

The Vindication of Sadat in the Arab World

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The late President Anwar al-Sadat appeared to have lost much respect in the eyes of Egyptians and in the Arab world by the time of his assassination in 1981. Only in the past three years has the Arab world revised its negative image of Sadat and realized the foresight and enduring relevance of his policies.

As president from 1970 to 1981, Sadat took bold steps to consolidate his power, affect profound changes in Egypt's political structure and revamp the country's domestic and foreign policies. First, Sadat launched a liberalization of Egypt's economy that cost him much public support. Second, he took measured steps to democratize Egypt's political system. Third, Sadat seized opportunities to move away from Egypt's traditional alliances with the Eastern Bloc and radical Arab regimes and shift towards the West. Fourth, Sadat sought to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict through "historical compromise." This last effort, culminating in the Camp David Accords of 1978, led to an Arab boycott of Egypt, the suspension of Egypt's membership in the Arab League and Sadat's eventual assassination in 1981.

At least four phases can be identified in the ten-year process by which Egyptians and Arabs revised their image of Sadat. From 1981 to 1983 Egyptians and other Arabs continued to level harsh criticism and express outrage over his policies. In the mid-1980s anger toward Sadat began to dissipate as Jordan restored relations with Egypt. Following that restoration, an Arab summit held in Amman in mid-1987 passed a resolution that led the other Arab states to restore relations with Egypt over the following two years. Then, in 1988, Jordan, Yemen and Egypt formed the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC), Egypt regained its membership in the Arab League, and the league's headquarters returned from Tunis to Cairo.

While the formal reinstatement of Egypt in the Arab fold occurred gradually between 1987 and 1990, the Gulf crisis provided the real rehabilitation of Sadat in the Arab world, as Arabs who participated in the coalition against Iraq developed a newfound appreciation for Sadat's policies of alignment with the West, reconciliation with Israel and realistic focus on the concrete interests of his country. This new awareness in the Arab world is currently unfolding in at least two areas -- the quest for democracy and peace.

Syria's recent policy re-orientations bear some resemblance to Sadat's policy changes after 1973. Assad's economic policy following the Gulf crisis is similar to Sadat's bold economic steps taken after the October War. After the Iran-Iraq War, and more vividly in the aftermath of the Gulf War, Assad embarked on a course of improved relations with the West, also following in Sadat's footsteps. Although there are some tentative parallels between Assad's policy of controlled pluralism and Sadat's own democratization initiatives, it is not yet clear that Assad has decided on Sadat's course of "full peace" with Israel.

The recent mutual recognition agreement between Israel and the PLO, and the opportunities for future peacemaking it ushers in, can be said to be the ultimate vindication of Anwar al-Sadat.