The Egyptian-Israeli Peace:

Lessons for Today

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Brief Analysis

This week marks the thirtieth anniversary of the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Reverberating across the Middle East, the accord profoundly impacted regional politics, inter-Arab relations, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although the parties, their leaders, and the neighborhood in which they operated were much different from those today, understanding how the pact was achieved provides lessons for future negotiations.

Background

The Treaty of Peace between Egypt and Israel, signed on March 26, 1979, was the fourth major Egyptian-Israeli agreement negotiated after the October 1973 war, with each previous understanding incrementally reducing the prospects of all-out war between Israel and the Arab states. Although battered by domestic discontent and regional forces, the treaty has remained intact over the years: it survived Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981, has been staunchly defended by his successor, Hosni Mubarak, and has been meticulously observed by eight different Israeli prime ministers. The treaty demonstrated that Middle East leaders, and not just foreign powers, have the power to transform regional politics.

At the time, a common fear of the Soviet Union drove the Egyptian and Israeli leaders together. Neither side wanted the Soviet Union playing a renewed role in Arab-Israeli diplomacy, while both sought Washington to steward the diplomatic process -- without getting in the way -- and to be a close ally, financier, and guarantor.

Leadership, however, ultimately catalyzed the Egyptian-Israeli treaty process. The two leaders collaborated willingly and incessantly with American mediators, and the promotion of national interests overruled all other considerations. Sadat wanted the Sinai returned to Egyptian sovereignty, and Israeli prime minister Menecham Begin aimed to remove Egypt once and for all from the Arab military orbit facing Israel. Deeply embedded ideological moorings -- for Egypt, the destruction of the state of Israel, and for Israel, the total mistrust for any Arab leader, especially an Egyptian -- were loosened. Although the treaty did not bring full normalization to Egyptian-Israeli relations, their "cold peace" has had the significant strategic benefit of removing Egypt from the circle of war in the region.

Understanding Previous Missteps

Examining how Washington handled the Arab-Israeli negotiations in the two years prior to the 1979 treaty -- a period that included many missteps -- is very useful. When the Carter administration took office, it wedded itself to a process and an outcome. The administration's formula called for Israel's withdrawal to a border near the June 1967 ceasefire line and for Henry Kissinger's successful step-by-step diplomacy to give way to a search for comprehensive peace. As such, the administration sought but failed to convene an international conference with all concerned parties, including the Palestine Liberation Organization, which refused to recognize Israel's existence. And without consulting Israel, Egypt, or the U.S. Congress, the Carter administration decided to invite the Soviet Union to play an influential role in resumed Arab-Israeli negotiations.

The initial approach of the Carter administration failed, largely because it did not understand a historical context in which both Israel and Egypt had come to despise any Soviet presence in Middle East diplomacy. In addition, the administration failed to realize that when the United States broached the idea of a conference, Sadat and Begin were already negotiating directly through their emissaries. An impatient Carter administration often aligned itself with Sadat, who wanted quick action; it viewed Israel's slowness in the negotiating process as a stalling tactic. As President Carter said on numerous occasions, "I trusted Sadat too much and Begin not enough." But unlike Egypt, where Sadat could essentially make unilateral decisions, Israel requires collective cabinet approval. The new U.S. administration can play a constructive role if misunderstandings like these can be avoided.

Lessons for Future Negotiations

With the Obama administration considering serious engagement in Arab-Israeli conflict resolution, several lessons can be gleaned from the process that led to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty:

• The reality of territorial differences. With the Egyptian experience behind them, Israelis recognize that a treaty with Syria or the Palestinians will be more difficult to negotiate because the territories under dispute have greater emotional and/or strategic worth than the Sinai. Also, no Arab leader wants to get less than what Sadat received, namely, all of the territory that was in Arab hands before the June 1967 war.

• Knowing what can be compromised. Negotiations cannot succeed when the parties do not know what they are prepared to relinquish. Agreements can only occur when all sides believe that the current status quo needs to be altered and that an accord will be beneficial to both parties in the long term. Negotiations cannot be forced on countries or leaders, especially if the outcome is seen as a national disservice. Incentives can generate engagement, but cannot substitute for commitments to end the conflict.

• Engaged parties. Without participants committed to reaching a diplomatic agreement, third-party-led negotiations cannot work. Moreover, when an American plan is foisted on Arabs and Israelis without prior consultation, both sides react with varying degrees of dismay. Since neither side wants surprises or external diktat, U.S. prescriptions have gained no traction and should be avoided. It was for this reason that summarily announced solutions such as the Rogers Plan in 1969, Carter's comprehensive effort in 1977-1978, and the Reagan Plan in 1982 all failed.

• Be prepared. Washington cannot afford to dally. It must be prepared to engage vigorously if an opportunity arises to change the status quo. For almost four months, the Carter administration refused to accept that Sadat was interested in direct negotiations with Israel. What would have happened if Sadat had been assassinated in that interim?

• Prenegotiations are critical. Narrowing the differences before arriving at a public or private summit is key to hammering out an agreement. The 1978 Egyptian-Israeli-U.S. Camp David summit was successful because American diplomats and officials spent hundreds of hours working on principles of agreement and ways to circumvent ideological or physical roadblocks. Since Israel has engaged in years of prenegotiations with both the Syrians and the Palestinians, the most recent agreements and differences should be used as an outline for jump-starting negotiations.

• Timing of U.S. entry. Washington should enter the negotiations only when positions have been narrowed, and only if needed. If another third party, such as Turkey or France, is mediating, U.S. intrusion could be counterproductive. The United States does not need to take credit for success, and should seek any agreement that enhances stability. The Oval Office or its diplomatic surrogate should be engaged only as a clarifier, bridge builder, and mediator. Washington must urge the EU, the Quartet, and the Arab states to support ongoing negotiations and to bolster agreements.

• Local leaders matter. Leaders with drive, courage, and vision are essential for successful negotiations. They must be able to generate public consensus for making compromises. If a leader is unwilling to make a necessary

ideological, philosophical, or tangible concession, no agreement is possible. Concessions are difficult but not impossible to make, and sometimes more easily made to the mediator than directly to the opponent. Both Begin and Sadat knew what they would have to give up to reach an agreement, and Kissinger and Carter persevered to achieve agreements even when breakdowns overwhelmed the moment. Sadat, however, was unique. Flamboyant, unpredictable, and without fossilized positions, Sadat pushed the negotiating process relentlessly. Although many disagreed with Sadat and Begin, they exhibited leadership. Thirty years later, the protection of long-term national interests is the proof of their success.

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