

HALF RIGHT AND STILL WAITING

Parsing the successes of the Israeli–Egyptian peace treaty against the failure of Camp David’s other framework agreement sheds light on the pillars of a successful security relationship, and the unique sticking points of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict

By Michael Yaffe, Lucy Kurtzer-Ellenbogen, and Robert Barron

September 2018 marked two significant anniversaries in the Israeli–Palestinian and broader Arab–Israeli conflict. One was marked prominently as opinion writers across the political and ideological spectrum joined together in proclaiming the death of the Oslo Accords—now twenty-five years past. The presiding argument is that a confluence of Israeli, Palestinian, and international geopolitical trends, and ever-shifting realities on the ground render Oslo’s vision and roadmap for peace and security an impractical or even impossible outcome. Politicians, pundits, and publics are invariably debating whether faith and investment in a viable two-state solution can be revived, or what alternative models can take its place.

Less visible during the last year, however, was reflection on the Camp David Accords—now forty years strong. Of the two documents Camp David produced, the second document—“A Framework for the Conclusion of a Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel,” negotiated by Anwar Sadat, Menachem Begin, and Jimmy Carter in September 1978—led to a peace agreement that has endured for four decades. Though the peace has remained a cold one below the elite levels of political and diplomatic exchange, the resilient security relationship between the two states has staved off mutual hostilities, enhanced security cooperation around shared threats, and turned a relationship that was once a key threat to Middle East stability into a resilient cornerstone of regional security.

Key to the consummation of Israeli–Egyptian peace was the parties’ shared acknowledgment of the mutual strategic interest and benefit to be gained. Essential to its sustainability have been the security arrangements put forward in Annex I of the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty, and the related oversight mechanism embodied in the Multilateral Force and Observers (MFO).

Meanwhile, Camp David’s first document, “A Framework for Peace in the Middle East,” remains the unfinished story of the summit. While it paved the



way for the 1993 and 1995 Oslo Accords, that formula for mutually recognized shared strategic benefit continues to elude the parties. The convergence of the two milestone anniversaries provides an opportunity to consider each process and agreement in light of the other. Camp David is generally considered a success on the exclusive basis of the resulting Israeli–Egyptian peace treaty. Less retrospective focus has been placed on the unfinished work of the first framework, and the incomplete vision of the summit: a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and a comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

△ The border fence between Israel and Egypt in southern Israel, Sept. 26, 2018. Amir Cohen/Reuters

Both the Camp David and Oslo Accords paid direct homage to the goal of peace situated in security, yet while the authors of Oslo inherited a valuable framework and exemplar from their forerunners at Camp David, the fundamental differences between the Israeli–Egyptian conflict and that between Israel and the Palestinians has limited Camp David’s applicability to the latter. While one agreement was more readily able to address security as a matter of military disengagement, non-belligerency, and defense capabilities, the conclusion of the other continues to be stymied by the more challenging proposition of providing a sense of security, reliant on mutual acceptance, to two parties with zero-sum claims.

The Second Framework Agreement: Accounting for Success

The road to the Camp David summit and the resulting Israeli–Egyptian peace treaty was a rocky one. The Carter administration’s early diplomatic attempts to reconvene a Geneva conference broke down, hampered by inter-Arab disagreements and an Israeli election upset in which Begin came to power,

The Carter administration’s early diplomatic attempts to reconvene a Geneva conference broke down, hampered by inter-Arab disagreements and an Israeli election upset in which Begin came to power.

articulating a strong rejection of the concept of “land for peace.” This process also served to underscore the centrality of the Palestinian issue to any attempt at Arab–Israeli peace. Predicting the futility of the Geneva track, Sadat began his unique brand of diplomacy with Israel in mid-1977, starting a set of talks in Morocco in September that led to his groundbreaking visit to Jerusalem two months later, and his landmark speech in the

Israeli Knesset. His remarks were noteworthy, not only for the symbolism of the context, but for his emphasis on the need for a multilateral regional security approach to Arab–Israeli relations. He also stressed repeatedly that without a just solution for the Palestinians, peace would not be sustainable, and Israel could not enjoy the benefits of regional acceptance.

Accordingly, the talks over the next few months followed two lines—Sinai and the Palestinian Territories. These were difficult discussions, particularly when it came to how the West Bank and Gaza would be addressed. Begin, while rejecting any ideas about a Palestinian state or future role for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), proposed levels of “home rule” for the Palestinians but with no timeframe for advancement or clear definition of what the end state of his proposed Palestinian “entity” would be. Sadat, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and President Carter sought to define principles on final status issues related to the West Bank and Gaza. In August, the Carter administration proposed a summit meeting between the three leaders at Camp David.

An initial strategy of “linkage”—tying an Israeli–Egyptian agreement to benchmarks on the broader Jordanian–Palestinian issue—was attempted, but by the end of the summit was deemed unworkable by President Carter, who instead favored defining specific Israeli–Egyptian peace and security arrangements and using the momentum of Israeli–Egyptian peace to spur a broader agreement.

The result was two papers, the first defining mutually-agreed principles on the Palestinian issue which were meant to serve as a basis for negotiations in the months following the summit, but which instead came to effectively shape the subsequent forty years of Israeli–Palestinian peace efforts. It is often forgotten that peace between Israel and Egypt would not have been possible without this

first paper denoting intent and proposing a framework for resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The second paper, defining peace between Israel and Egypt, articulated the goals of mutual recognition—ending the state of war that had existed since 1948—normalization of relations, the complete withdrawal by Israel from the Sinai Peninsula, including leaving settlements and airfields, and freedom of navigation for Israeli ships. Egypt agreed to leave Sinai demilitarized, and both agreed to a United Nations force to monitor the area.

In the Israeli–Egyptian context, the core issue was defining a working security relationship. At once, the relationship needed to be verifiable, stable, and guaranteed by the international community, but also needed a degree of flexibility and backstopping to ensure perceived breaches did not lead to war and the end of the agreement. Between 1979 and 1982, several steps were taken to implement the agreement. In January 1980, normalized relations began between Israel and Egypt with the exchange of ambassadors; boycott laws were repealed in Egypt; and modest trade began between the two countries.

In January 1980, normalized relations began between Israel and Egypt with the exchange of ambassadors; boycott laws were repealed in Egypt; and modest trade began between the two countries.

Early on, however, a core component of the deal—a UN monitoring force—was jeopardized. Between 1980 and 1981, the UN prepared to create a peacekeeping force for Sinai. By May 1981, however, it was clear that the UN Security Council would not be able to build the consensus for such a permanent UN peacekeeping force. Negotiations began between Israel, Egypt, and the United States to create an independent peacekeeping organization to monitor both parties to ensure compliance with the treaty, and on August 3, 1981 a treaty was signed establishing the MFO. Between 1980 and 1982, Israel began preparing for a six-stage withdrawal from Sinai, while the MFO built its capacity to take over. Eight months after completing the negotiation, and six months after Sadat was killed by Egyptian Islamic Jihad, in April 1982, Israel withdrew fully from Sinai.

Since that 1982 withdrawal, the MFO has been judged to be both “servant and witness” to Israel and Egypt in fulfilling the terms of the April 1979 treaty of peace between the two countries, according to Arthur H. Hughes, who served as director-general of the Egypt–Israel Multinational Force and Observers. Several factors account for the MFO’s success and longevity, foremost being its precise and unambiguous mandate. The MFO agreement outlined the limitations on military forces and equipment within four defined zones. MFO observers, largely under U.S. leadership, were to operate checkpoints and reconnaissance

patrols, implement verification mechanisms, and monitor freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran, among other assignments.

A sense of ownership by the treaty parties has also been critical. Israel and Egypt themselves negotiated and agreed to the mandate defining peace terms and committed themselves to their implementation, including supporting the international force presence and suppressing spoilers to the agreement. Both parties designed the MFO as a mechanism solely for implementing the Security Annex in the 1979 peace treaty and continue to see sustaining the MFO as in their national interests.

Value also lies in the fact that the MFO reports directly to the treaty parties, not to the UN or another multilateral organization with its own agenda, own decision-making apparatus, and own need to accommodate all members in reaching a consensus. Therefore, the MFO is spared from the vagaries of UN politics that would likely occur when its mandate would come up for renewal annually under the UN peacekeeping system. It also maintains an active and dynamic liaison system linking the two parties to the MFO and with each other. This system helps the parties accurately assess issues in treaty implementation, facilitate communications and meetings, and promote confidence-building measures.

Further, the MFO has a sufficient degree of flexibility built into its governance structure to adapt to conditions unforeseen by the drafters of the treaty, and

Through its annual military assistance packages to Israel and Egypt, the United States includes allocations to cover the MFO dues for both countries.

benefits from a stable funding mechanism and consistent international participation. The United States is the linchpin to the entire operation. Steady American leadership and support for the MFO have been critical. Egypt, Israel, and the United States are the core and equal funders, while other nations contribute additional funds, troops, and equipment. Through its annual military assistance packages to Israel and Egypt, the United States

includes allocations to cover the MFO dues for both countries. Requiring the treaty parties to commit financially to the MFO encourages their active participation and oversight of the organization.

Finally, the MFO has an effective command structure that provides direct communication to top-level security officials on both sides, plus the United States. The MFO is led by a powerful director general (a retired senior American diplomat) who is responsible for the overall direction of the MFO, and a force commander (a non-U.S. general officer) who exercises operational control over MFO military elements in Sinai. Both leaders are selected mutually by Egypt and Israel. Military personnel come from about a dozen states, many with

peacekeeping experience. The observer component of the MFO is comprised of civilians seconded to the peacekeeping forces (mostly retired U.S. military and diplomatic officers). The sum of these factors has imbued the MFO with a steadfast record of professionalism, impartiality, reliability, and credibility with both parties. Though contributing countries have questioned the need for sustaining a robust force nearly four decades after the peace agreement, there is little appetite to curtail what is generally regarded as a successful operating formula.

Drivers of Success

Israel's and Egypt's shared strategic interests and assessment of stakes have been the principal pillars behind the success and sustainability of their peace treaty, buttressed by a solid monitoring mechanism for assuring compliance. These were two states that had fought a prolonged hot and simmering conflict for three decades from 1948 to 1978. While the power asymmetries that had long fueled Israel's existential fears were recalibrated in the 1967 Arab–Israeli War with Israel's stunning military victory, any sense of complacency Israel may

have gained was redressed by Egypt's strong performance in the 1973 war. By the time of Camp David, Israel and Egypt were two regional military powers. It became clear in the context of international, regional, and domestic events what would be gained by a deal and lost by its absence. As such, the hard-fought Camp David Accords yielded what was both achievable and necessary for both sides: a technical peace rooted in a security pact. Egypt regained Sinai,

Within the course of a decade, Israel made peace with its greatest adversary, and strengthened an invaluable alliance with the United States, which became its greatest guarantor of security.

the domestic dignity and political benefits that came with it, and a powerful role on the world stage at a time when Sadat had decided to shift Egyptian alliances in the Cold War toward the United States. Concurrently, Sadat received U.S. support for the Egyptian military and economy, which were sorely in need of aid, and a central place in U.S. regional strategy. Within the course of a decade, Israel made peace with its greatest adversary, and strengthened an invaluable alliance with the United States, which became its greatest guarantor of security. The United States facilitated what at the time seemed like a major step toward a comprehensive Middle East peace and secured an important advantage over the Soviet Union.

Key to the analysis of the success of the Egypt–Israel track over the Israeli–Palestinian one are the variables of symmetry, the relatively absent pull of ideology, and the ultimate ability for both countries to detach their fates from one another. Both Sadat and Begin were state leaders empowered to make the deal and with the necessary resources at their disposal. An agreement between Egypt and Israel entailed defining the relationship between two established

states across a clearly definable border. Comparatively, the Israelis and Egyptians could more readily agree to the necessary conditions for peace with each other because once the intent to resolve the Palestinian issue was set down with the marker of the first Camp David Accord, lines of territorial compromise between the two states were clear and defined. Neither side construed a zero-sum relationship to exist between their respective national identities or mutual existence. Sinai served as a territorial buffer for Israel while in its possession, whereas the biblical lands of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), beyond the provision of strategic depth, hold foundational religious significance within Judaism.

Therefore, for Begin and subsequent Israeli leaders, the concession of Sinai for peace with Egypt (particularly given the oversight mechanisms embedded in the agreement) was a leap and a public sell less ideologically and psychologically

The concession of Sinai for peace with Egypt was a leap and a public sell less ideologically and psychologically fraught than any territorial compromise with the Palestinians.

fraught than any territorial compromise with the Palestinians. For Egypt, a working peace with Israel came at the expense of the country's regional standing in the immediate term, and domestic opposition for which Sadat ultimately paid with his life. But the subsequent and successive national consensus underpinning the agreement's sustainability lies not just in the long-term economic and

strategic benefits that accrued, but in the country having regained its maximal territorial aspiration.

Camp David was a landmark achievement, and a heavy lift. But when juxtaposing the Israeli–Palestinian and Israeli–Egyptian agreements, the different realities and challenges become clear, and account for much of the agreement's longevity. Between Israel and Egypt, the security arrangements negotiated and described above were ultimately more readily achievable and sustainable in the turbulent regional geopolitical and public opinion environment which has often contributed to the failure of Israeli–Palestinian negotiations. Through ups and downs, while any party could pull out of the treaty, the incentives for remaining a part of the agreement, and disincentives for leaving, are very strong—particularly the threat of instability on the border and loss of American aid and goodwill. A stable Israeli–Egyptian security relationship works and remains mutually beneficial.

The MFO's resiliency is perhaps the most acute representation of this point. The reliable and mutually agreed-upon verification mechanisms of the MFO, and related security tenets of Camp David, have held up despite occasional tensions, potential breaches, attacks by insurgent groups, and an uprising in Egypt. Over the past decade especially, the Agreed Activities Mechanism, which allows

Israel and Egypt to jointly agree to Egypt's security posture in Sinai, has been an important part of this flexibility. Throughout the transitions in governance in Cairo, the Egyptian military continued its support for the MFO and used its liaison channels to maintain communications with the Israeli Defense Forces when it moved Egyptian forces in Sinai. The MFO, in turn, provided assurances to Israel and the United States that by its actions Egypt intends to live up to its treaty obligations despite the upheavals.

Further, even during the Egyptian–Israeli relationship's tensest moments in recent memory, the Camp David agreement has proven remarkably resilient. Despite the 2012 election of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi, who reportedly reconsidered the deal, it ultimately held. And setting aside ideological opposition from within his party, in favor of Egyptian security interests, Morsi went on to mediate an Israel– Hamas ceasefire. Security relations have only strengthened since the ascendance of Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in 2013, responding to a shared interest in combating and stemming the expanded presence of extremist groups in North Sinai.

Even during the Egyptian–Israeli relationship's tensest moments in recent memory, the Camp David agreement has proven remarkably resilient.

The First Framework Agreement: Unfinished Business

While often lost in the retrospective analysis of Camp David's successes, the summit's first paper was significant and deserving of attention. One can analyze and critique intent and process, but the paper represented a shift in discourse and proposed a framework toward a political agreement over a Palestinian political entity in the West Bank and Gaza that continues to shape the diplomatic paradigm.

The first paper—A Framework for Peace in the Middle East—described a five-year transitional process that would yield a self-governing Palestinian entity in the West Bank and Gaza and precipitate Israeli troop withdrawal. Egypt, Israel, and Jordan would jointly determine the “powers and responsibilities” of the elected self-governing authority, and external security and public order would be assured through the establishment of a local police force and joint patrols by Israeli and Jordanian forces to assure border security. Once the self-governing authority was in place, and before the end of the five-year period, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and elected West Bank and Gaza representatives would negotiate the ultimate status of the West Bank and Gaza and their combined relationship with their neighbors and achieve a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan. The paper also provided for a committee of Egyptian, Israeli, Jordanian, and West Bank and Gaza representatives to agree to “modalities of admission of persons displaced from the West Bank and Gaza in 1967,” and called on Egypt and Israel to work together to establish “agreed procedures

for a prompt, just, and permanent implementation of the resolution of the refugee problem.”

Despite the hopes of the Carter team, the paper faced challenges right out of the gate. The UN General Assembly rejected it on grounds of substance and process. On the former, the framework did not reach far enough in speaking

King Hussein objected to the de-linkage of Israeli–Egyptian peace from progress on the Palestinian issue, and to unilaterally designating Jordan as a negotiating party.

to Palestinian national independence or directly addressing the right of return. The UN also objected to its own exclusion and that of the PLO. Additionally, Jordan, under the leadership of King Hussein, was alienated by the accords. Chief among his concerns, King Hussein objected to the de-linkage of Israeli–Egyptian peace from progress on the Palestinian issue, and to the framework unilaterally designating Jordan as a

negotiating party for the transitional arrangement without prior consultation. Likewise, the Palestinians were disinterested in a process or agreement over which they felt no ownership, and they distrusted the motivations of the Begin government that continued settlement activity and made clear its interest in a limited autonomy for the Palestinians.

Distinct from its companion paper, the first paper was intentionally vague. It provided little detail on implementation and monitoring arrangements and left unaddressed or under-addressed issues that were central to the conflict it was seeking to resolve, including Jerusalem. While progress on a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel proceeded apace, the broader peace envisioned by the first document foundered, until echoes of its framework resurfaced in the 1993 Oslo Accords, which were followed in 1994 by an Israel–Jordan peace treaty. Oslo II (or the interim agreement) signed in 1995 eventually established self-governance for the Palestinians with the creation of the Palestinian Authority and a plan for phased Israeli troop redeployment. This time, the Palestinians were a party at the table. But as with the Camp David framework for addressing the Palestinian issue, the steps outlined at Oslo deferred dealing with core final status issues—including Jerusalem, refugees, borders, and permanent security arrangements—to future negotiations.

Accordingly, comparing the Egypt–Israel process with that designed to address the Palestinian issue, one can reasonably hone in on the framing of the agreements themselves. Drawn-out timelines, deferral of core issues, and end-game ambiguity—hallmarks of Camp David’s first framework and later Oslo—while arguably allowing time to build trust and for publics and politics to adapt, also provide space for spoilers to derail progress, erode trust, and harden attitudes. It is a catch-22 in which mutual good-faith adherence to a process can build trust and momentum, but only if there is requisite belief on each side at

the outset that the other is negotiating in good faith or has enough at stake to want to succeed. Viewed through a broader lens of security, the land-for-peace formula that proved so apt and effective in the Egypt–Israel case becomes a heavier lift for Israelis and Palestinians, whose psychological sense of long-term security is rooted in far more than non-belligerency and defense capabilities. For Israelis and Palestinians, each side’s fulfillment of its national identity relies on a claim over the same land. Negotiators and mediating third parties of Israeli–Palestinian peace are thereby tasked with crafting a process and agreement that must not only confront the parties’ relative structural challenges, but also address and withstand inevitable compromise over foundational narrative, identity, and maximal aspirations.

The MFO Model and Israeli–Palestinian Peacemaking

Camp David set both precedents and expectations for Arab–Israeli peacemaking. The MFO arrangement is a prime example. Such a model for international monitoring forces has been raised as a potential arrangement for the Israeli–Palestinian context. The idea has been entertained by both sides, including the participation of U.S., Jordanian, and NATO troops. Focused research, negotiations, and non-binding agreements between the parties on third-party assistance occurred mostly after the failed second Camp David summit between Israelis and Palestinians in July 2000.

Importantly, a key difficulty in envisioning an MFO-style arrangement for the Israeli–Palestinian context lies in examining the prospective roles and functions of third parties to an agreement that is yet to be negotiated, and for which the contours of a final settlement remain opaque. The MFO was designed to work closely with Israel and Egypt in support of a permanent peace in which both parties would be exercising sovereignty over their clearly defined respective territories, not as a buffer or interim measure between combatants. Such a political and territorial environment does not exist between the Israelis and Palestinians.

The MFO was designed to work closely with Israel and Egypt in support of a permanent peace in which both parties would be exercising sovereignty over their clearly defined respective territories, not as a buffer or interim measure between combatants.

For those who have attempted to envision an international monitoring mechanism as a part of a lasting accord between Israelis and Palestinians, certain critical assumptions have been made about a future agreement with strong echoes of the example provided by the Egypt–Israel treaty. These assumptions include a permanent end-of-conflict agreement between an Israeli and Palestinian state living peacefully side-by-side; that all major issues and claims are resolved in the agreement and all borders will be final; that Israeli forces will eventually withdraw from the West Bank to Israeli territory; that both sides accept

international force presence and assistance to help implement the permanent status agreement; and that the role, mission, organization, administration, rules of engagement, and duration for this international presence will be defined in a treaty protocol or annex.

At a time when the fate of the two-state solution is uncertain, the viability of this potential formula remains in question. Finding a security formula for the West Bank that satisfies both Israelis and Palestinians will not be easy. The current Israeli government rejects the idea of ceding security in the Jordan Valley to non-Israeli forces either leading up to, or as a part of, an Israeli–Palestinian agreement. The Palestinian leadership has shown openness to the idea of an international presence in the Jordan Valley if that is what it takes for a complete Israeli Defense Forces withdrawal and would find it difficult to accept Israeli boots on the ground of a “sovereign” Palestine. For Palestinians, a third-party presence

For Israel, cynicism toward the effectiveness of international forces in guarding against all threats is grounded in prior experience, and the unwillingness to entrust its security to anyone else, given the hostility of its neighborhood.

is preferable to the prospect of a long-term Israeli military presence that would suggest ongoing occupation. Moreover, Palestinians regard a third-party presence as, ideally, an interim measure necessary until they are fully capable of handling all security responsibilities, and therefore an expediter for realizing the end-of-conflict. For Israel, cynicism toward the effectiveness of international forces in

guarding against all threats is grounded in prior experience, and the unwillingness to entrust its security to anyone else, given the hostility of its neighborhood.

Therein lies the core challenge; without a final settlement on the central issues of the conflict, interim security arrangements may hold to a point, satisfying a number of the mutual needs of the parties to the conflict, but they are not likely to serve as a force for moving the parties toward a comprehensive agreement. To the contrary, the longer this stasis persists, the greater the chance that confidence will break down and spoilers will present themselves.

Takeaways from Two Agreements

Forty years later, Camp David’s impacts still loom large in the Middle East. Those thirteen days in September 1978 yielded a lasting peace between two once-warring states and offered a pathway and vision for Israeli–Palestinian and broader Arab–Israeli peace that paved the way to the Oslo Accords and the subsequent peace treaty between Jordan and Israel.

Key to Camp David’s achievement on the Israel–Egypt track was the ability of the parties to hone in on their shared security interests and address the related mutual requirements through a detailed implementation and monitoring plan.

But getting there required visionary leadership. While Egypt's and Israel's fates are not as inextricably tied as those of the Israelis and Palestinians, the emotional and psychological gulf still ran deep and wide, grounded in a history of multiple and mutually brutal and bruising wars. Sadat understood the power of psychologically bridging that gulf, and his trip to the Knesset was a momentous first step, without which the achievement of Camp David could not have been realized.

That same step, and the agreement that ensued, set lasting precedent and expectations among the parties central to the concept of Israeli–Palestinian and Arab–Israeli peacemaking. Addressing the former will require the parties to overcome the distinct challenges of a conflict in which both parties' national identity is wrapped up in claims to the same piece of land, and in which a sense of existential security relies, beyond defense capabilities, on acceptance, recognition of legitimacy, and a definition of a border. Israeli, Palestinian, and third-party leaders who will seize the opportunity and confront these inherent challenges with pragmatism, empathy, courage, and creativity will be essential to realizing the full vision of Camp David: a comprehensive Arab–Israeli peace, grounded in security, with a resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict at its core. 