the British Mandate, endorsed the Balfour Declaration, and stipulated, “The Mandatory shall be responsible for placing the country under such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish national home.” Although mainstream Zionist leaders accepted the mandate, the World Union of Zionist Revisionists, founded in 1925 by Begin’s mentor Ze’ev Vladimir Jabotinsky, insisted that the mandate be revised to include Transjordan in the future Jewish state. Begin spoke of Jabotinsky as “the greatest influence in my life” and considered himself to be his successor. Some have suggested that Jabotinsky’s idea of “national-cultural autonomy” for Palestinian Arabs living in a Jewish majority state may have inspired the proposal Begin brought to Carter and Sadat in December 1977.

Begin’s father had been an early Zionist in the Eastern European border town of Brest-Litovsk (Brisk) where Begin was born. “From my early youth,” Begin wrote in an autobiographical account, *The Revolt*, “I had been taught by my father—who, as I was later told, went to his death at Nazi hands voicing the liturgical declaration of faith in God and singing the Hebrew national anthem, ‘Hatikvah,’—that we Jews were to return to Eretz Israel. Not to ‘go’ or ‘travel’ or ‘come’—but to *return*.” Begin joined the Revisionist youth movement, Betar, at age 15 and later married the daughter of a Revisionist activist. At the third world convention of Betar held at Warsaw in 1938, Begin, who had studied law at Warsaw University, gained prominence speaking for the younger, more radical, generation of Revisionists. He challenged the strategy of “political Zionism” that relied on diplomacy and moral suasion to advance its agenda, criticizing its ineffectiveness. Inspired by the Italian reunification battles of the 19th century and the Irish rebellion against the British, Begin advocated “militant Zionism”—armed struggle in a war of national liberation. “We want to fight,” he told the convention, “to die or triumph!” Although Jabotinsky and most of his followers had left the World Zionist Organization a few years earlier after the latter group refused to clearly state demands for an independent Jewish state, he contended that “conscience in the world” was still their best hope for success. Jabotinsky reminded Begin of “the disproportion of Jewish and Arab military forces in Eretz Israel” and argued that such a war as Begin envisioned would be suicidal.

Disputes between Jews and Arabs living in Palestine had erupted into cycles of rioting and large-scale violent attacks beginning in 1929 as Jewish immigration and land purchases increased, Arab peasants were dislocated, competition between Jews and Arabs for jobs intensified, Palestinian national consciousness began to form, and separation between the two communities grew sharper as what social scientists have called a “dual society” emerged. Hostility became more acute between 1933 and 1939, a period of boycotts, atrocities, and a general strike known as the Arab Revolt.

In response to the increased violence, the Palestine Royal Commission, known also as the Peel Commission, recommended in 1937 termination of the British Mandate and partitioning of Palestine between Arabs and Jews with transfers of populations to reduce conflict. The plan called for the creation of a small Jewish state in less than 20 percent of Palestine and the unification of the rest of Palestine with Transjordan into a single Arab state. Although Zionist leaders in Palestine believed that future expansion might follow the establishment of a small state, the Zionist Congress meeting that year in Zurich found the specific proposal “unacceptable,” but did not reject the idea of partition. The Arab Higher Committee—the leaders of the Arab Revolt—and Revisionist Zionists rejected both the plan and the principle of partition.

Two years later, in May 1939, British Colonial Secretary Malcolm MacDonald issued a White Paper setting out a new policy for Palestine. The document judged both that the framers of the mandate “could not have intended that Palestine should be converted into a Jewish State against the will of the Arab population of the country” and also that the McMahon pledge did not form “a just basis for the claim that Palestine should be converted into an Arab State.” McDonald’s solution was an independent state to be created within 10 years “in which Arabs and Jews share government in such a way as to ensure that the essential interests of each community are safeguarded.” The White Paper blamed the Arab Revolt on Arab fears that Jewish immigration “will continue indefinitely until the Jewish population is in a position to dominate them.” Britain thus placed a five-year quota of 75,000 Jewish immigrants to Palestine—during a period in which millions of Jews perished in Nazi persecutions—and imposed severe restrictions on Jewish acquisition of land. Following the initial five-year period, the White Paper stipulated, “no further Jewish immigration will be permitted unless the Arabs of Palestine are prepared to acquiesce in it.” As with the Peel Commission proposal, the Arab Higher Committee rejected the White Paper.

For Begin, the White Paper was the last in a series of British political maneuvers—including the Balfour Declaration, the British Mandate, and the Peel Commission’s partition plan—that gave evidence of a longstanding “British Master Plan” to gain dominance over strategically-situated Palestine without having to annex it. Instead, Begin charged, Britain had convinced the world community to sanction it as the protector of Jewish immigrants, whom they made

sure to limit in numbers so as not to be threatening. “The aim,” he charged in *The Revolt*, “was to maintain the British government’s control over Eretz Israel with a number of ‘protected Jews’ in the midst of an Arab sea, whose waves would be ruled by the traditional rulers of the waves.”

Appointed commissioner of Polish Betar in 1939, Begin led a group of more than 1,000 Betar members to the Rumanian border, planning to immigrate to Palestine, but they were turned back. Begin finally arrived in Palestine in 1942 after having withstood imprisonment in a Soviet gulag, an experience he later documented in the prison memoir, *White Nights*. In 1943, Begin assumed command of the Revisionist-affiliated underground resistance movement, the Irgun Zvai Leumi. On February 1, 1944, he declared a revolt against the British—who had been preventing Jewish refugees from Nazi-controlled areas from reaching Palestine—to try to force them to leave.

Begin later distinguished the actions of the Irgun from terrorism. “We were not a ‘terrorist’ group,” he wrote in *The Revolt*, “neither in the structure of our organization, in our methods of warfare, nor in spirit.” He argued that their purpose was the opposite of terrorism, not “to instill fear but to eradicate it.” During Begin’s years as commander, the Irgun was involved in a series of controversial actions, including a coordinated attack on two British police stations; the blowing up of a wing of the King David Hotel, part of which served as British military headquarters; the execution of two British sergeants to retaliate for the hanging of three Jewish resistance fighters; a massacre in the Arab village of Deir Yassir that left more than 250 civilians dead, including approximately one hundred women and children; and the attempted landing at Tel Aviv of a munitions ship against the wishes of the Israeli government, an incident that led to a battle between Irgun fighters and the Israeli Defense Forces in which eighteen persons died. Such actions provoked outrage among other Zionists. Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, called the Irgun “the enemy of the Jewish people.” The Haganah, the Jewish defense force prior to independence, cooperated with the Irgun at times, but also captured Irgun fighters and turned them over to the British. Begin refused to retaliate, however, fearing that a civil war might ensue.

After Israeli independence was declared in May 1948, Begin formed the Herut (Freedom) party in opposition to Ben-Gurion’s Labor government with the stated principle that “The Hebrew homeland, whose territory extends on both sides of the Jordan, is a single historical and geographical entity.” In 1950, when Jordan’s King Abdullah annexed the West Bank, Begin called for a no confidence vote against the Israeli government, which, Begin charged, acquiesced in the annexation. Begin vowed, “When another government will come – and it will come – it will announce that this signature is invalid. The whole of *Eretz Yisrael* belongs to the people of Israel, and we shall not recognize Abdullah’s right, nor that of the British, to rule over a single inch of our homeland.”

Begin remained in the opposition until 1967, when he and others induced the cabinet of Prime Minister Levi Eshkol to form a unity government prior to the Six Day War. Begin became a cabinet minister without portfolio. One historian has called this first entry of Begin into the government, “a revolutionary change in Israeli political history.” Begin told one of his biographers that he understood his role in the years following the war as that of a “watchdog” to make sure Israel would not withdraw from the occupied territories. Begin resigned from the government in 1970 when Prime Minister Golda Meir informed the U.S. and the Knesset that Israel was going to abide by UN Security Council Resolution 242 in conformance with the plan set forth by the U.S. Secretary of State, William Rogers, which Begin opposed. In September 1973, Begin formed the Likud coalition, which later gained support from voters dissatisfied with the scandals and feuds that plagued the government following the October 1973 Yom Kippur War. In addition, the Likud also attracted Jews from families that had emigrated from Muslim countries in the 1950s and 1960s and held anti-Arab attitudes.

The Likud victory in the 1977 elections marked what many have termed a “political earthquake” in the history of Israeli politics. Two days after winning the election, Begin visited a settlement on the West Bank that had been started illegally by the religious fundamentalist group Gush Emunim. Begin announced to the settlers and the press, “A Jew has every right to settle these liberated territories of the Jewish land.” Accompanying Begin, former Lt. Gen. Ariel Sharon—who soon would become Begin’s minister of agriculture—contended that the election showed that “the West Bank is part of Israel and we will stay here forever.” During Begin’s six years in office, the number of settlers in the occupied territories increased from 3,200 to 28,400. By 2014, there were more than 372,000 settlers in the West Bank.

Aftermath

Following the Begin-Carter meetings in March 1978, Defense Minister Weizman met with Sadat, who discussed with him a new autonomy proposal that Weizman thought was similar to Begin’s. Sadat proposed that the West Bank and Gaza would be demilitarized; Israel would retain a small number of military bases there; the area would be administered by executive and legislative councils made up of representatives from Jordan, the local population, and Israel; existing settlements would remain and Jews would be able to buy state lands. In addition, Sadat assured Weizman that there would be no Palestinian state, saying, “I have excluded the PLO from my lexicon. By their own behavior, they have excluded themselves from the negotiations.” The next day, however, Sadat phoned Weizman to report that he had met with Palestinian representatives from Gaza who rejected his plan and thus he could not stand by the previous day’s proposal.

Weizman encouraged Sadat to conclude the Israel-Egypt peace treaty as a

first stage before a more comprehensive solution was sought. Quandt has written that Sadat by this time probably had begun to accept the idea that a bilateral framework for peace between Egypt and Israel could be separated from a framework for overall peace. When Carter, Sadat, and Begin met for 13 days at Camp David in September 1978, this formula prevailed. The Camp David Accords, consisting of two separate frameworks, did not make the framework for an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty dependent on its framework for a comprehensive Middle East peace. 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.

The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of March 26, 1979, 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—a concession Begin was loathe to make, but one he accepted in the interests of peace—and Egypt recognized Israel's sovereignty. When he signed the peace treaty in 1979, Begin stated it was “the third greatest day of my life,” placing it just below the day in May 1948 when Israeli independence was proclaimed and the day in 1967 when Jerusalem was reunified as one city.

Both Moshe Dayan and Ezer Weizman resigned from Begin's cabinet due to differences with Begin pertaining to the occupied territories. Although autonomy negotiations regarding the West Bank and Gaza began in May 1979, they ended in 1982 without substantial agreements between Egyptian and Israeli negotiators. The PLO was excluded from the talks, and West Bank and Gaza residents, in addition to Jordanian officials, refused to participate. Begin continued to support the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza until he resigned from office in 1983.

While Begin never explained the reason for his resignation and subsequent withdrawal from public life until his death in 1992, most commentators cite three major reasons: the death of his wife in November 1982; his failing health; and consequences of the Lebanon War that he and Ariel Sharon, then his defense minister, initiated in 1982 to remove the PLO from southern Lebanon. The war soon escalated into a campaign to restore a Maronite Christian government, force Syrian troops out, and more generally cripple the PLO. The ongoing war deeply divided Israeli society, and Begin faced widespread condemnation for a bombing campaign and siege of Beirut that lasted ten weeks. A commission investigating large-scale massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla led by Phalangist militia groups found that Begin “was not a party to the decision to have the Phalangists move into the camps,” but concluded that his “lack of involvement in the entire matter casts on him a certain degree of responsibility.” A vigil of war protesters marched daily outside his house with signs reminding onlookers of the number of soldiers killed in the war. A lifelong friend said that Begin refused to have police force the protesters to leave,

believing he had a responsibility to face the consequences of his actions.

Sadat and Begin jointly received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978. In his acceptance speech, Begin declared, "This is our common maxim and belief – that if through your efforts and sacrifices you win liberty and with it the prospect of peace, then work for peace because there is no mission in life more sacred." At Begin's death, Riyad Malki, a Palestinian professor and political activist, stated: "For us, Mr. Begin meant the total opposition to Palestinian national rights, but I have to acknowledge that as a leader, he was excellent and accomplished many things. He was sincere, totally committed to his cause. His strength was felt by friends and opponents alike." In an obituary, journalist Eric Silver, one of Begin's biographers, summed up the most significant consequences of his time in office: "As prime minister, Begin left his people three enduring, sometimes conflicting, legacies. He demonstrated that it was possible to make a lasting peace with one of Israel's Arab neighbors. He fostered a pattern of Jewish settlement in the populated hill country of the West Bank that will make it harder, if not impossible, to repartition Palestine between Jew and Arab. And he brought the Middle Eastern Jews into the mainstream of Israeli democratic life."

-- Alan Gevinson, *Special Assistant to the Chief,*
National Audio-Visual Conservation Center, Library of Congress

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