

Sadat and His Legacy: Egypt and the World, 1977-1997

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In-Depth Reports

Introduction

Anwar Sadat remains a controversial figure in the Middle East. Praised as a prophet and cursed as a traitor, neither his death in 1981 nor the passage of time have resolved the ongoing debate about the man and his legacy. There is not yet an authoritative biography of Sadat in either Arabic or English, although Sadat himself made several efforts during his career to define himself to the Egyptian public and the world community.⁽¹⁾

Some of the controversy over Sadat arises from the fact that the future that Sadat predicted has not yet come to pass. Egypt's economy, while showing encouraging signs of life, has not yet produced prosperity for a large number of its citizens. Peace with Israel, although secure on the Egyptian border, has left the Palestinians with fewer fruits of peace than they and the Egyptians had hoped they would have. Many who have lived through the unfulfilled promises of Sadat's vision have continued to speak and act violently against his legacy.

For many, Sadat's legacy is a series of ongoing processes -- the Arab-Israeli peace process, Egyptian economic development, and political liberalization, among others -- and this surely has something to do with continuing debates over his legacy. Those with a stake in current issues speak about Sadat as a coded way to criticize current leaders and influence current developments. In Egypt in particular, debates purportedly over Sadat have served as cover for discussions about economic change, corruption, political repression, international politics, and negotiating strategy in the peace process.

The foregoing, however, is insufficient to explain the relative unease that historians and other students of the region have in finding a place for Sadat. The fact is that there remains a tension about Sadat, an inability to explain a man who appeared equally comfortable with peasants and presidents, a man who seemed at home with a feisty international press corps yet who imprisoned thousands of his domestic political opponents.

Much of this discomfort springs from Sadat's own interest in presenting himself as a statesman and world leader. Although he certainly was that, he derived his place on the world stage from his success in and knowledge of the Egyptian scene. It was in Egyptian domestic politics that Sadat learned his exquisite sense of timing, and in that same setting that he learned the importance of the dramatic gesture. It was on the Egyptian political stage that Sadat learned to create photo opportunities, and on that same stage that he learned how to build public support without the vindication of contested elections.

Most important, it was on the Egyptian stage that Anwar Sadat learned how to gain trust. He did so not by demonstrations of overwhelming force, nor by blackmailing his interlocutors with damaging information. He did so through a blend of humility and hauteur, a willingness to be underestimated, and an understanding of the importance of building confidence, step by step, with one's adversaries. Sadat used all of these skills to implement his vision for Egypt. His vision was not borne out of bureaucratic planning or academic strategizing, nor was it laden with detail. It was a visceral vision that wedded Sadat's deeply held Egyptian nationalism and his political sense of the realistic possibilities for Egypt's future. It is only through understanding Sadat in his Egyptian context that his legacy can be assessed.

Anwar Sadat's political ascendance began with his matriculation in the military academy. Previously reserved for the scions of elite and noble families, the academy opened its doors to the Egyptian middle class in May 1936.⁽²⁾ The effect was to bring together in the military the very groups that were most politically active in Egypt and most eager for a change in the status quo. These sons of clerks, low-ranking officers, and small businessmen brought into the officer corps the political ferment then present on the streets of Cairo. In the years after he entered the academy, Sadat was active in many political movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, the fascist Young Egypt, the pro-palace Iron Guard, and a secret military group called the Free Officers, which sought to liberate Egypt from British influence. He spent much of World War II in jail for aiding Germany in its efforts to force the British from Egypt. Upon his release, he resumed his political activities and emerged as part of the "inner circle" when the Free Officers overthrew the monarchy in a coup on July 23, 1952.

As a group, the Free Officers were largely unknown to the Egyptian public for months after the coup. Sadat was in no way visible among them at first, but as time passed he took on a public role as a fiery and voluble propagandist of the revolution. He was named editor of *al-Gumhuriya*, the daily paper established as a regime mouthpiece in 1953, and in its pages he became an outspoken opponent of Western imperialism. Sadat also authored a number of books in the late 1950s explaining the revolution to the Egyptian public, and he took on leadership roles in government-sponsored mass political organizations.

As factional politics swirled within the leadership of the Free Officers, from the purge of Gen. Muhammad Naguib and Col. Khalid Mohieddin in 1954 to the dismissal of the military leadership after the 1967 debacle, Sadat appeared detached from the action. Insulting caricatures of him appeared in the press, and jokes circulated about the lack of esteem he enjoyed among his colleagues. Although he was named speaker of the National Assembly in 1959 and vice president in 1969, few took him as a serious contender for power. When Gamal Abdel Nasser died and Sadat ascended to the presidency in October 1970, Department of State officers responsible for the Middle East knew almost nothing about this eighteen-year veteran of Egyptian cabinet politics, and it has been widely reported that the Central Intelligence Agency estimated he would last no longer than six months in office before a "stronger" leader emerged.

Sadat's unassuming nature may have been partly by design. In *Search for Identity*, Sadat mentions that while in prison he read an article on psychology in *Reader's Digest* that changed his life.⁽³⁾ His professing a taste for what many would consider pedestrian reading material contrasts sharply with his predecessor, whose book *Philosophy of the Revolution* drops the name of a Luigi Pirandello play that Nasser later admitted he had never read.⁽⁴⁾ Sadat's refusal to portray himself as an intellectual, as a power broker, or as a schemer surely kept him from becoming a lightning rod for political opponents, although it also subjected him to occasional ridicule and disrespect. The extent to which Sadat consciously and strategically ensured that he was underestimated will never be known, although he benefited from this assessment time after time.

Upon coming to power, Sadat acted quickly to secure his rule. He moved strongly against Ali Sabri and other leaders seeking to use the mass political party, the Arab Socialist Union, as an alternative center of leadership.

Understanding that the Soviet Union supported the Sabri faction, Sadat turned to the U.S. government for support, making an extraordinary yet secret appeal for friendship in May 1971 to Secretary of State William Rogers on the latter's trip through the region. Although Egypt and the United States did not enjoy diplomatic relations, Sadat offered to jettison Egypt's fifteen-year alliance with the Soviet Union in favor of an American arrangement. U.S. officials, who knew little of Sadat to begin with, had no idea whether the offer was serious or a kind of ploy.

On the domestic front, Sadat stepped into the shoes of a leader who ruled partly through personal charisma and partly through intimidation. Sadat changed the mix. He supervised the symbolic burning of thousands of wiretap recordings and secret police files in the courtyard of the Interior Ministry, yet the practices of wiretapping and keeping secret files continued. He jailed political opponents on more than one occasion, but he released far more to show his magnanimity. More than anything, Sadat's days as a propagandist taught him how to use images and photo opportunities to create apparent realities years before Ronald Reagan reinvented the U.S. presidency by doing the same thing. Although some considered Sadat's publicity efforts to be cynical stunts, they underestimated Sadat's sophisticated understanding of the importance of symbolism, and, further, his understanding of the role of public opinion in creating a "mood" quite apart from the exigencies of electoral politics.

In a move intended for both domestic and foreign consumption, he expelled thousands of Soviet advisers from Egypt in July 1972. In an even bolder move, Egyptian troops broke through the Bar Lev line on October 6, 1973, using water cannons to blast away a steep thirty- to sixty-foot-high sand wall on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal that had previously been thought impregnable. The dramatic crossing electrified a country demoralized by its defeat in the 1967 war. Although Egyptian troops fared less well once the element of surprise had passed and the war waged on for several weeks, even temporary success against a country that had been Egypt's foe for twenty-five years allowed Sadat to consolidate his leadership domestically.

Sadat's audacious gamble also catapulted him for the first time for consideration as a serious player in international diplomacy. Long accustomed to hanging back when his predecessor feted other world leaders, Sadat found himself being courted by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who had a reputation as a brilliant strategist and thinker. Sadat was being seen as a brilliant strategist in his own right, since his limited war against the Israelis resulted in the Egyptians regaining control over the Suez Canal, as well as what the Egyptian military to this day considers to be its principal victory in the modern era.

Sadat's emergence on the world stage, however, remained tied to his political success in Egypt. He understood the intimate relationship between success in the foreign affairs arena and popularity at home, which Nasser had so successfully constructed and manipulated, and he understood how gestures on the domestic scene could help his international position. He became a master at both. Sadat led Egypt away from the Soviet Union and into the waiting arms of the West. He dismantled many of the socialist features of the Egyptian state, and in so doing he impressed Western leaders with his sincerity, weakened his opponents, and enriched his friends. Just as the revolution's land reform program had attacked the power bases of the "feudal" class, Sadat's "economic opening," or *infitah*, in 1974 attacked the power base of the government oligarchy. Sadat also began a controlled opening of the political process, although never so much as to threaten his hand on power. Whereas each of these moves might be seen as expressions of a pro-Western stance, they all had important repercussions on the Egyptian domestic stage.

It was Sadat's mastery of the Egyptian stage that allowed him to be so successful on the international stage when the opportunity presented itself. From his experience in Egyptian politics, Sadat understood the importance of forming long-term and durable alliances to pursue long-term goals. His two primary goals upon coming to power were to regain the Sinai for Egypt and to improve the lackluster Egyptian economy. Although he was a nationalist, he understood that his goals could be achieved most readily with the support of an outside power.

Surveying the world in the early 1970s, Sadat decided an alliance with the United States offered the best prospects.

The Soviet Union had been tested and found wanting, and Sadat saw in America's close relationship with Israel an opportunity to form his own close relationship with the United States. To this end, Sadat developed an unusual rapport with the American ambassador in Cairo, Hermann Eilts, and he assiduously cultivated friendships with each of the four U.S. presidents with whom he dealt: Nixon, Ford, Carter and Reagan. In the words of Henry Kissinger:

He treated Nixon as a great statesman, Ford as the living manifestation of good-will, Carter as a missionary almost too decent for this world, and Reagan as the benevolent leader of a popular revolution, subtly appealing to each man's conception of himself and gaining the confidence of each.(5)

Sadat approached each of these men with the disarming (and, at least at the beginning, counterintuitive) premise that the United States and Egypt shared deep common interests. He offered rosy visions of a common future, and he laid out a road map to get there. At several times during American-mediated peace negotiations with Israel, Sadat slipped a secret copy of his "fall-back" positions to the U.S. president, at once showing his reasonableness and enlisting American partnership in achieving his goals.

Sadat also applied his mastery of symbolism to international relations. His decision to go to Jerusalem was breathtaking in its effect, and his landing on Israeli soil irrevocably changed the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In one gesture granting the Israelis the recognition they had been demanding for decades, Sadat at the same time won an American commitment to aid Egypt in recovering the lands Egypt had lost in war.

Sadat's decision to go to Jerusalem was surely the most dramatic of his life. It was dramatic not only because it utterly transformed the Middle East, but also because it was a supreme act of faith. Sadat decided to play his primary card -- recognition of Israel -- out of a conviction that the United States, and particularly President Carter, would not allow his effort to be in vain. The gesture becomes even more impressive when one considers that Sadat had been disappointed with Carter's election only a year before his trip to Jerusalem, and that the great trust the men had in each other had developed after only a single set of meetings between them.

Sadat's calculus depended on his assessment that he had a limited window of opportunity, and that window was closing. Without clear U.S. leadership and something approaching bilateral negotiations with the Israelis, Egyptian claims to Sinai would surely be lost in fruitless multilateral peace negotiations in Geneva. The entropy unleashed by Sadat's dramatic breeching of the Bar Lev line would dissipate, and the sole consequence of the 1973 war would be Egyptian sovereignty over the Suez Canal. The bulk of Sinai would remain under Israeli control, and any further efforts to regain Sinai for Egypt would require a massive military confrontation with the Israelis. In that event, a larger victory would prove much harder to achieve than the tactical victory of October 6, 1973. Further, the United States was anxious for a deal in 1977, and Sadat understood the prospect of harnessing American enthusiasm for significant economic development assistance.

Sadat chose the riskiest of the options before him in November 1977, at a time when the magnitude of the rewards for his actions could not have been foreseen. Sadat gambled because he must have understood that the costs of inaction were almost as great as the costs of losing, while the possible rewards for action were much greater. Sadat, and Egypt, won much from his gamble.

Sadat's leadership style has been dismissed by some as an expression of *fahlawa*, an Egyptian peasant's shrewd combination of dissimulation and flattery in the face of power.(6) Such assessments underestimate Sadat on several levels. First, they give insufficient credit to Sadat's ability to identify and achieve his goals. Sadat was opportunistic to be sure, but he also had a keen sense of the "big picture" and constantly took incremental steps to bring him closer to his objectives. Second, such assessments do not account for Sadat's ability to take dramatic and forceful steps when conditions were propitious. Once he was in power, Sadat did not play cautiously on the margins but moved daringly in pursuit of his goals. Third, such assessments play into the very image Sadat created for himself -- the *ibn*

al-balad⁷ from Mit Abul Kum who made good in the big city. The image of a village naïf helping his country may have been useful politically, but it surely does not account for the astounding success of an agitator and survivor with a truly life-long involvement in politics. It does not take fahlawa to explain the wisdom of not confronting those with overwhelming strength, and it certainly takes more than that to explain Sadat's mastery of the political scene once he became ascendant.

Sadat's calculations in positioning Egypt on the world stage are the subject of the presentations that follow, a product of a special conference commenced on the twentieth anniversary of Sadat's journey to Jerusalem. As they demonstrate, his actions were a combination of the personal and the political, a product of Sadat as an individual and Sadat as the president of Egypt.

Although he will always be remembered for his courageous leap toward peace, Sadat's ultimate legacy remains uncertain. The negotiations he started did not result in the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict, nor did they create a prosperous Egypt. In his last years, Sadat appears to have lost his "touch" in Egyptian politics, and in his final months he seemed to be turning oppressive. But it is worth remembering that Sadat's political skill brought enormous benefit to his country. Egypt now has peace on its eastern border, and in fact it faces no serious military threats from any direction. Egypt has received tens of billions of dollars of U.S. aid over the last two decades, which it has used to modernize its army and thoroughly improve its national infrastructure. Even small Egyptian villages are now connected to the electric grid, and in Egypt, the credit for that is seen to lie with Sadat rather than the United States. Egypt also has emerged as the leading state in the Arab world and in the region. Faced with a crumbling and inward-looking economy oriented toward the Soviet Union, Sadat laid the groundwork for Egyptian prosperity, even if it has not yet arrived. Sadat truly led his country, and it was his tragedy that, perhaps, he got too far ahead of the people he was leading.

The presentations that follow illustrate both the direction in which he led and the legacy of his leadership. They begin with an appreciation of the human side of Anwar Sadat by his daughter Camelia. She discusses his combination of deep nationalism and humanity, and the strength he gave to those around him by his example. Ambassador Ahmed Maher el-Sayed of Egypt, who worked on the Egyptian negotiating team during the Sadat era, lays out his perspective on the Sadat vision and its future.

The second section of this volume offers eyewitness testimony to the drama unfolding in Cairo, Jerusalem, and Washington in November 1977 as Sadat's offer to go to Jerusalem, "to the ends of the earth," became a reality. Ambassador Hermann Eilts represented the United States in Cairo, while Ambassador Elisha Ben Elissar served as a close aide to Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin. Kenneth Stein interviewed the principal U.S. participants in Middle East policy at the time and offers the view from Washington.

The third section explores the military changes brought about by Sadat's trip to Jerusalem. Maj. Gen. (ret.) Ahmed Fakhr presents the view from within the Egyptian armed forces, and Ambassador Wat Cluverius describes the view from his position as director general of the Multinational Force and Observers that monitors the peace in Sinai. Military analyst Kenneth Pollack offers his own assessment of Sadat's role in history as a great strategist.

The fourth section examines Sadat's domestic political legacy, with analyses from three professors with intimate knowledge of Egypt and the Egyptian political system -- Shimon Shamir, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, and Shibley Telhami -- and the fifth concentrates on the Egyptian-Israeli relationship. In that section, Abdel Monem Said and Ehud Ya'ari detail the fruits and occasional frustrations of peace, and Ambassador Samuel Lewis offers his insights as a long-time U.S. ambassador to Israel and a veteran of Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. In the sixth section, Peter Rodman, Ambassador Robert Pelletreau, and Robert Satloff examine the Egyptian-U.S. relationship that Sadat was so important in nurturing. Finally, Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk assesses the fundamental importance of the peace process that Anwar Sadat began and looks ahead to the future.

The conference on which this volume is based took place in November 1997. Several major policy issues were very much on the minds of the attendees at the time, as is evidenced by the discussions following the formal presentations. Just prior to the conference, the government of Egypt announced that it would not attend the fourth Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Economic Conference in Doha, Qatar. The MENA meetings have been an integral part of the ongoing Arab-Israeli peace process, and many in Washington took the Egyptian decision not to attend the Doha Conference as an intentional snub of the United States. Also in November, a crisis was brewing between Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and the UN Special Commission established to investigate and dismantle his program to develop and deploy weapons of mass destructions. The resolution of that confrontation was unclear in November; even now, with a UN-brokered diplomatic resolution averting war, the final outcome remains cloudy.

The searching discussions that followed the panels are a sign of just how relevant Sadat's diplomacy remains today, twenty years after his historic trip to Jerusalem.

Notes:

1. Most notably, *Revolt on the Nile* (New York: John Day, 1957) and *In Search of Identity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). Part of the problem may lie in irreconcilable inconsistencies between the two accounts. See David Hirst and Irene Beeson, *Sadat* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 59.
2. The ruling Wafd party opened the academy's doors wider in a nationalist move against the British. Of the eleven founding members of the Free Officers movement, eight entered the academy in its first year of more open admissions, two in the second year, and one in the third. See the table in P. J. Vatikiotis, *The Egyptian Army in Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), pp. 48-49.
3. *Search for Identity*, p. 76.
4. The play is "Six Characters in Search of an Author." See Kennett Love, *Suez: The Twice-Fought War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 411.
5. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 649.
6. For example, Raymond A. Hinnebusch, Jr., *Egyptian Politics under Sadat: The post-populist development of an authoritarian-modernizing state* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 80-81, and Hirst and Beeson, pp. 354, 356.
7. Literally, "son of the land."

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