

# American Peace Process Diplomacy: What Works? What Doesn't?

by [Martin Indyk \(/experts/martin-indyk\)](#), [Stuart Eizenstat \(/experts/stuart-eizenstat\)](#), [Susan Glasser \(/experts/susan-glasser\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### [Martin Indyk \(/experts/martin-indyk\)](#)

Martin Indyk served twice as U.S. ambassador to Israel and is the author of the just-released book, "Master of the Game: Henry Kissinger and the Art of Middle East Diplomacy" (Random House, 2021).



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Susan Glasser is a staff writer for the New Yorker and coauthor of "The Man Who Ran Washington: The Life and Times of James A. Baker III" (with Peter Baker, 2020).



Brief Analysis

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**The authors of three recent books on Henry Kissinger, Jimmy Carter, and James Baker explore the lessons that today's leaders can learn from their landmark peacemaking efforts.**

On November 24, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Martin Indyk, Stuart Eizenstat, and Susan Glasser. Indyk is a two-time U.S. ambassador to Israel and author of the just-released book *Master of the Game: Henry Kissinger and the Art of Middle East Diplomacy*. Eizenstat is former deputy secretary of the Treasury and author of *President Carter: The White House Years (2018)*. Glasser is a staff writer for the *New Yorker* and coauthor of *The Man Who Ran Washington: The Life and Times of James A. Baker III (with Peter Baker, 2020)*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## Martin Indyk

At the beginning of his tenure as secretary of state, Henry Kissinger devoted little time to Middle East diplomacy, believing that Israeli and Iranian deterrence in the Levant and Gulf, respectively, created a stable equilibrium. Yet President Nixon pushed him to stabilize the region further by working toward Middle East peace.

Kissinger originally planned to launch an initiative after Israel completed its elections in 1973, but the surprise military conflict that October forced him to change course. In his view, the Yom Kippur War created a sort of plasticity in the Middle East that he could exploit to sideline the Soviet Union in the region and mold a new American-led order.

Kissinger excelled at moving the pieces of the Middle East “game” and compelling leaders to make concessions they would rather avoid. Unlike in the 1990s, when the United States established a large military presence in the region following the Gulf War, he did not have American force to back him up. Rather than focus on grand peace plans, he applied selective pressure in order to nudge key figures and achieve discrete objectives. In 1973, for example, he used the threat of Israeli attacks to compel Egypt, Syria, and the Soviet Union to accept his proposed ceasefire. Similarly, he used Israel's postwar weakness to bend that country's leaders to his will, for instance withholding arms sales to compel key concessions on Sinai oil fields.

In short, Kissinger preferred incremental steps over dramatic gestures, order over peace, and realistic expectations over risky ideals. Yet while this conservative style worked well during the Nixon administration, it sometimes cut both ways. His aversion to making waves prevented him from using the 1973 war as a direct launching pad for an Israeli-Egyptian treaty or including Jordan in peace discussions. His greatest skill was also his greatest failure: the ability to see the danger in major regional shifts prevented him from seeing grand possibilities.

## Stuart Eizenstat

Jimmy Carter went from being a one-term Georgia governor with little foreign policy experience to a major figure in Middle East diplomacy upon the signing of the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt. Influenced strongly by his national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter believed that the gradualism of the Kissinger era had run its course and that Middle East peace would significantly expand U.S. influence in the region at Moscow's expense. The 1973 war and resulting oil crisis had wreaked havoc on the U.S. economy and contributed to his 1976 election victory. He wanted to avoid a recurrence of those crises at all costs, and thus aspired to achieve a comprehensive regional settlement.

Carter also saw the Middle East through a moral lens and deeply sympathized with the Palestinians, comparing their plight to that of African Americans back home. His convictions ran so strong that he was prepared to lose reelection if it meant achieving peace. These convictions often drew ire from Israel and American Jewry. On one occasion, for example, he made an unscripted comment about creating a Palestinian homeland, and to this day some Labor politicians in Israel believe that his remark enabled Menachem Begin's right-wing faction to ascend to power.

Regarding Carter's greatest achievement, the Camp David Accords, Egypt and Israel worked toward that outcome gradually through various covert negotiations and outreach. In the years after the 1973 war, Begin and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat both met with Romanian leaders, Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan met with King Hassan II of Morocco, and the Mossad tipped Cairo off about an assassination attempt. The two countries were even moving toward a public affirmation of their contacts via a UN Security Council conference, but Carter opposed it.

Carter initially believed he could succeed where Kissinger had failed and reach a comprehensive peace rather than just a bilateral Egypt-Israel deal. This idea failed once Syria pulled out of the negotiations. It was not until Sadat went to Jerusalem and Israel reciprocated with messages of reconciliation that Carter invited the two leaders to Camp David. There, he used his personal touch to bring them together, recognizing Sadat's political instability and maneuvering around Begin's intransigence. Crucially, he put the prestige of the presidency on the line in pursuit of peace, spending two weeks at Camp David and proposing many plans—a notable difference from the 2000 Camp David talks, which President Clinton left at one point to attend a G7 meeting.

Carter generally preferred a soft touch over Kissinger's leveraging. He never withheld arms sales to Israel; in fact, he went out of his way to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge when selling arms to Saudi Arabia. In the end, it was his relentless pursuit of peace and willingness to invest enormous political capital and energy that led to the signing of the accords.

## Susan Glasser

Like many of his predecessors, James Baker wanted nothing to do with Middle East peacemaking when he became secretary of state. He had neither Kissinger's love of the spotlight nor Carter's religious motivation and idealism. Yet Dennis Ross, his director of policy planning,

reminded him of the proven regional adage: you may not want to be involved with the Middle East, but the Middle East wants to be involved with you.

As the Cold War ended, the region remained a strategic point in the post-Soviet world—one that became inflamed when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990. This conflict and its aftermath soon became Baker's focus, with the American-led coalition victory against Saddam fostering broad support for the U.S. role in the region.

Baker also realized that the realignment in the global balance of power provided him with an opportunity to exert maximum leverage to create peace. He convened the Madrid Conference in 1991 and tirelessly sought to sit Israelis and Arabs together. Although he did not achieve a major peace agreement in the Middle East, he laid the groundwork and proof of concept for future negotiations.

Baker was very close to President George H. W. Bush. The two men greatly respected each other as peers—when Baker spoke, those listening knew he spoke for Bush (unlike, for example, when Cyrus Vance tried to speak for President Carter). Similar to Kissinger's approach, Baker used leverage to make Israel accept U.S. requests, from avoiding military involvement in the campaign against Saddam to attending the Madrid Conference.

Ultimately, Baker's involvement in the Middle East ended as it began: with unexpected events that were largely out of his control. The Soviet collapse and Saddam's invasion threw him into the region, but Bush's inability to secure a second term removed him from the scene earlier than he anticipated.

*This summary was prepared by Alex Harris and Jonah Shrock. ❖*

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