

The Camp David Accords Twenty Years Later:

A Balance Sheet

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Brief Analysis

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Camp David saw an Arab-Israeli conflict "permanently altered." The accords have withstood the change of Egyptian government from Anwar Sadat to Hosni Mubarak, which demonstrates their acceptance by the Egyptian body politic. Indeed, they have been accepted by the Arab world: Mubarak has succeeded in regaining Egypt's central role in the Arab world while maintaining peace with Israel.

> The formula that Sadat endorsed in the accords remains a prerequisite to the Arab-Israeli peace process: mutual acceptance. Camp David normalized most Egyptians' feelings toward Israel. Among some, ill feelings may still exist, but there is no denial of Israel's existence.

In the Egyptian perspective, the notion of mutual acceptance was coupled with the need to solve the Palestinian question both to facilitate a full peace and to avoid further tension and conflict. In this way, Camp David led to the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. After the Oslo breakthrough, the cold peace between Egypt and Israel began to thaw. Rejectionist voices were heard less frequently and people were willing to give the new atmosphere a chance. The business community in Egypt felt that both sides could benefit from cooperation. The intelligentsia in Egypt began to write about opening up to Israel now that there was a solution-in-the-making to the Palestinian question. Additionally, Egyptian newspapers opened their papers for the first time to Israeli writers and the Egyptian parliament received an Israeli parliamentary delegation. Egypt, throughout the Arab world, promoted peaceful relations with Israel and many countries responded favorably.

> Binyamin Netanyahu's election and policies reversed these trends. The West Bank closures, the harsh and sometimes brutal punishment of Palestinians after the suicide attacks of 1996, the rejection of the land-for-peace formula, and -- worst of all -- the opening of the Hasmonean Tunnel and the construction in Har Homa all replaced the psychology of reconciliation with the psychology of conflict.

The Future of Camp David. The coming decade is sure to be one in which the people, not just the leaders, will be involved in Egyptian-Israeli politics. This can be positive or negative. It is up to the respective leaders to "transform the dynamic" of the region to facilitate a positive outcome. There are hopeful signs: Egyptian-Israeli trade has

increased eight-fold from 1991 to 1996, and the number of Egyptians visiting Israel has grown from mere hundreds per year to 30,000 in 1996. On the other hand, there are extremists on both sides who would sap away at the pluralistic values inherent in Egyptian and Israeli culture.

One problem for the relationship is that Egypt's foreign policies are often attacked by the Israeli media. Egyptians see this as an attempt to drive a wedge between Egypt and the United States to secure Israel's dominant and hegemonic position in the region. Egyptians resent the fact that support from the United States is dependent on Egypt's policies towards Israel.

> Egypt remains a pivotal country in the region and remains the key to the peace process. Israel-Egypt relations cannot withstand a prolonged stalemate in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

SHIMON SHAMIR

Both sides have benefited enormously from the Camp David accords:

- Each gained its main aim: The Egyptians retrieved the Sinai. The Israelis received their first recognition from an Arab state, ending the taboo on relations with Israel.
- There has been no war between the two countries. The saving of lives and money has been incalculable.
- Each country's relations with the United States are stronger as a result of the accords. Although Israeli politicians are not always sensitive to Egyptian perceptions, they were and are supportive of positive relations between Egypt and the United States.
- Both countries benefited economically from peace.
- Multilevel communication was opened up between Egypt and Israel, enabling Egypt to play a constructive role in the peace process. The Egyptians are committed to facilitating peace between Israel and the Palestinians, even if their position is not always to the liking of the parties.

The "Cold Peace." There is a structural problem in the nature of the accords. Egypt's conflict with Israel ended once the peace treaty was completed. Israel made peace with Egypt, yet it continues to have a conflict with others in the Arab world. This forced Israel into a double posture -- peaceful toward Egypt, vigilant toward other Arab countries -- which Egyptians could not accept.

Another problem is their different interpretations of normalization. To the Israelis, the treaty was meant to establish a network of relations between Egyptians and Israelis in all different occupations, which would solidify peace. To many Egyptians, normalization will take place only after a full peace between Israel and all its neighbors is established, not the other way around. Additionally, many Egyptians are afraid that Israel intends to penetrate their economy and culture. Yet, strides in normalization have taken place, for instance, in trade, agricultural technology, tourism, oil, and the academic center. Peace movements now exist in both Israel and Egypt.

> The cooling of relations in recent years cannot be blamed only on Netanyahu. There is a wide gap separating Israeli and Egyptian policies. The dissemination in Egypt of hate literature against Israel, which has increased, is difficult for Israelis to ignore. Plus, the media in Egypt block out positive messages from Israel.

Suggestions for Improved Relations. Egypt should establish permanent back-channels with Israel to increase communication and to avoid misunderstandings. Egypt needs to understand that Israel is not interested in regional competition. Additionally, Egypt needs to differentiate between legitimate political criticism and defamation of a religion and culture. Also, Egyptians should make up their minds whether they want to have real economic

cooperation with Israel or not.

Israel should move forward with the peace process -- this is the key. Israel must show greater understanding for Egypt's position in the peace process, namely, that Egypt cannot be expected to be impartial, though Israel can expect that Egypt be constructive. Finally, Israel should determine if it will define itself through its relations with the West or if it wants to be integrated into the Middle East.

> Even without these improvements, the Egyptian-Israeli relationship has essentially been successful and the leaderships of the two countries can take credit for that.

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