



**ARAB-ISRAELI
DIPLOMACY
UNDER CARTER
THE U.S., ISRAEL AND
THE PALESTINIANS**

JØRGEN JENSEHAUGEN

I.B. TAURIS

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'Jorgen Jensehaugen has provided an original piece of work, both in his use of US archival material and his examination of the way the Carter administration dealt with the Palestinian issue and the matter of Palestinian participation in negotiations. Indeed, this work fills a void, enlightening us on the inner workings of Carter's team regarding the conflict, while also highlighting the Palestinian aspect of the negotiations at that time (as distinct from the relatively large literature on Egyptian–Israeli relations of the same period). The volume provides new material and insights regarding deliberations within the Carter administration prior to the Camp David talks. Moreover the author brings a wealth of supporting information and detail, analysing the factors involved in the decisions taken, and the individuals behind them. Truly a valuable contribution to our understanding of the history of American policy regarding the Palestinian issue.'

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'This is a well-researched and expertly told account of the Carter administration's diplomatic efforts in the Arab–Israeli conflict. Jensehaugen has written one of the most compelling narratives of Jimmy Carter's pursuit of, and ultimate failure to achieve, comprehensive Arab–Israeli peace.'

Asaf Siniver, Associate Professor of International Security,
University of Birmingham

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The US, Israel and the Palestinians

JØRGEN JENSEHAUGEN

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To Amanda

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Forty years ago Carter, Begin and Sadat gathered at Camp David. Absent, as always, were the Palestinians. This Palestinian absence from the various Arab–Israeli peace processes has long intrigued me, and I remember the immediate sense of a lost opportunity the first time I read that President Carter had wanted to include the Palestinians in his peace-making. What had happened to that effort? That question drove me to conduct this research. Now, several years later, I am the proud author of this book.

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CHAPTER 1

PRESIDENT CARTER AND THE PALESTINIANS

On 16 March 1977, US President Jimmy Carter publicly declared: ‘There has to be a homeland provided for the Palestinian refugees who have suffered for many, many years.’¹ The statement, however, was off-script. Carter was responding to a question from a journalist and caught everybody off guard, including his own advisors. While this focus on the Palestinian issue was a cornerstone of President Carter’s Middle East policy, it was almost revolutionary in a US context. For decades the Palestinians had either been ignored, treated as a humanitarian issue or viewed as terrorists. Under President Carter the Palestinians suddenly found themselves playing a central political role in the Middle East peace process. Carter made solving the Palestinian issue one of three cornerstones in solving the larger Arab–Israeli conflict; the other two were mutual recognition and the establishment of permanent borders.² Still, slightly more than two years after coming to power, Carter helped Egypt and Israel sign a bilateral peace agreement, which pushed the Palestinian issue to the sidelines in all but name. Israel and Egypt continued conducting Palestinian autonomy negotiations for the remainder of Carter’s term, but nothing came of them. Almost two decades later, however, the autonomy model would resurface in the Oslo negotiations.

Carter’s presidential legacy in the Middle East, then, had little to do with the Palestinians. By failing to deliver on the Palestinian issue while securing an Egyptian–Israeli peace, Carter had reverted to the

traditional US approach to the Arab–Israeli conflict. What had happened to the comprehensive peace and the call for a Palestinian homeland? Why were the Palestinians excluded from the negotiations, when Carter had insisted on their inclusion?

To answer these questions, we must start at the beginning. Jimmy Carter was an unlikely candidate to be the first US president to make the Palestinian question the centrepiece of US policy towards the Arab–Israeli conflict. He was a born-again Christian from the deep South – a peanut farmer who eventually became the governor of his home state of Georgia, and who had practically no foreign policy experience. As governor, he had visited Israel only once, arranged by the Israeli government, but he had never visited an Arab country and never met an Arab leader. Prior to becoming president he had never met any Palestinians, and he did not meet any while he was president either.³

The Palestinian issue was not the only area where he lacked political experience. In fact, Carter made it very clear that he was an outsider in Washington. This was important, because in the mid-1970s, Washington was tainted by Watergate and the Vietnam war. In one election commercial, Carter stated ‘There is one major and fundamental issue. And that is the issue between the insiders and the outsiders. I have been accused of being an outsider and I plead guilty.’⁴ He took great care to distance himself from what many considered the dishonesty that plagued US politics, and key-words in his campaign included ‘good’, ‘honest’ and ‘decent’.⁵ Carter’s position as a political outsider helps explain both why he won the election and how he was able to think outside the box of traditional US foreign policy. He was not enmeshed in the Vietnam and Watergate imbroglios, and his mindset was not stuck on the idea that the Palestinians were either refugees or terrorists. As such, Carter brought a fresh perspective to Washington. Despite his lack of relevant experience, foreign policy played an unusually significant part in his election campaign.⁶ Carter came to power with a desire to change US foreign policy, insisting that he was the man for the job.

Unsurprisingly, Washington insiders disagreed. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was dumbfounded by Carter’s lack of foreign policy experience, complaining: ‘I don’t know how you can have a President who knows nothing about foreign policy and a Secretary of State also.’⁷ This quote says more about Kissinger than it does about Carter. While

Carter's choice for Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, would play a central role in the Carter administration, Carter was going to make his own foreign policy. He would be a hands-on president if ever there was one.⁸

In a thinly veiled attack on his predecessors, Presidents Gerald Ford and Richard Nixon, Carter insisted: 'The President is the one who makes foreign policy. I make the foreign policy. There have been Presidents in the past, maybe not too distant past, that let their Secretaries of State make foreign policy. I don't.'⁹ As Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, pointed out, 'Carter wanted to be his own Secretary of State [...] he would therefore be in control over foreign policy in the White House.'¹⁰ Giving his insistence on such a pronounced role in foreign policy, Carter's lack of experience could have been costly, but he was unusually smart and he appointed a competent and generally unified foreign policy team.¹¹ Carter also decided to invest the bulk of his time in foreign policy issues. Carter has often been described as a naive moralist, but his Palestinian policy, as well as much of his other foreign policy, was actually based on a strategic and pragmatic evaluation of the global situation which he derived from the ideals of liberal internationalism.¹²

Until Carter started his presidency, the inclusion of the Palestinians in the peace process had been merely academic and had not led to a change in US policy towards the Palestinians. Many explanations have been put forth regarding Carter's decision to focus on the Palestinians, including his Christian faith, his focus on human rights in general and his experiences in the segregated South.¹³ While each of these explanations shed light upon part of the picture, particularly on an emotional level, they miss a central point: solving the Palestinian issue was considered a strategic necessity by Carter, his closest foreign-policy advisors, and both the CIA and the State Department. He entered the White House with a clear intention of taking the United States in a new direction, away from the 'malaise' which had descended upon the nation during Nixon's presidency and persisted during Ford's. Carter came to power with an approach based on 'preventive diplomacy', global interdependence and the pursuit of human rights.¹⁴

In addition to the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate political atmosphere, Carter had also inherited the aftermath of the international oil shock, a consequence of the Arab oil embargo which followed the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Carter therefore thought it vital to secure

stability in the Middle East, and reduce the potential for a new oil embargo.¹⁵ In terms of this peace-making, Carter had a radically different approach from the preceding presidents. Where Nixon and Ford, under Kissinger's guidance, had tried to solve parts of the conflict while always isolating the Soviet Union, Carter aimed to solve the whole conflict with the assistance of the Cold War rival, not in competition with it. This approach had been promoted by, amongst others, a 1975 Brookings Institution report titled *Toward Peace in the Middle East*, written by a study group which included Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Middle East advisor, William B. Quandt.¹⁶ The report is often cited as having provided the 'blueprint' for the Carter administration's approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁷

While that may be an overstatement, the report was clearly influential, particularly because so many of its authors subsequently gained prominent positions within the Carter administration. The report was seen by many Americans as so radical and anti-Israeli that both Brzezinski and Quandt were targeted by pro-Israeli groups in the United States for being co-authors of the report. Appeals were even made exclude them from the Carter administration.¹⁸ This pressure on the report's signatories was a forewarning of the domestic tension which such a comprehensive approach would create in the United States. It was also particularly hard for Carter to sell domestically because it contradicted two of the most essential aspects of the well-established tradition of US Middle East policy: the exclusion of the Palestinians and the Soviet Union from the diplomatic process. Despite the evident controversy, Carter ultimately failed to grasp the importance of grounding his Middle East policy domestically. This oversight would weaken his ability to counteract domestic pressure.¹⁹

The British journalist and Middle East expert Patrick Seale neatly summed up Carter's incoming position:

the Bible and Brookings, the fear of another war and another energy crisis, a sense that Kissinger had left the peacemaking job half done, pity for the Palestinians under Israeli occupation – promoted the Middle East to the top of Carter's foreign policy priorities.²⁰

Carter's comprehensive approach was, for better or worse, far more ambitious than Kissinger's step-by-step approach, which had preceded it. If it were to succeed, it would solve the Arab–Israeli conflict in its entirety. Rather than merely calm some areas and address some aspects of the conflict, the comprehensive approach sought to remove the possible reasons for the conflict to reassert itself.

As this book will show, Carter clearly sought such a comprehensive approach, but he was equally clearly unprepared for the resistance to it he would face. Carter was the first US president to talk of a Palestinian 'homeland'. This was a radical stance for a US president to take. While the term 'homeland' was imprecise and non-binding, it recalled the language used by Lord Balfour when he made his promise to the Jews in 1917 – a declaration which became the frame of reference for the Zionist movement when it established Israel. The use of 'homeland' in relation to the Palestinians therefore made Carter highly unpopular in Israel, and amongst Israel's supporters in the United States. Carter's initial stance was generally supported by the Arab states and the Palestinians, though the latter wanted him to take a step further and support their demand for a Palestinian state under PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) leadership. Such a step was unacceptable in the United States, however, and anathema to Israel.²¹ It was not a step, therefore, that Carter would take – while he sympathised with much of the Arab position, he found himself bound by domestic political structures and policies which strongly favoured the Israeli position. If Carter ventured within those bounds, he never directly crossed them.

During the whole presidency, then, the Carter administration manoeuvred between the Israeli criticism of going too far in supporting the Palestinians, and the Palestinian criticism of not going far enough. This bind was made even more difficult by the context in which the negotiations took place. The Arab states were divided; the United States did not talk directly to the PLO; and Israel's supporters in the United States applied persistent domestic pressure upon Carter. In practice, that is, many of the steps Carter took were seen as being far beyond the maximum of what Israel could give, yet below the minimum of what the Arab states and the Palestinians were demanding.²²

As the Carter administration pushed forward with its approach to peace during the early months of 1977, it became clear that this initiative was a very tall order. Some would insist that it was impossible from the start. The Carter team, however, dove straight in. Secretary of

State Cyrus Vance went on several tours of the Middle East, and Carter hosted most of the Middle East leaders in Washington. While the Carter administration refused to meet directly with the PLO, Carter went further than previous US administrations in lowering the bar for what would be needed to initiate such contact. Several back-channels were used to communicate with the PLO, and the PLO sent signals that it was heading in a more moderate direction and closing in on the type of formulation regarding UNSC Resolution 242, implying a recognition of Israel, which was demanded by the US administration to open any direct contact with the Palestinian national movement. At the same time however, the PLO was sending contradictory signals, implying that it was heading in what the United States considered to be the wrong direction, away from moderation.²³

Meanwhile the Arab states were at odds, not only with Israel but also amongst themselves. Egypt was leaning towards a willingness to participate in a peace process through which it could make large concessions. Jordan had a similar stance, but, being the weak link in the Arab chain, it depended on Syria to move forward. Jordan also had a domestic problem, in that over half its population was of Palestinian origin. Making peace without Palestinian consent was therefore extremely difficult. Syria, for its part, was against entering any open-ended peace process. The PLO, then, was mired amongst these various Arab stances and, to complicate things further, was struggling with internal divisions of its own.²⁴ When Carter tried to induce the PLO to make concessions so that it could be included in the peace process, he was not addressing a unified movement, and those groups within the PLO which opposed the moderate leadership's position could always use violence to spoil that leadership's ability to negotiate.

Just months after Carter came to power, Israel also underwent a political change which had, to that point, been considered inconceivable: the age of Labour ended with the Likud victory in the national elections in May 1977. Israel's new prime minister, Menachem Begin, was ideologically more hawkish and much more decisive than Yitzhak Rabin had been, though he did share Rabin's adamant opposition to the comprehensive approach.²⁵ Israel, under both Rabin and Begin, did not want the Soviet Union on board; it did not want to negotiate with all the Arab states at once; and, most importantly, it found any engagement with the PLO to be unacceptable. Also, particularly after Begin came to

power, it moved to take the West Bank and the Gaza Strip completely off the negotiating table.²⁶ Carter would not fully grasp the ideological depth of Begin's commitment to keeping the West Bank and Gaza for Israel.²⁷ What he treated as an Israeli bargaining position was in fact an Israeli red line. Had he realised this, he might have acted differently, but it is unlikely that he could have changed Begin's mind on the Palestinian territories.

In the end, of all the Arab leaders, Carter managed to please only Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Sadat was a rather difficult leader to understand, with a decision-making style which might best be described as erratic and 'enigmatic'.²⁸ In terms of foreign policy, it would eventually become clear that Sadat primarily sought two things: a close alliance with the United States, and the return of the Sinai, which had been occupied by Israel since 1967.²⁹ These goals were achieved upon the signing of the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty. Beyond them, it was hard to say exactly how much he cared about the Palestinian issue, if at all. After the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty was signed, Sadat essentially stopped working towards any Palestinian gains; by then, as well, he had been ostracised within the Arab world. He became furious with the PLO and the other Arab leaders and lost all interest in struggling for gains on their behalf. This does not mean that he did not initially seek to be the Arab leader who had also secured a broader peace and real gains for the Palestinians, but these were never his primary goals.

Carter's rising star in Palestine

While Jimmy Carter is often recalled as an unpopular president, he has, in recent years, earned a positive reputation with regard to the Palestinian issue. He may have failed to provide the Palestinians with a viable solution when he was president from 1977 to 1981, but he returned to the issue in 2006 with his controversial book titled *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*.³⁰ That same year, he suggested that the international community recognise Hamas.³¹ Clearly, then, Carter had never given up on Palestine. Recent literature on the Arab–Israeli conflict has also placed his efforts in a positive light. In Nathan Thrall's 2017 book *The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine*, Carter is depicted as the role model for how a US president can pressure Israel to make concessions. While Thrall strongly

exaggerates the extent to which Carter pressured Begin, he is undeniably right in his assertion that Carter was central in making Israel withdraw from the Sinai in the interests of peace with Egypt.³²

Carter has also gained academic attention of late simply because his administration's archives have been declassified over the past few years, making his presidency much more accessible to the research community. Much of this literature paints a picture of Carter entering office as an idealist and leaving as a realist who was scarred by the harsh realities of the world. The most poignant expression of this view is found in the title of Yael S. Aronoff's article 'In Like a Lamb, Out Like a Lion'.³³ It is difficult to disagree with this general assessment, and it largely rings true for his work on the Arab–Israeli conflict as well. He came in with an innovative approach aimed at a grand peace, and he left office largely content with a more limited arrangement which secured traditional US interests in the region.

The main problem with this view, however, is that while it is easy to criticise the comprehensive approach as naive, it was not disconnected from US interests. Quite the opposite, in fact. The central premise of the comprehensive approach was that only such a grand peace could create a stable Middle East and reduce Cold War tensions. The Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty, while immensely significant, did neither of those things, as the amount of conflict in the wider Arab–Israeli arena since 1979 amply demonstrates.

In general, the literature on President Carter's Middle East peace-making is dominated by works covering the period from Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem on 19 November 1977 to the signing of the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty on 26 March 1979.³⁴ And no wonder: the period before this did not produce any results, whereas the Camp David summit is one of the most famous modern peace conferences, and the peace between Egypt and Israel was a tremendous diplomatic accomplishment. Still, this focus on the period starting with Sadat's Jerusalem visit largely disregards the depth of commitment the Carter administration had towards a comprehensive peace, and thus misses out on his historical role as the first US president to focus on the Palestinian issue.

This book is the first full account of the impact of the Palestinian issue upon the Carter administration's policies. Its in-depth research was made possible by the aforementioned declassification of the Carter

archives, which include all the papers which went through the White House during Carter's time in office. Because Carter was so deeply involved in the day-to-day running of US foreign policy, this means that the Carter archive houses most of the relevant documents. Some important papers, however, did not pass through the White House, so other US government sources have been used to complement the White House papers, including documents from the State Department and the CIA. To further complement these US archives, material from the British Foreign Office and some recently available Israeli sources have been used, as have a variety of interviews with decision-makers.

From the perspective of the 1970s, it was truly remarkable how present the Palestinians were in the Carter White House's deliberations. From today's perspective, it is odd to find that it took 30 years for an American president to understand that the Palestinians were central to their own conflict, but, as we will see, the Carter administration brought about a unique moment in US Middle East policy. Carter broke with a decades-old frame of reference in US policy towards the Middle East, through which the Palestinians had been ignored.³⁵ After Carter, they would once again be moved to the sidelines, though events in Lebanon, then later in the occupied Palestinian territories, would make it impossible to ignore them completely.

CHAPTER 2

US PRESIDENTS AND THE PALESTINIANS

Eleven minutes after Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion declared Israeli statehood on 14 May 1948, US President Harry S. Truman extended a *de facto* recognition of Israel. This set the tone for US–Israeli relations and earned Truman the nickname ‘Israel’s midwife’. While Truman’s policy towards the Zionist movement varied over time, his vital support at the key moment created an almost mythological link between him and Israel, to the extent that ‘the history of Truman and Israel’ has become a genre of its own.¹ Compared to later US presidents, however, Truman was lukewarm towards Israel. As time passed the United States would increasingly support Israel, with close cooperation on all fronts.

In contrast, the Palestinians were largely invisible to US decision-makers. While this did not start with President Truman, it also certainly did not end with him. The United States had supported the UN’s 1947 partition plan, which nominally paved the way for a Palestinian state, but no such thing was established in 1948 or in the decades that followed. The Palestinians were the clear losers of the 1947–49 war, and as a result they disappeared from the US political horizon. For decades they would be ignored by US presidents. How did events in the Middle East allow the Palestinians to disappear from the political limelight? What had shaped the US view of the Arab–Israeli conflict, and why was there such a lack of understanding of its Palestinian aspects?

President Truman and the United Nations had together inherited the Palestine issue from Britain, when the British government decided to

withdraw from Palestine in 1947.² On 28 April 1947, the UN arranged a special session to discuss the question of Palestine, and established the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP).³ UNSCOP's subsequent partition plan, which called for the division of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state, with Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum*, won through on 29 November 1947, as the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 181, with 33 votes in favour, 13 against, ten abstentions and one absent vote.⁴ With the narrowest of margins, then, the world body decided to divide Palestine. None of the parties directly involved had voted for the resolution. The US government, though, had not only voted for partition but worked hard to get other states to vote for it, too. This was not done in the spirit of equal support for Palestinians and Zionists but out of great sympathy for the latter.⁵

Not everything Truman did pleased the Zionist movement, however – far from it. In 1947, the Truman administration initiated a Middle East arms embargo, which encompassed Israel. The United States would not sell advanced weaponry to Israel until 1962, during the Kennedy administration.⁶ Arms sales to Israel would then gradually increase for each presidency thereafter.⁷

The first Arab–Israeli war

Although the UN had formally provided what the solution to the question of Palestine should look like – a division of Palestine under which 56 per cent would be a Jewish state, 43 per cent would be an Arab state, and the Jerusalem area would have international status – there was no plan for *how* to divide the land. Since neither the UN nor the superpowers were willing to provide military forces to implement partition, the stage was set for the parties to fight for, or against, partition.⁸

By December 1947, a civil war was raging in Palestine between Zionist forces and the Palestinians.⁹ During this period, as well, the first wave of Palestinian refugees left Palestine, largely to avoid the war.¹⁰ The armed Palestinian groups had some initial success, but, in April 1948, the Haganah (the predecessor of the Israeli Defense Forces, or IDF) launched the Plan D offensive. Plan D was decisive in turning the tide of the war, and a profound contribution to the creation of the Palestinian

refugee problem, since part and parcel of Plan D was to clear the interior of threats, which in practice often meant rooting out Palestinians.¹¹

On 14 May 1948, Israel declared its independence as the last British forces left Palestine. The next day the Arab armies invaded. Despite the many controversies surrounding the establishment of Israel, the new-born state was recognised *de facto* by the United States and full *de jure* by the Soviet Union within the timespan of three days.¹²

Starting on 15 May 1948, Israel began to fight a war against Syria, Lebanon (Trans)Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. The war was divided into rounds of fighting separated by several cease-fires, the last of which was established on 6 January 1949. Armistice negotiations followed throughout the first half of 1949. After the armistices were signed, Israel was in possession of 77 per cent of Palestine, including the western half of Jerusalem.¹³

While the war was a success for Israel, where it is known as the War of Independence, it was a disaster for the Palestinians, who know it as *al-Nakba* (the Catastrophe). From 1947 to 1949, more than 700,000 Palestinians had fled from the area which became the state of Israel. They settled in refugee camps in the surrounding Arab states, in Gaza and in the West Bank.¹⁴

The formal UN approach to the refugee question was then founded in UN General Assembly Resolution 194(III), which stated: 'the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date'.¹⁵ This position had the support of the Arab states and the Palestinians. Israel, for its part, claimed that it had no responsibility for the refugees, because they were the result of a war started by the Arabs.¹⁶ This then becomes one of the deepest, most controversial issues between the parties.

After the 1948 War, the Palestinian population was divided between those who had remained in Israel, those who had fled outside of Palestine, and those who were in Gaza, under Egyptian military control, or the West Bank, which was annexed by Jordan. A large portion of those who lived in Gaza and the West Bank were refugees. Thus, while Israel emerged as a strong state with which many Americans identified, the Palestinian state never came to be at all, and the Palestinians were grouped under the generic term 'Arab refugees', disappearing from view as a national entity. In the words of Kathleen Christison:

The Palestinian people themselves were nameless [...] without identity or status except as a mass of camp dwellers. As far as the United States was concerned, the Palestinians did not exist politically [...] an entire generation of policymakers came of age not knowing, and not thinking it necessary to learn, the Palestinians' story.¹⁷

For American policy-makers, Jordan and Egypt would represent the Arab claims on the West Bank and Gaza, respectively. The humanitarian understanding of the Palestinians as a mass of 'Arab refugees' would colour the US outlook during the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations.¹⁸ US policy towards the Palestinians would therefore centre upon the non-political humanitarian approach of relief, rather than the political repatriation approach. To the extent that repatriation was an issue at all, that is, it would not be connected to support for the establishment of a Palestinian state.¹⁹ Instead, the US approach towards the Palestinian refugees would be based on the fear that they would become communists due to their predicament.²⁰ Aid, channelled through UNRWA, was the tool used to avoid such a scenario.²¹ Humanitarian aid, after all, was easier and less politically costly than a political solution based on repatriation. For consecutive US administrations, then, the Palestinians were 'a problem, not a people'.²²

The rise of pan-Arabism

The defeat suffered by the Arab armies in the war in Palestine sent political shock-waves through the Arab world. The obvious question was this: How was it possible for a united Arab world to suffer such a staggering defeat at the hands of small, new-born state? The answer was that Arab unity had been a bluff. The Arab leaders were increasingly seen as corrupt and inept, and the years following the 1948 war would see great upheaval in the region. In 1951, King Abdullah of Jordan was assassinated. In Syria, a series of coups took place between the 1940s and the 1960s. Most importantly, in Egypt, the Free Officers carried out a coup in July 1952.²³ For US policy-makers this meant that the Arab states were unstable, and they grew concerned that they might tilt towards the Soviet sphere of influence. From this perspective, as well, the regional developments seemed to confirm this analysis.

The Egyptian Free Officers gradually became more radical, increasingly allied with the Soviet Union and increasingly anti-Israel. This was the result of a complex dynamic, but several important events took place during the 1950s which pushed Egypt in this direction. For one, the border with Israel was never stable, but Gamal Abdel Nasser – who gradually took control of Egypt – tried to control the Palestinians who sought to infiltrate into Israel. However, in 1955, after an Israeli incursion into Gaza, during which 37 Egyptian soldiers were killed, Nasser decided to sponsor Palestinian Fedayeen attacks on Israel. Also in 1955, Nasser completed the famous Czech arms deal after he was denied US arms. This was interpreted by the United States as Egypt's turn to communism.²⁴ Within a dichotomist Cold War world view, this meant that the United States increasingly supported Israel as a Western bastion in the region, whereas the Palestinians were associated with the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, President Eisenhower refused to sell advanced weaponry to Israel.²⁵

The pivotal moment for Nasser was the 1956 Suez War in which Israel, Britain and France colluded to attack Egypt. One of the goals was to topple Nasser. Although the war was a military success for the aggressors, they then found themselves politically humiliated by the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Nations, as the IDF was pressured to withdraw from the Sinai.²⁶ Rather than topple his regime, the Suez war made Nasser into the great Arab hero, and boosted pan-Arabism as a political project. President Eisenhower's decision to act against Israel did not mean that he sided with the Palestinians, however. They remained far removed from the political scene, as far as the United States was concerned. Despite the fact that the Fedayeen attacks were one of the reasons Israel had for starting the war, the United States continued to perceive the Palestinians only as 'Arab refugees'.²⁷ For Eisenhower, it was the Cold War that mattered, and all political decisions were based on the US rivalry with the Soviet Union. Eisenhower was therefore confused when he discovered that the Arab states disliked Zionism more than they disliked communism.²⁸

Eisenhower's pressure on Israel in the Suez war was the exception to the rule in US-Israeli relations and, after his administration, the US relationship with Israel only grew closer. Under President John F. Kennedy (1961–63), the United States shifted towards the role of staunch ally of Israel. Kennedy coined the term 'special relationship',

and in 1963 agreed to sell Hawk anti-aircraft missiles to Israel, a reversal of the long-standing US policy of refusing to sell the Israelis high-tech weapons.²⁹ Kennedy was also the last US president to actively seek a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, through what was called the Johnson plan.³⁰ This initiative was named after Dr Joseph Johnson, not his namesake and Kennedy's successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson. When President Kennedy died, President Johnson informed Israel: 'You have lost a great friend, but you have found a better one.'³¹

While President Johnson would lump the radical Palestinian movements into what he saw as the rise of global communism, the rise of the Palestinian national movement was not a product of the Cold War, but the result of regional developments. It was within the context of pan-Arabism that the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was established in 1964, since the liberation of Palestine was a central tenant of Arab nationalism.³² To have any credibility among the Arab people, it was very important for Nasser to express support for the Palestinian cause. At the same time, however, he tried to retain control of the Palestinians by creating the PLO, while ensuring that it was not a politically independent body. The PLO therefore arose under supervision of the Arab League and Egypt and was placed under the leadership of Ahmed Shukayri, a Palestinian whom Nasser thought he could contain. Although the organisation had its own army, the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA), it was largely controlled by the Arab states.³³ The fact that the Arab states established the PLO made it possible for the United States to initially ignore this new movement, seeing it largely as an Egyptian puppet.³⁴ In March 1965 US Secretary of State Dean Rusk declared, 'We do not recognize it [the PLO] as the sole or even as the official representative of the Palestinian people. It is the [US government's] view that it has no official status whatever.'³⁵ Ironically, the view of the Palestinians held by both the Arab states and the United States in this period echoed Marx's general verdict upon the colonised: 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.'³⁶

Initially, in any case, the pan-Arab expression of support for the Palestinians was mirrored by the Palestinian support for pan-Arabism. Many Palestinians saw in pan-Arabism the structure for their liberation.³⁷ Meanwhile a younger generation of Palestinians started creating its own political structures, along two main lines of thought. The first, mainly represented by Yassir Arafat's Fatah (the Arabic reverse

acronym for Palestinian National Liberation Movement), considered the Palestinian cause to be a nationalist struggle which was independent of the larger pan-Arab ideology. The second, mainly represented by George Habash's Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM), sought to encapsulate the Palestinian revolution within that larger pan-Arab movement.³⁸ Up until the 1967 war the movements which privileged the pan-Arab cause would dominate. After the war, this would all change.

The six-day war: Shifting fronts

The run-up to the 1967 war was a complicated affair. In short, Israel seized on an opportunity created when President Nasser took a miscalculated gamble, based on Soviet misinformation, that Israel was planning an attack. After enduring prolonged Arab–Israeli tension and recurrent cross-border clashes, particularly on the Syrian front, Nasser knew he had to challenge Israel to save the image of the pan-Arab project. Unfortunately, his challenge would spiral out of control. Nasser removed the UN troops separating the Egyptian and Israeli forces, sent his troops into the Sinai, and closed the straits of Tiran. Israel considered this a *casus belli*. Since Egypt had a defence pact with both Jordan and Syria, Nasser was making a grand challenge on behalf of three of Israel's neighbours – a daring act of brinkmanship which demanded that Israel fold or call his bluff. Well aware that it would win the war, and with a 'yellow light' from US President Johnson, Israel chose the latter.³⁹

On the early morning of 5 June 1967, Israel launched a surprise strike against Egyptian airfields. Catching all the Arab armies unaware, Israel decimated the Arab air forces within hours. Then, in the six days from 5 to 10 June 1967, Israel captured the Sinai and the Gaza strip from Egypt, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, from Jordan.⁴⁰

The war clearly demonstrated the increased US support for Israel. President Eisenhower had refused to sell advanced weaponry to Israel, and in 1956 he had forced Israel out of the Sinai after the Suez war. In the run-up to the 1967 war, on the other hand, consecutive US presidents, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, made large arms sales to Israel, including advanced weaponry.⁴¹ Then, in 1967, Johnson gave Israel the green light to start the war and allowed Israel to hold the occupied territories following the war. In this way, Johnson firmly

cemented the pro-Israeli tilt of US politics. For him, Israel was an ally, the Arab states were the enemies and the Palestinians were practically non-existent.⁴²

Nonetheless, intense diplomatic activity followed the fighting. In November 1967, after long rounds of haggling over words, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 242. It called for the following:

Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict [...] acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries [...] *Affirms further* the necessity [...] For achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem.⁴³

This resolution became the foundation for all later attempts at solving the Arab–Israeli conflict, and it is therefore necessary to give a critical and detailed account of its contents. The document primarily describes the ‘land-for-peace’ formula through which Israel would withdraw from the occupied territories and the Arab states would grant Israel peace and recognition.⁴⁴

Beyond the fundamental premise of ‘land for peace’, however, UNSC Resolution 242 introduces several problematic issues. For one, it only refers to the ‘recent conflict’, making the June 1967 lines its point of reference, rather than the 1947 partition plan lines. Secondly, it refers to ‘territories’ in the indefinite form, omitting defining words such as ‘the’ or ‘all’, and thus allowing Israel to argue that some of the territories could be retained. Thirdly, the resolution only talks about states, and therefore excludes the Palestinians as an actor. And fourthly, the only reference to the Palestinians is hidden in the phrase ‘the refugee problem’. All these issues made UNSC Resolution 242 unacceptable to the Palestinians.⁴⁵ As we will see, this would become a massive hindrance for Jimmy Carter when he became president, because acceptance of the resolution became a precondition for participation in the peace process.

The 1967 war drastically shifted the map, both politically and geographically. All of Israel’s neighbouring Arab states were humiliated once again, and pan-Arabism suffered a serious defeat, from which it would never recover.⁴⁶ The Arabic name for the 1967 war made this

clear: *an-naksa* (the setback). To handle the setback, the Arab states convened an Arab League summit in Khartoum. Here they spelled out their official policy towards Israel. The stance has become famous as the 'three no's of Khartoum': no recognition of Israel, no negotiation with Israel and no peace with Israel. On the face of it, the Khartoum meeting delivered a completely rejectionist stance. Some analysts, such as Israeli historian Avi Shlaim, have instead argued that Khartoum was actually a victory for the *moderate* Arab states, and that the three no's should be read as 'no formal peace *treaty*, but not a rejection of a state of peace; no *direct* negotiations, but not a refusal to talk through third parties; and no *de jure* recognition of Israel, but acceptance of its existence as a state.'⁴⁷ Understandably, Israel heard only 'no', not the unstated 'but'.⁴⁸

An unintended consequence of the 1967 war was that the region became more deeply embedded in the cold war, since states like Syria and Egypt increasingly received Soviet weaponry.⁴⁹ This again entrenched US support for Israel, and the Americans sold arms to the Israelis on a much larger scale after the war. In 1969, weaponry totalling \$160 million was sold to Israel; in 1971, the total reached \$643 million.⁵⁰ The most significant development in the Arab-Israeli conflict at this time, however, went largely unnoticed by the United States.

Fatah takes charge

For the Palestinians, the 1967 war revealed that Palestine could not be retaken by the Arab armies – pan-Arabism, then, would not be the answer to their woes. The Palestinians had to take matters into their own hands.⁵¹ To all appearances, the 1967 war was the second major catastrophe in less than 20 years. Up to 300,000 Palestinians had fled from the West Bank and Gaza, which Israel had occupied. Most of these people fled to Jordan.⁵² Paradoxically, though, for some of the Palestinian guerrilla movements, the Arab defeat in the 1967 war presented an opportunity. As stated in one Fatah publication, the war ensured 'the return of the cause to its true nature – a Palestinian-Israeli conflict'.⁵³ Or, as Fatah leader Yassir Arafat stated to one of his comrades: 'This is not the end. It's the beginning.'⁵⁴ The United States did not notice this shift. For US Presidents Johnson, Nixon and Ford the conflict was still seen as one between Israel and the Arab states, and it was framed

within the broader cold war. Within this structure there was no room for Palestinian nationalism.

Fatah's rise to prominence amongst the Palestinian guerrilla movements was aided by the fact that George Habash's Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM) fragmented in the wake of the 1967 defeat and its associated political implications. Habash went on to create the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).⁵⁵ Central to both Fatah and the PFLP was the idea of creating a revolutionary base from which they could launch the liberation of Palestine.⁵⁶ The stage was thus set for decades of Israeli–Palestinian clashes. The Palestinian Fedayeen launched a variety of attacks on Israel from bases in Jordan. In March 1968, after a landmine placed in Israel by Fedayeen exploded, killing two Israelis, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) decided to attack the Jordanian town of Karamah, where a large number of Fedayeen were gathered. While most of the Palestinian guerrilla groups withdrew upon learning of the impending Israeli attack, Fatah decided to stand its ground and make Karamah an example of resistance.⁵⁷

Despite its military superiority, the IDF met staunch resistance from Fatah troops, but also, and primarily, from the Jordanian army. Although the Israeli army won the battle, and most of the losses inflicted upon the IDF were by the Jordanian army, Fatah successfully used the battle for propaganda purposes. Fatah turned a military defeat into a political victory. After Karamah, Fatah's recruiting offices were flooded with new recruits.⁵⁸ Arms started flowing in from China, and Fatah went from having 2,000 men under arms in 1968, to having 14,000 men in 1970.⁵⁹

Another effect of Karamah was that Fatah was able to weaken the PFLP and strengthen its own political role, since the PFLP had withdrawn from Karamah before the battle. A wise military decision would prove politically costly to the PFLP, and Fatah's role in the PLO would grow rapidly. In December 1967, Shukayri resigned, and in February 1969 Fatah leader Yassir Arafat became PLO chairman. With the Fatah takeover, armed struggle became a central component of the PLO. Furthermore, the PLO was no longer entangled in pan-Arabism. The goal was the liberation of Palestine for the Palestinian people, by the Palestinian people, not as part of a larger Arab project.⁶⁰ They could finally represent themselves.

Beyond its military strategy, Fatah was both building a state in exile and promoting its cause globally. In October 1968, Fatah sent an open letter to the UN General Assembly, claiming to be a legitimate national resistance movement fighting for self-determination, in line with the UN Charter.⁶¹ Also in 1968, US diplomats in the region started hearing the argument that the Palestinians had to participate in peace talks and that it would be impossible to reach peace unless the Palestinians were included.⁶² Still, it would be a decade more before these observations from the field reached the White House. The Soviet Union, despite being sceptical of Fatah, held high-level meetings with Arafat in 1968 and pledged political and economic support to the guerrilla movement.⁶³ This did nothing to impress on the United States the gravity of the national claims of the Palestinians. Instead, it reinforced an image of the PLO as Soviet puppets.

Not only did the United States not engage with the Palestinians but also Henry Kissinger, President Richard Nixon's national security advisor, tried to keep the United States from engaging in the Middle East in general.⁶⁴ This would become impossible when the War of Attrition broke out along the Egyptian-Israeli front in June 1968, forcing the US administration's hand. During the summer of 1970, then, the United States became engaged in active diplomacy to finally end the Israeli-Egyptian fighting.⁶⁵ On 22 July 1970, Egyptian President Nasser accepted the US cease-fire, and a week later Israel reluctantly followed suit.⁶⁶ For the PLO, the Egyptian acceptance of the cease-fire with Israel was a rude awakening. It proved that Nasser could no longer be trusted to hold the front against Israel, and that none of the involved parties was willing to include the Palestinians in negotiations.⁶⁷ For the United States, the Palestinians were still largely invisible, except as mere refugees without a national political role. This image would only change in the early 1970s.

1970: Exiled from exile

By 1970, the PLO had built a state within a state in Jordan. The organisation was running civil institutions, and had a markedly military presence. Armed Fedayeen controlled the streets and set up checkpoints. The Jordanian kingdom was caught in an unfortunate circle. The more control the Palestinian guerrillas gained, the more attacks they launched

against Israel from Jordan, and the more reprisals were launched from Israel into Jordan. These Israeli attacks then meant that public support for the Palestinian cause gained some ground, especially among Jordanian leftist groups.⁶⁸ Meanwhile King Hussein was under great pressure from the Jordanian army to intervene against the Palestinian guerrillas which were challenging his regime.⁶⁹ Despite the obvious fact that this was a regional conflict spurred by the aspirations of the Palestinian nationalist movement, the US administration considered it a cold war confrontation driven by the Soviet Union.⁷⁰

Although the PLO as a political body had decided not to overthrow the Jordanian monarchy, the radical PFLP thought otherwise.⁷¹ The PFLP massively abused their power, and between 6 and 9 September 1970, the group successfully hijacked four planes and failed to hijack a fifth. Three of the hijacked aircraft were flown to Jordan, where the passengers were taken hostage and the empty planes were blown up.⁷² The hijackings were much more than King Hussein could tolerate. Along with an attack on the king's motorcade on 1 September, the hijackings provided the *casus belli* for a war against the Palestinian guerrillas in Jordan.⁷³

King Hussein demanded that the PLO lay down their arms, stating: 'The situation can't go on [...] There must be peace or war.'⁷⁴ The PLO refused to concede. Instead, it made Arafat commander in chief and called for a general strike to topple the Jordanian government. The die was cast. On 17 September 1970, the Jordanian civil war began.⁷⁵

King Hussein was worried that the Syrian army would intervene on behalf of the Palestinian guerrillas and therefore mobilised US aid, a request which prompted US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger to ask Israel to support King Hussein. Israel responded by mobilising on its border with Jordan. The threat of an Israeli attack ensured that the Syrian tanks would withdraw after Jordanian aerial bombardment. King Hussein's army could then crush the isolated Palestinian guerrilla movement.⁷⁶ The Jordanian civil war was short but bloody. Totally defeated, the PLO was forced into exile, and the only thing that saved it was Egyptian President Nasser, who brokered a deal between the PLO and King Hussein. After ten days of fighting, King Hussein signed the Cairo Agreement. The day after the agreement was signed, Nasser died of a heart attack. He was succeeded by Anwar al-Sadat, a very different president.⁷⁷

As a result of the Jordanian civil war, the United States started to view Israel as a strategic asset in the region, given that it had been the Israeli forces which had ensured that Syria did not seriously intervene.⁷⁸ This represented a decisive escalation in US support for Israel, and US aid to Israel skyrocketed as well. In the years 1968–70, the aid budget had been \$25 million, \$85 million and \$30 million, respectively, whereas in the years 1971–73 it was \$545 million, \$300 million and \$307.5 million, respectively. The United States also signed its first long-term arms deal with Israel in 1971.⁷⁹

The Palestinians, on the other hand, got no such boost. They had lost yet another war. To the extent that they were noticed politically, it was primarily as a nuisance. The White House and State Department realised that the Palestinians were a spoiler group which could disrupt a peace process.⁸⁰ For the first time, though, some prominent individuals in the United States voiced an understanding of the centrality of the Palestinian issue. In October 1970, Joseph Sisco, assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs, stated: 'The Palestinians will have to be active participants in a peace settlement and this settlement will have to take account of their aspirations.'⁸¹ Despite Sisco's prominent position, however, this opinion was still fringe in US political circles.

After September 1970, the PLO moved its leadership to Lebanon.⁸² This was not a stable transition and the PLO presence in Lebanon would once again drop the Palestinians into the midst of another local conflict with regional ramifications. The amount of attacks across the Israeli–Lebanese border quickly increased. From the late 1960s into the early years of the 1970s, the Palestinian struggle had been deeply mired in global terrorism, or in the nomenclature of the movements themselves, 'external operations.' In July 1968, the PFLP had hijacked an El Al plane, and, in August 1969, the PFLP had hijacked a US airplane. Such hijackings then became a PFLP trademark, the most famous of which were the 1970 PFLP hijackings which triggered the Jordanian civil war. Other instances of high-profile Palestinian terrorist attacks included the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre, perpetrated by the Black September Organisation (BSO), as well as airplane hijackings in February and May 1972 and an attack on Ben-Gurion Airport in May 1972. In the early months of 1972, the BSO also committed its last major attack, killing two US ambassadors and a Belgian diplomat in Khartoum. Between 1972 and 1974, both Fatah and the PFLP took steps to distance

themselves from this type of action. In March 1972, PFLP leader George Habbash declared that the PFLP would no longer take part in external operations.⁸³ Violent incursions into Israel, however, did not stop. In May 1974, for instance, Palestinians militants killed 25 Israelis in a high school in northern Israel.⁸⁴

Paradoxically, it was Palestinian terror that made the United States finally acknowledge the Palestinians as something more than refugees. As has been noted, Palestinian terrorism became a 'form of mass communication'.⁸⁵ The famous US news anchor Walter Cronkite stated in September 1970, following the PFLP hijackings, 'Palestinian guerrillas, in a bold and coordinated action, created this newest crisis [...] in doing so they accomplished what they set out to do: they thrust back into the world's attention a problem diplomats have tended to shunt aside in hesitant steps towards Middle East peace.'⁸⁶

The downside of being noticed through terrorism was obviously that the Nixon administration started to see 'Palestinian' as a synonym for terrorism.⁸⁷ The leap taken was therefore from unknown humanitarian question (refugees) to prominent terrorists; while being noticed as an active actor in the conflict represented a step forward, being stereotyped as terrorists was a step back. The next thing the Palestinian national movement had to do was to reject terror in order to be recognised as a legitimate political actor.

In February 1974, the Fatah leadership officially declared that the phase of external operations had ended, and the phase of international diplomacy should begin.⁸⁸ This was the start of a process of PLO moderation, but it was not the start of the US acceptance of the movement, which was still a long way off.

The 1973 Arab–Israeli war

The period between the Jordanian civil war and the 1973 Arab–Israeli war was one in which the Middle East seemed less volatile – a region where it was unnecessary for the United States to spend political energy which could be directed elsewhere. It was a period of 'standstill diplomacy'.⁸⁹ It was also the lull before the storm.

In 1971, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat offered to negotiate a peace treaty with Israel. The Israelis and the United States gave him a cold response. Sadat was humiliated.⁹⁰ He tried again, in the early months of

1973, when Henry Kissinger held a series of meetings with Egyptian Presidential Adviser for National Security Affairs, Hafiz Ismail. They explored the possibilities for a negotiated settlement with Israel. Ismail pointed out that Egypt could lead, but would not go it alone; peace needed to include Jordan and Syria. Ismail also noted that any settlement must be tied to achieving Palestinian rights.⁹¹ Kissinger dismissed the offer, then added insult to injury by saying that Egypt was the defeated party and must act accordingly.⁹² Sadat had gone out on a limb for peace, but after being ignored and rejected by both Golda Meir and Henry Kissinger, he decided to go to war.⁹³

On 6 October 1973, the Syrian and Egyptian armies caught Israel off guard. While Egyptian forces broke through the 'impregnable' Bar-Lev line along the Suez Canal, the Syrian forces attacked Israel on the Golan Heights.⁹⁴ The war was both a tightly coordinated Syrian–Egyptian attack against Israel on two fronts, and an expression of two divergent approaches to the conflict. For the Syrian regime it was a war aimed at regaining territories lost in the 1967 war; for Egypt, it was a way to force Israel and the United States to take the nation seriously in future negotiations.⁹⁵

The Egyptian offensive halted once it had captured a bridgehead in the Sinai, leaving Syria to absorb the full Israeli counteroffensive. The Syrians were quickly defeated. On 10 October 1973, in the midst of the war, Sadat offered a cease-fire proposal, formulated as the first step in a complete peace process, through which Israel would withdraw to the 1967 lines, with a final peace conference including all parties, even the Palestinians. From a US and Israeli perspective Sadat was asking too much. Israel, however, was also asking too much. While the United States wanted a cease-fire, Israel wanted the United States to give it enough arms to conclude a full military victory. As the tide of the war turned, Israeli forces once again inflicted devastating losses on the Arab armies. When Israel defeated the Egyptian forces in the Sinai, Israel had far less need for a cease-fire at all.⁹⁶

Meanwhile, the war was having large global ramifications. The United States airlifted huge amounts of weapons to Israel, while the Soviet Union provided an airlift to Syria. The sums involved were staggering, with US aid during and following the war totalling \$2.2 billion.⁹⁷ This activity once again increased cold war tensions. Moreover, the Arab states initiated an oil embargo which targeted both

Israel and Israel's allies, triggering a global oil crisis.⁹⁸ With both Syria and Egypt militarily defeated, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 338, calling for immediate negotiations for a peaceful solution.⁹⁹ The war was brought to an end, but peace negotiations were still a long way off. Under Kissinger's leadership, the ensuing years would be spent negotiating separate and partial agreements instead. The Palestinians would not be part of these, and, in fact, their exclusion would thereby be formalised.

The 1973 war posed a political conundrum for the PLO leadership. After the war, when Sadat asked the PLO if it would participate in a peace conference, the reply was vague. The PLO leadership would not reject a conference in principle, but they were worried that it would be based on UNSC Resolution 242, which failed to address the Palestinian question.¹⁰⁰ This was a foreshadowing of a looming problem which would have a large impact on Carter's peace-making. While the United States demanded that all peace processes be based on UNSC Resolution 242, that condition was inherently unacceptable to the PLO.

Though they were unwilling to accept UNSC Resolution 242, Yassir Arafat and the moderate PLO leadership had signalled a willingness to accept the two-state principle since the 1973 war. These signals did not take the shape of clear-cut declarations but of 'trial balloons that showed a real desire to compromise'.¹⁰¹ The PLO had also tried to reach out to the United States through the security apparatuses. The most known of these contacts took place in March, July and November 1973, as well as in March 1974, during which the CIA held exploratory talks with the PLO. None of these meetings led to any political initiative, however.¹⁰²

While the CIA-PLO talks never fully developed into political conversations, the channel was stronger than is commonly known. In fact, CIA agent Robert Ames had developed contacts with the high-ranking PLO official Ali Hassan Salameh as early as late 1969. According to Kai Bird's biography of Robert Ames, Ali Hassan Salameh even held security talks with the CIA in New York in 1974, and then again met the CIA in the United States in early 1977. Until Ali Hassan Salameh was murdered by the Israeli Mossad on 22 January 1979, Ames regularly met with him in Beirut.¹⁰³ During the decade following Ames's first established contact with Salameh, the PLO took a series of moderating steps, but the United States never responded by upgrading the talks to a political level.

The first large step the PLO took towards a policy of political compromise came at the 12th Palestinian National Conference (PNC) in 1974. The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) took the lead, together with Fatah, in writing the Ten-Point Programme adopted there, which insisted on Palestinian national rights as a necessary precondition for a peaceful solution. The PLO program stood by armed struggle as a method of obtaining liberation and rejected peace based on UNSC Resolution 242, because the resolution treated the Palestinians strictly as a refugee problem. The programme did allow participation in a peace process if UNSC Resolution 242 were amended to recognise Palestinian national aspirations. The most profound change expressed in the programme was its allowance for a political solution not founded on the liberation of the whole of Palestine. It was therefore the first official document implying acceptance of a two-state solution.¹⁰⁴

Serving in the US National Security Council at the time, William Quandt argued that the Ten-Point Programme was the PLO's way of saying, 'in heavily qualified language ... that it was prepared to settle for a Palestinian state consisting only of the West Bank and Gaza'.¹⁰⁵ This political shift was crowned by a symbolic victory when Yassir Arafat was invited to speak before the UN General Assembly on 13 November 1974. In one of his most famous statements, he laid out the two paths available to the PLO: 'I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand.'¹⁰⁶ This was the most vocal expression of the PLO's increasing moderation. It did nothing for the Americans. Kissinger exclaimed: 'Our reading of it is that it called for a state which really did not include the existence of Israel and therefore was dealing with a successor state, and we do not consider this a particularly moderate position.'¹⁰⁷ Nor did the US perspective change following Arafat's statements to US senators in the early months of 1975 that he supported a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza only.¹⁰⁸

The UN, however, gave Arafat another victory when the General Assembly passed Resolution 3236, which reaffirmed the 'inalienable rights of the Palestinian people in Palestine, including [...] the right to self-determination [...] national independence and sovereignty [and] the inalienable right of the Palestinians to return to their homes and property'.¹⁰⁹ UNGA Resolution 3237 then granted the PLO official observer status in the General Assembly.¹¹⁰

Within the PLO, this shift was highly contentious, as various factions within the Palestinian movement wanted different things. For some groups, such as the PFLP, the acceptance of a Palestinian mini-state on the West Bank and Gaza was anathema. They were also willing to resort to violence to thwart the PLO moderates in their search for a diplomatic solution.¹¹¹

Step by step

On 25 October 1973, the war between Israel and Egypt and Syria had finally come to an end. Kissinger saw a political opportunity to break the stalemate which had existed prior to the war. Creating fruitful diplomacy out of war was no simple task, however, and Kissinger's solution was a step-by-step formula for negotiations – one excluding both the Soviet Union and the Palestinians.¹¹² The parcelling-out of issues related to the conflict strongly strengthened Israel's hand, of course; the historian Salim Yaqub goes so far as to argue that the whole point of the step-by-step structure was 'to be a mechanism for Israel's indefinite occupation of Arab land'.¹¹³

To initiate this particular peace process, Kissinger created a mediation umbrella, to signal that it aimed to include all the parties. The chosen forum was a Geneva conference co-chaired by the United States and the Soviet Union; the substantial negotiations, however, would be bilateral, under the sole supervision of the United States. The Geneva conference nonetheless proved difficult to convene. The question of who would attend, for example, was a thorny issue. Israel would not accept PLO participation at any cost, and the United States accepted this premise. Syrian President Hafez al-Asad refused to attend, leaving only Jordan, Egypt and Israel to appear in Geneva on 21 December 1973. The impact of the conference was largely symbolic. The parties spoke, but not to each other – for each of the participants, instead, the audience was domestic. For the United States, as well, the conference was a showcase intended to provide multilateral cover to a bilateral process, and, towards this end, it succeeded.¹¹⁴

After the Geneva conference, the next step was the Israeli–Egyptian disengagement negotiations, for which Kissinger initiated his famous shuttle diplomacy, travelling between Egypt and Israel, to carry their respective ideas and responses back and forth. On 18 January 1974, the

first Egyptian–Israeli disengagement treaty was signed.¹¹⁵ Kissinger's focus then shifted to Syria, where he found a demanding negotiator in President Hafez al-Asad. After extensive shuttling, an agreement was reached there too, and the Syrian–Israeli disengagement treaty was signed on 31 May.¹¹⁶ Upon the completion of these agreements, the Arab oil embargo ended.¹¹⁷

Although a peaceful solution was also necessary on the Jordanian front, this would prove difficult, if not impossible, within Kissinger's disengagement framework. The step-by-step format of negotiation was only workable on less complicated fronts, such as the Golan and Sinai. It could not address the more fundamental issues of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees or the West Bank, a territory with both ideological and security implications for Israel. Kissinger had also, purposely and under pressure from Israel, isolated the Palestinians by excluding the PLO from negotiations. This made the Jordanian front even more complicated, because the Arab states insisted that the West Bank was Palestinian territory, and that it was for the PLO to negotiate the status of the West Bank, not Jordan. Including the PLO in negotiations was out of the question for both the United States and Israel, which showed, perhaps more than anything else, how out of sync with regional developments the US policy was. Ignoring the Palestinians meant that there were certain things that simply could not be done, and it would clearly have been pertinent to consider whether movement was possible without a change in the parameters of the negotiations. Instead, all focus shifted towards a second disengagement on the Egyptian front.

To Kissinger's disappointment, the Israelis were so unwilling to make further concessions that even a second limited Egyptian–Israeli deal seemed impossible. In unusually outspoken fashion, Kissinger told Israeli Prime Minister Rabin: 'I see pressure building up to force you back to the 1967 borders – compared to that, ten kilometers is trivial. I'm not angry at you, and I'm not asking you to change your position. It's tragic to see people dooming themselves to a course of unbelievable peril.'¹¹⁸ Kissinger then suspended the talks.

In the midst of this suspension of negotiations, the first round of the Lebanese civil war erupted.¹¹⁹ The PLO was central to this outbreak, having sided with the leftist forces under the leadership of Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt. The PLO had also taken control of large areas of Beirut and southern Lebanon, their main base since the 1970 Jordanian civil

war. The PLO posed a major challenge to the pro-Western Lebanese regime. Fighting erupted as a local political struggle over fishing rights spun out of control, pitting Christian militias against the Palestinians. Once this spark was lit in a highly volatile country, it started a civil war that would last for 15 years. This was not only a domestic issue, as the PLO also used Lebanon as a base from which to launch attacks on Israel.¹²⁰ The US policy of ignoring the Palestinians did not stop the organisation from having a massive influence on regional developments. As with international terrorism previously, the PLO's role in the Lebanese civil war helped put it on the map, but it did not help its image. This despite the fact that the PLO helped to facilitate the evacuation of US personnel from Beirut in June 1976. While both President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger thanked the PLO for this assistance, it had no effect on the US political position on the movement writ large.¹²¹

While Arab–Israeli talks were suspended in 1975, the US administration re-evaluated its diplomatic strategy, and Kissinger met with a large number of foreign policy specialists. Two main alternatives came to dominate this re-evaluation phase. One strand of foreign policy thinkers argued for a continued step-by-step approach, excluding the Palestinians, and another argued for a comprehensive approach, including the Palestinians. Dominant among the latter voices was the Brookings Institution study group which recommended a comprehensive approach to US Middle East diplomacy, including the Palestinian issue. This group's work would form part of the intellectual underpinning of the Carter presidency's Middle East diplomacy.¹²²

This re-evaluation period should have been a golden opportunity to review and revise US–PLO policy. It was not to be. President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger decided that what was needed was more of the same. When Kissinger was asked directly about including the Palestinians in the next round of negotiations, he responded: 'Do you want to start a revolution in the United States?'¹²³ Instead, it was back to step-by-step negotiations, without the Palestinians.¹²⁴

Sinai II

Kissinger promptly initiated a new round of disengagement negotiations between Israel and Egypt, but Israel largely remained

intransigent. In late June 1975, however, Israel finally signalled a willingness to make some minor concessions. Sadat followed up by granting further concessions of his own. The United States paid with increased aid and, on 4 September 1975, the second Israeli–Egyptian disengagement agreement (Sinai II) was signed.¹²⁵

With Sinai II, many of the US promises previously given orally to Israel were put into writing. The agreements were secret, but some authorised leaks were provided to the Israeli press.¹²⁶ In all, there were three secret agreements between the United States and Israel, and one between the United States and Egypt. The latter was simply a vague promise of intent to bring about an agreement on the Syrian front, as well as a promise to provide US assistance to Egypt.¹²⁷ Many of the US agreements with Israel contained clauses which limited the US diplomatic room for manoeuvre in upcoming negotiations. In one memorandum, the United States committed to

not recognize or negotiate with the Palestine Liberation Organization so long as the Palestine Liberation Organization does not recognize Israel's right to exist and does not accept [UN] Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. The United States Government will consult fully and seek to concert its position and strategy at the Geneva peace conference with the Government of Israel.¹²⁸

Rather than work to include the Palestinians in future negotiations, Kissinger did the opposite. He blocked future US presidents from talking to the PLO. To quote US journalist Edward Sheehan: '[I]n excluding the PLO from the start, Kissinger excluded from the process of peacemaking the very essence of the Arab–Israeli quarrel.'¹²⁹

The United States also promised to veto any UN Security Council resolution aimed at changing UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338.¹³⁰ Since an important fault of UNSC Resolution 242 was that the Palestinians were not treated as a political party in the conflict, this was yet another mechanism for excluding the Palestinians. The US administration could not negotiate with the PLO unless Israel accepted it first. This self-imposed limitation had been long in the making. In early December 1973, Kissinger had accepted the Israeli demand that there would be no PLO participation in the Geneva conference.¹³¹ Two weeks later Kissinger

had given the Israelis a secret 'Memorandum of Understanding', promising them that 'no other parties would be invited to future meetings at Geneva 'without the agreement of the initial participants'.¹³² This was, in effect, a US guaranteed Israeli veto against PLO participation.¹³³ In the words of Janice Gross Stein: 'what Kissinger kept off the agenda was far more important than what he put on'.¹³⁴

When Jimmy Carter came to power in 1977, he inherited this 'diplomatic straitjacket' from Kissinger.¹³⁵ Reflecting on this some years later, Herman Eilts, Carter's ambassador to Egypt, stated: 'From that point on our greatest vulnerability in pursuing an effective mediatory role in the peace process was our inability to have dialogue, real dialogue with the PLO.'¹³⁶ While this analysis is accurate, it is also true that Carter failed to ever seriously challenge the limitations Kissinger imposed.

Failing to see the Palestinians

Not only was the US policy of limiting its own room for manoeuvre a hindrance on future US policy-makers, it was also largely out of sync with developments in the Middle East. For several years, at this point, the PLO had become *the* representative of the Palestinian people and had gained legitimacy as the only actor which could negotiate the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza. In 1973, in an Arab League meeting in Algeria, all the Arab states, bar Jordan, agreed that the PLO was the Palestinians' sole legitimate representative. Because Jordan objected, however, no resolution to this effect was passed.¹³⁷ The PLO had to wait another year before this would become an official Arab League policy; on 28 October 1974, in Rabat, the Arab League finally did declare that the PLO was 'the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people'.¹³⁸

Despite their centrality to the conflict, then, and their increasing regional and international recognition and influence, the Palestinians failed to be acknowledged as a legitimate actor by the United States in the period preceding President Carter. This is true both at the political leadership level, and in US public opinion.¹³⁹ There were many good reasons for this, the most basic of which being that the Palestinians did not have a state to represent them. The PLO was, at the best of times, a para-state, or a state apparatus in exile, whether in Jordan or Lebanon.

Another reason was that Israel was adamantly against including the Palestinians in any political solution. Israel had an increasingly special relationship with the United States, and thus the US understanding of the conflict was very often shaped through an Israeli lens. The friendly US-Israeli relationship was evident under Harry S. Truman, became warmer under John F. Kennedy and then steadily became closer, until Israel was seen as a strategically vital ally under Richard Nixon.¹⁴⁰ This increasingly special relationship, of course, was always paired with a blindness about, and unwillingness to engage with, the Palestinians and their claims.¹⁴¹

While Kennedy, like Eisenhower before him, had made some attempts to befriend the Arab states, to avoid a Soviet monopoly in the region, he never grasped the fact that the Palestinians were a people with national aspirations. Like US presidents before him, he saw them as a humanitarian problem, not a political issue.¹⁴² That perception remained intact until it was replaced by the understanding that Palestinians were terrorists.

This brings us to the third reason for excluding the PLO from negotiations, which was that the PLO became synonymous with terrorism. Most famously the PFLP had carried out its hijackings in 1970, and the Black September Organisation committed the Munich massacre in 1972, killing 11 Israeli athletes at the Olympic games.¹⁴³ This history stained the PLO long after the main member organisations had ceased to support international terrorism.¹⁴⁴ It certainly had not helped that presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated by Palestinian born Sirhan Sirhan in June 1968.¹⁴⁵ The image of the Palestinians as terrorists was also sustained by the actions of extreme Palestinian factions, such as the Abu Nidal group, and compounded by the fact that the PLO's main allies were the communist countries and the radical Arab states.¹⁴⁶

A fourth reason was that Jordan, an important US ally in the region, wanted to regain control over the West Bank and Jerusalem, and thus insisted on being the legitimate partner in negotiating on behalf of the Palestinians. For US policy-makers, in turn, Jordan was considered important precisely because it stood in the way of Palestinian nationalism.¹⁴⁷ Starting in 1970, this assumption was sometimes challenged. For instance, a report from the US consulate in Jerusalem stated that the conflict could only be solved if the Palestinians were

included.¹⁴⁸ In another report the same year, Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Sisco argued, 'perhaps it is time to shift our attention from the two-power and four-power exercises to direct action vis-à-vis the principal actors – Israel, the Palestinians and the UAR [Egypt]'.¹⁴⁹ Such a view did not last for long. In November 1970 the Palestinians were described as a 'refugee and a Jordanian problem'.¹⁵⁰ By the end of December 1970, the so-called Palestine Option was laid aside. US policy was that Jordan was responsible for negotiating on behalf of the Palestinians.¹⁵¹

A last reason was the US domestic imbalance between the pro-Israeli interest groups, known as the Israel lobby, and the Arab-American interest groups. While the former were firmly established, well-funded and tightly organised, the latter were only slowly beginning to make their marks in the 1970s. In fact, the imbalance was so strong that even the various rising progressive and leftist movements in the United States found it difficult to side with the Palestinians. This greatly benefitted Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians.¹⁵²

Despite all these reasons, the Palestinians could not be ignored. In early 1973, the US Bureau of Intelligence and Research wrote a report on the Palestinian Fedayeen, concluding that the PLO was the 'only agency that can speak for the Palestinians *en masse*'.¹⁵³ Again, in February 1974, members of Kissinger's National Security Council recommended that Kissinger should work towards a rapprochement between Jordan's King Hussein and the PLO. According to Harold Saunders, one of Kissinger's top aides, a good way of doing so would be to approach the PLO directly and convince the movement to accept the fact that King Hussein could negotiate on its behalf. Kissinger disagreed with Saunders. For him it was King Hussein who would negotiate with Israel over the future of the West Bank – a negotiation in which the PLO had no place.¹⁵⁴ President Nixon, however, used the phrase 'the legitimate interests of the Palestinians' in his overview of what needed to be addressed in a peace process.¹⁵⁵ The statement had no political consequence, and the Palestinians continued to be ignored.

Towards the end of his foreign policy reign there were indications that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was considering a more comprehensive approach to Arab-Israeli peace-making. Essentially, though, the comprehensiveness would continue to be limited by the fact that the Palestinians were not to be included in any meaningful way.¹⁵⁶

There was one major exception to this rule. On 12 November 1975, Harold Saunders of the US National Security Council, in a statement before the US House of Representatives subcommittee of international relations, recognised

that the final resolution of the problems arising from the partition of Palestine, the establishment of the state of Israel, and Arab opposition to those events will not be possible until agreement is reached defining a just and permanent status for the Arab peoples who consider themselves Palestinians.¹⁵⁷

This statement brought about such negative reactions from Israel and pro-Israel groups in the United States that Kissinger quickly backtracked, calling the statement 'a somewhat academic exercise'.¹⁵⁸ He said this despite the fact that both Kissinger and President Ford had accepted the wording of Saunders's statement.¹⁵⁹ Internally, Kissinger had also admitted: 'We can't refuse forever to talk to the PLO. [...] We could co-exist with the PLO. It is indeed historically inevitable.'¹⁶⁰ Thus, while one can debate whether Kissinger might have been ready to include the Palestinians in a peace process, neither the US public, its pro-Israeli interest groups nor Israel itself was ready. And, in the end, Kissinger was not willing to challenge any of them. This was a foretelling of what would come in the Carter years. Including the Palestinians in the political process would be no easy task.

CHAPTER 3

THE COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

On 20 January 1977, Jimmy Carter was sworn in as the 39th president of the United States of America. Carter came into office with fresh ideas, and a desire to break free of the political deadlocks in the Arab–Israeli conflict. In an American context, Carter’s Middle East approach was therefore radical. It went far in actually recognising Palestinian aspirations, and it attempted to abandon the cold war mould by including the Soviet Union in the peace-making enterprise. The goal was to obtain a comprehensive peace which would solve all the outstanding issues between the involved parties: Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Israel and the Palestinians. The chosen format for negotiating such a settlement would be a reconvened Geneva conference. This time, the conference would not be for show, but represent *the* format for Arab–Israeli negotiations.

Carter was fully dedicated to the concept of achieving a comprehensive peace, as both his public and private statements made abundantly clear. The Middle East policy of the first half-year of his presidency was clearly geared towards that end. While preparing for a Geneva peace conference, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance went on two Middle East tours, and President Carter personally met with the region’s heads of state. However, by October 1977, this approach was already falling apart, due to Israeli intransigence and an inability to solve the question of how the Palestinians could be represented at Geneva. This was made all the more difficult by the disinclination of the Arab states to agree amongst themselves as to what political positions to take.

Coming into office

President Carter and his political team were not alone in advocating for a comprehensive approach. It had the support of both the State Department and the CIA. A lengthy State Department transition document titled 'Arab-Israeli Dispute' mapped out the situation in the Middle East for the incoming administration. Its authors argued that the United States needed to choose between a comprehensive solution and a partial solution, as an interim step, and if the former were indeed chosen, the Carter administration would have to make 'a commitment to put our full influence into the scales in an effort to achieve a settlement'.¹ A lengthy CIA report also supported a comprehensive approach and noted that Palestinian participation was the key ingredient.²

The State Department was more cautious than the CIA on the Palestinian question. It recognised that the Palestinian issue was central to the conflict but also acknowledged that the Palestinians would probably not be able to meet the US demand that the PLO first had to accept UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338 and recognise Israel's right to exist.³ Nor would this likely be enough, since Israel 'would not accept the PLO as an independent party to the negotiations even under these circumstances'.⁴ In light of this obstacle, the State Department recommended instead that Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia represent the Palestinians, and 'press the PLO not to hinder the process unduly'.⁵

The Palestinian dilemma facing Carter was clear from the outset. On the one hand, he wanted a comprehensive peace, which included the Palestinians; on the other, he was limited by a US policy which greatly restricted all official contact with the PLO as long as the organisation did not accept the US demands. Kissinger had made that promise to Israel, we will recall, during the finalisation of the Sinai II agreement.⁶ Carter and his team employed a very strict interpretation of the PLO clause in Sinai II, interpreting the phrase 'will not recognize or negotiate' to mean that they could have no direct political contact with the organisation, despite the fact that the text did not mention less formal contact.⁷ This strict interpretation unnecessarily restricted the administration's room for manoeuvre.

Carter's Palestinian dilemma was made even starker by Israel's insistence that it would not negotiate with the PLO even if the PLO *did* meet those US demands. It seems obvious, in hindsight, that something

had to give. Carter could either reduce the demands on the PLO in order to negotiate with it, then pressure Israel to accept this arrangement, or he could come to terms with the fact that the PLO would continue to be excluded. Instead, Carter wanted to both convince the PLO to accept the US demands and convince Israel to accept this condition. Furthermore, rather than try to break with the largely irreconcilable stances of getting the PLO involved in the peace process without talking to it, Carter tried to achieve the former within the confines of the latter. In the months ahead, then, his administration would attempt to activate a large range of indirect lines of communication with the PLO.

Developing the comprehensive approach

The commitment to a comprehensive approach represented a major strategic decision which was made at the very top level and discussed within the Policy Review Committee (PRC). The PRC was chaired by the State Department and responsible for broader foreign policy issues. Its meetings were attended by the most important people in the administration, including Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and Vice President Walter Mondale.⁸ Along with Middle East specialists such as William B. Quandt (NSC), Harold H. Saunders and Alfred L. Atherton (both State Department), this team developed and worked to implement Carter's comprehensive approach. It was clear at all times that Arab-Israeli peace-making was a high priority for the administration.

One of the primary questions was to decide on a suitable forum for negotiations, and the group decided to reconvene the 1973 Geneva conference but expand its mandate. Other fundamental questions involved deciding on who would participate, and who would host the conference. It was in his answers to those two questions where Carter departed the furthest from previous US presidents. The inclusion of the Palestinians was obviously the most radical aspect of the Carter approach. While the Palestinians had always been seen as part of the problem in the Arab-Israeli conflict, they had rarely been seen as an independent political actor which might be central to finding its solution. Carter's other central innovation was his inclusion of the

Soviet Union. While Henry Kissinger had used the Soviet Union as co-chair for the 1973 Geneva conference, it did not have an active role.⁹ In fact, Kissinger's peace-making tried hard to exclude the Soviet Union and make it an irrelevant regional actor. Carter and most of his top advisors, on the other hand, agreed that active Soviet participation was desirable.¹⁰

Brzezinski differed on this point. Fearing Soviet and Palestinian intransigence, he argued that the United States should work on getting the involved Middle Eastern states to agree on certain premises before going to Geneva.¹¹ This tension in the Carter administration over whether to include the Soviet Union and the Palestinians in this preparatory stage highlighted another dilemma of the comprehensive approach. While this approach demanded Soviet and Palestinian participation, some were sceptical about bringing them in at an early stage. It also highlighted one of the most famous tensions within the Carter administration, namely the Vance–Brzezinski divide – of the two, Brzezinski was far more sceptical of the Soviet Union.

The PRC's initial discussions revealed inherent contradictions within the comprehensive approach. How comprehensive was a peace which depended on the old structures of exclusion in order to create a new structure of inclusion? Was it even possible to ask the Soviet Union for support while keeping it out of the talks? Was it possible to include the Palestinians without talking directly to the PLO? These contradictions were never adequately addressed and gradually became the cause of large problems for the US administration.

Theory to practice: Visiting the Middle East

The Carter administration decided to try to tackle these dilemmas as the talks developed. Officials therefore proceeded to consult with the relevant Middle Eastern governments. The two first rounds of consultations began with a Middle East tour by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, followed by state visits from the Middle East to Washington.

On 14 February 1977, less than a month into the Carter presidency, Vance left on an eight-day Middle East tour to meet with the leaders of Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iran and seek common ground upon which a second Geneva conference could be based.¹²

This early top-level engagement indicated to all that Carter was putting his weight behind Middle East diplomacy.

Vance identified four main issues of concern which needed to be addressed in order to have fruitful negotiations: the nature of the peace, boundaries, Palestinian issues, and procedure. There were some overarching areas of agreement. The various states all agreed that the United States should help develop an overall settlement, and that a Geneva conference was a good idea. Beyond that, however, the Middle East states were at odds. Israel wanted peace to entail both diplomatic relations and trade, whereas the Arab states saw peace merely as an end to the state of war, without any normalisation. Israel wanted defensible borders and no withdrawal from Jerusalem, whereas the Arab states demanded borders based on the June 1967 lines. President Sadat and King Hussein of Jordan were willing to accept minor border modifications.¹³ On the Palestinian issue, though, there was no agreement whatsoever. Israel was adamantly against the creation of a Palestinian state, whereas the Arab states insisted on some form of Palestinian entity. Israel refused to negotiate with the PLO, and the Arab states insisted that the PLO had to participate in the talks.¹⁴

With this feedback from the region, Carter realised that getting Israel to accept PLO participation, in one form or another, would determine whether it would be possible to hold a Geneva conference.¹⁵ For that very reason, Vance had prodded the Israelis as to whether they could talk to the PLO if the PLO were to recognise UNSC Resolution 242. Israel's Foreign Minister Yigal Allon responded: 'Without its covenant and refraining from terrorism and recognizing the right of Israel to exist and recognizing 242 – the PLO ceases to be the PLO. [. . .] [W]hen this tiger becomes a horse let me know and I will think about riding it.'¹⁶ There was simply little hope of moving Israel, without first getting the PLO to budge, but even if the PLO budged, there was no guarantee that Israel would reciprocate.

On the question of what form the Arab delegation at Geneva would take, Syria opted for a unified Arab delegation, whereas Egypt preferred bilateral delegations.¹⁷ Syria preferred a unified delegation because it would enable Syrian President Hafez al-Asad to hold Egyptian power in check, and it would ensure that Syria had a role in negotiating the Palestinian issue.¹⁸ Israel shared the Egyptian preference for bilateral delegations.¹⁹ The questions of what format the Arab delegation could

have, and the issue of Palestinian representation, would prove to be thorny in the coming months, and Carter's struggle to secure agreement on the format of talks did not bode well for the difficult questions of substance.

These major difficulties aside, Vance returned to the United States to emphasise that his trip had allowed him to build 'trust and confidence' among the region's leaders and underline the 'depth of Presidential commitment to finding a peaceful solution'.²⁰ The Syrian president also stated publicly that he viewed Vance's visit as an indication of Carter's dedication to finding a solution to the conflict.²¹ This was an unusually positive comment from Asad.

The Clinton speech and tidings from Moscow

On 16 March 1977, Jimmy Carter gave a speech in Clinton, Massachusetts. The speech itself contained few and uncontroversial references to the Middle East. In the question-and-answers session afterwards, however, Carter mapped out his Middle East policy by dividing the prerequisites for peace into three categories. The first two were old news: normalisation and recognition of Israel by the neighbouring Arab states, and an agreement on the delineation of permanent borders. The third, and most noteworthy, was new: a solution to the Palestine problem. 'There has to be a homeland provided for the Palestinian refugees who have suffered for many, many years', Carter insisted.²²

This reference to a Palestinian 'homeland', which was heard as an echo of the British Balfour declaration 60 years earlier, caused a stir, both domestically and internationally.²³ The American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the main body of the so-called Israel lobby, launched a campaign at Congress and the White House opposing Carter's position.²⁴ The PLO, on the other hand, welcomed the 'homeland' statement.²⁵ PLO leader Yassir Arafat was 'ecstatic'.²⁶ Clearly, it was hard to please everybody in a diplomatic process which took the form of a zero-sum game. This was a recurring pattern. The more Carter exerted himself to include the Palestinians, and please the Arab states, the less amiable his relationship became with Israel and its domestic supporters in the United States. At times, this dynamic would prompt Carter to backtrack. In the early months of 1977, though, Carter soldiered on.

After Carter had publicly made his position on the Palestinian question clear, the Soviet Union answered in kind. On 21 March 1977, Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev held a speech indicating that the Soviet Union shared much of Washington's view regarding Middle East peace negotiations.²⁷ He stated that the Soviet Union

[w]elcomes Geneva [...] Withdrawal of Israeli troops to the 1967 borders [...] Demilitarized zones on both sides of borders [...] UN forces or observers for a specified period of time. Guarantees by UNSC and by four powers [...] relations of peace begin when withdrawal is completed. All sides undertake to respect each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence and to resolve disputes by peaceful means. [...] The inalienable rights of the Palestinian Arab people should be ensured, including the right to self-determination and the creation of its own state.²⁸

This was something with which the US administration could work. Self-determination and statehood were steps further than 'homeland', but apart from that the two superpowers agreed to a remarkable extent. The insistence on Palestinian statehood was also counterbalanced by the fact that Brezhnev did not mention the PLO. Brezhnev's statement was so aligned with the Carter administration's thinking that Brzezinski commented: 'Perhaps he [Brezhnev] also has read the Brookings Report.'²⁹

Within the timespan of one week, the two most controversial aspects of the Carter approach were out in the open. First Carter had publicly supported a Palestinian homeland, and then the Soviet Union had declared that it wanted to participate in working towards Middle East peace in cooperation with the United States. Carter had issued a challenge to Israel and its supporters in the United States, and Brezhnev's speech made it evident that the Soviet Union was more or less in line with Carter. But what about the political leaders in the Middle East? What were their views about a possible new Geneva conference? Many outstanding questions remained after Vance's tour. It was time to upgrade the talks.

Theory to practice: State visits

Shortly after Vance finished his Middle East tour, the Middle East heads of state started visiting Washington to clarify the outstanding issues.

This formal upgrade brought the talks from the secretary of state to the presidential level. It was indicative of the gravity with which the Carter administration viewed the Arab–Israeli peace process.

The first visit to Washington was by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Rabin's labour party had trouble domestically, and Israel, a tough negotiator at the best of times, had a leadership with little political will or ability to make concessions.³⁰ It did not help that Israel was at odds with the US administration's views on most issues, or that the personal chemistry between Rabin and Carter was terrible.³¹ Vance and Carter agreed that the 'major problem is with Israel', and Carter later wondered whether it had been a mistake to invite the Israeli prime minister as the first of the Middle East heads of state to visit Washington.³²

Rabin made it clear that Israel would not accept a separate Palestinian state on the West Bank or any form of PLO participation, even as part of the Jordanian delegation.³³ The Americans rejected the Israeli position, and Carter informed Rabin that he considered the Israeli settlements illegal, and that he viewed the Israeli stance as becoming increasingly rigid.³⁴ Carter told the prime minister:

We see a possibility that Palestinian leaders can be absorbed in an Arab delegation. And we don't know any Palestinian leaders other than the PLO. We hope that you could accept such an arrangement. It would be a blow to US support for Israel if you refused to participate in the Geneva talks over the technicality of the PLO being in the negotiations.³⁵

This was an unusual position for a US president. Not only was Carter pushing for PLO participation – at one time an almost unimaginable stance – but he was also threatening Rabin with the potential consequences of a 'blow to US support for Israel'. Despite such pressure from Carter, Rabin rejected talking to the PLO, even if the PLO accepted UNSC Resolution 242. The tension with Israel had become apparent, and the administration had to engage with the US Jewish community to assure them that the US stance on Israel was not changing.³⁶ This would be a recurring theme in the months and years to follow. Each time Carter pressured Israel, he would also appeal to his domestic audience, to reassure it that the good US–Israeli relationship was

unchanged. While this made sense domestically, it took the force out of his pressure on Israel.

Despite the rejectionist position taken by Israel, Carter proceeded with his further state visits as planned. President Anwar Sadat of Egypt was the first Arab leader to visit Washington, arriving on 4 April 1977.³⁷ By that time, Carter had clarified his comprehensive approach around three central points. The first point was that peace had to be comprehensive, and ensure normalised relations between the states. The second point was that territorial sovereignty and security arrangements should be treated as distinct – certain security arrangements, such as surveillance systems, could be in place within a territory for a transitional period without being considered an infringement of territorial sovereignty. The third point was that the Palestinians should have a homeland.³⁸ These were revisions of the three points Carter had made in Clinton, and they would be reiterated time and again as the cornerstones of the comprehensive approach.³⁹

A primary goal of Carter's meeting with Sadat was to see if the Arab states could get the PLO to accept UNSC Resolution 242, which would mean that the United States would allow the PLO to be a partner in negotiations. If it proved impossible to get the PLO to make that commitment, then the United States needed Egypt to provide an alternative for Palestinian representation at Geneva.⁴⁰ Sadat claimed that he wanted individual Arab national delegations at Geneva and agreed that the PLO should recognise resolutions 242 and 338, but lamented that he would be unable to push the PLO to commit to such a recognition. The United States therefore shifted its focus towards encouraging a PLO–Jordanian dialogue.⁴¹ The Carter team was both interested in getting the Palestinians on board and pragmatic about finding a way to do so. The problem was that Israel, as Rabin made clear, was neither for including the Palestinians nor pragmatic about the situation. So while Carter and Sadat were saying 'yes, if', the Israelis were saying 'no, even if'.

After President Sadat came Jordanian King Hussein, who was walking a diplomatic tightrope. While he wanted to retain the ties between Jordan and the West Bank, he had to hold the Arab line of supporting the PLO, based on the 1974 Rabat summit's declaration that the PLO was the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. For King Hussein, the optimal solution would be a unified Arab

delegation, whilst the worst case scenario was an independent PLO delegation.⁴² The Jordanians were flexible on most issues but preferred a Palestinian federal link to Jordan.⁴³ The tension between King Hussein and the PLO was obvious. On the positive side King Hussein acknowledged that minor border modifications would be possible.⁴⁴ While King Hussein was as moderate as Sadat, as the king of Jordan he did not carry the political weight which would allow him to break with the more radical Arab regimes, and particularly Syria.

Carter's next Middle East meeting was therefore far more politically significant: On 9 May, he travelled to Geneva to meet Syrian President Hafez al-Asad. It was crucial to have Asad on board if the process were to have any chance of success, particularly since Asad was considered to be the Arab statesman who was closest to the Palestinians.⁴⁵ Carter's focus was therefore to impress upon Asad the need for Syria to convince the PLO to accept UNSC Resolution 242; the need to explore security arrangements; and the importance to Israel of a full peace, including normalisation.⁴⁶ This was a tall order. Syria was against normalisation, and was, in general, the most intransigent of the three Arab states whose territory was occupied by Israel (the other two were Egypt and Jordan). Syria insisted that the 'Palestinian problem' was the heart of the matter, that the Arab states should have a unified delegation and that the PLO had to be invited to Geneva.⁴⁷ Syria drove the hardest bargain of the Arab states but remained vital to the potential success of the comprehensive approach. To convey the sincerity of his peace-making, Carter reiterated the 'homeland' statement in a press conference with Asad present.⁴⁸ The Clinton question-and-answer session in March was clearly not a one-off occasion.

Towards the end of May, Crown Prince Fahd of Saudi Arabia paid a state visit to Washington. While Saudi Arabia did not play a direct part in the conflict, the US administration wanted Saudi Arabia to use its influence over the Arab states and the PLO to promote positions which could be acceptable to the United States and Israel in upcoming talks.⁴⁹ Although the meeting was cordial, the dialogue between the heads of state highlighted one of the most fundamental problems of the peace process: even if Saudi Arabia managed to get the PLO to accept UNSC Resolution 242, Israel would probably not be willing to recognise the PLO.⁵⁰ More fundamentally, all the talks with the Arab heads of state illustrated an inherent flaw in the comprehensive approach: all the talks

focused *on* the Palestinians, but the Palestinians themselves were not talked *to*.

To talk or not to talk?

Carter and Vance had met with all the parties in the conflict except the Palestinians. This was problematic, considering that the issue of Palestinian participation in negotiations was one of the biggest obstacles on the way to Geneva. Vance was crystal clear on the importance of solving this problem: 'Unless some means could be found to approach this explosive problem [of Palestinian representation] rationally, there could be no negotiation, no peace, and in the long run, no security for Israel or stability in the Middle East.'⁵¹

There were at least three main issues blocking a direct dialogue between the Carter administration and the PLO. The first was the US policy of not recognising or negotiating with the PLO until the organisation recognised Israel and accepted UNSC Resolution 242.⁵² The second was Israel's absolute refusal to talk to the PLO, even if the above admissions were made.⁵³ The third was Arab disunity – while the Arab states had technically agreed that the PLO was the sole representative of the Palestinians, it was largely treated as a means of fronting the regional interests of the various states.

With regard to this last issue, the administration concluded that the Arab states first had to answer the question of Palestinian representation for themselves.⁵⁴ The State Department argued in vain that it was unlikely that the Arab states could find such a solution.⁵⁵ The administration's stance, that the issue of Palestinian representation was one the Arab states had to solve, was symptomatic of its dealings with the Palestinians. Despite an internal consensus that the Palestinian issue played a major role in the peace process, the main responsibility for moving that issue forward was pushed to others, such as the Arab states and the Soviet Union, as well as a variety of individuals.

Realising the depth and apparent intractability of the Palestinian representation issue, Vance suggested that the Palestinians could be convinced to forego attendance in Geneva in return for an understanding that they would participate later.⁵⁶ The comprehensive approach, though, was already slipping – the Carter administration proved

unwilling to put its political weight behind solving the very issue that it had identified as the main roadblock in the peace process.

For Carter the question of PLO participation formally rested on the status of UNSC Resolution 242. However, since the resolution referred only to states, and the Palestinians were merely referred to as refugees, Vance informed Carter that there was no way the PLO could accept UNSC Resolution 242 unless it were adapted to grant the Palestinians recognition as a legitimate actor with legitimate claims.⁵⁷ Because Israel would not accept the emendation of the resolution, the PLO was being asked to accept a resolution which failed to recognise its legitimacy. Again, the administration's greatest dilemma was evident. Whilst a strict 242-as-precondition approach was unacceptable to the PLO, Israel would have it no other way, and Israel was allowed to set the bar.

In March 1977, the PLO held its 13th Palestine National Council (PNC) meeting. The PNC was the setting in which the PLO, as a political body, could alter its stance to respond to the US demands. As such, the PLO disappointed. The PNC made a commitment to a two-state solution but masked the commitment in rejectionist language. The declaration from the PNC rejected both UNSC Resolution 242 and any recognition of Israel. It did, however, refer to an 'independent national state on their national soil'.⁵⁸ The keywords here were 'on' and 'state', as they implied the potential acceptance for the existence of two states.⁵⁹ The PNC also sent a letter to the UN Security Council supporting a UN report that specifically referred to a two-state solution and recognised Israel.⁶⁰ The latter move was subtle and a long way from explicitly accepting UNSC Resolution 242, so, while the 1977 PNC went slightly further than the 1974 PNC, it was not far enough for the United States. The United States was looking for *the* major step, and would not accept subtle steps in that *direction*.

Even as the PLO made these moves, it became increasingly obvious that even if it were to recognise UNSC Resolution 242 with a modifying statement, Geneva would be hard to convene, because Israel would still need to recognise the PLO. But the US administration was simply unwilling to pressure Israel on this point until after the Israeli election in May. Israeli Prime Minister Rabin was losing ground domestically, making him the only relevant Middle East head of state who was not in a position to make nationally binding commitments.⁶¹ On 8 April 1977 Rabin resigned. He was replaced by Shimon Peres,

who went on to lose the May election to Likud leader Menachem Begin.⁶² This turn of events would come as a shock to the Carter administration.

Talking around the dilemma: Palestinian back channels

The politics of talking indirectly to the Palestinians was not only handled at the uppermost political levels; since Carter had taken office, there had been various back-channel attempts at getting the PLO to make the concessions needed to allow the political contacts to be direct and official. On 2 February 1977, for example, PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat had informed the United States of his interest in opening a dialogue with the US government.⁶³ Due to the United States policy against talking to the PLO, this channel was never established. While direct communication between the US administration and the PLO was considered to be impossible, signals continued to be sent between the two parties, as a weak substitute for direct diplomacy. One such signal had been Carter's Clinton speech, where he called for a Palestinian homeland. This had been warmly received by Arafat. The US State Department had also received signals from various sources that the PLO wanted to 'convey an image of moderation.'⁶⁴ While these were positive signs, they were open to interpretation by both parties. What, for example, did 'homeland' mean? For the Carter administration, finding a way to circumvent the political binds and ensure that the flow of information was steady and reliable, were not easy tasks.

Several back channels were therefore explored. One was to use Palestinian-American intellectuals such as Columbia Professor Edward Said, or Ibrahim Abu-Lughud, professor in political science at Northwestern University and a member of the Palestine National Council, as intermediaries between Arafat and the US administration.⁶⁵ This type of back channel functioned for a while, and ultimately worked best through Harvard fellow Walid Khalidi, another prominent Palestinian intellectual.⁶⁶

Another back channel to the PLO was the 'Quaker channel', through which certain Quakers met with Arafat and then conveyed messages to the US administration. For example, on 3 June 1977, William B. Quandt met two unnamed Quakers who had held a long meeting with the PLO leader. The main message from Arafat was that he wanted

direct contact with the US government, rather than contact via the other Arab states.⁶⁷ Other messages were passed via Landrum Bolling, also a Quaker, who met with the PLO on various occasions.⁶⁸ These channels were helpful in facilitating communication of the parties' respective views, but they lacked the necessary political weight to break the US–PLO impasse.

And this impasse needed to be broken. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance understood that it was unlikely that the Arab states would accept that representation at Geneva by individual Palestinians would suffice.⁶⁹ In fact, the US administration concluded that it was impossible for any Arab state to conclude a negotiated peace treaty which excluded the PLO.⁷⁰ This left the whole process hamstrung by a massive contradiction: the PLO had to participate, but it was impossible to accept their participation.

The Soviet Union agreed that the PLO had to participate, but it also seemed to accept both a unified Arab delegation model and a model in which the PLO participated in a Jordanian delegation.⁷¹ As early as February 1977, the Soviet Union had indicated that it wanted the PLO to take a more moderate stance.⁷² The Soviet Union, furthermore, was one of the most important channels of communication for the PLO. Through the Soviet ambassador to the United States, the Americans were told that the PLO wanted to participate at Geneva as a separate delegation and that it did not want formal ties to Jordan.⁷³ Since the Soviet Union had such close contacts with the PLO, the US Policy Review Committee decided that the US administration should approach the Soviet Union and get *it* to persuade the PLO to accept UNSC Resolution 242, with the possible reservation that there be some formula to include the Palestinians other than as refugees.⁷⁴ UNSC Resolution 242, after all, was *the* major hurdle which needed to be overcome in order for the United States to be able to talk to the PLO.

By early June, the Soviet track seemed to have a positive, but still very uncommitted effect. Following Soviet officials' talks with Arafat, it was reported that 'they have the impression the PLO is prepared to recognize Israel's right to exist if Israel will recognize the right of the Palestinians to an independent state, though it [the PLO] is not now prepared to take this position officially'.⁷⁵ This political reliance on the USSR was highly unorthodox US policy, to put it mildly – this was, after all, the cold war. The bold step of including the USSR was

indicative of Carter's level of commitment to convening a Geneva conference, but it also showed how encumbered the United States was by its policy of not talking to the PLO.

As with the academic and Quaker back channels, and the talks with the Arab states, the contacts with the Soviet Union ultimately failed to facilitate direct contact between the PLO and the United States. With no real movement on the PLO front, the US administration's focus shifted towards trying to secure an agreement between the PLO and Jordan so that certain PLO members could be part of the Jordanian delegation.⁷⁶ Sadat, unsuccessfully, promoted the needed dialogue, and Vance hoped that Asad would attempt the same.⁷⁷ But inter-Arab disputes got in the way. Asad carefully avoided openly supporting Sadat because he preferred that the PLO should be included in a single unified Arab delegation.⁷⁸

The situation was gridlocked and good solutions were few and far between. At one point the Policy Review Committee (PRC) discussed the possibility of 'direct contact with the PLO' after the Israeli election.⁷⁹ This possibility was, as always, framed according to whether the PLO could be convinced to endorse UNSC Resolution 242.⁸⁰ This direct contact with the PLO never took place, but the fact that the idea was even aired demonstrated that the question of Palestinian representation was moving in that direction. With regard to the Soviet role, the two superpowers agreed to meet every month at the ambassadorial level to exchange views on peace negotiations.⁸¹

In the meantime, as we will see, the Israeli election brought Menachem Begin and the Likud party to power. Begin would flaunt harsh anti-Palestinian rhetoric. In turn, the PLO reacted to the election by proclaiming that 'the Likud victory destroyed any illusions about arriving at a quick settlement through American mediation'.⁸² This was part of the explanation for why, by late June, the signals from the PLO were shifting. At that time, the US administration was handed a paper in which the PLO outlined its position. The positive signals from the preceding months were supplanted by older PLO rhetoric of one state in all of historic Palestine and full right of return for the Palestinian refugees. This was far outside the realm of what the United States or Israel could accept. The US administration's reaction to the letter was curt: 'it provides further evidence that it is not possible at this time to incorporate the PLO as an organization into the negotiating process'.⁸³

But how bleak was the PLO outlook in reality? How much of this shift, that is, was a reaction to the hardening Israeli position after the May election? These questions were very hard for the US administration to assess, given that the two parties were not talking directly, and things were getting lost in the indirect correspondence. For example, between June and July 1977, the PLO asked the United States, via Saudi Arabia, if the United States could provide a draft formulation for how the PLO could position itself vis-à-vis UNSC Resolution 242. The PLO then waited a month without a response from the United States.⁸⁴

In early July, the US administration started seeing the option of a unified Arab delegation, including PLO representatives, as the most promising alternative.⁸⁵ This was less radical than working for a separate PLO delegation, but it still went some distance in striving to get the Palestinians on board. Would it be enough? Could it be acceptable to Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab states?

Begin the game-changer

On 17 May 1977, as mentioned above, the Israeli elections brought to power Menachem Begin's right-wing Likud party. This triumph ended almost 30 years of Labour dominance in Israel and has even been described as the 'greatest upheaval in Israel's political history'.⁸⁶ Neither the Israeli political elite nor the US administration was prepared for Begin's premiership – William B. Quandt claims that the administration 'hadn't even considered the notion that he could win the election'.⁸⁷ Carter had no idea what he was up against. The British prime minister, James Callaghan – who, unlike Carter, had met Begin – called Carter a few days after the Israeli election and warned him that Begin 'is extremely hard line. It was the most confrontable conversation I had [...] in the Middle East'.⁸⁸ Carter would soon experience exactly what Callaghan was describing.

It is hard to underestimate the effect Begin's electoral victory had on Israeli politics, and thus on the US-led Arab-Israeli peace process. Menachem Begin had, since his youth, been a zealous supporter of Vladimir Zeev Jabotinsky, the founding father of revisionist Zionism.⁸⁹ Revisionist Zionism was the most right-wing strand of modern Zionism. The Revisionist party was established in 1925, and its ideological hallmark was 'territorial and political maximalism [...]

uncompromising in their insistence that within this enlarged territory there must be a Jewish majority and an independent Jewish state'.⁹⁰ The totality of this vision was considered extreme by the mainstream Zionist movement at the time, and the British mandate considered the revisionists 'an irrelevant lunatic fringe'.⁹¹ Even within this 'fringe', as well, Begin was a hardliner. In fact, according to Ilan Peleg, Begin's zealotness led him to radicalise Revisionism.⁹²

Menachem Begin became the political heir of Jabotinsky himself. He secured this heritage first through the underground militant group, Irgun Zvei Leumi, in which he was a senior commander for six years. The Irgun, as the group was commonly known, became notorious for such actions as the King David Hotel bombing in 1946 and the Deir Yassin massacre in 1948. When the Irgun was disbanded after Israel was established, Begin was central to forming the Herut party in 1948.⁹³ Begin would remain leader of Herut for its entire lifespan. When Herut then became the dominant group within the new Likud party, founded in 1973, Menachem Begin became both the absolute leader and the central ideologue of the party.⁹⁴

The core of the Revisionist ideology was the notion of the territory of *Eretz Israel*. While the phrase literally means 'the land of Israel', the term does not match with the State of Israel. During the first half of the twentieth century, for example, the Revisionist movement claimed that Jordan was part of *Eretz Israel* and fought against territorial division at every opportunity. For one thing, the Revisionists rejected the 1947 UN Partition Plan because it divided the Jewish homeland.⁹⁵ Then, in 1949, Begin called for a vote of no-confidence against the Israeli government for having signed an armistice with Jordan, since such an agreement meant that Israel did not claim the East Bank.⁹⁶

Starting in the mid-1950s, Begin gradually ceased claiming that Jordan was part of *Eretz Israel*. Ideologically, however, this was his final concession. He considered the West Bank and Gaza to be integral parts of *Eretz Israel*.⁹⁷ In 1967, after Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza, Begin insisted that 'the national sovereignty of the renewed State of the Jews effectively applies to every area of the Land of Israel liberated from illegal alien control'.⁹⁸ This was his unvarnished opinion, and it would form the core of the platform on which he was elected in 1977. The Likud party manifesto of that year stated: 'The right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel is eternal [...] Judea and Samaria [the West Bank]

shall therefore not be relinquished to foreign rule; between the sea and the Jordan, there will be Jewish sovereignty alone.'⁹⁹ A natural extension of this view, from Begin's perspective, was that Israelis could settle anywhere in the West Bank, including Palestinian-populated areas.¹⁰⁰ This meant that not only would he follow Labour's lead in the settlement enterprise, and even accelerate it, but he would also support the building of settlements in areas where Israel had not built them previously. The Carter administration failed to grasp exactly how firmly Begin believed in his position on the West Bank and Gaza as integral parts of *Eretz Israel*. The next months and years would gradually make them realise that Begin's stance was not a starting position but a final red line.

The change of Israeli leadership meant that Carter needed to reengage with Israel in order to find out where Begin stood before the next round of US policy development.¹⁰¹ On 10 June, in light of the Israeli election, the Policy Review Committee (PRC) discussed the way forward for US Middle East diplomacy. The picture it painted was dark. While the Arab states and the Palestinians demanded total withdrawal to the 1967 lines, and the United States preferred it too, though with 'minor, mutually agreed modifications', the Israeli position recognised 'limited withdrawals', at most, and no withdrawal from the West Bank.¹⁰² This left no room for optimism. The PRC concluded that even if the upcoming Carter-Begin meeting went well, they would be left with a 'strong disagreement on territory and borders, a large gap [...] on the nature of peace, and [...] Palestinian representation issue will almost certainly be unresolved'.¹⁰³ To ensure that Begin understood Carter's stance, the State Department issued a statement spelling out that the United States considered UNSC Resolution 242 to imply withdrawal on all fronts, including the West Bank.¹⁰⁴ As we will see, Carter would not be able to hold this position when he confronted Begin.

Begin was sworn in as Israeli prime minister on 20 June 1977, and the new Israeli government promptly issued firm statements of where it stood. Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan publicly stated that Israel had the right to build settlements in the West Bank, and that there would be neither a Palestinian state in the West Bank nor a surrender of the West Bank to Jordan. Dayan added that the PLO would not be present at Geneva, and that it was, in fact, in no way entitled to be there.¹⁰⁵ Dayan was not even the hardliner in the government – that was Begin.

He enhanced this image when he pronounced to the Zionist General Council:

Israel can not under any circumstances withdraw to the line of June 4, 1967 [...], we will not agree under any circumstances that in Judea and Samaria and Gaza a state should come into being called Palestinian. [...] And with regard to the Palestinian State, we have to realize that we are faced with the most cruel enemy of the Jewish people since the days of the Nazis.¹⁰⁶

Was there any flexibility behind this hard-line nationalist rhetoric? The US administration planned a new round of touring in the Middle East after a visit by Begin to Washington, in which Vance would map out the standpoints of the various Arab states in relation to Begin's position.¹⁰⁷ Although the endgame was different, the method of the Carter approach was looking more and more like Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy, with Secretary of State Vance working on a million mileage peace plan.

The complexity of working in the Middle East was obvious, and it was tiring. It was a Rubik's-cube diplomacy – each political shift by one party set in motion a series of shifts by the other parties. The PLO was also drifting, and the Arab leaders had become increasingly pessimistic after Begin won the Israeli election.¹⁰⁸ A serious amount of diplomatic ground therefore needed to be covered.

The US administration which had started on the diplomatic offensive, then, soon changed gears into a defensive mode. Instead of aiming to stand its ground in the face of Begin's position, the administration shifted towards damage control ahead of the Begin visit.¹⁰⁹ The PRC saw the best possible outcome of Begin's visit as Carter's success in getting Begin to (1) agree to a temporary restraint on West Bank settlements and (2) commit to examining prospects for peace which did not involve the complete rejection of West Bank withdrawal. If Carter were to fail in these goals, the administration simply hoped to get Begin to 'put the best possible face' on his refusal to comply with the US demands.¹¹⁰ This was not a very ambitious position, demonstrating the trepidation which Begin had induced in the Americans. Alfred Atherton and Harold Saunders reported that Begin would 'press his hawkish positions hard' and that he was 'convinced that he can persuade US leaders to "come around" to his view.'¹¹¹ The newly elected

Menachem Begin had no intention of allowing the United States to dictate Israeli policy, and the Carter team had no strategy for how to make him concede.

Begin's hard-line position prompted a US approach which would come to form a pattern in its subsequent negotiations with Israel. Rather than use its leverage over Israel, the US administration attempted to compensate for the hardened Israeli stance by asking the Arab leaders for more concessions. This alternative was considered easier than making Israel concede. In the scenario outlined prior to Begin's visit, that is, even the best outcome would still mean that PLO representation was off the table. It fell to Vance to ensure that the Arab states understood and accepted this.¹¹² One of the most important premises of the comprehensive approach, then, was falling apart. The fact that the Carter administration was buckling to Israeli pressure by taking the PLO issue out of the process before it even met with Begin demonstrated that the US administration and its Arab-Israeli diplomacy were becoming hostage to Israeli politics.

At one point, the administration did consider revisiting its policy regarding the PLO if the Israeli government refused to budge. A 'public showdown' with Israel was also contemplated.¹¹³ Both ideas were short lived, though; threats against Israel were viewed as too difficult because of certain US domestic constraints.¹¹⁴ Right away, for example, various US senators criticised Carter for favouring the Arab states.¹¹⁵ Carter felt the heat, and only ten days after Begin officially formed his government, Carter held a press conference where he denied that his administration was 'selling Israel down the river'.¹¹⁶ This illustrated the classic US diplomatic dilemma: pressuring Israel might be good foreign policy, but it was a nightmare for domestic policy. Begin was well aware of this and was playing hardball. Brzezinski was worried about whether the administration could stand firm against Begin 'in the face of domestic pressure'.¹¹⁷ He would be right. The US administration would be unwilling to blame Begin if progress were to stop due to Israeli intransigence.¹¹⁸

The Begin visit

When Begin arrived in Washington on 19 July 1977, he carried with him a proposal that essentially broke the back of the Geneva conference,

though he tried to package the proposal in a pro-Geneva guise.¹¹⁹ Begin stipulated that Geneva should be convened, with the Soviet Union as co-chair. So far this was in line with the Carter approach. However, according to Begin, only Israel, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and perhaps Lebanon, would be allowed to participate. He explained that there could be no preconditions for Geneva, then added that Jerusalem would remain Israel's undivided capital, that the PLO could not participate and that there could be no 'so-called Palestinian state' in 'Judea, Samaria [and] the Gaza Strip'. He also insisted that Israel would remain on the Golan Heights, though there could be some withdrawal on that front.¹²⁰ Begin's position was obviously a non-starter for the Arab state and the PLO.¹²¹ So, although Begin claimed to support a Geneva process, he rejected almost all the fundamental elements of the comprehensive approach.

Despite the difficulties the two leaders had regarding the Palestinian issue, Carter made a point of appearing positive when he met the press. He even stated that the Geneva conference was likely to take place in October.¹²² Carter's expressed positive attitude was due to the administration's desire to avoid making the meeting with Begin confrontational, and Vance recommended that it would be useful to create 'psychological momentum'.¹²³ It was difficult, if not impossible, to both stay on track and avoid confronting Begin, since Begin's position was far outside the realm of what would be needed to create a comprehensive peace. In fact, not only had Carter not confronted Begin, but he had also made concessions. Carter had promised Begin not to publicly use the phrase '1967 lines with minor modifications', and in return Begin was asked to show restraint on the settlement issue.¹²⁴ The key word here was 'restraint', rather than a more forceful and less ambiguous term. As Carter would learn the hard way, Begin had a keen legalistic mind and took advantage of any room for interpretation.

What, then, did the attempt at 'psychological momentum' gain the administration? Rumour had it that Begin found Carter as soft as a 'cream puff'.¹²⁵ Returning to Israel, Begin took advantage of Carter's perceived weakness, and began to challenge the US administration. First, Begin moved to legalise three settlements on the West Bank, in breach of Carter's plea.¹²⁶ Then, speaking to the Knesset, Begin reiterated his views yet again: no participation of the PLO; no Palestinian state; and the continued building of settlements.¹²⁷ Both the State Department

and Carter promptly criticised the 'legalisation' of the settlements, called the move 'illegal' and termed the settlements 'obstacles to peace'.¹²⁸ If such critical statements represented the extent of the penalty Begin would pay to the US government for his hard-line stance and expansionist actions, of course, he would press ahead unabated.

For one thing, Begin would keep challenging Carter over the settlement issue. Begin and Dayan argued that settlement construction was neither illegal nor an obstacle to peace, stating that their compromise was to limit construction to 'six to eight locations'.¹²⁹ This was certainly not the restraint Carter had in mind. When Vance completed his second Middle East trip in August, the Begin government approved a further three new settlements on the West Bank.¹³⁰ Again Carter called them illegal and obstacles to peace, but there was little political force behind the condemnations. Strong words alone did nothing to change Begin's ideological position.

Begin thus kept winning the challenges. After Carter condemned the Israeli settlement activity, he publicly softened his stance by assuring the US public that he would take this matter no further and that the United States would not use any other method of pressuring Israel over the issue.¹³¹ Begin could absorb the criticism without any particular cost, because he saw how Carter would subsequently cave in domestically. This result reflected not only the fact that Israel had strong political supporters in the United States, and particularly in the Senate, but also the lack of organised pro-Arab groups there.¹³²

Vance was well aware that Begin's proposals were highly contentious, and he asked the Arab heads of state to limit their public debate over the statements until he had a chance to talk to them in person.¹³³ This was a recurring US tendency, as mentioned previously – when the Israeli position hardened, the US administration pressured the Arab states. On the central Palestinian question, though, the Arab states were not prepared to concede, instead continuing to insist that the PLO had to be included in the talks. Sadat demanded that the United States speak directly to the PLO, and that a PLO–Jordanian link had to be agreed upon before a Geneva conference. This demand was incompatible with Begin's position that peace had to be 'based on the territorial status quo in Judea and Samaria'.¹³⁴

The difference between the parties' positions became even clearer when a message from Arafat reached the White House on the same day as

the Begin visit. Arafat stressed the PLO's 'willingness to live in peace with Israel, with Israel and Palestine enjoying mutually acceptable and secure borders'.¹³⁵ Arafat 'indicated that he was prepared to make an "even more blunt statement in secret" to you [Carter]' if, in return, the United States would make a 'commitment to the establishment of an independent Palestinian "state unit entity."'¹³⁶ Carter would never make that statement, however; the vague 'homeland' was as far as he would go.

This message from the PLO, coupled with Israeli intransigence, left the United States in a bad place – since Begin would not accept the PLO, and the Arab states demanded PLO participation, something had to give. There was little indication, despite its efforts and best intentions, that the Carter administration would find a formula which was acceptable to all the parties.

Second Vance tour

Despite all indications to the contrary, the Carter administration continued to work under the assumption that it would be possible to convene a Geneva conference by the end of the year. Vance therefore prepared for his second Middle East tour by outlining a five-point plan as the basis for the Geneva discussions: that the purpose of the negotiations was to reach peace agreements; that the conference had to be based on UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338; that the aim was completely normal relations between the parties; that Israel should withdraw on all fronts; and that the Geneva conference should include a directive about 'a Palestine entity'.¹³⁷ Israel was quick to react. Simcha Dinitz, Israeli ambassador to the United States, informed Vance that Israel did not agree to Israeli withdrawal on all fronts or to any reference to a Palestinian entity.¹³⁸

The Arab states were not happy either. They supported the goal of peace treaties based on UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338 but had a variety of reservations about Vance's other points. For instance, Syria did not want 'normal peaceful relations' to be binding, as this should be a question of sovereignty. The Saudis felt that normal peaceful relations should be developed over time, rather than come into effect once the treaties were signed. While this would not satisfy Israel, Vance considered the Arab stance on normalised relations to be a positive extension of their previous rigid goal of simply an end to the state of war.

Regarding the question of which areas Israel must withdraw from, the Arab states could only accept minor border modifications on the West Bank, and none on the Sinai and Golan fronts, where they demanded full Israeli withdrawal. As for the question of a 'Palestinian entity', as well, the Arab states found the concept of an 'unarmed' Palestinian entity 'unnatural' and unacceptable to the Palestinians.¹³⁹ In other words, they wanted a state with full sovereignty.

Regarding Palestinian representation, Vance concluded that, on the Arab side, the 'concept of a unified Arab delegation with Palestinian participation' was the only practical formula, but Israel rejected even this compromise solution.¹⁴⁰ Vance reported, upon the conclusion of his trip, that he found the Arab leaders to have moved in a good direction, while the Israelis remained 'remarkably unyielding'.¹⁴¹

Problems with the PLO

While Vance was confronted by the Israeli stonewalling, movement was made towards getting the PLO to accept UNSC Resolution 242, assuming a change of its reference to the Palestinians simply as refugees. While he was in Saudi Arabia, Vance was told to expect 'an imminent change' from the PLO. Exactly what type of change could be expected was unclear, but, in his optimism, Vance passed this information on to the media.¹⁴²

After messages were relayed through both Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Arafat finally drafted his statement: 'Had resolution 242 dealt with the Palestinian question as a cause of a people that has its national rights and aspirations to establish its state in its homeland and not as a problem of refugees, the PLO would have accepted it.'¹⁴³ Vance found the new formula to show a constructive 'evolution in the PLO thinking', but it was not enough to satisfy the US demands.¹⁴⁴ The administration informed the PLO that the phrasing the United States could accept was as follows:

The PLO accepts UN Security Council Resolution 242, with the reservation that it considers that the Resolution does not make adequate reference to the question of the Palestinians since it fails to make any reference to a homeland for the Palestinian people. It is recognized that the language of Resolution 242 relates to the right of all states in the Middle East to live in peace.¹⁴⁵

The difference between the PLO statement and the US statement was that the PLO positioned change in UNSC Resolution 242 *before* a hypothetical PLO recognition of it, whereas the United States placed PLO recognition of the resolution as a precondition for a change to it. There were obvious political differences between these two statements, but they were remarkably minor, given how far apart the United States and the PLO had been over the previous decade.

Both Vance and Carter made it clear that if the PLO accepted the US formula, the United States was prepared to initiate direct contact with the organisation.¹⁴⁶ This was a conspicuous development in a US political context. Although the United States and the PLO did not communicate directly, they were actually negotiating semantics through intermediaries. The fact that the Carter administration managed to get that close to opening talks with the PLO has been greatly under-communicated in the existing academic literature.¹⁴⁷

However, even the promise of direct contact with the PLO had its limitations since Kissinger had granted Israel a veto clause in 1973 through which no new parties could be added to a Geneva conference unless all the parties to the original Geneva conference agreed.¹⁴⁸ Vance acknowledged that Israel retained that veto power.¹⁴⁹ So, unless Israel acquiesced, the PLO could not participate in any Geneva conference. Kissinger's ghost was haunting Carter's peace process.

Despite the Israeli veto, the US promise of direct contact with the PLO, if the organisation were to agree to the US formula, was a large step in the direction of facilitating a US–PLO dialogue. It was also further than any US administration had gone before. Still, one could well question how far the Carter administration would have gone even if the PLO did everything the United States demanded. In a meeting with Israeli Ambassador Dinitz, US Under Secretary Philip Habib stressed that even if the PLO were to accept UNSC Resolution 242, the purpose of direct talks between the United States and the PLO would simply be to determine whether there was anything for them to talk about. On a positive note, such dialogue would make it easier to convene Geneva, because it might produce an arrangement of representation which Israel could accept. In other words, a dialogue with the PLO might at best be used to find a formula for Geneva without the PLO.¹⁵⁰

This was not the type of reward the PLO wanted, but it was a 'take it or leave it' offer from Carter. If the PLO demanded more from the

administration in return for accepting UNSC Resolution 242 (with reservations), it would 'risk seriously overplaying its hand and may end up with nothing and find itself on the outside looking in while negotiating process goes forward', Vance warned.¹⁵¹ As Vance saw it, the US administration had done enough because it had made the 'homeland' statement and promised direct contact if the PLO committed to the US formula.¹⁵²

The US self-constraint regarding contact with the PLO meant that the administration could not hold meetings to directly discuss the various finesses of the 242 formulation with the PLO itself. Everything had to happen through intermediaries which was bound to create difficulties. For example, with regard to the new 242 formulation, PLO leader Yassir Arafat complained that he had received different messages from Egypt and Saudi Arabia as to what the United States demanded.¹⁵³ This alone does not explain why the two parties were unable to agree on a formula, but it was undeniably a hindrance. The PLO's inability to adopt the US formulation frustrated Vance, who became resigned, for a time, to the idea that there was no point investing more time and energy into the PLO.¹⁵⁴

After having made various positive overtures in early August 1977, then, the PLO demanded a hardening of Arab attitudes in late August.¹⁵⁵ As usual, it was hard for the Carter administration to develop a clear understanding of what the PLO actually stood for. Just prior to making these negative statements, the PLO had sought to gain US assurances in return for possible PLO support for the US formulation regarding 242.¹⁵⁶ One explanation for the shift in August was that the negative statements came from the PLO Central Council (PCC), after a meeting in Damascus. As the State Department noted, the PCC had been under Syrian pressure to reject the US formula.¹⁵⁷ Prior to the meeting, though, the Saudis, the Egyptians and the Soviet Union had urged the PLO to accept the US formula.¹⁵⁸ These contradictory pressures made the PLO seem erratic. Still, Vance concluded that the PLO top leadership was still considering the US formula.¹⁵⁹

This complication was revealing of a major political dilemma which was hampering the process. The PLO was internally squeezed between its moderate and radical factions, and externally pulled in opposite directions by its moderate and radical Arab 'allies'. Since the United States refused to speak to the PLO directly, the administration was left to interpret the discrepant PLO signals from Cairo and Damascus. This act

of interpretation was made more difficult by the fact that Damascus was hardening its own stance as a reaction to what it saw as successful Israeli intransigence.¹⁶⁰

The non-state channels to the PLO were equally confusing. Through Walid Khalidi, the US administration was informed that Arafat was, in theory, ready to commit to UNSC Resolution 242. The problem was that the United States only promised vague formulations in return, such as 'homeland' and 'entity'. For Arafat, making a commitment to something as concrete as accepting UNSC Resolution 242 could only be done if the Palestinians were given something concrete in return, such as a US commitment to 'sovereignty over a piece of territory'.¹⁶¹ Egyptian Foreign Minister, Ismail Fahmy tried without success to get such a commitment from the United States.¹⁶² The same type of overture was made by Arafat through US journalist Edward Sheehan.¹⁶³

In mid-September, using Walid Khalidi as intermediary, Arafat again delivered a message to the US administration: the PLO was willing to go 'all the way' if it were to gain support for a Palestinian state. Arafat also asked for clarification on three other questions: What status would the United States give the PLO? Did the PLO have to use the exact 242 formula proposed by the United States? If the PLO accepted UNSC Resolution 242, would the organisation be invited to Geneva? William Quandt, on the National Security Council, responded in a non-committal but generally positive manner to Khalidi. The US stance was clear – first the PLO needed to recognise UNSC Resolution 242 along the lines proposed by the US formula, and then the United States could talk directly to the PLO. After that, the remaining issues were up for negotiation.¹⁶⁴

Although a US commitment to Palestinian statehood or sovereignty never came, it is difficult to precisely ascertain how far US thinking actually went in this regard. At a 19 April Policy Review Committee meeting, it was decided not to take or circulate notes on the issue of how a Palestinian entity on the West Bank might pose a threat to Israeli security.¹⁶⁵ What discussions were concealed by this limitation on note-taking is impossible to know.

Peace treaty drafts

While the US administration was struggling, unsuccessfully, to bridge the gap with the PLO, the state-to-state negotiations shifted gear.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing which would emerge from Vance's second Middle East tour was the fact that President Anwar Sadat showed real and surprising diplomatic initiative. He handed Vance a draft peace treaty and 'a series of fallback positions which he said we [the US] could use at our discretion'.¹⁶⁶ Sadat also stated, for the first time, that if the other Arab states failed to follow suit, he was willing to meet with Begin and sign a separate peace treaty.¹⁶⁷ This was the earliest indication of how the talks would then develop over the next two years. While Sadat's expressed willingness to sign a separate peace was a surprise, the draft peace treaty itself should not have been entirely unexpected since Sadat's preferred format was bilateral negotiations under the Geneva structure.¹⁶⁸

Vance did not pick up on Sadat's willingness to go it alone with Israel, but he urged the other involved states to produce similar peace treaty drafts.¹⁶⁹ They all agreed.¹⁷⁰ The new US policy was therefore to collect these drafts and, based on them, put forth new US suggestions to be discussed in the next round of talks.¹⁷¹ These would take place in New York in September 1977, at the foreign minister level, in connection with the UN General Assembly.

This was the beginning of the end of Carter's comprehensive approach. The draft peace treaties approach shifted US thinking considerably. Since the Palestinians did not comprise a state or enjoy the representation of one, they were effectively squeezed out of this process, which was state to state by nature. For the US administration these drafts were a positive breakthrough. It had found the Palestinian representation issue to be increasingly intransigent, and this shift in focus was therefore welcome. The Egyptians and the Israelis were also undermining the comprehensive approach by conducting secret high-level talks via Romania. Although the parties never met directly in Romania, messages were delivered from Begin to Sadat via Romanian President Nicolae Ceauşescu. Ceauşescu told Sadat that Begin was a man with whom he could work. This channel was possible because Romania was the only Eastern Bloc country that maintained an Israeli embassy after the 1967 war.¹⁷² Due to these indirect contacts, the distance between Israel and Egypt was narrowing, whereas the attitude between Israel and the other Arab states either stayed reliably negative or worsened.

The comprehensive approach had always been a tall order. It demanded that the Carter administration bridge political gaps to

the degree that a peace conference at Geneva could be fruitful. This meant solving many issues towards which the various parties had massively divergent views. First, on the nature of the peace, the Israelis wanted full normalisation of relations, whereas the Arab states wanted simply an end to the state of war. Sadat would accept full normalisation of relations with Israel, but the other Arab states would not follow suit. During Vance's second Middle East tour, he found that the Arabs had moved in a positive direction on this question, but not enough to please the Israelis, who refused to budge. Second, on the question of borders, the Arab states wanted full withdrawal on all fronts, whereas Israel wanted partial withdrawal on most fronts and no withdrawal on the West Bank. Again, there was some positive movement on the Arab side, which came to accept minor and mutually agreed modifications on the West Bank.¹⁷³ In Israel, however, the change in government made this issue even thornier. For Begin, there could be no withdrawal on the West Bank whatsoever.

But the most important issue, which in the end made the process grind to a halt, was the question of Palestinian representation. The Carter administration went further than any previous US government in pushing the Palestine question to the fore. First Carter called for a Palestinian 'homeland' in the Clinton speech in March. Then, the administration made clear that if the PLO were to accept UNSC Resolution 242, the United States would talk to them directly. Last, the administration offered a precise formulation for 242 which the PLO needed to accept. This formula allowed for a modification of the content of the resolution which would have granted the Palestinians legitimacy.

Despite the good intentions and hard work of the Carter administration, however, it failed to induce the PLO to make the necessary concessions to satisfy the administration's demands. This failure boils down to several closely related factors. For one, the PLO faced conflicting inter-Arab pressures and was also internally divided between moderates and radicals.¹⁷⁴ This combined external Arab pressure and internal division made the PLO stance volatile and susceptible to political change. Ahead of the Israeli election, the organisation had been moving in a moderate direction, but once the Israeli hard-line Likud party came to power, the incentives for moderation all but disappeared. The US unwillingness to communicate directly with the PLO enhanced the effects of these pressures as well. The

PLO messages coming out of Damascus were different from those which emerged from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which were yet again different from those delivered via Walid Khalidi and Landrum Bolling. It was therefore hard for the United States both to understand the PLO position and to engage in a dialogue in which that position could be altered in a direction acceptable to the United States. Also, even if the PLO had made the statement about UNSC Resolution 242 that the United States demanded, the PLO was only guaranteed a dialogue with the United States, not a presence in Geneva. This was hardly sufficient inducement to get the PLO to give up one of its most important negotiating cards.¹⁷⁵

The rejectionist stance of the Begin government meant that the US administration failed to get Israel to accept PLO participation, even if the PLO took the important step of accepting UNSC Resolution 242.¹⁷⁶ Begin did not mince words in this regard. In August he had told Vance: 'The PLO is excluded forever.'¹⁷⁷ This problem was compounded by the fact that Carter was unwilling to invest the political capital required to confront Israel. Begin was able to challenge Carter directly on the settlement issue, winning an important victory when Carter's criticism resulted in a domestic political attack against the president. Compared to getting Begin to accept the PLO, the settlement issue was relatively minor. Since Begin was able to outmanoeuvre Carter on the settlements, he knew he could comfortably do the same on the Palestinian question.

The failure of Carter's comprehensive approach can be boiled down to an inherent dilemma which the administration failed to face. The idea behind the comprehensive peace was founded upon a break with previous US approaches, but Carter was unwilling to break with the political restrictions which had shaped the previous approach towards the Arab-Israeli conflict. This was an irreconcilable dilemma. It was impossible to develop a peace based on Palestinian representation while simultaneously working under the restriction that the PLO could not be talked to. Carter was working for a comprehensive peace but unwilling to fully activate a comprehensive approach. One could argue that changing that premise was not really feasible in the first place, but Carter failed to put it to the test in any case. With some minor exceptions, the Carter administration never seriously considered revisiting its PLO policy.¹⁷⁸

Begin gave the US administration ample excuse to reconsider its US–PLO policy, given the Israeli stonewalling and broken commitments regarding the settlements, but Carter never took advantage of these opportunities. The administration was unwilling to break out of the ‘diplomatic straitjacket’ which Israel and Kissinger had imposed on the United States.¹⁷⁹ This represented a massive limitation of the administration’s room for manoeuvre. Cyrus Vance admitted that it made ‘our task of finding a way to deal with the PLO close to impossible’.¹⁸⁰ The irony is that the limitation was self-imposed.

CHAPTER 4

CLINGING TO COMPREHENSIVE PEACE

President Carter had spent the first seven months in office working intensely on a formula which would enable negotiations for a comprehensive Middle East peace. This was not the only foreign policy issue which demanded attention, of course. On the contrary, Carter had also initiated a global focus on human rights, negotiated a Panama Canal treaty and initiated negotiations for an arms-reduction treaty with the Soviet Union. From the very first days of his administration, Carter had made the Middle East a top priority, but the burden of trying to achieve breakthroughs on so many difficult foreign policy issues was immensely taxing on the political energy of the administration.¹

By the end of the summer of 1977, the Carter administration was growing tired of a Middle East process which was leading nowhere. Conceptually, the administration was still set on a comprehensive peace to be obtained through a Geneva conference, but a breakthrough was sorely needed. Thus, when Sadat suggested on 2 August 1977 that Carter should collect concrete peace proposals from Israel and the Arab states, Carter gladly accepted the proposition. This broke with the comprehensive approach in two ways. First, since the Palestinians were not a state, they were excluded from this new initiative. Second, while the original comprehensive approach was multilateral, the new peace-proposal approach was multi-bilateral – that is, it was a series of bilateral approaches under a multilateral umbrella. The challenge would be to make the multi-bilateral approach, which excluded the

Palestinians, function as a comprehensive approach, or at least as a proxy for one. Even more difficult, of course, was the need to keep the Palestinians on board, despite the shift in approach. It was an attempt at squaring a circle and, despite the best of intentions, the Carter team would not succeed.

During the first week of September 1977, the United States received a draft for an Israeli–Egyptian peace treaty from Israel. The Israelis explained that they would make similar drafts for all the other neighbouring Arab states (with Lebanon as a possible exception), and that, based on these, negotiations would be bilateral. In the Israeli–Egyptian draft, Israel insisted on keeping large areas of land, including all of the West Bank.² The draft addressed issues such as full normalisation, the exchange of ambassadors, final borders and demilitarisation of the evacuated areas. The important issue of where the borders should be drawn was not actually addressed, but they would not be based on full withdrawal.³ The Americans were deeply disappointed by what Israel was proposing. Carter noted in his diary, ‘I thought the Israelis were deliberately blocking the peace treaty and were being remarkably inflexible.’⁴

The Syrians did not deliver a draft treaty but instead provided a list of ‘items’ that should be part of a settlement.⁵ Asad reiterated that the Palestinian issue was the core of the conflict, and that the PLO had to be present at any peace conference in Geneva. He argued that there were two possible formulas for Palestinian representation. There could be either a unified Arab delegation which included the PLO or individual Arab delegations, one of which was a PLO delegation. The Syrians demanded that peace had to be based on the June 1967 lines, and an implementation of the right of return for the Palestinian refugees. Asad also specified that the term ‘ending the state of war’ was synonymous with peace, and that measures such as buffer zones and international observers along the border could be acceptable.⁶ This was a compromise position similar to the US administration’s idea of separating security and sovereignty.

The Jordanian equivalent of a draft peace treaty was close to the Syrian position, demanding full Israeli withdrawal to the June 1967 lines, with minor reciprocal adjustments, and a corridor between Gaza and the West Bank. Furthermore, the refugee issue had to be solved through a combination of repatriation and compensation, fulfilment of

Palestinian self-determination and an Israeli evacuation of the Palestinian territories within six months, followed by a UN trusteeship. After two years, a plebiscite could take place. The proposal added that a state of peace must be established, and that concrete arrangements for security zones should be in place. On Jerusalem, the draft stipulated that Arab Jerusalem should be under Arab sovereignty, but that the city should not be divided. The US diplomat who received the document viewed it as fruitful.⁷

Unlike the Syrians, the Jordanians opposed including the PLO in a Jordanian delegation. They urged the United States to support Palestinian self-determination, hoping that this could make the PLO moderate its position.⁸ This was a setback for the United States, which had hoped to use the Jordanians as a proxy for the Palestinians. The good news was that both the Syrian and the Jordanian papers showed a willingness to compromise on the other issues, even as they both made clear that the thorny issue of PLO representation had to be solved.

Carter agreed. In a 29 September press conference, he stated: 'there can be no Middle Eastern peace settlement without adequate Palestinian representation'.⁹ He added that the United States would not talk to the PLO until it accepted UNSC Resolution 242, but that if the PLO did so, with the reservation that the resolution did not adequately address the Palestinian issue, then the United States would initiate direct contacts with the PLO.¹⁰ Much like the homeland statement in March, this represented a public moderation of the US stance on the PLO. The lure of direct contact in return for recognition of UNSC Resolution 242 with a qualified reservation was the furthest the United States would go in clarifying its PLO policy. As the Carter administration saw it, this statement placed the ball squarely in the PLO's court.

Including the PLO through Syria and the Soviet Union

Inducing the PLO to play ball was, as we have seen, not the only challenge the Carter administration faced in the Middle East. Far from it. The Syrians were particularly perturbed by Carter's inability to stop Begin from building settlements in the occupied territories, and by his lack of will to punish Begin for the settlements he had built.¹¹ These two US incapacities compounded one other. The Syrian government 'assume[d] that if the USG could not face down the "Lobby" on such a

clearcut provocation [building settlements], Washington would be unable to guide a Geneva conference to a successful conclusion'.¹² A PLO representative similarly commented in *The New York Times*: 'The trend is toward a retreat of the Americans in the face of Begin, instead of pressing Begin into a settlement.'¹³ This was not an unfounded accusation – given Carter's inability to stop Begin, the Syrian government needed a safeguard to ensure that Syria would not be excluded from the peace process and would retain its influence over the PLO.

It was important for the United States to placate Syria, and convince President Asad to get the PLO to accept the US formula for UNSC Resolution 242 with reservations. Carter therefore sent Asad a personal message.¹⁴ This was a typical Carter move; he was a president who often used the personal touch. While the Syrians reacted positively to the letter, they suggested that the United States should offer a more precise definition of what 'official contacts' entailed for the PLO.¹⁵ As before, the United States could not guarantee participation for the PLO at Geneva even if the PLO accepted the 242 formula, because Israel retained a veto over who could participate. Although it was important to get the Syrians on board, it was more important for the US administration to uphold the official stance on the PLO, and the promise that had been made to Israel. The United States would offer no more on the question of PLO participation.¹⁶

As the US administration saw it, the Syrian regime had pushed the PLO away from the possibility of compromise in August. This explained the Palestine Central Council's decision to reject the '242 with appropriate reservation' formula.¹⁷ In September, therefore, the US administration again tried to get the Syrian regime to help moderate the PLO. One suggestion, which two US diplomats presented to Asad, was that Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam could serve as Arafat's 'postman'.¹⁸ Before the Syrians could respond to this suggestion, however, Washington delivered a counter-message saying that Arafat must send no letter to President Carter, even via intermediaries, as this could be interpreted by critics of the US government's Middle East policy as a direct contact with the PLO. It is unclear why the administration changed its mind.¹⁹

This about-face illustrated the administration's utter inability to break out of its self-imposed PLO straitjacket, and it showed the dampening effect which domestic politics had on US foreign policy.

The idea of using Khaddam as a postman was a foreign policy solution to a foreign policy problem, but it was withdrawn because it was perceived as impossible due to domestic political considerations. The Arabs, and particularly the Palestinians, were the victims of this constraint, while Israel strongly benefitted.

Discarding the 'postman' model, the US administration continued to use the Syrians as its line of communication with the PLO in a less formal fashion. Through Syria, in turn, the PLO suggested a new formula for its qualified acceptance of UNSC Resolution 242: 'The reservation of the PLO regarding Res 242 is that it does not establish a complete basis for the Palestinian issue and for the national rights of the Palestinians. It also fails to refer in any manner to a national homeland for the Palestinian people.'²⁰ This was a reformulation of the 242 formula the PLO had made in August, which had been unacceptable to the United States.²¹ Nevertheless, the US administration saw this new formulation as a positive step and found it acceptable as long as the PLO added that it was also a commitment to accepting UNSC Resolution 242, and the rights of all states in the region, including Israel, to live in peace. US Ambassador Richard Murphy presented the Syrians with two alternative formulations for the PLO:

The PLO accepts UNSC Resolution 242, recognizing that it relates to the right of all states in the Middle East to live in peace, with the following reservation, the reservation of the PLO regarding resolution 242 is that it does not establish a complete basis for the Palestinian issue and for the national rights of the Palestinians, it also fails to refer in any manner to a national homeland for the Palestinian people.²²

or

The PLO accepts the UNSC resolution 242 with the following reservation. The reservation of the PLO regarding resolution 242 is that it does not establish a complete basis for the Palestinian issue and for the national rights of the Palestinians. It also fails to refer in any manner to a national homeland for the Palestinian people. It is recognized that the language of resolution 242 relates to the right of all states in the Middle East to live in peace.²³

The only difference between these two formulations was whether the recognition of UNSC Resolution 242 as 'relating to the right of all states in the Middle East to live in peace' should come at the beginning or the end of the statement. There was very little space for flexibility, and the formulation had to start with the phrase: 'The PLO accepts the UNSC resolution 242'. The Carter administration was of the unwavering opinion that it had given the PLO the absolute best offer it could.

From the Syrian point of view, however, the US formulations were asking too much of the PLO in return for too little, since they implied PLO recognition of Israel with little concrete reward apart from direct communication with the United States. Syria asked if the United States could grant any *quid pro quos*: 'Will Israel recognize the rights of the Palestinians?; Does the U.S. guarantee the rights of the Palestinians? And finally, when the U.S. speaks of the rights of the Palestinians, is it speaking in the name of Israel?' The US ambassador could promise no such thing.²⁴ Although the Carter administration was more flexible towards the PLO than its predecessors in the White House had been, it was not even-handed. On UNSC Resolution 242, it was the Palestinians who would have to make the major concession, while the Israeli position was considered non-negotiable.

Given all of the time and energy invested in convincing Syria, one can understand how Steven Spiegel concluded that the comprehensive approach was a 'Syrianized' process.²⁵ However, the opposite argument is more convincing. It was Israel which set the tone for the negotiations, and all of the US pressure on Syria – and, indirectly, on the PLO – was applied to accommodate the Israeli demands, or to avoid pressuring Israel.

For Israel, there could be no PLO participation whatsoever, and the unified Arab delegation model was unacceptable. As Ambassador Samuel Lewis commented, 'it is hard to overstate the rigidity of the Israeli position on Palestinian representation'.²⁶ In addition to the Israeli rigidity, Carter was under increased domestic pressure. AIPAC was highly critical of the attempts to include the Palestinians, and Vance reported 'cries of distress' from Congress.²⁷ Carter noted in his diary: 'We had adverse reaction from the Israelis, as expected, from our release concerning the need for Palestinians to participate in any future Geneva conference.'²⁸

In mid-September, Arafat met with the Soviet leadership in Moscow, and the Soviet ambassador relayed Arafat's views to the US administration. Arafat had argued that the goal of a peace conference had to be the creation of a Palestinian state and the fulfilment of the right of return for the Palestinian refugees. The PLO insisted on participating at Geneva, but agreed that there could be two possible models for such participation: a separate PLO delegation or a unified Arab delegation. No matter which of these models was chosen, Arafat argued, it was of vital importance that the PLO be explicitly mentioned in the invitation to the conference.²⁹

Throughout September and into October 1977, contradictory messages arrived regarding the Soviet stance on the PLO. The US administration was repeatedly informed that the Soviet Union would not participate in Geneva unless the PLO was allowed to participate.³⁰ Jordan's King Hussein, however, said he had received information from PLO sources that the Soviet Union pushed the PLO not to recognise Israel and UNSC Resolution 242 until Israel was willing to recognise the PLO.³¹ In a meeting between Vance and Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, on the other hand, Dobrynin said that the Soviet Union would assist in finding a solution to the Palestinian representation problem.³² It was difficult for the US administration to discern whether the Soviet Union was trying to be helpful or obstructive.

Complicating matters further, the Jordanian king was unhappy with the increased US focus on the PLO. King Hussein favoured Sadat's suggestion for early links between Jordan and the PLO, and Asad's suggestion that the Arab League could represent Palestinian interests in Geneva, because both suggestions implied a weakening of the PLO's position.³³ Interestingly, much of the information on King Hussein's views came to the Americans via Moshe Dayan, and the United States therefore assumed that Dayan and King Hussein had recently met.³⁴ King Hussein's biographer, the historian Avi Shlaim, confirms that such a secret meeting did indeed take place in London on 22 August 1977.³⁵

The fact that the United States was informed of King Hussein's opinions via Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan made the information unreliable, of course, both because it came from an indirect source which could not be independently verified, and because Dayan had a vested interest in overstating King Hussein's distrust of the PLO.

But the situation does illustrate how Dayan used Hussein's despair, overstated or otherwise, to argue that the focus of negotiations should be on Syria and Egypt, with a 'functional partition of responsibility' for the West Bank and Gaza.³⁶ Thomas Pickering, the US ambassador in Jordan, thought Dayan purposefully exaggerated Hussein's worried state of mind to keep the West Bank off the negotiation table.³⁷

Multi-bilateral negotiations: Israel sets the tone

The Carter administration kept publicly pushing the points that the Palestinians had to be a partner in the peace process and that the Palestinian issue was one of the cornerstones of a comprehensive peace. As a result, Carter found himself under considerable domestic pressure since Jewish and pro-Israel interest groups increasingly perceived the administration as too pro-Arab, too critical of Israel and too lenient with the PLO.³⁸ The administration referred to this domestic pressure in its talks with the Arab regimes to explain how difficult Carter's position was, and how difficult it would be for him to pressure Israel.³⁹ The fact that Carter's Middle East foreign policy was embedded in US domestic politics was something the Israeli politicians used to their advantage.

When Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan visited the White House on 19 September 1977, Carter told him that he thought Israel had taken an overly adamant stand, and that the Arab states were more flexible. Carter once again emphasised his position that Israeli settlements were illegal, and the Israeli stance on these settlements cast doubt on Israel's support for UNSC Resolution 242 and, in practice, made a renewed Geneva conference impossible. Dayan refused to budge. While he admitted that it was up to the PLO whether Jordan could represent the Palestinians, the Israeli government's view was that Israel could only discuss the West Bank with Jordan. The Israeli formula for Geneva was that the Arabs could only have a unified delegation at the opening ceremony, after which all the negotiations should be bilateral. While Carter responded that this was perhaps an unhelpfully narrow understanding of 'opening stage', he also agreed that final peace treaties would have to be negotiated bilaterally.⁴⁰

The parties were talking at cross-purposes. Israel wanted no Palestinian participation and wanted Jordan to negotiate the West Bank; the Syrians would not accept anything less than a unified Arab

delegation including the PLO; Jordan could not talk about the West Bank without consent from the PLO; and both the United States and Israel refused to talk to the PLO.

On the settlement issue, Israel made no more than a cosmetic attempt to soften its staunch position. Dayan told Carter that the Israelis would continue to build settlements, but that, for the time being, they would only build military camps with 'marriage quarters' in the West Bank. This meant that they would have a civilian function as well, of course.⁴¹ It was an odd attempt to mask settlement expansion as a concession. Although Carter's tone was blunt and critical towards Dayan throughout this meeting, he did not take a hard stance here. Rather than inform Dayan that this settlement proposal was unacceptable, Carter told him that it was better than if Israel built new settlements.⁴² Carter even asked Dayan to simply tone down the settlement question, so as to avoid a public debate.⁴³ While Israeli settlements were far less of an issue in 1977 than they are today, the Carter team clearly considered them a serious problem but was unwilling to put any real weight behind its position.

Seeing the settlements as a problem and acting forcefully to stop the settlement expansion were very different things. By simply asking Dayan to tone down the issue, Carter was setting a remarkably low bar. It was yet another example of how Carter gave Israel concessions rather than stand his ground. Carter had leverage over Israel, but he refrained from using it. Dayan's hard line on settlements had no consequences for US aid, nor did it affect the US stance on Israel in the UN. In this meeting, then, Carter inadvertently exposed his domestic weakness and set the stage for an even more rigid Israeli position.

Ten days after discussing the Geneva conference with Carter, Dayan met with US Under Secretary Habib, and Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Alfred L. Atherton to discuss a draft working paper for Geneva. Instead of facilitating the talks, however, the working paper would become yet another roadblock to them. Dayan wanted clarifications on who would negotiate over what, and reiterated that Israel would not accept Syrian involvement in any West Bank negotiations. He also wanted the paper to explicitly state that peace treaties would be negotiated bilaterally. Habib clarified that the focus would be on bilateral negotiations, but that certain themes would be negotiated in thematic subgroups. Dayan concluded that Begin would

probably not accept such a Geneva conference, and that he would definitively reject the US suggestion that the Palestinians could be represented by 'not well-known members of the PLO'.⁴⁴

Dayan was right. Begin declared 'in most unequivocal terms imaginable that Israel would not attend Geneva conference if any [...] known PLO member took part'. Begin added that the Palestinians could not have any separate delegation and could only be part of a Jordanian delegation. Anything else would 'Lay the foundation for the end of Israel, everything is negotiable except Israel's destruction'.⁴⁵ The Americans most familiar with Begin knew that this was Begin's deepest conviction. The US ambassador reported: 'I am completely convinced that Begin means it with regard to PLO participation. To assume that either persuasion or pressure will move him off this point is to misread the man'.⁴⁶

This did not sink in with Carter. He continued to insist on the Geneva format, but appeared to have no plan for how to persuade Begin. Instead, he forged ahead with the Arab states. In a 28 September meeting with Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdul Halim Khaddam, Carter insisted on a Geneva conference with a unified Arab delegation, which 'will include PLO members. The only caveat is that the PLO representatives should not be well known or famous persons'.⁴⁷ Carter made the same point when he met with a Jordanian delegation.⁴⁸ Israel pushed in the opposite direction. During a 30 September meeting, Dayan probed directly for the US administration's views on possible separate Egyptian–Israeli negotiations. This was yet another forewarning of how any future talks would develop, but at the time the United States did not support such a separate peace. Vance replied that he saw no such possibility unless those negotiations took place within a Geneva framework.⁴⁹

Difficult as it was to get the PLO on board during this time, the PLO and the United States had never been closer to opening direct talks. The fact that they were indirectly negotiating a 242 formula and considering the use of Syria as a 'postman' and other ideas around including 'not well-known' PLO members in an Arab delegation, showed that the Carter administration took the question of PLO participation seriously. The PLO was also moving. On 3 October, Arafat claimed that he would support having the PLO represented by a US citizen of Palestinian descent on an Arab delegation.⁵⁰ The suggestion would come too late, however – that first week of October would change everything.

The US–Soviet joint communiqué

On 1 October, the United States and the Soviet Union issued a joint communiqué on the Middle East. It stated that their common goal was a comprehensive peace obtained through the participation of all the involved parties, including the Palestinians. It also stressed that a solution to peace must include Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines. Interestingly, it lacked any specific reference to UNSC Resolution 242.⁵¹ The communiqué was a compromise between the US and Soviet positions. Whilst the United States for the first time acknowledged 'the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people', the Soviet Union agreed not to mention the PLO, and to call for 'normal peaceful relations'.⁵² In a sense, this joint communiqué was to be expected, since US–Soviet cooperation was one of the cornerstones of Carter's comprehensive approach to Middle East peace-making.⁵³ Still, the announcement of the communiqué came as a shock and prompted radically opposed reactions which shed light on the communiqué's profound impact on the peace process overall.

First of all, the communiqué set off alarm bells in Israel. Menachem Begin was furious when he saw the draft of the statement, claiming that it was a breach of the 1973 US–Israeli Memorandum, and Carter's promise to not publicly mention the 1967 borders.⁵⁴ The negative reaction to the statement in Israel was uniform across all political boundaries and focused on the use of the term 'Palestinian rights', the lack of reference to UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338, and the lack of explicit mention of a 'peace treaty'.⁵⁵ A *Haaretz* editorial described it as 'one of the gravest crises since the establishment of Israel'.⁵⁶ According to Naphtali Lau-Lavie, Moshe Dayan's advisor, who was present when Vance first handed the communiqué to the Israelis, Dayan was so angry that he would not allow his aides to accept the photocopies of it.⁵⁷ Dayan had warned the United States that Israel objected to the communiqué, but the US administration was nevertheless unprepared for the adverse reactions which would arise.⁵⁸

The reactions in the United States were also highly negative. Pro-Israeli interest groups and the US Jewish community 'went bonkers'.⁵⁹ One hundred fifty members of the House of Representatives signed a letter criticising Carter for the communiqué.⁶⁰ This reaction resonated perfectly with the Israeli view, and Israel promptly turned the heat up on

the Carter administration through a high intensity media campaign managed by Dayan and his aides.⁶¹

Most of the Arab leaders, on the other hand, reacted with cautious optimism. The Syrian *al-Baath* newspaper stated that the communiqué was 'largely in harmony with Arab demands'.⁶² The Syrians termed the document a 'positive step', especially since it showed that the United States had adopted the Syrian idea of a unified Arab delegation. However, Syria was disappointed that the communiqué made a reference to neither the PLO nor a Palestinian state.⁶³ According to leading Syria expert Patrick Seale, the Syrians were not as openly enthusiastic as they should have been, and Vance was therefore not convinced that the communiqué was important to the Arabs.⁶⁴ The Syrians and the US representative in Syria agreed that the United States was going to have a rough time with Israel's supporters in the United States, and the US representative therefore once again asked the Syrians to help get the Palestinians to show moderation and accept the American 242 formula.⁶⁵

Despite the lukewarm response from Damascus, both Quandt and Vance saw evidence that the US–Soviet statement elicited gestures of moderation on the parts of both the PLO and Syria.⁶⁶ The PLO praised the communiqué for referring to Palestinian 'legitimate rights' and remarked upon the fact that this was the first time the United States had publicly done so.⁶⁷ The US administration would only stick to this formulation for a very short while, however. In his 4 October speech to the UN General Assembly, Carter stressed the importance of negotiating a Middle East peace based on UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338 and once again stressed the need to recognise 'the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people'.⁶⁸ The PLO then watched in dismay as Carter retracted this emphasis on 'legitimate rights' shortly thereafter.⁶⁹

Egypt's view of the joint communiqué is much debated. It is often argued that Sadat disliked the communiqué, because it brought the Soviet Union back into Middle East diplomacy. This explanation is logical, as Sadat had invested much political energy in partings ways with Soviet tutelage, as exemplified through his expulsion of Soviet advisors in 1972.⁷⁰ However, in a February 1978 meeting between Carter and Sadat, Carter quotes Sadat as having called the communiqué 'marvellous'.⁷¹ This is not entirely convincing, as Sadat had a clear interest in pleasing Carter at that point. So, while the jury is still out on Sadat's reaction, it was Israel's reaction that was the game-changer.

Duelling with Dayan

The negative US and Israeli reactions to the communiqué, which were then fuelled by Dayan's media campaign, created a tense political situation for the Carter administration. To tackle this crisis head on, Carter and his foreign policy team met with Dayan in New York on 4 October. These talks, which included Dayan, Carter, Vance and Brzezinski, lasted for over five hours. The negative Israeli reaction had surprised Carter, since he had considered the communiqué to be a positive step forward. Carter summed up the positive elements of the statement: the United States had made the Soviet Union accept the possibility of a full Middle East peace with the normalisation of relations, made it accept that there would be no mention of the 1967 lines and 'national' Palestinian rights, and made it accept that there would be no endorsement of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinians. Carter also pointed out that although the statement did not explicitly refer to UNSC Resolution 242, it had incorporated the resolution's main points.⁷² Carter thought this should have been considered good news for the Israeli leadership.

Dayan disagreed. He wanted assurances that the United States would stand by all its obligations to Israel, and insisted that UNSC Resolution 242 did not call on Israel to withdraw to the 1967 lines.⁷³ Dayan was clearly taking the offensive, striking directly at US public policy. He knew that this was Carter's weak spot. He also knew that the communiqué was an easy target in the United States, given the combined anti-Soviet and pro-Israeli sentiments there.⁷⁴ For Carter, the communiqué was an issue of foreign policy alone, and he had seen it in those terms.⁷⁵ He was therefore unprepared for what Dayan had in store. Although the meeting was held behind closed doors, the media waited outside. This was the culmination of Dayan's media campaign, putting extreme pressure on Carter to emerge with a solution to the crisis.⁷⁶ The pressure was so harsh that Brzezinski described Dayan's tactics as 'blackmail'.⁷⁷

Dayan rehashed the fact that Israel would not accept a Palestinian state, even if it was federated with Jordan. Carter told Dayan that Israel was too rigid on the question of Palestinian representation, and that this needed to be solved. In response, Dayan demanded that Palestinian representatives be only from the West Bank, Gaza or Jordan.⁷⁸ Carter promised that Israel could screen the list of Palestinians who were

suggested for participation at Geneva. Those Palestinians who did not pass the screening would be discussed with the Arab states with the aim of excluding them. If unacceptable Palestinians were then to attend Geneva, Israel could refuse to attend.⁷⁹

Much of the marathon meeting with Dayan was spent negotiating a revised working paper and a joint US–Israeli press statement for the press corps waiting outside. Carter largely caved in to Israeli pressure, and the revised working paper would replace the communiqué as the basis for the Geneva conference. It listed six principles:

1. The Arab Parties will be represented by a unified Arab delegation, which will include Palestinian Arabs. After the opening sessions, the conference will split into working groups.
2. The working groups for the negotiation and conclusion of peace treaties will be formed as follows: a. Egypt–Israel b. Jordan–Israel c. Syria–Israel d. Lebanon–Israel.*
3. The West Bank and Gaza issues will be discussed in a working group to consist of Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and the Palestinian Arabs.
4. The solution of the problem of the Arab refugees and of the Jewish refugees will be discussed in accordance with terms to be agreed upon.
5. The agreed basis for the negotiations at the Geneva Peace Conference on the Middle East are UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.
6. All the initial terms of reference of the Geneva Peace Conference remain in force, except as may be agreed by the parties.

* All the parties agree that Lebanon may join the Conference when it so requests.⁸⁰

Dayan had accepted the idea of a unified Arab delegation with Palestinian representatives during the opening session, and agreed to discuss both the future of the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the refugee issue. These were the positive aspects of the working paper. On the negative side, the question of who would represent the Palestinians remained unresolved, and point 6 implied that Israel retained its veto against PLO participation.⁸¹

Via the joint press statement, the US–USSR joint communiqué was discarded. It was ‘not a prerequisite for the reconvening and conduct of the Geneva Conference’.⁸² While meeting with the press, Dayan declared that he had accepted the US working paper and would recommend it to the Israeli government. He added the usual mantra that Israel would not talk to the PLO and would not negotiate about a Palestinian state. Jody Powell, the US press secretary, added that although the US–USSR communiqué would not supply the basis for Geneva, it still reflected the shared US–USSR view.⁸³ This point was also made in meetings with the Arab leaders.⁸⁴ The argument was cosmetic, however; the communiqué had been scrapped.

Since Dayan had to get his government’s approval for the working paper, the US government would not show the paper to the Arab heads of state until Israel had accepted it.⁸⁵ The result of the Carter–Dayan meeting was that Israel had made the United States discard a document which it considered to be a reflection of its view, and which the Arab parties generally liked, in return for a document which the Israeli government had not even accepted on its part yet. Carter even had to intervene further before Begin would finally accept the paper on 11 October.⁸⁶ As we will see, however, Israel would then proceed to undermine this working paper as well.

Who can accept the working paper?

The working paper did not address the issues that most troubled the Arab states. Jordan, for example, had no desire to negotiate over the West Bank, while the working paper insisted that it was Jordan’s to negotiate. Also, while Egypt and Israel favoured the ‘bilateral groups’ model, both Jordan and Syria favoured the ‘functional groups’ model.⁸⁷ King Hussein was satisfied that the United States considered Palestinian representation possible without the PLO, as part of a unified Arab delegation, but Egypt, according to King Hussein, was pushing for a separate PLO delegation.⁸⁸ Jordan looked into possible Palestinians, but all those who were suggested had some connection to the PLO. As expected, the PLO ‘firmly rejected’ the working paper, claiming it was tantamount to ‘liquidat[ing] the question of [Palestinian] national rights’.⁸⁹

To make the working paper more palatable to the Arab states, the United States wanted it to appear to be a US initiative. Israel made this difficult when Dayan leaked the paper and referred to it as both 'his own paper' and as a 'US–Israeli paper'.⁹⁰ This was not the only source of discontent between the two governments. The United States was publicly at odds with the Israelis over the Palestinian representation issue. Since the middle of September, Begin had been stating that Vance had given him a veto over PLO participation. To quote Begin, in his vehemently anti-PLO language:

Vance has stated explicitly [...] that the participation of the organization of murderers [the PLO] in the Geneva Conference is conditioned on the consent of the parties. [...] the US Administration is not pressuring the Israeli government to go to Geneva with the organization of murderers known as the PLO. [...] the U.S. is explicitly leaving the decision in the hands of the parties which means, in our hands as well, because we are one of the parties.⁹¹

The US State Department insisted that there was no such US–Israeli agreement. The United States also tried to clarify that no new participants could attend Geneva unless all the parties agreed, and that the Israeli position was that the PLO as an organisation could not participate in the other delegations. This formula did not exclude individual PLO members, in other words. Dayan disagreed. Israel not only did not want the PLO as an organisation to participate, but also felt that no PLO members could participate whatsoever. Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz was duly informed that this was not how Vance had understood the 4 October meeting.⁹²

This stern message to Dinitz had no effect. Moshe Dayan blatantly pushed the issue as far as he could, hoping the United States would relent. Vance was nervous about the impact of Israel's behaviour. He urged Israel not to leak any more of the US–Israeli discussions, since this 'could destroy possibility of getting to Geneva'.⁹³ No wonder: in the Arab states, the working paper was already being referred to as an 'Israeli paper'.⁹⁴

Selling the working paper

The working paper had failed to facilitate talks. It was unpopular in Israel, because it included Palestinian representation as an issue.⁹⁵ It was even less popular in the Arab states and among the Palestinians. If it was to have any value, however, they would have to accept it. On 14–15 October, then, President Carter sent personal letters to the Middle East heads of state asking them to support the working paper.⁹⁶ It was no easy sell. King Hussein accepted the working paper but added that he could not go to Geneva if only he and Sadat accepted it.⁹⁷ This was a classic problem; unless Syria could be brought on board Jordan had to stay away for fear of being isolated.

The Syrian reaction was predictable. Syrian Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam criticised the paper for being a 'clear retreat' which took only Israeli concerns into account. Khaddam particularly resented the removal of any reference to the PLO, as well as the mechanism of allowing working groups to report to the plenary session in Geneva.⁹⁸ The US administration knew it would be difficult to sell the working paper to the Arabs and was therefore adamant about rejecting any further conditions from the Israelis.⁹⁹ But the Arab leaders demanded changes too. Was it feasible to make them, then resell the amendments to the Israelis? The Egyptian reaction spoke to this quandary.

Egypt was one of very few buyers of the document, and the Egyptian leadership even tried to convince the PLO and Syria to accept it. Egyptian Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy found this to be a tall order.¹⁰⁰ While Fahmy and Sadat both claimed that they were willing to go to Geneva tomorrow, if need be, they found that the working paper was impossible to accept for the other Arabs, because of the removal of references to the Palestinian question.¹⁰¹ Fahmy and Sadat therefore suggested a slightly amended working paper which would re-insert such a reference.¹⁰² Although Carter and Vance sympathised with their suggestions, the Americans contended that, if further changes had to go back to the Israelis, they would reject them and the whole process would collapse.¹⁰³ Without changes, however, the PLO and Syria would not accept the working paper and there would be no Geneva.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Arafat would later argue that while the PLO could largely accept the US–Soviet joint communiqué and the original working paper from

September, with some reservations, the October working paper was completely unacceptable.¹⁰⁵

Vance concluded that it was not even worth trying to get Israel to accept an amended working paper. Rather than pressuring the Israelis, Vance once again put the onus on the Arab leaders. He underlined two concessions which Israelis had made. The first was that the Arabs could participate in the opening session with a unified Arab delegation, and the second was that the Palestinians could participate in that delegation.¹⁰⁶ At face value, these concessions appeared significant, but both were greatly watered down. The unified Arab delegation would only have a role during the opening session at Geneva, and there would be no reporting back from the bilateral talks to the plenary session. On the second point, the Palestinians would be far removed from an independent role in the substantial talks which were to take place after the opening session, and they could not represent the PLO.

The communiqué and the ensuing debate were enormously detrimental to the comprehensive approach. Syria, at this point, worried that Egypt could be 'going it alone' and sought to coordinate against this eventuality with Jordan.¹⁰⁷ Clear cracks were thus appearing in the relations among the Arab states, and Jordan was caught in the middle, politically closer to Sadat's stance but unable to make a commitment without Asad.

Could Egypt go it alone?

The Arab divisiveness nicely suited Israel, which wanted a separate peace with Egypt. Sadat certainly considered this option as well. In early August, Sadat had told Vance that he could sign a separate peace with Israel if the other Arab states failed to participate in negotiations.¹⁰⁸ Vance had ignored the implications of this statement.¹⁰⁹ In late October, for example, this statement from Sadat should have come to mind, when Dayan asked Carter how he would react if Egypt and Israel agreed to end the state of war. Carter responded that he would not stand in the way, but that he preferred a comprehensive peace.¹¹⁰ The Carter administration did not see a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace as a priority, nor was it even aware that such a peace process was already developing.

The Carter administration had been kept in the dark about the indirect contact Sadat and Begin had through Ceauşescu. It was also mostly unaware of the fact that Moshe Dayan had met with Sadat's emissary, Hassan Tuhami, in Morocco on 16 September 1977, after Egypt had delivered its draft peace treaty to the United States. To the extent that Vance was informed, he failed to grasp the significance of the meeting.¹¹¹ Egyptian Deputy Premier Hassan Tuhami and Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan had arranged this top-secret meeting through King Hassan of Morocco. The goal was to prepare for direct negotiations between Sadat and Begin. Given the secrecy of these talks, there has, until now, been no documentary evidence of the meeting; all accounts of it have been based on various memoirs.¹¹² However, the Israeli State Archives recently published a four-page summary of the meeting in Morocco. It reveals that Sadat was willing to meet Begin directly and discuss any issues, so long as Begin first accepted the principle of 'evacuation of Arab occupied territories'.¹¹³

Sadat wanted these contacts to be kept secret from the Americans, but, if they produced results, then they should be handed over to the Americans to frame as a US initiative. Sadat insisted, furthermore, that all issues should be decided directly between Israel and Egypt, and then delivered to a Geneva conference for official signing. As for the Palestinians, the message from Sadat was that there should be formal links between the Palestinian territories and Jordan and Egypt. Dayan and Tuhami suggested that a new meeting should take place two weeks later, but this second meeting never took place.¹¹⁴ Until Sadat's trip to Jerusalem two months later, the contact between the two states ceased.

In the meantime, the tiresome discussions about the working paper dragged on. Sadat and Fahmy demanded changes which would make the paper acceptable to the PLO.¹¹⁵ Vance knew that it would be impossible to get Israel to accept the Egyptian changes, to say nothing of the Syrian changes.¹¹⁶ This was obviously not an outcome the Americans had sought. Hafez al-Asad, in fact, suggested a complete reformulation of the working paper. His version included explicit mention of PLO participation in the united Arab delegation and placed the substantive negotiations in the plenary.¹¹⁷ The Syrians were worried that the bilateral format would open up for a bilateral peace between Egypt and Israel – a nightmare scenario which would leave Syria and the PLO with little leverage over Israel. The Americans knew that they had to take

Syria's protests seriously, but since Vance was unwilling to push Israel to make concessions, the Arab leaders could not accept the revised working paper. There were no easy options on the table, and the Carter administration was walking in circles.

Jimmy gets personal

Frustrated by the deadlock President Jimmy Carter sent a personal letter to Anwar Sadat, asking him for help to push the process forward.¹¹⁸ A week later Carter sent another message to Sadat, thanking him and Foreign Minister Fahmy for trying to accommodate the other Arabs by suggesting changes to the working paper, then lamenting that it was futile to try to settle on a detailed working paper upon which all parties could agree. The main appeal of the letter, however, was its personal character. Carter told Sadat that he would send similar letters to Asad and King Hussein, but that the close personal relationship between himself and Sadat prompted him to contact Sadat first. Carter stressed that the parties should move beyond procedure in the hope that 'negotiations create a dynamic of their own'.¹¹⁹

Carter added the selling point, that if the Arab states agreed to this procedure, then he would make an 'unequivocal public statement that the Palestinian question, as well as the question of withdrawal and borders and of peace, must be dealt with seriously at the conference with the aim of finding a comprehensive solution to all aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict'.¹²⁰ The final carrot Carter offered Sadat was that if Sadat gave the green light, Carter would go to the Israelis and make them accept the proposed procedure.¹²¹

This was an attempt to give the impression that Carter was putting Egypt before Israel, but it was illusory. There was a glaring problem of balance here which diplomatic cosmetics could not conceal. Carter and Vance had accepted the negotiation of the nitty-gritty details of the working paper with Israel alone and had accepted practically all the Israeli amendments to it. When the Arab leaders demanded alterations, however, the United States told them that such detailed changes were pointless. The United States closed the debate once Israel had won it.

It seemed, though, that Carter had sugar-coated the deal enough for Sadat, who replied to Carter that he accepted the suggested procedure.¹²² In a later meeting with US Ambassador Eilts, Sadat

repeatedly stressed that he was “‘fed up” with the procedural debate’, and that ‘the situation needs a “very bold act”’.¹²³ Sadat also warned Eilts that the Palestinians must not be given a chance to ‘creat[e] difficulties for us’.¹²⁴ This was yet another indication of Sadat’s growing inclination to go it alone, but the Carter team still continued to miss what was developing under their noses.

While Sadat said he would accept the vaguer approach to procedures at Geneva, Begin and Dayan were worried about them. They had, after all, meticulously hammered out Israel’s terms for the working paper, and going to Geneva without such a document might make all that effort irrelevant. Begin was adamantly opposed to negotiations in the plenary sessions at Geneva, and he would not accept the condition that the Soviet Union would chair the negotiations.¹²⁵ Cyrus Vance was blatantly upset with the Israelis at this point.¹²⁶ One sensed that a US–Israeli confrontation was in the air and that Israel had pushed its advantage too far. But it never came to that. Sadat’s ‘bold act’ served to relieve the tension of a deadlocked process.

In the meantime, all possible ways to moderate the Arab demands were being tested by the Americans. Despite shelving the joint communiqué, the US administration kept the Soviet Union generally informed about the developments in Middle East diplomacy. The most important message sent to the Soviet leadership was that it should use its influence to moderate Syria and the Palestinians, and that some accommodation had to be found regarding the Palestinian dilemma. Vance made it clear that it was as impossible for Israel to accept PLO representation at Geneva, as it was for the Arab states to accept the fact that the PLO was not represented. It was vital to find some middle ground between those deeminglly irreconcilable principles.¹²⁷

Since the Arab foreign ministers were preparing for a foreign minister summit in Tunis at this time, Vance sent an appeal to the Syrian, Egyptian, Jordanian and Saudi Arabian foreign ministers, asking them not to support any proposal which required PLO attendance at Geneva.¹²⁸ Vance also suggested to Sadat and Fahmy that they should start to work on a list of acceptable Palestinians for a Palestinian delegation. If the Palestinians could accept such a list, it would be difficult for Syria to block it.¹²⁹

Unsurprisingly, Israel had input on the formation of this Palestinian delegation as well. Dayan suggested that Palestinian West Bank mayors

could represent the Palestinians in Geneva, as long as they did not claim to represent the PLO, in which case Israel would veto their attendance.¹³⁰ This idea of using West Bank Palestinians as representatives of all Palestinians in order to bypass the PLO was something of an Israeli obsession. It was based on the erroneous analysis that these mayors were non-PLO members or sympathisers and flew in the face of the fact that pro-PLO candidates had largely won the 1976 West Bank municipal elections.¹³¹ Contemporary research surveying the opinions of Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories also revealed that most of them were PLO supporters.¹³² There was, then, no realistic non-PLO Palestinian option to pursue.

For the Carter administration, the fall of 1977 was dismal when it came to Arab–Israeli peace-making. The comprehensive approach was coming apart at the seams. September had started well enough, with the collection of the draft peace treaties, since several of those drafts reflected a willingness to compromise. However, they did nothing to alter the problem of Palestinian representation. Instead, they compounded it. As a non-state, the Palestinians were unable to deliver a draft treaty, and none of the Arab states could deliver a treaty on their behalf. Thus, while collecting the draft treaties from the Arab states, the Carter administration tried to get the Palestinians on board by handing them a ‘242 with reservations’ formula. This was the most which any US government had offered the Palestinians to that point. While the two sides seemed to be only inches apart, it was still not enough.

In an attempt to push the process forward, the United States and the Soviet Union released their joint communiqué on 1 October. Although the contents of the communiqué represented a compromise between the Soviet and US positions, and although the document did not mention the PLO, Israel and its supporters in the US were aghast at it. Dayan launched a hard-hitting media campaign in the United States, forcing Carter to withdraw it, then introduced the US working paper as a substitute for the communiqué. Where the communiqué had raised alarms in the Israeli camp, the working paper raised similar concerns in the Arab camp. Such was the nature of the Rubik’s-cube diplomacy. Any move Carter made to appease one party would upset another. The joint communiqué had pleased the Soviet Union, Syria and the PLO but upset Israel, the US domestic scene and, debatably, Egypt. To solve this, the working paper was launched. The paper pleased Israel but upset all

the Arabs. Israel had outmanoeuvred Carter, and Carter was unwilling to spend any substantial political capital to make Israel concede.

Instead, Carter and his team spent weeks haggling over the working paper. The Israelis refused to amend it, whereas the Arabs demanded a variety of alterations. Realising the futility of this haggling, Carter suggested that they should proceed without the working paper. This outcome pleased Sadat, who was tired of the deadlock, but upset Begin and Dayan, for whom the working paper had been a great victory. Any step forward entailed at least one step back, then, and often more. In his desperation, Carter appealed personally to Sadat to make a bold move. Little did he realise how bold Sadat's move would be. It would save *a* peace process, but terminate the comprehensive peace process.

CHAPTER 5

THE JERUSALEM BOMBSHELL

By late 1977, the comprehensive approach had reached a dead end. Something drastic had to happen if there was any chance of getting the process back on track. On 3 November 1977, in a secret 'eyes only' letter, Sadat informed Carter that he wanted to upgrade the talks. He suggested a top-level peace conference in East Jerusalem sponsored by all the major powers.¹ Sadat was thinking far outside the box, and Brzezinski wondered if he was 'losing his sense of reality'.² But Sadat needed a serious peace process, and he had a myriad of ideas regarding how to make it happen. Even at this late moment, in fact, he was not sure which idea to pursue. His ultimate decision to go it alone rather than opt for a multilateral conference might well have been prompted by Carter's reply to his Jerusalem conference initiative: 'I must tell you that this public announcement [of a Jerusalem conference] may seriously complicate, rather than facilitate, the search for peace in the Middle East.'³

Rebuffed by Carter, Sadat then surprised everybody. On 9 November 1977, Sadat delivered the game changer. In what have become some of the most famous words in modern Middle East history, Sadat declared: 'I am prepared to go to the ends of the earth [...] I am prepared to go to their very home, to the Knesset itself and discuss things with them [the Israelis].'⁴

The Carter administration failed to grasp the significance of these words. In his first report to Carter, Brzezinski acknowledged that the speech was 'remarkable' but did not supply any deeper analysis of how it represented a shift in Egyptian policy.⁵ Ambassador Eilts's first report

also placed the Knesset remark in the context of Sadat's desire to convene the Geneva conference.⁶ Carter does not even mention the speech in his diary.⁷ The US administration was obviously confused by the initiative and unsure whether to take it at face value or as engaging rhetoric.

It was not only the US administration that was caught off guard. PLO leader Yassir Arafat was present in the Egyptian Assembly when Sadat made his speech, and Sadat had specifically brought attention to Arafat during the speech. This gave the impression that Arafat had been informed of Sadat's intention to go to Jerusalem.⁸ But this was not true. Witnesses and analysts disagree over whether Arafat even understood the political significance of Sadat's words, or whether he thought the speech was rhetorical.⁹

The 'Knesset speech' was Sadat's expression of his solo initiative – an idea which evidently came to him after Carter's personal appeal to make a 'bold, statesmanlike move'.¹⁰ According to Egyptian journalist Ahmed Bahaa al-Din, who was there when Sadat received the note, Sadat had exclaimed, 'You see, the American president is begging me.'¹¹

The seriousness of Sadat's statement would not take long to sink in. Egyptian Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy resigned in protest shortly afterwards, along with a group of senior diplomats.¹² As Fahmy saw it, going to Jerusalem, which implied the recognition of Israel, would isolate Egypt and make a comprehensive Geneva conference more difficult to convene. Internal Egyptian opposition did not faze Sadat. He was an autocrat, and he had strengthened his domestic position during this period.¹³ In the ensuing negotiations, then, Egypt was essentially Sadat.

While Carter and Vance had 'great admiration for [Sadat's] courageous and bold step', they were worried that it would antagonise the other Arab leaders who would see it as a betrayal of Arab solidarity. They therefore urged Sadat and Begin to publicly clarify that the goal was still a comprehensive peace on all fronts, to be obtained through a Geneva conference.¹⁴ Sadat did keep toeing the line, reiterating his support for a comprehensive peace and stating that the Palestinian issue was 'the crux of the problem'.¹⁵ This could not conceal the fact that the Jerusalem speech had changed the situation drastically. There was no going back from the ends of the earth.

Going to Jerusalem

It was no wonder that the United States, as well as the Arab states and the PLO, were caught off guard by Sadat's initiative. The whole idea of going to Jerusalem was not only untraditional politics but also anathema to the Arab political consensus. There had been some hints that Sadat was ready to break new ground, however. For instance, on 27 October, Vance was informed by Nahum Goldman, president of the World Jewish Congress, that Sadat was planning for 'the visit of a high-level Jewish delegation in the near future'.¹⁶ But the leap from that to actually visiting Israel was enormous.

Unlike the United States and the Arab states, Begin was ready for Sadat's initiative. He and Sadat had spent the last few months testing each other out in secret.¹⁷ Only in mid-November did it become known to the US administration that Romanian President Nicolae Ceauşescu had, for two months, facilitated a back channel engagement between Sadat and Begin.¹⁸ More important was the Moroccan back channel from September, where Dayan had met Sadat's trusted envoy and vice premier, Hassan Tuhami.

Most indications are that the United States was not aware of the depth of the direct and indirect talks between Egypt and Israel. Yet there had been several signs along the way that Sadat was willing to go it alone, without the other Arab states. In his later account, Quandt claims that the Egyptians informed Vance of the meeting in Morocco, but that he did not understand the full significance of these meetings.¹⁹ The signals of Sadat's willingness to go it alone had thus not been picked up the US administration, which did not expect him to pursue such a policy.

While the United States had no good follow-up plan after Sadat's Jerusalem speech, Begin promptly took matters into his own hands. Things moved very fast. Two days after Sadat's speech, Begin addressed the Egyptian people in a radio broadcast, welcoming Sadat to Jerusalem.²⁰ On 14 November, the two men were interviewed by Walter Cronkite, the famous American news anchor, and Sadat declared that once he received an official invitation, he would accept.²¹ On 15 November, Begin sent the invitation, and Sadat accepted immediately.²²

Catching up with events, the United States offered Sadat and Begin help to facilitate Sadat's visit to Israel.²³ In a personal phone call, Carter told Begin to ensure that Sadat's visit would clear the path for the

Geneva conference. The key, stressed Carter, was to publicly state that Israel was willing to deal with the Palestinian problem and give Syria something, so that Asad could support Sadat in turn.²⁴ Carter also phoned Sadat to offer him his full support. He encouraged Sadat to convince Begin that Syria should be included in the Geneva working group which would discuss Gaza and the West Bank. Carter considered it vital to give Syria something to increase the chances of convening a Geneva conference.²⁵ From all these personal letters and telephone conversations with Sadat and Begin, it is clear that Carter did not fully understand the depth of the changes set in motion by Sadat's declaration. Well into the second week after Sadat's speech, Carter and Vance still viewed the upcoming Jerusalem visit in light of a Geneva conference.

In reality, though, Sadat was too far along his bilateral track to revert to the comprehensive approach. Still, he needed something more to give this bilateral process legitimacy. Alfred Atherton and Harold Saunders of the State Department's Bureau of Near East Affairs aptly described the difficulty Sadat faced:

he must be seen by Egyptians as having achieved something substantial in terms of the Sinai *and* be seen by Syrians and Palestinians as having achieved something substantial in terms of their particular interests as a means of allaying their suspicions that he is pursuing Sinai III.²⁶

For the two American diplomats, the onus lay on Israel. If Israel did not alter its position, or altered it in a way which only favoured Egypt, it would destroy the chances for Geneva. If, however, Israel could give something on Palestinian representation, it could help push forward the possibility of convening the Geneva conference.²⁷ In light of Begin's track record, of course, this was highly unlikely.

For most Arabs, the writing was on the wall. The reaction to the forthcoming Sadat visit to Israel was 'hostile and violent'. Anti-Sadat demonstrations and acts of violence against Egyptian targets broke out across the Middle East. Even Saudi Arabia's King Khalid distanced himself from Sadat.²⁸ The PLO declared, 'Sadat's decision is a betrayal of the dearest and most sacred goal of our nation [...] this dangerous move which imperils the existence of the Arab nation, its future and its honour.'²⁹ Two weeks later, the PLO's tone was even harsher: 'Sadat's

determination to pursue his policy of capitulation to the terms set by the enemy and American imperialism deals the greatest blow to the Palestinian cause since it has existed.³⁰ Meanwhile, the PLO persisted in working with the comprehensive approach framework which had preceded Sadat's speech. The PLO suggested a formula under which Geneva should be convened on the basis of the joint US–Soviet communiqué, and asked that the UN General Secretary issue an invitation to 'representatives of the Palestinian people'.³¹ This might have been a helpful suggestion in late September, but the PLO had fallen behind in the political developments. The US–Soviet joint communiqué had been scrapped even before the Sadat initiative, and there was no reason for it to resurface after the 'ends of the earth' speech.

Visiting Israel

Sadat's initiative developed quickly. On the evening of 19 November, only ten days after his speech, Sadat arrived in Jerusalem. It was the first time an Egyptian leader had visited Israel, and hundreds of foreign journalists were present to cover the momentous event.³² It also massively stirred popular emotion. Israeli Minister of Defense Ezer Weizman recounted: 'Half of the Israeli people were glued to their television sets, and the other half were squeezing into the airport to shake the hand of our great enemy.'³³ Could popular emotion compel the rigid Begin government to soften its position?

Shortly after Sadat arrived in Israel, he and Begin held a brief private meeting, and they both expressed a commitment to 'continuing a dialogue leading to peace treaties in Geneva'.³⁴ But the grand moment of the trip, the Knesset session, was disappointing. The combined effect of the two leaders' speeches pleased no one.

While the trip to Jerusalem was made to calm the Israelis and break the 'psychological barriers' between Israel and Egypt, Sadat's Knesset speech was designed to calm the Arabs and justify his visit to Israel.³⁵ Most important to his Arab audience were Sadat's statements that a complete Israeli withdrawal from all territories occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem, was not negotiable, that the Palestinians must be granted a homeland in Palestine, and that Egypt would not sign a 'separate agreement, a partial peace, or a third disengagement'.³⁶ Although Sadat's Knesset speech generally did not deviate from the

official Egyptian policy regarding the Arab–Israeli conflict, Sadat did refrain from explicitly mentioning the PLO.³⁷ Dayan had warned Sadat against referring to the PLO because, if Sadat did so, ‘Begin would be obliged to attack the PLO.’³⁸ Since Begin’s general tendency was to compare the PLO to the Nazis, claim that the organisation was a Soviet puppet, and even deny that there was any such thing as a Palestinian people, Sadat would gain nothing from provoking such a response.³⁹ Begin then answered Sadat’s speech by extending invitations to Asad and King Hussein and talking about a Geneva conference, but he did not mention the Palestinians as a party or mention territorial withdrawal.⁴⁰

The Egyptians were disappointed by Begin’s speech, as was much of the Israeli public, and the Israelis were aggrieved by Sadat’s perceived hard line.⁴¹ PLO and Syrian comments were all harshly critical of both Sadat and Begin.⁴² While the Israelis were largely disappointed by Sadat, some analysts noted that the speech had constituted a *de facto* recognition of Israel, at no cost to Israel. This point was underlined by the Israeli politician and peace activist Uri Avnery:

For him [Begin], this visit was a gift from Heaven. It was handed to him for free, on a silver platter. It was Sadat who initiated it and paid the full price for it, endangering his life and his regime, and gave Israel an invaluable prize – full recognition of her existence and her legitimacy. And what did Begin pay? Nothing at all, not even a piaster with a hole in it. He did not risk anything and did not give anything.⁴³

As for the Carter administration, it was concerned that the Jerusalem visit had taken the process out of its hands. The Americans were kept in the dark. On 20 November, the United States still did not know what had taken place during Begin and Sadat’s private meetings. Reports indicated that Sadat brought a peace plan to Begin, and that Begin was authorised by the Knesset to offer Sadat such a plan in return.⁴⁴ But, in their joint press statement, Begin and Sadat had continued to focus on a process leading to peace treaties with all Arab states signed at Geneva.⁴⁵ Two things should be noted about this statement. First, it was clear that the expressed goal was not a separate peace and, second, it was clear that the Palestinians – as a non-state – were not included. These two points are self-contradictory, of course – the parties could talk about Geneva as

much as they wanted, but all the premises on which the Geneva conference rested had been destroyed. Sadat was isolated in the Arab world, the Palestinians were out, the Soviet Union was out, and the United States was kept in the dark.

Returning to Egypt, Sadat was boisterous. He described the trip as his 'greatest victory'.⁴⁶ Still, his actual gains were opaque. Begin and Sadat had agreed to continue their talks using two separate channels. The first channel would take place in Morocco between Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs Moshe Dayan and Egyptian Deputy Prime Minister Hasan Tuhami and deal with political issues. The second channel would take place in Romania between Egyptian War Minister Mohamed Abdel Ghani al-Gamasy and Israeli Minister of Defense, Ezer Weizman, and deal with security issues. Despite the fact that these two channels were bilateral, Sadat still presented them to US Ambassador Eils as part of an effort to ensure a Geneva conference by the end of December 1977 or in early January 1978.⁴⁷ Sadat said that he had received a peace proposal from Begin. Curiously, it was the same peace proposal given to the United States in September.⁴⁸ This should have been a forewarning of how little Begin's position had been influenced by Sadat's grand gesture. But Sadat was euphoric at this time and did not see it.

Sadat argued that the purpose of his trip was to jump-start an 'over-all Arab/Israeli' peace process, and he had refused Weizman's proposal that he should stay in Israel for an extra 24 hours to sign an Egyptian–Israeli agreement.⁴⁹ The Israelis were trying to lure Sadat into a bilateral peace, but Sadat maintained that he was aiming for something larger. It is difficult to gauge whether Sadat was delusional or whether he was simply trying to placate Carter. Realistically, however, Sadat had laid waste to the grand bargain by going to Jerusalem and estranging the remaining interested parties.

Sadat was so optimistic after his Jerusalem trip that he told the US ambassador that he no longer thought the United States needed to pressure Israel. Sadat also suggested a compromise for the West Bank, in which the area would be under UN jurisdiction for five years, during which a plebiscite could be held for Palestinian self-determination. In the meantime a new Palestinian leadership could be built up in Gaza. Sadat also claimed that he was willing to slightly enlarge Gaza by giving away some of the Sinai to the Palestinians.⁵⁰ All this was the product of euphoric optimism detached from political reality. Sadat did not control

the Sinai, because Egypt had lost it in the 1967 war. Until Israel agreed to give it back to Egypt, it was not Sadat's to give away again. Sadat's suggestion that the United States could stop pressuring Israel also revealed an unrealistic view of the impact his trip to Israel had made. As the forthcoming negotiations would demonstrate, Begin was going to be almost impossible to budge, even with US pressure.

After having conferred with both Begin and Sadat, Vance finally realised that Sadat's Jerusalem trip had created an entirely new situation in the Middle East. Massive political adjustment was required. First of all, the direct contacts between Egypt and Israel meant that the importance of the US intermediary role was reduced. Second, Israel and Egypt wanted to use these direct contacts to work out the substance of an agreement between the two. Vance thought that Israel probably wanted a separate Israeli–Egyptian peace and concluded that an early reconvening of the Geneva conference was unlikely. Furthermore, it seemed that both Egypt and Israel thought Syria and the Soviet Union could be ignored. Sadat's optimism rested on the assumption that he could get the necessary movement on the Palestinian issue to cover himself regarding the accusation of abandoning the larger Arab cause. While Vance advised Carter to support Sadat's intention of using direct negotiations, he was not hopeful about what this might engender.⁵¹ He dryly commented that Sadat 'is overly optimistic about the ease and speed with which his negotiations with the Israelis can proceed'.⁵²

The Israelis confirmed what Sadat had told the US administration. Begin noted that Sadat wanted 'agreement in principle on Palestinian problem before negotiating Israeli–Egypt issues'.⁵³ According to Begin, the ball was in Sadat's court, and Israel was waiting for his next move. Brzezinski concluded in the margin of the telegram: 'Geneva out'.⁵⁴ It was harder for Carter and Vance to reach that conclusion, however. They had worked for such a conference for so hard and so long that it was almost impossible to let it go.⁵⁵ As a result, they began grasping at straws.

Despite the drastic change which had occurred after Sadat's Jerusalem trip, Carter maintained that the overall process had to include Syria and the Palestinians. Yet another clear divide between Carter and Begin thus became apparent. Unlike the US administration, the Israeli government was intent on making a bilateral agreement *the* option. It would be a dream come true if Israel could make peace with Egypt without

involving the Palestinian question and in this way eliminate the threat of a new war with both Syria and Egypt. Carter strongly disagreed with the Israeli position. While he supported the two tracks of continued Israeli–Egyptian dialogue, he stressed that a comprehensive approach was vital.⁵⁶ Again, we see an inherent contradiction here. The more Egypt and Israel negotiated separately, the less likely it was that the other Arab states and the Palestinians would join in.

This contradiction did not elude the US administration. The Americans knew something had to be done, but they had no clear plan about what to do. Vance asked Sadat to clarify how he proposed to tie the bilateral treaties into a comprehensive approach. How far did he envisage going with bilateral negotiations before the other Arab states should be involved? Vance stressed that it was important for Sadat to publicly support the goal of a comprehensive approach, through a Middle East peace conference, in which the Palestinians would participate.⁵⁷ But that was not going to happen. Vance was finally convinced that Sadat was seeking a bilateral peace with Israel, and that he was using the concept of a comprehensive peace to ‘protect his flanks’ from Arab criticism.⁵⁸ Carter admitted that steps needed to be taken to ‘try to keep together what seems to be coming apart’.⁵⁹ Carter and Vance refused to give up on the comprehensive approach despite all indications that it was no longer possible. Arguably, they were more committed advocates of the larger Arab cause than Sadat was.

Vance was convinced that Sadat would realise that his optimism was unfounded and that he would soon approach the United States to pressure Israel. In the meantime, the US administration should hang back and simply encourage Israel to pursue peace, but ‘keep under review how we can encourage the bilateral track while keeping alive the prospects for a comprehensive settlement’.⁶⁰ It was finally sinking in that the comprehensive approach was becoming impossible, and that the bilateral approach was gaining strong momentum.

Taking the talks to Cairo

Against US advice, Sadat invited all the parties to a preparatory conference in Cairo. Israel immediately accepted the invitation, and Carter sent Assistant Secretary Atherton as the US representative.⁶¹ The PLO was also invited, but Israel gambled on the likelihood that it

would decline the invitation. If the PLO had accepted the invitation, Israel would have been forced to either *de facto* recognise the PLO or withdraw from the conference and take the flak for torpedoing the peace process. Both of those scenarios would have been bad news for Israel.⁶² Predictably, the gamble paid off, as both the PLO and Syria declined the invitation.

For the PLO and Syria, the situation was one of 'damned if you do, damned if you don't'. They could not accept the Sadat initiative but, by not attending, they were in effect forcing Sadat to continue to follow the path of bilateralism. To counterbalance this bind, the Syrian regime tried to garner broad condemnation of the Sadat initiative.⁶³ In the UN General Assembly, where the PLO was an official observer, the PLO united with Syria to argue that Sadat had betrayed the Arab cause by recognising Israel, and implicitly recognising Jerusalem as its capital.⁶⁴ Both the Soviet Union and Jordan declared that they would only attend a Geneva conference if the PLO participated.⁶⁵ The fact that Jordan had suddenly become an active supporter of PLO participation was striking. All the cracks which had been visible in the comprehensive approach during the summer and fall of 1977 had become gaping fissures. All the work the Carter administration had put into moderating the Syrians, finding a formula for enabling Palestinian participation and getting support from the Soviet Union was falling apart as Sadat pushed forward and the Begin government fully invested in bilateral negotiations with Egypt.

Carter, too, was more openly supporting Sadat at this point. In a 30 November press conference, he praised Sadat's initiative for its positive impact on the peace process. What Carter presented as positive developments were the very same things which the other Arabs opposed: 'Two of Israel's most cherished desires have already been met. One is this face-to-face negotiation possibility, and the other one is a recognition by a major Arab leader that Israel has a right to exist.'⁶⁶

Oddly, though, Carter continued using the reference points of his comprehensive approach in his analysis of the Middle East situation. He referred to his original three points, stating that much progress had been made on the definition of peace, even though the Palestinian issue and the borders/security question remained undecided. He even continued to stick with the idea that the Soviet Union should be part of the process, despite the fact that the USSR declined the invitation to

the Cairo conference. Carter even insisted that a separate peace was undesirable, as long as there was hope for a comprehensive peace process. He claimed that such hope still existed.⁶⁷

Consequences of a separate peace

Despite Carter's public optimism about salvaging a peace process which would include all the warring parties, he also had to prepare for a scenario in which Sadat negotiated a separate peace with Israel. Vance therefore asked the US embassies in the Middle East for input. The question was so sensitive that the embassies were strictly forbidden to mention it to anyone outside the missions. The premise of the study was that Sadat had four options. His first option was to negotiate a comprehensive peace with Israel, which he could then try to sell to Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. If they rejected the possibility, he could sign the Egyptian–Israeli portion of it. His second option was to negotiate a comprehensive peace but retain a fall-back position in the form of an Egyptian–Israeli peace 'plus a Gaza–West Bank–Jordan–Israel settlement of the Palestinian question'.⁶⁸ This option would exclude the PLO and Syria. Sadat's third option was to try for a comprehensive peace but be willing to accept a separate peace if Israel was unwilling to give anything outside the Sinai. His last option was to negotiate a separate peace while claiming to pursue a comprehensive peace. In short, the options ranged from full comprehensive to optical comprehensive.⁶⁹

Based on the feedback from the various regional embassies, the US study concluded that the best option for Sadat, and the US administration, was to continue to focus on the comprehensive approach, with special attention to finding a Palestinian settlement. According to the study's authors, Sadat should start by working for a comprehensive approach but gradually lower the bar and aim for a separate deal if that ambition were to fail. Sadat's greatest hope would be to get an Israeli agreement to withdraw from the West Bank. If he managed that, Sadat would have the comprehensive peace in his pocket, even if Syria and the PLO refused to participate.⁷⁰

The argument in favour of a separate treaty was that even such a limited arrangement would be better than none at all, and it would eliminate the threat of a war which could endanger Israel's existence. While a separate peace could induce the other Arabs to join the process

at a later date, the same peace would give Israel few incentives to make further concessions. The report therefore concluded that the best situation for the United States was still a comprehensive peace, but that if Sadat was able to make a separate peace without causing a complete Arab–Egyptian schism, then it was better than the current deadlock. The United States should therefore be as willing to take that chance as Sadat.⁷¹

The first Arab attempt to formalise opposition against the Sadat initiative came in early December 1977 at a summit in Tripoli, Libya, which issued a declaration against Egypt. Despite its harsh tone, though, the substance of the declaration was weaker than expected. Rather than rejecting negotiations with Israel outright, as the staunchest rejectionists wanted, the declaration stated that negotiations would be acceptable as long as they aimed at ‘the establishment of a just and honourable peace’.⁷² Such a peace would entail full Israeli withdrawal and recognition of the national rights of the Palestinian people.⁷³

Atherton and Saunders considered Syrian President Hafez al-Asad to be the conference’s ‘clear winner’, as he was able to both condemn Sadat and maintain the option of a negotiated settlement. The Iraqi delegates had walked out of the conference in protest because Syria insisted that a negotiated solution was possible if it was based on UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338 and recognised Palestinian national rights. Compared to Iraq, then, Syria was moderate. Sadat did not accept this distinction, however, forcing the Arab states to either support his initiative or fully embrace the rejectionists.⁷⁴ This made both Syria and the PLO oppose Sadat even more, and they pulled Jordan with them.

The PLO, for their part, called for the formation of a ‘Steadfastness and Confrontation Front’, rejected UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338 and called for a political boycott of the Sadat regime.⁷⁵ As Sadat went on alone, the PLO was becoming more radicalised and rejectionist – essentially, that is, a spoiler movement. The rift between Sadat and Syria—the PLO meant that, while Sadat continued talking about a comprehensive peace and a Palestinian solution, he could not deliver one, unless Begin suddenly changed course and accepted some form of Palestinian self-determination. This was highly unlikely.

Sadat therefore again suggested that a solution to the Palestinian problem could be a five-year UN mandate, followed by a vote for self-determination, and that it was necessary for Israel to respond with a

gesture to match his Jerusalem trip. Sadat wanted Israel to declare that it was willing to withdraw to the 1967 lines on all fronts, and that it was ready to 'resolve the Palestinian question in all its aspects'.⁷⁶ As Quandt phrased it, 'somewhere the magic words "withdrawal to the 1967 lines, with minor modifications" must appear'.⁷⁷

This was wishful thinking as there was absolutely no reason to expect that Israel could be made to issue such a statement. In fact, months before, Begin had rejected any such prospects outright. For example, in a 6 September interview, Begin had stated:

We do not accept the idea of a trusteeship regime [...] this proposed trusteeship regime is bound up with the establishment of a Palestinian entity, a homeland for the Palestinians, a national home for the Palestinians – whatever name you want to give it, they all lead to one result. An Arafatist state, a state which will endanger the very existence of the Jewish state.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, the direct talks between Egypt and Israel progressed, albeit slowly. On 2 December 1977, Dayan introduced Begin's peace plan to Tuhami in Morocco. Sadat rejected the proposal because it did not contain a link to Palestinian issues, and because Israel insisted that the Sinai settlements would remain.⁷⁹ Sadat was still trying to obtain all the goals of a comprehensive peace – full Israeli withdrawal on all fronts, Israeli security and Palestinian rights – but he was negotiating without the other involved parties, and Israel was not even prepared to make adequate concessions in the Sinai. It was evident that Sadat needed help. His euphoria after the Jerusalem trip had been completely unfounded. He was, in short, in dire need of US pressure on Begin.

Prior to the Cairo conference, Vance went on yet another Middle East tour to discuss the process with Sadat and Begin, as well as some of the other Arab leaders. His emphasis was still on a comprehensive approach, and the US support for the Cairo conference was based on the idea that it would help facilitate a Geneva conference at a later stage. Sadat was at this point furious with Asad and the PLO, and although he still argued for a comprehensive approach, the fissure between PLO–Syria and Egypt was becoming so large that this approach was clearly a pipe dream.⁸⁰ Vance's meetings in the Arab states confirmed as much.⁸¹

It should have been no surprise then that the Cairo conference produced nothing. Officially, the chief negotiators of Israel, Egypt and the United States all claimed that the aim was still a comprehensive peace.⁸² However, everything in the conference indicated the opposite including even the visual formalities. First, Egypt wanted to have name plates for all the invitees, including the PLO. When Israel insisted that the PLO nameplate should be replaced by one labelled 'The Arabs of Eretz Israel', Egypt decided to have no name plates at all. Then, Egypt insisted on flying the flags of all the invitees outside the conference hotel, but Israel refused to accept the Palestinian flag. Once again, Egypt caved in by flying only the flags of the actual participants. Visually, and in content, the Cairo conference was a bilateral one with the United States as the sole third party.⁸³

The Cairo conference was yet another diplomatic dead end (and there would be many more to follow in the months ahead). Even within the limited framework of a bilateral peace, it produced nothing, serving only to highlight the fact that Israel was pushing hard for the exclusion of the Palestinians, and that Egypt was willing to cave in on this question without much of a fight. Might Carter have any more success at compelling Begin?

Home rule for the Palestinians

Only days after the unsuccessful Cairo conference, Menachem Begin came to Washington. The US administration considered it to be of the utmost importance to impress upon Begin that the goal of the peace process was still comprehensive.⁸⁴ For there to be any semblance of a comprehensive peace, however, the Palestinians had to be included, in some form or another. The critical question was whether Begin could be coaxed into making any concession on that front. Begin was well aware that the Americans would pressure him on this and, to counter the pressure, Begin and his closest advisors developed a new concept for the Palestinian issue which the Israelis would push hard in the coming months, and which would gradually come to form the cornerstone of the Egyptian-Israeli negotiations.

On 16 December, Begin offered Carter a 'home rule' proposal for the Palestinians in 'Judea, Samaria, and Gaza'.⁸⁵ This proposal specified that Israel would retain responsibility for public order and security in the

West Bank and Gaza, while a Palestinian Administrative Council would run the daily affairs of the Palestinian inhabitants. The central question of sovereignty was kept clear of this equation – Begin argued that sovereignty had to be excluded because both Arabs and Israelis insisted that they had legitimate claims upon it. Thus, if Israel insisted on including sovereignty, the Arabs would not accept the proposal, and if the Arabs insisted on including sovereignty, the Israelis would abandon the proposal.

The proposal was frankly mind-boggling. As long as it excluded sovereignty, there was no hope that the Palestinians would accept it. Since the Israelis would not withdraw from the territories, as well, it was unclear what was actually in it for the Palestinians. To exclude the question of sovereignty while continuing to occupy the land effectively meant that Israel had claimed sovereignty. Furthermore, while the Palestinians living in the area could have free elections, they would not be allowed to vote for any PLO affiliated parties.⁸⁶ 'Free' was therefore devoid of any actual meaning.

Puzzled by the proposal, the Americans pushed Begin on the question of who would make decisions in the West Bank and Gaza. The Israelis responded that the Palestinian Administrative Council's power would be derived from the Israeli military governor, and that this same governor could revoke the powers delegated by that office.⁸⁷ In other words, 'home rule' was a very limited form of autonomy under which Israel would retain full control over the external borders and the territory. The Palestinians would have individual but not national rights. The Carter team viewed the proposal as a useful starting point but insisted on more sovereignty for the Palestinians and clearer indications of withdrawal from the Israelis. As it would turn out, the Carter team could argue as hard as it liked, but Begin would only give in on words, not on substance.⁸⁸ This argument would persist for the remainder of Carter's presidency.

When Begin then returned home to discuss the proposal with the Israeli cabinet, he introduced amendments to counter the arguments from the Israeli critics who claimed that the original proposal could pave the way for a Palestinian state.⁸⁹ After closing all the loopholes in the proposal which could lead to Palestinian statehood, Begin took the stricter version to Sadat.

This version consisted of two documents. The first was titled the 'Proposal for a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel', and set out what a

separate peace treaty would look like. The second was the amended 'home rule' proposal, now titled 'Self-rule for Palestinian Arabs, residents of Judea, Samaria and the Gaza District'.⁹⁰ This pairing of a separate treaty between Israel and Egypt with a vague solution to the Palestinian issue would henceforth dominate the peace process.

The first document was brief. Its main points were that normal relations would be established between Egypt and Israel, and that Israel would withdraw from the Sinai in two phases. The second document proposed that the residents of 'Judea, Samaria and the Gaza District' could elect an Administrative Council which would sit for four years at a time. The Council would run departments covering civilian affairs, while security, foreign policy and public order would remain Israeli responsibilities.⁹¹ When Sadat pressed Begin for some formulation concerning Palestinian self-determination, Begin responded that "self-determination" is tantamount to recognizing the right to an independent state'.⁹² In a word: No.

The proposal was not reciprocal in its dealings with Israelis and Palestinians. With regard to the land question, for instance, Palestinian refugees could not acquire land in the areas in question, while both current and future Israelis from the Jewish diaspora could acquire land on the West Bank and in Gaza. Furthermore, although Palestinians could ask for Israeli citizenship, the question of whether Israel would grant such citizenship would depend on Israeli citizenship laws.⁹³ As Israeli Foreign Minister, Moshe Dayan, later noted in a discussion with President Carter, the proposal was made with the knowledge that hardly any Palestinians would request Israeli citizenship, adding, 'They can then *dream* of being Palestinians.'⁹⁴

The Sadat-Begin talks produced nothing apart from an understanding that further negotiations would follow two tracks. A military committee would negotiate in Cairo, and a political committee would negotiate in Jerusalem. Highlighting the lack of success, the statesmen could only manage to agree to issue a statement presenting their diverging views on the Palestinian issue:

The Egyptian and the Israeli delegations discussed the Palestinian problem. The Egyptian position is that in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip a Palestinian State should be established. The Israeli position is that the Palestinian Arabs residing in Judea, Samaria

and the Gaza district should enjoy self-rule, and the issue will be discussed in the political committee.⁹⁵

Sadat would later tell Carter that this meeting with Begin was his 'first experience of disillusionment'.⁹⁶

Despite the opposition from both Carter and Sadat, Begin presented his 'self-rule' proposal, and the main principles of an Egyptian–Israeli peace, to the Knesset for a vote of approval in which 64 members voted in favour, eight voted against and 40 abstained.⁹⁷ Begin had secured domestic support for his Palestinian solution, but neither the Palestinians nor the other Arab states would accept it. Tellingly, King Hussein, one of the most moderate Arab leaders, described Begin's proposal as 'shocking and distressing'.⁹⁸ Also, all the local Palestinians rejected the 'home rule' proposal. They consistently rejected any proposals which ignored the PLO.⁹⁹

The major question for Israel was not whether the Palestinians or the other Arab states would accept the proposal, but whether the United States would accept 'home rule' as an adequate Palestinian solution. While Carter was sceptical when Begin first presented the proposal on 16 December, he gradually warmed to the idea. In a 28 December 1977 interview, Carter stated that Begin had 'taken a long step forward in offering to President Sadat, and indirectly to the Palestinians, self-rule'. He went on to say that he did not prefer a solution in which the Palestinians gained an independent nation.¹⁰⁰

The PLO was furious, and declared that Carter's stance was 'an insult to the entire Arab nation'.¹⁰¹ The US–PLO attitudes had soured considerably in a very short time. Where, only three months before, they had been working on a formula for acceptable reservations on UNSC Resolution 242, they were now exchanging insults.¹⁰² For example, in a 15 December 1977 press conference, Carter had stated: 'The PLO have been completely negative. They have not been cooperative at all.'¹⁰³

The president started the new year by meeting King Hussein of Jordan. Carter informed him of the recent diplomatic developments, highlighting the facts that Sadat was willing to cede parts of the Sinai to Gaza, and that Begin's autonomy proposals included a withdrawal to certain military cantonments on the West Bank. Carter presented his view of the process as though nothing had changed: 'there are two crucial elements: [...] withdrawal with minor modifications, and [...] a

resolution of the Palestinian problem in all its aspects.¹⁰⁴ King Hussein said he could participate in negotiations if they were based on these broad principles, but he was not convinced by Begin's autonomy proposal.¹⁰⁵

Although much of what Carter discussed with King Hussein was still in line with the increasingly defunct comprehensive approach, one aspect had definitely changed. Carter informed him that he would 'not make his acceptance dependent upon Syria'.¹⁰⁶ This was the sorry state of the comprehensive peace. Not only was Carter not interested in bringing the PLO on board any more, but Syria was also considered a less than necessary party to the process. This was a drastic move away from the principle of including all the confrontation states. The difficulties of Middle East diplomacy had taken their toll.

At this point, Sadat, too, admitted that his demand for Palestinian self-determination was a mere 'cover', telling the Americans, in absolute secrecy, that what he needed was a separate peace – with only enough linkage to the Palestinian issues to make his peace with Israel sellable to the other Arabs. In order for that plan to work, he could not accept an Israeli military presence in the initial phase of the peace process, but 'he secretly had no problems if the West Bank eventually went to Israel'.¹⁰⁷ If this statement were to be taken at face value, Sadat was being even more lenient on Israel than the United States. While Carter was watering down his comprehensive approach, Sadat was saying that the comprehensive aspects of the peace process were outright charades. Carter and his team continued to work the process as though Sadat had not admitted as much. The US reaction to Sadat's statement was very similar to its reaction when Sadat had previously suggested that he could negotiate separately with Israel: they ignored it.

The Aswan statement

On 4 January 1978, Carter made an unannounced stopover in Aswan, Egypt. In his public statements after meeting Sadat there, Carter stressed that the peace process should continue to be driven by the three points which had always been the baseline for the comprehensive approach: true peace with full normalisation; Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories; and a resolution of the Palestine problem in all its aspects.¹⁰⁸ This statement made Arafat feel a 'glimmer of hope'.¹⁰⁹

Despite his public break with the United States after Sadat started his initiative, Arafat again tried to contact the US government. Republican Congressman Paul Findley, who was on the Middle East subcommittee, met with Arafat in Damascus. Arafat expressed disappointment in the direction the peace process had taken, and wanted to convey to Carter that he was willing to set up a Palestinian state in only the West Bank and Gaza. This gesture implied an acceptance of the existence of Israel.¹¹⁰ There is no indication, however, that the Carter administration picked up on this message as a positive move; on the contrary, Brzezinski wrote to Carter that 'our current posture of ignoring the PLO while concentrating on the Palestinian issue and encouraging moderate Palestinian voices to make themselves heard is the appropriate position for now'.¹¹¹ The problem with this approach was that the moderate Palestinians were at this point threatened by the rejectionists, and on this question Arafat belonged to the moderate camp. This threat from the extreme moderates was brutally exemplified when, on 4 January 1978, the PLO dove, Said Hammami, was murdered by the Abu Nidal faction in London because he had been putting out peace feelers to the Israeli left.¹¹² In such a political atmosphere, how could non-PLO Palestinians be expected to join the talks?

The US National Security Council presented Carter with a strategy through which it could pressure Israel, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinians to accept the self-rule concept as a transition phase and acknowledge that Palestinian self-determination could be implemented upon completion of the peace treaties. This approach would enable Jordan to participate in the process going forward.¹¹³ Although the US administration still claimed to be working towards a comprehensive peace, this position was illusory. It had accepted that Syria, the Soviet Union and the PLO were out of the process.¹¹⁴

Indicative of the shift in US policy is a memorandum from Quandt to Brzezinski in which Quandt argued that, although the administration should still aim for the inclusion of Palestinian issues, it should prepare for a scenario in which this would become impossible and the only way forward would be an Egyptian–Israeli bilateral track which did not address the Palestinian question. Quandt opined that the only way to make the Palestinian issue part of the negotiations was to make the self-rule proposal transitional, and to get Israel to declare that it would withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza.¹¹⁵ Withdrawal, argued

Quandt, was the key: 'I would rather see us argue hard for the principle of withdrawal, which has some tangible meaning, than for the vague notion of self-determination. Self-determination without withdrawal means nothing; the reverse is not the case.'¹¹⁶

To make this possible, something special had to happen first. Quandt suggested that the United States could manufacture a minor crisis by urging Sadat to make a public stance which was 'a bit tougher than his real position', after which the United States would 'intervene with an initiative to break the deadlock, which he would then accept'. This would put the onus on Israel, and Carter could 'consider his fireside chat to the American people'.¹¹⁷ The 'fireside chat' implied that Carter would publicly explain that Begin stood in the way of peace. This idea would surface several times. In the end, however, it was never utilised.

Sadat was, by this time, very disappointed in Begin. In a 15 January 1978 interview, he stated: 'Begin has offered nothing. It is I who offered him everything. I offered him security and legitimacy and got nothing in return.'¹¹⁸ Sadat was under increasing pressure from the other Arab leaders, and it seemed as though Begin strove to prove them right in their scepticism about Sadat's initiative. Sadat was therefore against going to the Political Committee talks with Israel in Jerusalem, and he only went on Carter's insistence.¹¹⁹ Carter had become the prime mover for a process that differed drastically from the one he had aimed for.

The preparatory talks between Begin and Vance represented an omen regarding how the talks in Jerusalem would go. Begin insisted that Carter had endorsed his proposals in Washington, while Vance maintained that Carter had called them a fair basis for negotiations. Vance also had to reiterate that the United States considered all settlements illegal, while Begin insisted on keeping even the Sinai settlements.¹²⁰

On 17 January 1978, Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohamed Ibrahim Kamel and Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan opened the Political Committee talks in Jerusalem. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance represented the United States. The Egyptian and Israeli leaders exchanged their respective drafts, and Vance then prepared a US draft based on common language from the two proposals. As before, the biggest gap between them was the Palestinian question. The Egyptian draft insisted on self-determination, whereas the Israeli draft pushed the self-rule proposal. Vance tried to bridge them with this formula:

'recognizes the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and enables them to participate in the determination of their own future'.¹²¹ By recognising the Palestinians as a people with legitimate rights, Vance stood closer to the Egyptian than the Israeli position, however.

Vance's attempt was in vain, because the gap was simply too wide to be bridged. On 18 January 1978, the Political Committee was suspended when Sadat withdrew his negotiators.¹²² The last thing to come out of the discussions was a reworked US draft. Illustrative of the differences between the parties was the fact that the paragraph on the Palestinian question had to have an Israeli version and an Egyptian version. Egypt had conceded that it would refrain from using the terms 'national rights' and 'self-determination'.¹²³ In return, they got very little. The Israeli version did not refer to the Palestinians as a people, addressing only the 'Palestinian Arabs in Judea, Samaria and Gaza'.¹²⁴

If September and October 1977 had been difficult months for the Carter administration and its desire to create a comprehensive negotiation format, the events which commenced with Sadat's November speech were disastrous. Although Carter had appealed to Sadat to make a 'bold' move, the US administration was completely unprepared for Sadat's decision to go to Jerusalem.

The process that developed in the months following the 'ends of the earth' speech was comprehensive in name only. The other main Arab states and the Palestinians vehemently opposed Sadat's solo initiative, and all the attempts the United States had made to get Syria to moderate its stance, and to get the PLO to accept a UNSC Resolution 242 with modifications formula, went down the drain. After the Jerusalem trip, Syria and the PLO hardened their stances.

Sadat had overestimated the positive effect his grand gesture would have on Begin, and he gained very little in return for what had amounted to his *de facto* recognition of Israel. Sadat became isolated in the region, the United States lost control of the peace process, and Begin made very few, if any, real concessions. Oddly, the US administration, with the exception of Brzezinski, insisted that the process was still comprehensive. It was as though the Americans were stuck in a preconceived model, and adamantly against adapting to the new political reality, or to applying the amount of pressure needed to get the parties back on the original track.

While refusing to make any real commitment on the Palestinian issue, Begin did realise that Sadat had to gain something on that front, however cosmetic. Begin's solution was to launch a two-treaty package. The first treaty was an Egyptian–Israeli bilateral peace, and the second was a self-rule proposal for the Palestinians. Initially, Begin found no buyers for this solution but, given how the negotiations would later develop, this two-treaty package would stick. This was the start of the exact process which the Carter administration had sought to avoid. Peace would move forward on one front, and the Palestinians would not be a participant in the process. Once again, the Palestinians would be a subject *for* negotiations, not a partner *in* negotiations.

CHAPTER 6

THE TORTUROUS ROAD TO CAMP DAVID

President Anwar Sadat had gone to Jerusalem to break the psychological barrier and ensure the development of a swift peace process. His daring move got him very little, however, and his optimism would soon prove unfounded. Instead of obtaining a quick breakthrough, Sadat and President Jimmy Carter got a process which moved nowhere as they talked in circles with Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who refused to budge. The inter-Arab divide had become irreconcilable, as both Syria and the PLO rejected Sadat's initiative. The Carter administration was in dire need of something, anything, which could get the Middle East peace process moving again. Carter would not get it for free, though, and developments were headed in the wrong direction. This was amply demonstrated when the national-religious settlement movement Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) erected a new settlement in the occupied West Bank, with Begin's knowledge.¹ This was a direct provocation both against Sadat, who was on the verge of withdrawing from the talks, and against Carter who had worked hard to keep the process going.

Attempting to salvage the process, Carter invited Sadat to Washington.² As expected, Sadat was disillusioned by Begin's actions over the past week, and particularly by his stated intention to retain even the Sinai settlements. Regaining all of the Sinai was the most essential issue for Sadat, and he handed Carter a plan for the peninsula which included large Egyptian concessions such as demilitarised zones, UN forces, and a joint Egyptian–Israeli Military Committee to oversee the

territory. Unlike Begin, Sadat made a point of showing that he was dedicated to finding a diplomatic solution. To have any chance of getting US support against Begin, Sadat needed to be perceived as moderate, and as a partner in peace with Carter.³

Carter and his team emphasised that pressure was building against Begin because of his intransigence over the settlements, but that Carter's ability to maintain such pressure depended on Sadat's ability to appear willing to make peace. If Sadat withdrew from the talks, many Americans and Israelis might think that Sadat was not sincere, which would make it hard for Carter. If he were able to maintain pressure, Carter insisted, perhaps Begin could be made to accept the possibility that Palestinian self-rule could evolve into some form of self-determination over time.⁴ This might have sounded alluring on the surface, but Carter was unable to specify what such pressure would amount to, how it would be utilised or even how it would influence Begin (if at all). In other words, Sadat was asked to hold the line in return for a vague promise but no concrete returns. The coming months would be a gruelling series of talks without movement, proving exactly how vague Carter's mediation strategy had become.

After the Sadat meeting, Carter reiterated in public that the Israeli settlements were illegal, according to international law.⁵ The Israeli government was infuriated.⁶ There was no love lost between Carter and Begin, but more than strong statements would be needed to make Begin budge. To move things forward, then, the United States therefore returned to the idea of a 'manufactured crisis' – that Sadat should launch an Arab peace plan which Israel would then automatically reject, after which the United States could break the deadlock by presenting a compromise proposal.⁷ The idea was enticing. Not only would Carter finally present a compromise but also a US–Egyptian collusion would be on the table.

Sadat was still caught in a vice, however. The United States was only willing to pressure Israel if Sadat continued to negotiate, but, as long as these negotiations continued to bear no fruit, Sadat remained under massive pressure from the other Arab states to cancel the talks. Furthermore, while Sadat had been forthcoming for months, if not years, Begin had been stonewalling ever since he came to power. The US promise to pressure Israel was immaterial, then, and the idea that Sadat should not pull out of the talks until Begin had made their continuation

pointless, was an open-ended offer, since it was not at all evident what Begin would have to do before Carter would blame him for making progress impossible.

Despite everything, Carter did not think that they had reached such a point. Rather than push for a confrontation with Begin, Carter sent Assistant Secretary Atherton to the region to work on a Declaration of Principles as a framework for peace.⁸ As before, the Carter administration hoped that introducing a new procedural document would be helpful. Their experience from the US–Soviet communiqué and their various working papers should have taught them otherwise, but it was a lesson not learned. Sadat was not optimistic. He was upset that Begin was not responsive to his Jerusalem initiative, that Begin wanted to retain parts of the Sinai, and that Begin refused to include the Palestinian issue in a Declaration of Principles. Furthermore, Sadat claimed that Begin's self-rule proposal was made so as to avoid the possibility of Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian territories.⁹ While the US administration insisted that self-rule had to be a temporary solution at best, its position in February 1978 was directly derived from Begin's proposal from December 1977.¹⁰ It seemed that Begin had found a buyer for the concept after all.

Begin's proposal was so full of caveats that it was difficult to imagine how it could succeed, even as a limited Egyptian–Israeli peace. Begin's actions did not help either. In addition to the aforementioned settlements established by Gush Emunim, the 1978–79 Israeli budget included funding for 11 new settlements. Five of these were planned for the Sinai, three on the Golan and three on the West Bank.¹¹ The timing of the budget was a provocation to both Carter and Sadat. The good news was that parts of the Israeli government agreed with Carter.¹² The president took this as a positive sign, noting in the margins of the report: 'Let's hold firm.'¹³

The question of settlements was difficult, but in terms of keeping the process as comprehensive as possible, the Palestinian question was still the thorniest. Carter needed all the help he could get to moderate the Israelis. Two US senators, Jacob Javits (R) and Abraham Ribicoff (D), promised to try to sell the US stance on the West Bank–Gaza issue to Dayan if Carter were to make certain modifications to the US language. At first glance, these changes looked minor – simply the removal of two words. Upon closer examination, however, the changes had significant

political implications. The words 'legitimate' and 'people' would be removed from the phrase 'a solution of the Palestinian problem in all its aspects which recognizes the *legitimate* rights of the Palestinian *people*'.¹⁴ Accepting this change opened the door for Begin's self-rule model, which denied the Palestinian claim of being a people with legitimate national claims.

While such changes benefitted Israel, Begin continued to push for even less of a Palestinian connection. Dayan and Begin asked the United States about the minimum level of 'comprehensive settlement' required to obtain an Egyptian-Israeli peace. Vance responded that he thought Sadat would accept a Declaration of Principles which brought Jordan on board, with 'broad outlines for a West Bank/Gaza plan'.¹⁵

Very little remained of the comprehensive approach which Carter had set out to obtain, although he insisted that this was still his ambition. The contradiction between intent and political reality is apparent from the internal US papers. Formally, the goal of the peace process was still ambitious, but, in practice, the Soviet Union was out, the PLO was out, the Syrians were out and the format of the negotiations was bilateral. What made these contradictions astounding was that the US administration still argued that 'the Palestinians should be enabled to participate in the determination of their own future'.¹⁶ Who would represent them if the PLO was excluded and the unified Arab delegation was no longer an option? The Carter administration was unable to find a satisfying answer to that conundrum. The Americans were out of tune with their own ambition.

The United States also became less inclined to work for the Palestinians when the PLO pivoted back towards the Soviet Union. In March 1978, PLO leader Yassir Arafat visited Moscow. The Soviet Union reaffirmed support for Palestinian self-determination and the right to a state. The PLO and the Soviet Union also agreed that the separate Egypt-Israeli talks were 'gravely detrimental' to Palestinian interests.¹⁷ This was the cold war logic in action: when the PLO was estranged from Washington, it gravitated toward Moscow, which in turn made the United States more distrustful of the PLO.

US Assistant Secretary Atherton informed Dayan that Sadat believed that the PLO had 'taken itself out of the negotiations', but that Jordan still needed to be on board before Sadat could conclude a peace with Israel. However, if Jordan's King Hussein refused to come on board, even

after Sadat had negotiated a reasonable Declaration of Principles, then Sadat could probably go it alone.¹⁸ Sadat confirmed this position.¹⁹ Once again, he was being far more conciliatory than the United States expected.

Israel did not answer in kind. When Vance met Dayan in February, the two got stuck debating one of the fundamentals of the conflict. They disagreed over the implication of UNSC Resolution 242. Vance insisted that the resolution applied on all fronts, whereas Dayan insisted that it did not demand withdrawal from the West Bank.²⁰ Dayan made the same point in a meeting with Carter.²¹ Vance and Carter should have been prepared for this argument, since Israel had pushed it since 1967. While they might have known that the argument over UNSC resolution would come up, it appears that they did not fully comprehend the ideological depth of Israel's stance – Begin considered the West Bank as belonging to Israel.

No matter how much Carter pushed, Begin would not accept the applicability of UNSC Resolution 242 on all fronts nor allow the West Bank to come under 'foreign rule'.²² He demanded that the political committee negotiations be reopened and threatened to withdraw from any military committee negotiations unless this was done. The Israelis pushed hard for a bilateral peace and even blamed Carter for hardening Sadat's position by insisting on a comprehensive peace. Sadat, for his part, refused to reopen the political committee until a Declaration of Principles was agreed upon.²³ The fact that even Egypt and Israel were this far apart, showed how unrealistic the comprehensive approach had become. The diplomatic correspondence between Begin and Sadat from this period is revealing. Instead of negotiating over the future, the two leaders squabbled over what happened in the 1967 war.²⁴ The parties were talking in circles, mired in procedural questions and debating the past.

Missing an opportunity to pressure Begin

While Sadat was willing to go far in negotiating separately with Israel, he needed some form of Palestinian solution to legitimise his peace with Israel in the Arab world. Sadat therefore presented a proposal to the United States in which he insisted on withdrawal to the 1967 lines, Palestinian self-determination and the right of return for the Palestinian

refugees, and suggested a Palestinian state linked to Jordan.²⁵ It was indeed hard to understand Sadat. One moment the Palestinian issue was a 'cover'; the next he made complete demands on the Palestinians' behalf. The Egyptian stance was miles away from what Begin was pushing for or anything he could even contemplate accepting. There was absolutely no progress to speak of. As Carter dryly noted: 'Atherton has been in the Middle East for weeks. We have now come down to the two basic questions of the Palestinians and withdrawal.'²⁶ But these had been the major questions all along.

The distance between the parties was confirmed by King Hussein of Jordan, whom both Egypt and Israel claimed they wanted on board.²⁷ King Hussein would only join talks if Israel was willing to fully withdraw from the West Bank and grant Palestinian self-determination.²⁸ This was extremely unlikely and left the US administration with the choice of either giving up on King Hussein, and thus the last semblance of comprehensiveness, or pushing Israel to make substantial concessions.

Vance made a half-hearted attempt at the latter. When he met Israeli Minister of Defense Ezer Weizman on 9 March 1978, he insisted that UNSC Resolution 242 applied on all fronts. Weizman tried to dodge the bullet by focusing on a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace, and by claiming that if the United States pushed Begin on UNSC Resolution 242, Begin would reject talks altogether. Vance stood his ground, however, informing Weizman that 'all Israel had to do was agree that Resolution 242 also applied to the West Bank, and that it was prepared to discuss final borders in negotiations'.²⁹ Vance could stand his ground against Weizman all he liked, of course, but Begin did not give in to verbal pressure. As long as the US administration was unwilling to put any weight behind those words, he could remain firm.

Begin had to be confronted directly, and he was coming to Washington in any case. In preparation for this visit, Carter sent a personal letter to Sadat to assure him that the United States stood by its strategy, as previously agreed. It would insist that UNSC Resolution 242 applied on all fronts, and that a peace had to include a just Palestinian solution with Palestinian participation.³⁰ If ever there was a chance of pressuring Begin, this was it. But it was not to be.

One problem was that Carter sent mixed signals. First, Carter made an implicit threat to blame Begin if talks collapsed.³¹ Then, in a

meeting with Weizman, Carter told him that he believed that an Egyptian–Israeli bilateral agreement was possible, and that an Israeli military presence on the West Bank could continue ‘whatever solution may be reached’.³² Carter thus disarmed his own threat to blame Begin by granting Israel exactly what it wanted – support for a bilateral peace, and an acceptance of no withdrawal from the West Bank.

Dealing with the parties included in the peace process – Egypt, Israel and perhaps Jordan – was difficult enough, but they did not have a monopoly on impacting the conflict. One major problem with the bilateral approach was that the excluded parties gained an interest in sabotaging the talks. As tensions rose on the Israeli–Lebanese border, the PLO was poised to reimpose itself on the conflict. On 11 March 1978, a Fatah raiding party arrived in Israel by boat from Lebanon, hijacked two Israeli busses, and in the ensuing drama killed 37 Israelis and wounded dozens, before being killed themselves.³³ Khaled Fahoum, the chairman of the Palestinian National Council, argued that the attack was conducted to show that ‘the PLO was not a spent force and that Begin’s obduracy was not acceptable’.³⁴

Israel reacted with expedient force. The Israeli army (IDF) invaded South Lebanon with 25,000–30,000 troops, while Israeli planes and warships bombed PLO bases and supply routes. The Israeli goal was to destroy the PLO presence in southern Lebanon and create a ten-kilometres-wide ‘security belt’ along the border. The attack had profound human consequences. Casualty figures vary greatly, but as many as 2,000 civilians may have been killed, as well as several dozen PLO fighters and two dozen Israeli soldiers. Several hundred thousand Lebanese civilians fled north.³⁵ On 19 March 1978, four days after the invasion, the UN Security Council passed a resolution demanding Israeli withdrawal. The United States took the unusual step of voting in favour – that is, against Israel.³⁶ Despite US and UN pressure, though, the IDF stayed in Lebanon for three months.³⁷

The Israeli invasion of South Lebanon certainly did not stir up any support for Sadat’s negotiations with Israel in the Arab world. The PLO attack took place amidst a peace process which had side-lined the PLO, and was intended to derail that process. This PLO move was made to reassert the relevance of the organisation – to prove, in short, that there could be no peace without it. If the attack did prove the organisation’s relevance, it also pushed the PLO further out of the process as a political

actor. By supporting the UNSC resolution condemning the Israeli incursion into Lebanon, the United States was able to keep the bilateral peace process on track. However, since the talks still did not include the Palestinians, they did not address the issue which had made the PLO resort to such an attack.

Despite the massive death toll and the rising Arab anger at Sadat, the conflict in Lebanon was a highly dramatic sideshow to the Israeli–Egyptian negotiations. Most importantly, Menachem Begin was still set for his Washington visit. If there was to be any hope for the peace process, some movement had to be made with Begin. William Quandt of the National Security Council wrote a lengthy and detailed brief to Brzezinski on possible trajectories for the negotiations. This brief provides valuable insights into the shifting trajectory of the peace process.

He argued that, while the Egyptian army might find a bilateral peace with Israel acceptable, Sadat needed a full Sinai withdrawal and some sellable progress on the Palestinian issue. Such progress had to be substantial enough that the other Arabs states could not dismiss it as a charade. The Palestinian formula would probably not have to explicitly support self-determination, and Sadat might even settle for a commitment to the effect that the Palestinians would negotiate the rest for themselves. If Quandt's analysis was correct, a bilateral peace was in sight if Begin could concede the entire Sinai and come up with an acceptable formula for the Palestinians. Those were big ifs, but prospects were much better than if the Americans continued to aim for a broader more ambitious peace.³⁸ That ambition, then, was finally taken off the table.

What Sadat could accept was one thing; how the other regional actors would react was quite another. As the Fatah attack on Israel, and the ensuing Israeli invasion of Lebanon, had illustrated, such reactions could have dire implications. Quandt predicted that PLO 'member groups' would react violently to a separate Egyptian–Israeli peace. The 'PLO mainstream' wanted a Palestinian state on the West Bank and would probably accept a trusteeship solution with a limited timeframe and a link with Jordan. However, Arafat would be incapable of convincing the radical PLO members of such a course, meaning that the PLO moderate–radical split would deepen.³⁹

Everything pointed in one direction. All the parties save for Israel wanted a comprehensive peace, whereas Sadat was trapped by his own

initiative. Since Sadat was desperate to succeed, he was willing to budge on a large variety of questions. It was a weakness Begin would exploit again and again.

Begin and Carter clash

On 21 March 1978, Begin and Dayan met with Carter and his foreign policy team in the White House. Carter presented the Arab compromise positions, and added that the PLO had side-lined itself from the talks. Still, the meeting rapidly became heated. Begin's position was that any formulations referring to Palestinian statehood and self-determination were unacceptable. Israel would only allow an interpretation of UNSC Resolution 242 which understood that there would be no withdrawal from the West Bank. Carter asked Begin to show more flexibility, and tried to bridge the gap with the vague formulation that negotiations 'call for the fulfillment of the principles of Resolution 242'.⁴⁰ As we will see, the verbatim records of this meeting include discussions which were uncomfortable for both parties. However, since the result was that Carter asked Begin to merely base the talks on UNSC Resolution 242, rather than actively demand Israeli withdrawal on all fronts, Begin's stonewalling got him what he wanted.

The Israelis knew that the question of self-rule was the key to success. If Carter and Sadat could accept self-rule on the Palestinian front, then a bilateral peace with Egypt was in sight. But self-rule was no easy sell, and its contradictions were clear; as Dayan explained, 'Israeli forces will stay there [West Bank] to defend Israel, but not to rule the Palestinians. This is equivalent to withdrawal, not in a territorial sense, but in substance.'⁴¹ It was a far cry from the self-determination demanded by the Arab states and the Palestinians. While the US representatives could accept aspects of the self-rule model, they insisted that it had to go hand in hand with Israeli withdrawal, so that it would not be a perpetuation of the occupation, but rather a step towards removing it. For this reason, Brzezinski and Carter pressed hard on agreeing on a timeframe. For them, it was essential that self-rule would be a temporary solution with a concrete goal. Begin would not yield. He wanted the concept to be open-ended – after five years, they would see what happened. Carter could not accept this position, because it would give Israel a veto after those five

years. If that were the case, the Palestinians could not decide their own fate, and the possibility of an agreement would be nullified.⁴²

Carter was clearly tired of the Israeli intransigence at this point: 'You get more and more demanding and you are closing the door [...] the obstacle to peace, to a peace treaty with Egypt, is Israel's determination to keep political control over the West Bank and Gaza, not just now, but to perpetuate it even after five years.'⁴³ Carter reprimanded Begin for his response to Sadat's compromises and informed him that Sadat was willing to sign a peace without Jordan, provided that peace included a full Sinai withdrawal, and an agreement on a 'statement of principles'.⁴⁴

The paradox here is that, even at the most heated moment between Carter and Begin, Carter gave Begin exactly what he wanted. Carter had finally dropped the comprehensive approach, accepted that even Jordan was out of the process, and admitted that, beyond a Sinai withdrawal, only a non-substantial statement of principles was needed. This was an almost perfect scenario for Israel. The only substantial sacrifice Israel would have to make was in the Sinai.

The next day the delegations met for a follow-up meeting. Carter was pessimistic and drained of energy after the preceding day's encounter. He opened the meeting by stating, 'I am now discouraged about the prospects for further progress. [...] I still believe that a comprehensive settlement is preferable, but the first agreement will have to be between Israel and Egypt, and then with Jordan, and then with the others.'⁴⁵ This was the first clear-cut declaration that Carter saw no hope for the comprehensive approach under the existing circumstances. One wonders why he realised it so late. Perhaps he had hoped that it would be possible to convince Begin to take the necessary steps to at least bring Jordan on board. After the first meeting with Begin in Washington, all such hope had faded.

Carter outlined his understanding of the Israeli position:

even if there were a clear statement by us, and if it were accepted by Egypt, against total withdrawal in the West Bank and against a Palestinian state, Israel would not stop new settlements, or the expansion of settlements in Sinai; Israel would not permit an Egyptian or UN protection over the Israeli settlements in Sinai; even with military outposts, Israel would not withdraw political authority from the West Bank and Gaza; Israel will not recognize

that Resolution 242 applies on all fronts, including the principle of withdrawal; Israel will not give the Palestinian Arabs, at the end of the interim period, the right to choose whether they want to be affiliated with Israel, with Jordan, or to live under the interim arrangement.⁴⁶

Begin tried to ward off the criticism, arguing that Carter saw only the negatives. However, even his positive rephrasing revealed that Carter had it just right. For example, Begin stated that there would be no settlement moratorium during the negotiations.⁴⁷ Carter continued:

To refuse to acknowledge the possibility that the withdrawal principle of Resolution 242 applies to the West Bank is an insurmountable problem. [...] All Sadat wants is for Israel to work to resolve the Palestinian question, and to give the Palestinian Arabs a voice in determining their own future. [...] We reach a stone wall [...] I don't know where to go.⁴⁸

This was a rather different tone from the softer approach Carter had offered given Begin in July 1977. This time, Carter was not a 'cream puff'.⁴⁹ The question was whether Carter was willing and able to apply any real and substantial pressure on Begin, or whether things would end with this verbal confrontation, then revert to business as usual. Either way, Begin had effectively gotten what he wanted from Carter.

Returning to Israel, Begin met opposition from within his own government over his 'excessively hard line', and there was a broad Israeli view that Begin's trip to the United States had been a failure.⁵⁰ The Israeli public was also against Begin's approach. In a March 1978 Israeli poll, 69.8 per cent of Israelis preferred peace over the historic right to all of Palestine; 60.9 per cent thought that the Begin settlement policy had damaged Israeli global standing; and 59.8 per cent supported a settlement moratorium during negotiations with Egypt.⁵¹

This mounting criticism against Begin in Israel could have provided Carter with an opportunity to make a real push against Begin, such as threatening to withhold US funds to Israel. While there was absolutely no guarantee that such pressure would work, the fact that Carter did not try sent the message that harsh words from the US president would not lead to actual pressure from the US government. Once again,

Begin found that he could push hard against Carter without being punished. Having failed to exert any leverage on Begin, Carter instead appealed to Sadat to reassure Israel that he supported their security needs.⁵² Carter hoped Sadat could help him address Begin's concerns. It was easier to lean on the weak party than on the strong.

Sadat by this time, had 'virtually given up hope that Begin will show the imagination and flexibility needed for peace talks to move forward'.⁵³ This was not very far from the view held in the White House. On 16 April, the Israeli cabinet issued a statement that UNSC Resolution '242 can serve as a basis for negotiations between Israel and all neighbouring countries – including Jordan'.⁵⁴ Since the statement did not specify the principle of withdrawal on all fronts, Carter's comment in the margins of the report was 'no change'.⁵⁵ Vance duly informed Carter: 'I will tell him [Dayan] that it is our judgement that Israel cannot get a resumption of serious negotiations with Egypt unless it is prepared to make more than cosmetic or semantic changes in its position.'⁵⁶ Carter agreed: 'Be firm – Don't gloss over differences.'⁵⁷

On 26–27 April 1978, Cyrus Vance again met with Moshe Dayan. While Dayan agreed that progress on the West Bank and Gaza was crucial to progress in the negotiations with Egypt, he would not give in to Vance's demand for a clarification regarding what would happen after the five-year transition period. He also insisted on preserving the right of Israelis to settle on the West Bank.⁵⁸ It was clear that the Begin government would not concede. Naturally, Carter's frustration with the Israelis did not diminish. He noted: 'This is probably a waste of time. Be sure to let public know how bad it is.'⁵⁹ By the sound of it, it was time for the 'fireside chat'.

Less than a week later, however, Carter gave an interview in which he stated that a solution for the West Bank would not be based on full Israeli withdrawal, that he did not support an independent Palestinian state and that the West Bank solution would be 'based substantially upon the home rule proposal'.⁶⁰ Carter was backtracking from his own position, and the PLO was infuriated.⁶¹ The organisation had lost all faith in the Carter administration.

The Egyptians, too, were worried that Carter supported the Begin plan.⁶² To dispel this fear, Sadat started to insist that Begin had to support the principle of withdrawal to the 1967 lines on all fronts, with negotiated minor modifications on the West Bank only.⁶³ This was not

going to happen, of course; they were talking in circles. The United States was faced with a choice between either confronting Israel directly, or finally offer a US proposal to bridge the Israeli–Egyptian gap.

The process slowed, almost to a halt. In Quandt's account of this particular period, the frustration within the administration was extremely high. The Americans lacked a basic strategy, and they had weakened their position to accommodate Begin's refusal to 'move an inch'.⁶⁴ All the United States did was ask for proposals, see whether the other party could accept them, (usually) get a negative answer, then repeat the exercise. In retrospect, Quandt described the US approach as '[n]egotiations by questionnaire'.⁶⁵ It was getting the Americans nowhere, yet still it continued, further draining the administration of energy.

Carter's face-off with the Israel lobby

During this tense period, Carter picked a fight with the pro-Israeli politicians in Congress. During the first two weeks of May, he pushed through an armaments package whereby the United States would sell fighter jets to Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. While the pro-Israeli lobbyists wanted the United States to sell only to Israel, the Carter administration insisted on a package deal. The United States would sell to all three countries, or to none at all. Despite tough opposition, Carter won the congressional vote, 54 to 44. Israel was allowed to buy 15 F-15s and 75 F-16s; Saudi Arabia would purchase 60 F-15s; and Egypt would buy 50 F-5Es.⁶⁶ The fact that this was controversial demonstrates Israel's standing in the United States. At this point, the Israeli army was stronger than at any previous time, and the package deal further enhanced Israel's relative regional power since the Egyptian planes primarily had defensive capabilities.⁶⁷

Although Carter won this battle in the US Senate, it cost him political capital. The pro-Israeli lobbyists, and AIPAC in particular, came out of it all better organised and even less willing to budge in any new confrontation.⁶⁸ The arms package had been unpopular within the administration as well, and Carter's liaison to the US Jewish community even resigned in protest against it.⁶⁹ If pressuring Begin into making concessions in the peace process was the goal of the Carter administration, then Carter made the wrong move in picking this

particular fight with Israel's supporters in the United States.⁷⁰ Carter had cashed in, and arguably wasted, the political capital he had gained through the domestic support Sadat had built in the United States over the past half year.

Meanwhile, the tension between the US administration and the Israeli government only increased, particularly when Dayan, in a 25 May Knesset debate, misrepresented the US view and blamed Sadat for the stagnant peace process. Not only was this embarrassing to the United States, but it placed Sadat under even more pressure from the Arab states.⁷¹ Sadat told the Americans that he would not speak with the Israelis unless the US government was present as a witness, because they were 'liars'.⁷² Sadat's optimism from his Jerusalem trip was long gone. Direct negotiations were not helpful, and having the United States as a witness was obviously not enough.

In order to keep the process going, however, Sadat offered further concessions – Israeli stonewalling had paid off, whereas Sadat's commitment to peace had cost him. Sadat declared that he supported a linkage between the West Bank/Gaza and Jordan, rather than an independent Palestinian state. Furthermore, he would even accept an Israeli military presence on the West Bank during a transition period, as well as the fact that Israeli security demands would come before withdrawal.⁷³ These were considerable Egyptian concessions, but the United States still asked Egypt to provide Israel with further assurances.⁷⁴

Nothing new came from Israel until 18 June 1978, when Begin finally gained cabinet support for his West Bank and Gaza stance. The new Israeli formula was that, after five years of self-rule, 'the nature of the future relations between the parties will be considered and agreed upon at the suggestion of any of the parties'.⁷⁵ This was far from what the United States wanted. There was

no mention of resolving the final status of the West Bank/Gaza [...] no reference to a final agreement being based on the principles of [UNSC resolution] 242 [...] 'self-rule' proposal comes into force with the establishment of peace, rather than being a transitional stage leading to a final peace treaty.⁷⁶

Carter's handwritten comment was damning: 'It means nothing. The Israelis have abandoned any commitment to UN[SC Resolution] 242.'⁷⁷

Although Sadat was disappointed, and his patience was running thin, his official reaction was mild. He reiterated his demands for Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines and a solution to the Palestinian issue. Seeing that Begin would not go far enough by himself, both the Egyptian and the Jordanian leadership called for a US proposal to push the peace process forward.⁷⁸

What was clear from this period in the talks was that the West Bank and Gaza were important issues and stumbling blocks, but that they were being discussed primarily between Israel and Egypt, secondarily with Jordan, and only lastly with (non-PLO) Palestinian representatives. While the Carter administration was talking more *about* Palestinian issues than prior US administrations, it was still talking *past* the Palestinians, as had its predecessors. The PLO maintained that 'neither Sadat nor anyone else is entitled to speak for the Palestinian Arab people or to negotiate away any part of Palestine.'⁷⁹

London talks

Given the absolute diplomatic standstill, the US administration decided that it was time to add much-needed momentum to the Israeli–Egyptian peace process. The idea was to start with trilateral United States–Israel–Egypt foreign minister-level talks in London on 18–19 July.⁸⁰ Here, the parties would discuss the Israeli West Bank/Gaza proposal, hoping to later expand their talks in a more comprehensive direction.⁸¹ Oddly, despite Carter's outburst in the Begin meeting in March, and despite all practical indications to the contrary, Carter was once again talking about a comprehensive peace. Unless something drastic happened, however, that phrase was by this point devoid of meaning.

With regard to how fed up Carter was with Begin, it was illustrative that the London meeting was more closely coordinated with Egypt than with Israel. Carter based the talks on the Egyptian counterproposal to the West Bank/Gaza solution, rather than on the Israeli paper itself.⁸² Still, this US–Egyptian coordination was not as lockstep as Sadat had hoped. Carter did not agree to Sadat's suggestion that the two presidents should meet shortly before Carter announced the London meetings, since this would give the impression that Carter had a pro-Sadat bias.⁸³ The Egyptian counter-proposal for the West Bank and Gaza called for a just solution to the Palestinian question which would guarantee

'the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people', with a transitional period of at most five years, after which the Palestinians could 'determine their own future'.⁸⁴ Begin had rejected the proposal completely, describing it as an existential threat to Israel.⁸⁵

The negotiations were therefore approaching a breaking point, and the London talks were viewed as a 'crucial moment'. The United States could either invest all its resources to break the deadlock or develop a damage-limitation approach by accepting the *status quo*. Brzezinski supported the all-in option, but the administration was divided.⁸⁶ In the end, the Americans settled upon something between the two options.

As it had with the fruitless Atherton mission in February 1978, the administration aimed for a Declaration of Principles (DoP) from the London talks. To this end, the US foreign policy team formulated various drafts, as well as a set of guidelines for the West Bank and Gaza negotiations.⁸⁷ Key differences between the drafts included how explicit they were in terms of further process, what would happen during the five-year transition period, and what the goals would be on issues such as the Palestinian refugee question. Vance preferred the most explicit version, but the Carter team concluded that the least detailed draft was the most likely to go through. The Palestinians were pegged to participate in the West Bank and Gaza negotiations, but it was not clear who these Palestinians would be. They would certainly not be the PLO. Furthermore, the United States had already accepted the Israeli argument that, on the West Bank, sovereignty would be a non-issue during the five-year transitional period.⁸⁸

It was taken for granted that the Begin government would resist the US proposals.⁸⁹ Despite this general pessimism, it is also clear that the US team underestimated the ideological value the Likud Government placed on the West Bank.⁹⁰ Had the Americans realised the depth of Begin's ideological commitment to 'Judea and Samaria', they would probably have been even more pessimistic than they were. Begin, after all, considered all of *Eretz Israel* to be eternally Jewish and something which could not be handed over to anybody else. The furthest he was willing to go was to temporarily abstain from claiming sovereignty.⁹¹

On 17 July, Vance met with each of the delegations separately. Dayan rehashed the Israelis' self-rule proposal and rejected the notion that Israel would agree to any commitment concerning what would happen after a five-year transitional period. He insisted that 'there was no way to

convince the Begin Government to make a pre-commitment to withdrawal'.⁹² In his meeting with Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohamed Ibrahim Kamel, Vance pointed out that the sticking point was the question of what would happen after five years, while the parties were actually rather close regarding what status the West Bank/Gaza should have during the transitional period. Kamel was far less optimistic than Vance, however. He doubted that there was any chance of success until Israel accepted that there would be actual withdrawal from the West Bank.⁹³ The London talks, then, seemed doomed from the outset.

As expected, when the talks got underway, Israel flatly rejected the Egyptian proposal, which referred to 'Arab sovereignty' in the West Bank and Gaza.⁹⁴ The talks therefore reverted to discussing the Israeli self-rule proposal, which was not productive. The same old disagreements dominated the talks. Israel rejected discussions of sovereignty, while Egypt demanded that the Palestinians' claim to the land had to be explicitly recognised.⁹⁵ Dayan added that Israelis had to retain the right to settle on and buy land in all of the West Bank even after the five-year transitional period, and that there could be no Palestinian state – even one federated with Jordan. Dayan clearly had not come to London to compromise. Egyptian Under Secretary Osama al-Baz did not mince words: 'No Palestinian yet has accepted the idea of self-rule. It is seen as a sham, a hoax. This view is shared by all Arabs.'⁹⁶ Kamel was even harsher. He likened negotiating with Begin to negotiating with Hitler.⁹⁷

The Israelis and the Egyptians were so far apart that it was futile for them to negotiate face-to-face. After the United States–Israel–Egypt trilateral meeting on 18 July, all further talks in London were either between Egypt and the United States, or between Israel and the United States.⁹⁸ This was a stark anticipation of the dynamic which would emerge at Camp David some months later. Even a separate Egyptian–Israeli peace, with a partial and temporary solution on the West Bank/Gaza had become almost impossible. Since coming to power, Carter had downgraded his ambitions massively, but unless something drastic happened, even that revised goal would be untenable.

Unsurprisingly, the London talks produced nothing. They were a huge disappointment for Sadat in particular. He had expected a US proposal; instead, the only conclusion which was reached in London was that further talks were needed.⁹⁹ Sadat's patience was running thin and

he launched a vociferous attack on Begin, stating that he was the only obstruction to peace and that he was driven by 'greedy ambition' for territory.¹⁰⁰ In a personal letter to Carter, Sadat explained that he saw no reason to continue talks while the Israelis refused to commit themselves to the idea that 'peace is worth giving up ambitions of annexation and expansion.'¹⁰¹ In a meeting with Atherton, he summed up his view of the London talks: 'They [the Israelis] are always [...] putting what we offer in their pocket and then asking for more.'¹⁰² This had been a very successful Israeli strategy, of course, and nothing indicated that this Israeli approach would change.

The invitation to Camp David

The London talks, like the Atherton mission, were without result. The next attempt for a diplomatic breakthrough was to take place in the Sinai. President Carter was pessimistic, and prepared for a likely collapse of the negotiations. The US State Department therefore drafted a plan for what the United States would do if the Sinai talks also ended in a deadlock. The working assumption was that Egypt would accept the US compromise position, while Israel would refuse. If this occurred, the United States could either accept the no-peace *status quo*, at the cost of the US global reputation, or pressure Israel into making concessions at potentially high domestic costs. According to this 'stalemate' paper, pressuring Israel was the only option aligned with US interests. Such pressure would have both an international and a domestic aspect. Internationally, the United States would have to appeal to countries to which Israel listened, garner Arab (and other) support for Sadat and appeal to international institutions. Domestically, Carter would have to build support for pressuring Israel in the US Senate and House of Representatives and appeal directly to the US public via a major television address, clarifying the US stance on the importance of peace and on the principles upon which that peace should be based. Other details in this long 'stalemate' paper included getting Jordan to accept the US proposal and possibly renewing the offer of direct talks to the PLO, if it were to accept UNSC Resolution 242.¹⁰³

Israel was lucky, because the US State Department's central presumption of Egyptian acceptance and Israeli rejection turned out to be wrong. Sadat beat Begin to the finish line and refused to participate

in the Sinai talks. He was tired of facing Begin's stonewalling and upset that the United States was unable to get Israel to make concessions. The US embassy in Cairo summed up Sadat's view of the US stance:

a quiet but steady erosion of our [US] previously enunciated positions, e.g. our failure to reiterate either President Carter's earlier statement that border rectifications should be minor or our view on the illegality of the Israeli settlements. Added to this is the growing Egyptian suspicion that our suggestions, when finally presented, will in effect ask them to compromise on a compromise, largely at their expense.¹⁰⁴

Sadat's timing was terrible. Had he waited out the Sinai talks, there was a real possibility that Carter would have taken some of the steps suggested by the State Department in the stalemate paper. Once Sadat pulled out of the talks, however, those steps were no longer considered an option.

Rather than give up, Carter opted for a last grand attempt. He invited Begin and Sadat to Camp David for a trilateral conference. Here the three heads of state would negotiate directly in a secluded environment, away from domestic constraints and the watchful eyes of the media. It was a shot in the dark, but given the state of affairs, Carter thought it was worth a try.¹⁰⁵

The year 1978 had been an excruciatingly slow one for US Middle East negotiations. A huge amount of energy was poured into a process which can best be described as moving from deadlock to deadlock. The only good news, from a US perspective, was that the Americans were back in the peace process, after Sadat's surprising Jerusalem trip had failed to garner him the peace process he desired. Being back in the game was a mixed blessing for President Carter, who was promptly forced into a reactive mode through which he gradually accepted the Israeli position, despite his opposition to Menachem Begin.

While this period contained ample opportunities for Carter to pressure Begin, he never did so. Though the team surrounding Carter developed several scenarios for applying pressure on Israel, Carter never decided that the situation was deadlocked enough to trigger such steps.

The precise amount of deadlock Carter felt was necessary in the situation is difficult to ascertain, and Carter clearly missed several opportunities. For instance, when Begin came to Washington in March, Carter could have used the prime minister's obduracy to his advantage by calling the talks off and blaming Begin; instead, Carter blew a fuse and declared that the comprehensive peace was dead. Rather than pressure Begin, this response actually placated him. Carter then wasted the domestic political capital he had built up in the United States against Begin and for Sadat when he pushed his arms package through Congress. While he won that battle, Israel's supporters were far less willing to lose again after that. The last example was Sadat's fault. Though Sadat did not know it, his decision to call off talks after London let Begin off the hook. Unable to pressure Begin any further, Carter had the choice of either giving up on the peace process or making Sadat concede, at the expense of the Palestinians. The lesson of these events was that Begin's stonewalling had paid off.

Despite having the closest relationship with Carter, Sadat bore the brunt of the US pressure. The tone was far friendlier between Carter and Sadat than it was between Carter and Begin, but Sadat had to bend, and then bend again, to please the Israelis. Whereas Begin could afford to stand firm, Sadat had invested everything in the peace process, and it would cost him enormously to give up. Knowing this, the Americans kept asking Sadat for more whenever they got stuck with Begin. Sadat increasingly gave the Israelis assurances, gradually made the talks more and more bilateral, and increasingly gave up on asking for anything substantial for the Palestinians. Sadat's desperation for peace made his position more malleable.

As for the Palestinians, these tense months in 1978 spelled the end of their role in Carter's peace-making. The Palestinians had been a cornerstone of Carter's comprehensive peace, but they had been squeezed out. Whereas in Carter's first year in office, the Palestinians were talked to, via indirect channels, they had become merely a *theme* in the talks by 1978. The Palestinian reaction was predictable. The moderates within the organisation found themselves under massive pressure from the radicals within the movement itself, and from other Arab states – and Syria in particular – to reject the ongoing diplomatic process. The process of moderation in the Palestinian national movement since the early 1970s had been contentious within

the PLO, and the developments in the peace process seemed to prove the rejectionists right. Since it perceived an Israeli–Egyptian peace as detrimental to its cause, and since it had no access to diplomatic channels with either the United States or Israel, the PLO reverted to violence to derail the process, as exemplified by the March attack in Israel. This reversion to violence further entrenched their exclusion from the political process.

CHAPTER 7

CAMP DAVID AND THE EGYPTIAN–ISRAELI PEACE TREATY

On the evening of 5 September 1978, the heads of state of Israel and Egypt arrived at Camp David, the secluded presidential complex of cottages. The next 13 days have become the most famous of all Arab–Israeli negotiations. The Camp David summit was unlike any of the other mediation formats which Carter had tried. For one thing, it was a completely sealed format, with no media access. Furthermore, it was at the head-of-state level (Sadat, Begin and Carter), ensuring that all the decision-makers were actually present. None of the negotiators, therefore, could create a scene outside the talks, and nobody could claim that he lacked the power to make decisions. The fact that the US president himself was the host and chief mediator meant that it was all the costlier for any of the parties to leave the summit without having made adequate concessions. Blame would fall on anyone who made the talks collapse. Politically, the Camp David summit was a high-risk endeavour, since it demanded that the political leadership of all three countries invest large amounts of political time, energy and prestige, with absolutely no guarantee of success.¹ Changing format and venue was not a miracle cure.

Study papers – still a comprehensive strategy

The US administration was theoretically well prepared for the conference. Carter and his foreign policy team had negotiated with these parties for

well over a year and a half at this point. Furthermore, the Americans had written a series of preparatory papers. What is particularly interesting about these papers is that the aim was still a broader Arab–Israeli peace, despite the developments which had occurred over the past year. For example, in two of the most central documents, the Palestinian issue dominated the majority of the priorities for the negotiations.²

Moving from its goals to the difficult question of how to achieve them, the US team strove to understand both the content and the relative strength of the parties' bargaining positions. Brzezinski argued that Sadat could not afford failure, whereas Begin probably thought that failure would hurt Carter and Sadat, but not him.³ The State Department agreed that Carter could not afford failure at Camp David.⁴ As we will see, Brzezinski was right. Begin was much more willing to risk failure to further his position than either Carter or Sadat. This gave him an advantage, because he could push his demands more than Sadat, and Carter realised that Sadat was more willing to budge than Begin.

Despite his insight into Begin's mindset, Brzezinski still insisted that Begin would have to agree that there would be Israeli withdrawal on all fronts. This was unlikely, to say the least, and Brzezinski understood that Begin would have to be cajoled. To that end, Brzezinski listed threats which Carter could use, the most potent of which was public shaming of Begin. Carter could go public with the US stance and the amount of aid given by the United States to Israel, putting it all in the context of US national interests. Such a stick – which would also be relevant if Sadat broke the talks – could be combined with carrots such as the promise of a closer relationship with the United States if the talks were successful.⁵

Vance agreed with Brzezinski and underscored the fact that the key was to find a price on the West Bank and Gaza which Begin would be willing to pay in order to secure peace with Egypt. The further they could push Begin, the more likely peace would be. According to Vance, unless Begin was willing to commit to a withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, progress was unlikely. Furthermore, Vance insisted that a successful peace had to recognise Palestinian 'legitimate rights', but the Palestinian solution only had to be good enough for Syria and the PLO to 'acquiesce' to the agreement.⁶ This reflected a persistent anomaly in US thinking – the Americans wanted a solution for the Palestinians without including the Palestinians in its negotiation.

Vance also thought that it would be possible to get a full Israeli moratorium on settlements during the negotiation period.⁷ In sum, Carter's top political advisors agreed that there should be a clear connection between the Palestinian issues and the Egyptian-Israeli treaty, and that it would be impossible to achieve a peace treaty without such a connection.

Given that the goals in all these documents were so far-reaching, it is surprising to see the following in Carter's diary: 'All the briefing books [...] set our expectations too low. I want to insist to the Middle East leaders that we resolve as many problems as possible at Camp David, not just come out with a declaration of principles leading to further negotiations.'⁸ Nothing suggests that Carter had given up on gaining some amount of linkage between an Egyptian-Israeli peace and the Palestinian issue. However, despite all its experience and preparations, the Carter team still failed to realise how difficult it would be to do so; how bad the Sadat-Begin chemistry actually was; and how far Begin would go to avoid making any concessions on the Palestinian issue.

Camp David Phase I: Openings and trilateral meetings

From the opening of the summit, it was evident that Carter would be navigating between two very different parties. In their opening meeting, Sadat told Carter that he wanted a comprehensive peace, but as long as Israel committed to withdrawing from occupied Egyptian territory, the rest was up to the US president. Sadat would not fight for Palestinian gains. In Carter's first meeting with Begin, on the other hand, Begin insisted that Israel would retain all the settlements, including those in the Sinai.⁹ From the very start, Sadat was flexible and trusted Carter, whereas Begin was rigid and prepared to fight the American president. It was clear that Carter would be better able to make Sadat concede than to make Begin do the same. Sadat compounded this imbalance in his second meeting with Carter, by handing him a secret list of concessions which he was willing to make.¹⁰ Sadat's trust in Carter, and Carter's knowledge of how far Sadat was willing to go, weakened Sadat's bargaining position considerably. Once Carter knew Sadat's fall-back position, Sadat could not claim to be demanding more in order to secure a treaty. Begin had the advantage. Since Sadat was prepared to make

concessions while Begin was prepared to fight, it was much easier to lean on Sadat.¹¹

Although the Camp David summit was trilateral, the top-level trilateral meetings only made an already tense political atmosphere worse. The first top-level trilateral meeting was on 6 September, and the last was the next day.¹² After that, Sadat, Begin and Carter did not negotiate in the same room for the remainder of the summit. In the first of those trilateral meetings, Sadat read his opening position to Begin. The proposal contained the usual Arab position on peace.¹³

Begin was furious and vented his anger on Carter the next morning. He insisted that Sadat's paper was completely unacceptable. Carter, in turn, was infuriated by Begin's behaviour. He insisted that Begin had to convince both him and Sadat that self-rule would not imply a prolonged Israeli presence on the West Bank.¹⁴ Begin could not convince Carter of that, because self-rule did imply a prolonged Israeli presence.

The handwritten notes from the second trilateral meeting, held from the morning through midday on 7 September, further illustrate how tense the situation was. Begin refused to accept even the language of UNSC Resolution 242 regarding the 'inadmissibility of acquisition by war', and Sadat declared: '[I] cannot continue discussion if Is[real] wants land.'¹⁵ Begin retorted that Sadat was paving the way for a Palestinian state.¹⁶ Sadat ended the session by decrying the lack of even '[m]inimum confidence', and Carter's summary of the meeting was as follows: 'bitter discussions'.¹⁷ The conference could hardly have gotten off to a worse start. Three days in, there was an all-out clash of both personalities and political positions. Illustrative of how far apart the parties were on settlements, for example, is the fact that, on the same day, Dayan suggested that Israel would only construct 15 to 20 new settlements in the Jordan valley in the next five years.¹⁸

The evening meeting on 7 September was the last top-level trilateral meeting and it was no less tense. Both Begin and Sadat tried to charge out of the room and leave the conference, but Carter begged them to stay for one more day so that he could present a compromise paper. They both agreed.¹⁹ While convincing Begin, however, Carter unwittingly revealed that Sadat's opening position was not the final Egyptian position. In this way, he hinted at the secret list of concessions Sadat had given him.²⁰ While this might have led Begin to stay in the talks, the cost for Egypt was high, since it lessened the need for Begin to concede.

As had been the case many times before, Sadat was paying the price for his flexibility, while Begin was reaping the benefits of his rigidity.

Camp David Phase II: The US draft

Realising that the trilateral format was counterproductive, Carter moved on to the next phase of the negotiations by formulating a US treaty draft. The level of comprehensiveness of the proposed treaty was toned down, as he instead aimed primarily at an Egyptian–Israeli peace, with an interlinked process for the West Bank and Gaza.²¹ From this point on, then, the discussions would focus on the text of the US draft, which was amended time and again and sent back and forth between the parties. There would be 23 revised drafts in total.²²

The first version of the ‘Framework for Peace in the Middle East’ was presented to the Israelis on 10 September.²³ Such was the order of the talks – the Israelis would have their say before the Egyptians. The Egyptians would then give their input on the version of the text which had been adapted to the Israeli demands. The exercise was then repeated as the parties inched towards an agreement.²⁴

A recurring theme in these negotiations was Begin’s resistance to anything which implied withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, or Palestinian self-determination. For instance, he reacted strongly to any phrases such as ‘Palestinian problem in all its aspects’, and he even wanted all references to UNSC Resolution 242 taken out.²⁵ Furthermore, while Egypt insisted that there could be no Israeli troops in the West Bank and Gaza after the transition period, Israel insisted that such troops had to stay.²⁶ The most important premise for Begin throughout the negotiations was to keep the West Bank under Israeli control; anything that hinted at an Israeli concession of land on the West Bank was unacceptable. The West Bank was nowhere near as important to Sadat as it was to Begin, but he needed some amount of linkage to the Palestinian issue to legitimise the peace he was making with Israel. He therefore reacted strongly to the lack of a clear linkage between Sinai and the West Bank and Gaza.²⁷

Due to these kinds of disagreements, on day eight, before the parties had completed the first cycle of negotiations over the US draft, Begin declared that the Camp David summit had reached a dead end. Carter was again infuriated.²⁸ Still, as had been the case in the months

preceding Camp David, Carter could become enraged by Begin's intransigence, but would not put any real weight behind his fury. He knew that if he pushed too hard, Begin would simply depart, which would destroy any possibility of reaching a negotiated settlement.²⁹ Begin's willingness to take the negotiations to the brink increased his leverage over both Carter and Sadat, because it limited how far Carter could push him without risking failure.

Despite Begin's declaration that he intended to leave, and the heated debate which followed, the talks continued the next day between the legal advisors of each party: Attorney General Aharon Barak for Israel and Osama al-Baz for Egypt.³⁰ Moving forward, these legal advisors would shoulder the principal burden of negotiating the text.

Camp David Phase III: Changing the framework, weakening the ties

Moving on from broader issues to more specific details, the parties concentrated on amending the framework. The main tendency of these revisions was to delink the Egyptian-Israeli peace and the Palestinian issue, as Israel insisted. In early drafts, the agreement was still based on UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338, but the phrase 'full implementation of' was removed. Technically, the framework was still comprehensive at this point, but the Palestinians were gradually removed as one of the parties. For instance, in two cases, the specified list of parties was deleted. The original lists included either the 'Palestinians' or 'inhabitants of West Bank and Gaza'. The removal of these lists therefore signified that the Palestinians had been taken out of future negotiations. In a third case, 'on all fronts' was replaced by a list of 'all neighbors' which did not include the Palestinians. On the refugee question, the word 'return' was replaced with 'admission' and whereas the original text used the phrase 'Palestinian and Jewish refugees', the Israeli team changed it to 'Arab and Jewish refugees'.³¹ Throughout the paper, then, the Palestinians were de-nationalised, reduced to the generic referent 'Arab' or removed entirely.³² Begin and his team wanted as thorough a peace with Egypt as possible for the fewest concessions on the Palestinian front, and they were successful at making this happen.

The next version of the framework, from 12 September, confirmed the Begin team's success. The US notes in the text pointed out that even the concept of synchronising withdrawal with the other peace treaties, was removed at Israel's behest, and Israel continued to reject linkages between the 'West Bank and Gaza' and Jordan.³³ While the Israeli team was succeeding at limiting the amount of linkage, Sadat's advisors worried that Sadat would make so many concessions that there would be practically no Palestinian issues at all in the final agreement.³⁴

The Egyptians team maintained that the Palestinian issue had to be included in the text. Some linkages, then, remained – the 12 September version of the text, for example, proposed to solve the refugee problem with reference to 'appropriate United Nations Resolutions', implying UNSC Resolution 194 and thus the Palestinian right of return. This was completely unacceptable to the Israelis, a fact which was strongly remarked upon by the Americans.³⁵ Furthermore, the Egyptians managed to include a paragraph on a settlement moratorium and remove a clause saying that Egypt would negotiate alone if Jordan refused to join the West Bank and Gaza negotiations. These Egyptian changes spelled trouble, of course, and the American notes included observations such as 'Israelis will object strongly' and 'Hard for Begin'.³⁶

The tug-of-war continued over each draft, with Israel gradually winning more and more ground. The 14 September draft started with a major Israeli alteration. A full paragraph referring to 'the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war' was removed and instead hidden in UNSC Resolution 242, which would only be attached as an annex to the treaty.³⁷ The largest formal claim against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza was thus excised from the main text. Furthermore, the Palestinians were eliminated as one of the independent political parties in future negotiations. While 'the representatives of the Palestinian people' was included in the section dealing with the West Bank and Gaza, those representatives were only given the right to participate in the later stages of these negotiations. The refugee formulation from the last round remained the same, but a note in the margin stated 'Egypt ok Israel no'. The settlement moratorium also remained in place.³⁸ In the final text, however, there would be no moratorium, and the refugee issue was not tied to any UN resolution.

In the 15 September version, there was still no decision on what formula to use for fronts other than the Sinai. Egypt wanted 'all fronts of

the conflict – the Sinai, the Golan Heights, the West Bank and Gaza, and Lebanon', a formulation which explicitly mentioned the territories from which Israel must withdraw, while Israel insisted on 'all of its neighbors – Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon', a formulation which named only the states with whom Israel had to solve the issues. The Israeli demands once again excluded the Palestinians. The section on the interim period for the West Bank and Gaza was still 'under discussion', and there was no agreement on the settlement moratorium or on the Egyptian insistence on a reference to UN resolutions on the refugee question.³⁹ While such references remained in the text, the Israelis had not made any real concessions at this point. They were merely chipping away at the Egyptian position.

Tiring of Begin's tough stance Sadat declared on 15 September that he and the whole Egyptian negotiation team would leave. He only agreed to stay after Carter promised to make a last push with Israel.⁴⁰ The cost of this gambit was high for Sadat, however. Carter made it clear that if Sadat actually left, the peace process would be over, and so too would the US–Egyptian relationship. Sadat thus lost his one major advantage in the negotiations – the fact that Carter considered him a trusted friend.⁴¹ If he followed through with his threat to leave, Sadat also risked losing the main asset he had been developing over the past five years or so – namely Egypt's close relationship with the United States. This had been the linchpin of Sadat's foreign policy, and he could not risk it.⁴²

Carter's reaction to Sadat's threat contrasted greatly with his reaction to Begin when the Israeli prime minister had threatened to leave some days earlier. While Carter was perhaps angrier with Begin's negotiation tactics, no real threat had followed; on the contrary, Carter had instead hinted at the Egyptian concessions he had in his pocket. This illustrated the difference in leverage possessed by Sadat and Begin. If talks collapsed due to Begin's behaviour, he risked being stuck with the moral responsibility for it, but the long-term Israeli relationship with the United States would most probably remain firm. If talks collapsed due to Sadat's behaviour, on the other hand, Sadat risked losing the US–Egyptian relationship he had worked so hard to develop. Begin could therefore afford to push much harder than Sadat.

Once again, Sadat's timing was terrible. Carter had been considering an end to the summit at this point, and he planned to blame Begin for its

collapse, due to the Israeli unwillingness to evacuate the settlements in the Sinai and accept that UNSC Resolution 242 applied to the West Bank. Without a commitment to that evacuation, it seemed impossible to reach even a separate peace between Egypt and Israel. Since Begin was unwilling to move on the broader issues, he would either have to concede on the Sinai issue, as a bare minimum, or take responsibility for killing the conference. The possibility of placing blame on Begin was therefore very real at this point, and William Quandt even wrote the failure speech, which was accepted by Carter with only minor changes.⁴³ The Carter team may have hoped that the threat of blaming Begin would make him concede on the Sinai settlements, and preferably on UNSC Resolution 242 as well. In order for that to have an effect, however, the threat had to be made. Sadat's decision to leave the Camp David summit pulled Carter back from the brink of blaming Begin, though, and the threat was never utilised. Sadat must have grossly misread Carter and concluded that he had more to gain by leaving than by waiting for Begin to force Carter's hand.

While the Israeli team was completely unwilling to concede on the West Bank, its members realised that they would have to accept withdrawal of the Israeli settlements from the Sinai. Without a Sinai agreement, there would be no framework. The Israeli team was therefore desperate to convince Begin that the Sinai settlements could be abandoned. On 15 September, the team decided to bring in Ariel Sharon – settlement stalwart, war hero and Israeli minister of agriculture. Sharon's position carried great weight in all questions relating to security and the settlements. If he could convince Begin that the Sinai settlements could be evacuated, then perhaps that argument could carry the day. Sharon agreed with the other Israeli negotiators, and, over the telephone, Sharon told Begin that if the Sinai settlements were the last roadblock for a peace with Egypt, then they should be removed.⁴⁴

Still, Begin stood his ground for a little longer on the Sinai. While Carter could not get him to consent to dismantle the settlements outright, he did manage to get Begin to agree to put the question of dismantling them to the Knesset. If the Knesset agreed, then the settlements could be removed.⁴⁵ The lifting of this roadblock paved the way for the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty.

This did not mean that Begin would also concede on the Palestinian question. On the contrary, he now insisted that future 'negotiations' be

based on UNSC Resolution 242, rather than that the 'result of the negotiations' should be based on UNSC Resolution 242. This would allow Begin to reject UNSC Resolution 242 once those negotiations got under way. Begin also insisted that the text should not list the specific elements of UNSC Resolution 242 but only refer to the resolution itself, meaning that the essential word 'withdrawal' would be removed from the framework's text.⁴⁶ As Begin kept winning points, the negotiations lurched towards their conclusion. In the first 16 September redraft, the refugee question was removed from the West Bank and Gaza section.⁴⁷ Again, Israel had prevailed on the Palestinian front.

In one of very few high-level verbatim records from Camp David, from a 16 September meeting with Carter, Vance, Begin, Dayan and Barak, Carter explained that they had reached a moment of truth. He listed all the gains Israel had achieved, and pointed out, if the talks were to collapse, all those gains would be lost. The amount of Israeli victories were remarkable. In addition to an Egyptian-Israeli peace, Israel had gained a veto over any arrangement regarding the Palestinian Self-Governing Authority; the fact that minor modifications of the West Bank borders were nowhere mentioned; and the fact that the terms 'inadmissibility' (of acquiring territory by war) and 'self-determination' (for the Palestinians) had been removed.⁴⁸ The Palestinians, who were not present at the summit, were the biggest losers, and Israel, who was the toughest negotiator, had made the largest gains.

Camp David Phase IV: Endgame

At this late stage in the negotiations, the moratorium on building Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza remained in place.⁴⁹ This moratorium was of great importance to Carter and the Egyptians, whereas Begin was adamantly against it. The last-minute negotiations over this moratorium would generate a heated debate, both at Camp David and afterwards. On the last day of negotiations, 16 September, Carter tried to get Begin to refrain from building any more settlements in the period between Camp David and the finalisation of the Palestinian self-rule negotiations, which would follow after the conclusion of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Carter thought Begin had accepted this condition, and he therefore agreed to remove the settlements

moratorium from the actual Camp David Accords and instead have it as a side-letter.⁵⁰ Carter had been duped.

In fact, Begin disagreed with Carter over which negotiations were tied to the moratorium. Begin considered the moratorium valid for three months only – that is, until the finalisation of a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt.⁵¹ When Carter was shown the Israeli side-letter on 17 September, the moratorium was specified for this three-month period. Carter did not accept this and asked Barak to redraft the paper, but, rather than insist upon its immediate return, Carter agreed that the final version of the side-letter could be delivered the next day – *after* the framework had been signed.⁵² This was a huge mistake. When Begin delivered the next version of the side-letter, it was the same as the one Carter had rejected.⁵³ It stated that ‘during the agreed period for negotiations for the conclusion of the peace treaty [with Egypt], no new settlements will be established’.⁵⁴ This meant that it was a three-month rather than a five-year moratorium. Since the accords had already been signed at that point, it was too late to press for an amended version.

How had Carter been outmanoeuvred in this way on such an important issue?

Based on an Israeli document composed by Aharon Barak, it is apparent that Carter earnestly thought that Begin had committed himself to a settlement freeze for the period until the Palestinian autonomy negotiations were finalised. Since this was not contradicted by the Israelis, Carter was convinced that they agreed with his interpretation when he suggested this formulation: ‘After the signing of the framework [agreement] and during the negotiations, no new Israeli settlements will be established in the area, unless otherwise agreed.’⁵⁵ If this version is accurate, then the real problem was not that Carter was, or was not, clear enough in stating which negotiations he was talking about, but that he accepted Begin’s response that he would ‘think about’ Carter’s proposal and present his position the next day.⁵⁶ Carter had mistakenly taken that to mean that Begin accepted his position. Upon his return to Israel, Begin clarified: ‘I responded to this proposed text by saying “I shall think about it and I will write to you tomorrow.” By any standard such a reaction cannot be construed as an acceptance.’⁵⁷

Carter, however, had no recollection of Begin saying that he would have to ‘think about’ it.⁵⁸ In an undated note, Carter summed up this

discrepancy. He made it very clear that he had rejected Begin's proposal that the freeze would last for three months only and, even more importantly, that Barak had not disagreed with Carter's version of what Begin had agreed to.⁵⁹ It was Carter's word against Begin's. Whoever was right, Begin got away with it.

In addition to the moratorium debacle, another last crisis emerged when Begin refused to accept a side-letter from Carter to Sadat stating that East Jerusalem was occupied territory. Begin threatened to leave Camp David at the zero hour in protest, demonstrating how important Jerusalem was to Begin. He was willing to risk the collapse of the entire Camp David Accords over a side-letter which was not legally binding but did confirm the US view that East Jerusalem was not Israeli. The solution had been to hide the question of Jerusalem's status by instead referring to previous US statements in the UN, rather than spelling out the position directly.⁶⁰ Israel would therefore not sign an accord which included a document that referred to East Jerusalem as occupied. As with the settlement moratorium and the question of acquisition of territory by war, Begin's very legalistic technique was to hide a disagreeable point by packing it away by an extra degree of separation. The more degrees of separation, the less legal weight these commitments and concessions carried. Begin thereby managed to secure that his concessions carried as little legal weight as possible. His gains, on the other hand, were always included in the main text of the accords and were therefore much more secure and legally binding.

Once the side-letters were in place the two treaty documents were signed on 17 September 1978. After returning to Israel, Begin secured clear support in the Knesset for the framework on 28 September. Apart from Ariel Sharon and Ezer Weizman, however, few of the Herut members (the right-wing core of Likud) voted for the Camp David Accords.⁶¹

Evaluating the framework

The Camp David Accords were composed of two agreements which were loosely tied together. One dealt with an Egyptian-Israeli peace, while the other dealt with the rest of the conflict, including the Palestinian issue. Not only were these two agreements not as strongly tied together

as Carter and his team wanted, but also the content of the larger framework was weaker than they desired.

The final version of the framework agreement contained a large section on two negotiating committees for the West Bank and Gaza. One would negotiate the 'final status of the West Bank and Gaza', while the other would negotiate 'the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, taking into account the agreement reached on the final status of the West Bank and Gaza'.⁶² The connection between these two negotiating committees meant that Jordan was involuntarily implicated in the West Bank and Gaza solution. King Hussein of Jordan had no knowledge of what transpired at Camp David, and he was furious that Sadat and Begin had made such a commitment on his behalf.⁶³

The omission of the Palestinians was a recurring theme in the Camp David Accords. The reason was simple: the Palestinians had not been present at the negotiation table and had not been able to press their case. Of the other parties at the table, it was Sadat who was given the task of speaking on their behalf. His interest was in regaining the Sinai. While he might have wanted to gain as much as possible on the other Arab questions as well, he was not willing to make any Egyptian sacrifices in order to do so. Because he was secluded at Camp David, he was also under considerably less pressure to press for Palestinian successes.⁶⁴ When it came down to choosing between Egyptian interests and Palestinian interests, Sadat would always choose the former. More importantly, Begin came to Camp David intent on giving in as little as possible on the Palestinian question. For Begin, that is, the West Bank was an integral part of Israel, while the Sinai was not.⁶⁵ While he was willing to surrender the Sinai, if the deal was good enough, nothing could make him give up the territory of the West Bank and Gaza. He considered these territories eternally Jewish and therefore not something which could be negotiated away. The vague autonomy proposal was as far as he was willing to go. Sadat and Carter could either accept this fact or give up on an Egyptian-Israeli treaty. Given that Sadat was not intent on fighting long and hard for the West Bank, Carter was not going to be more pro-Arab than Sadat.

It is also important to note that Carter thought he had secured a much greater commitment from Begin than Begin thought he had given to Carter. A clear indication of this is that when Carter presented the Camp David success to Congress, he lauded the framework for having secured

Palestinian participation, a five-year deadline and a recognition of the legitimate Palestinian rights.⁶⁶ This was a huge exaggeration regarding what had actually been achieved. Due to Begin's legalistic knack for details and insistence on not giving an inch on the Palestinian issue, Begin had been able to make those commitments so vague that they did not carry the weight which Carter and Sadat thought they did. Similarly, in letters describing the framework, the US administration stated that the refugee issue would be based on an 'appropriate UN resolution', and that the principles in the framework would be 'applicable to all fronts'.⁶⁷ Carter also affirmed that there was a moratorium on settlements during the interim period.⁶⁸ While all of this might well have been among the US intentions, those formulations were not actually in the final framework. Begin had made sure of that.

Looking back, US ambassador Herman Eilts aptly described the framework drafting process:

instead of being strengthened, the document becomes more and more ambiguous. It was no longer constructively ambiguous, but just ambiguous. [...] [N]obody was quite sure what autonomy meant. To Egypt it meant self-determination, or leading to self-determination. To Israel, it meant a kind of bondage status.⁶⁹

The Arab states and the PLO fumed at the Camp David Accords. For the PLO Executive Committee it represented 'what Zionism and American imperialism have been seeking to achieve for thirty years. [...] presented to them by Sadat through his total surrender to their terms for the liquidation of the Palestinian and Arab cause'.⁷⁰

Together with the other Arab states, the PLO organised against the treaty, gathering under the rubric of the Arab Front for Steadfastness and Confrontation States.⁷¹ The local Palestinian 'West Bank National Conference', and the Gaza version of the same body, rejected the accords for not including the PLO, for not granting Palestinian self-determination, and for dividing the Palestinians outside of Palestine from those within Palestine.⁷² A State Department report concluded that, except for the Egyptian army, no Arab leader supported the accords.⁷³

To lessen the Arab opposition, the US administration argued that there was a significant difference between the original Israeli self-rule proposal, and the 'self-governing authority' solution in the Camp David

Accords. This was a hard sell, since almost all of the changes between the two notions were theoretical gains to be resolved in future negotiations.⁷⁴ Many US diplomats failed to understand the implications of this fact. The US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, for example, told Crown Prince Fahd: 'I felt that the Palestinians were much like a starving person who upon suddenly being offered a half loaf of bread spurned it because the whole loaf was not offered.'⁷⁵ The problem was not just the size of the bread, of course – it was the extent to which any bread would be distributed at all.

The Americans were not resigned to the prospect of abandoning a Palestinian solution yet. Brzezinski informed the State Department that contacts with the Palestinians had to be developed, but, as always, the White House had to stay clear of such contacts, because they could have high domestic costs.⁷⁶ To the Arab states, which had rejected Camp David, finding a solution to the Palestinian question was paramount. Saudi Arabia therefore offered to help the United States establish an informal and secret meeting with the PLO leadership. As always, the United States turned down the offer, because the PLO had yet to recognise Israel and the UNSC Resolution 242 with reservations formula.⁷⁷ The US administration nonetheless informed the Egyptian PLO liaison that it stood by its offer of talking to the PLO once the organisation had accepted the US conditions.⁷⁸ These Palestinian contacts did not develop into anything substantial, but Brzezinski's considerations once again illustrated how including the Palestinians was essential as a foreign policy question but largely impossible as a domestic one. And the Carter administration was not willing to pay that price. As long as this was the position, the Americans could only wish for Palestinian participation.

Difficult rounds ahead

The Camp David Accords were not equivalent to a peace treaty but rather formed the basis upon which such a treaty could be negotiated. One month after signing the Camp David Accords, Carter therefore invited the Egyptian and Israeli leadership to Washington for the first round of Egyptian–Israeli peace talks.⁷⁹ This was supposed to be the start of a three-month process, but it would take almost double that time. The talks immediately showed that, while progress was possible on

the Israeli–Egyptian front, tying this to a broader Middle East peace still remained the major sticking point.⁸⁰ The pattern had been repeating itself since Sadat’s Jerusalem trip. Sadat demanded an explicit linkage between the two treaties and a settlement freeze, both of which Moshe Dayan rejected.⁸¹ The United States supported Sadat’s view, because this explicit linkage was important to its ultimate ambition to broaden the talks.⁸² Israel refused to include explicit linkage, while Sadat attempted to link normalisation to the timing of Israeli withdrawal. The Carter administration characterised both Dayan’s rejection of linkage and Sadat’s suggestion of phased normalisation as backtracking from the agreement at Camp David.⁸³ This would be the negotiation pattern moving forward – Israel tried to water down the Camp David Accords, while Sadat tried to expand on them.

Regardless of what Dayan’s actual position was, he had little room for manoeuvre since Begin had him on a tight leash.⁸⁴ Begin also claimed that he was not mandated to make any concessions without the approval of his government.⁸⁵ This was a typical Begin ploy. Rather than face up to any demands for compromise, he would insist that his own government was too rigid – even as he hindered the flexibility of his own foreign minister. In reality, Begin was the hardliner in his own government, and he had tight control over his party. Had he wanted to make concessions, that is, he could have.

The Egyptian dynamic was quite the opposite. Sadat was the most flexible Egyptian leader. He therefore bypassed his own mediators because they were making difficult demands in the negotiations. Sadat told Carter that he was willing to exchange ambassadors with Israel as soon as diplomatic relations could be established, but that Carter was not allowed to inform the Israelis or even the Egyptian mediators of this concession.⁸⁶ Sadat therefore repeated his error from Camp David, handing Carter concessions before the bargaining had begun. This showed that what really mattered to Sadat was the development of close ties with the United States.

In return for expedient normalisation, Sadat insisted, Gaza had to be explicitly included in the treaty so that Egypt could claim to have made concrete Palestinian gains. Sadat also wanted Israel to establish the self-governing authority in Gaza immediately, or at least in tandem with the Sinai withdrawal.⁸⁷ The ‘Gaza first’ scheme was initially rejected.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, the idea would henceforth be part of the negotiations.

Settlement expansion without consequence

As if the gap between the parties was not wide enough, there was more trouble ahead. In the midst of talks in Washington, the Israelis declared that they would 'thicken' the existing West Bank settlements.⁸⁹ Egypt reacted by postponing negotiations.⁹⁰ This Israeli move was a real shocker to Carter, who thought there was full agreement on a three-month settlement moratorium. Carter did not mince word, informing Begin that 'no step by the Israeli Government could be more damaging [...] taking this step at this time will have the most serious consequences for our relationship. [...] It may also jeopardize the conclusion of the peace treaty which we are negotiating.'⁹¹ Little over a month had passed since Camp David, but Begin replied to Carter that he had only promised not to create *new* settlements during the three-month period; expanding existing ones, on the other hand was within the boundaries of the Camp David Accord.⁹² This went against everything Carter had aimed for, but he was in too deep to back down, and he was not willing to seriously challenge Begin. The difference in opinion between the US president and the Israeli prime minister could hardly have been clearer, but once again no real pressure emerged from Washington. Begin was by now accustomed to these vocal confrontations with Carter. The prime minister knew from experience that talking tough was not followed by acting tough.

Illustrative of how exasperated Carter was with Begin is a note in Carter's diary from when Sadat and Begin were awarded the Nobel peace prize on 28 October 1978: 'Sadat deserved it; Begin did not.'⁹³ Then, some days later: '[T]he Israelis want a separate peace treaty with Egypt, to keep the West Bank and Gaza, to get as much money as possible from us, and use the settlements and East Jerusalem to prevent involvement of Jordan and the Palestinians.'⁹⁴

While Carter had ample reason to be frustrated, it was Sadat who really felt the heat at this point, thanks to the negotiation deadlock and the Israeli settlement expansion. The Arab League summit, held 2–5 November 1978 in Baghdad, condemned the peace process for not including the PLO and Palestinian self-determination. The summit statement called on Sadat to cancel the agreements with Israel and return to the Arab fold.⁹⁵ While it did not explicitly sanction Sadat, it laid the groundwork for doing so if a final peace treaty were to be concluded.⁹⁶

This did not make Sadat back down. Instead it fired him up and strengthened his determination to finalise the peace treaty with Israel. He then sent his negotiators back to Washington to get 'more explicit and far-reaching assurances from Israel concerning the West Bank and Gaza'.⁹⁷ Under Arab pressure, Sadat insisted on linkage, even at the cost of postponing the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai.⁹⁸ This was not a position Sadat would stick to, however. Once again, Begin had dodged the bullet. Since Sadat expediently returned to the negotiating table, there were no consequences for Begin's settlement expansion.

Nonetheless, the gap between the parties was widening, rather than shrinking. Vance realised that the choice the United States faced was between pushing for linkage at the risk of there being no agreement whatsoever, or aiming for a bilateral treaty at the risk of getting very limited linkage.⁹⁹ Carter aimed for the latter. In a 10 November draft of the Israeli-Egyptian treaty, linkage was only found in the preamble and in side-letters suggesting that the parties would agree to start West Bank and Gaza negotiations within a month after the signing of the peace treaty.¹⁰⁰ For the Israelis, this was still too much linkage, and Begin rejected the proposal.¹⁰¹ Sadat, like Carter, was disappointed.¹⁰² While the US mediators tried to assure the Egyptians that the draft treaty was good, their formulations were revealing: 'Our draft West Bank/Gaza letter provided for a process which *could* produce movement.'¹⁰³

Based on all the work the Carter administration had invested in the peace process to this point, we know for sure that they wanted a sufficient amount of linkage – and, ultimately, a solution – to the Palestinian question. It was also clear, however, that they were not willing to risk the collapse of the Egyptian-Israeli peace process. Begin's steadfast position in the negotiations showed that he would not agree to any explicit linkage, nor would he cede territory on the West Bank and Gaza. Unless Carter was willing to drastically heighten the cost for Begin for not moving on the Palestinian issue, Begin would not budge. This raises the question of how important linkage really was to Carter at this point – wishful thinking without forceful political action is only wishful thinking.

This became very clear when, on 21 November 1978, Israel accepted the treaty text but rejected the side-letters. The Israelis insisted that there could be no more linkage than there had been in the Camp David

framework.¹⁰⁴ The parties were largely home free with the bilateral peace, but linkage was still the deal-breaker.

The State Department's Warren Christopher suggested that Sadat should push for a timetable which focussed on the West Bank and Gaza, so that the whole treaty would then depend on that timeline.¹⁰⁵ The problem was that Begin adamantly rejected any timetable other than for one concerning when to *start* negotiations.¹⁰⁶ While Christopher's proposal was sound, Begin would have nothing to do with it. Once again, Begin won. The United States realised that it would be impossible to get Israel to accept anything that formally tied withdrawal and autonomy negotiations together.¹⁰⁷ The United States could either accept this or make a serious push on Begin. To make such a push, Carter would need to have, and be willing to use, a considerable amount of political leverage. But did the United States have any such leverage over Israel at this point?

When Carter again discussed the questions of a timetable and formal linkage with Begin, Begin inadvertently revealed that the United States did in fact possess such leverage. Begin asked for US economic aid to counterbalance the cost of the Sinai withdrawal and the loss of the Sinai oil fields. Carter mentioned that such subsidies would be considered only in connection with a treaty, but he did not push the matter, nor did he tie the aid to the Palestinian issue and the autonomy negotiations.¹⁰⁸

Reflecting on the potential use of this leverage, Brzezinski noted to Carter:

tell Begin that Israeli failure to accept the timetable and to begin positive movement on the West Bank/Gaza will mean that the US will take the entire matter to the UN Security Council, and consequently that the U.S.–Israeli economic-military relationship will not be allowed to perpetuate a stalemate [...] For the above to work, we must be genuinely prepared to be as direct and blunt as is stated above; so far, we have never managed to be and we have always backed off at the last minute.¹⁰⁹

Brzezinski also suggested that all the money Israel had spent on settlements should be subtracted from the total amount of aid it would

be given from the United States and that, if settlement construction continued, the United States should vote against Israel in the UN.¹¹⁰ As Brzezinski hints, there is an important difference between having leverage and using it. Carter clearly had it, but despite his deep frustration with Begin, he declined to use it. The result of not using the leverage, as Quandt observed, was as follows: 'Neither side seems to take our views very seriously, presumably because there are no consequences when they ignore us.'¹¹¹ Since Carter failed to apply this type of pressure, Begin could once again continue to make gains, and refuse to make concessions.

Another go with the PLO?

In a 27 November version of the side-letter, the United States included a clause inviting Palestinians to participate in the negotiations for the self-governing authority.¹¹² The problem with this clause was that while the Palestinians insisted that the PLO was their sole representative, the United States insisted that the Palestinians had to be represented by somebody other than the PLO. In the midst of these talks, Arafat sent a new message via US Congressman Paul Findley (R). Findley was an outspoken advocate of the need to talk to the Palestinians, and he had also met with Arafat in January 1978.¹¹³ This time, Arafat's message was that the PLO was prepared to accept a two-state solution and recognise Israel.¹¹⁴ This same message was sent from the PLO via Arab UN ambassadors to the United States.¹¹⁵ Findley argued that, in light of the new PLO view, the United States should start talking with the organisation.¹¹⁶

The US government did not publicly respond to Paul Findley, but British diplomats were confidentially informed that the US government reacted positively to Arafat's messages. However, the risk of going public was seen as too great, because it could threaten the peace process.¹¹⁷ Walid Khalidi later informed the United States that the PLO did not intend to recognise UNSC Resolution 242, because the United States had not made a clear enough commitment as to what it intended to do with the West Bank and Gaza.¹¹⁸ Once again, then, the PLO initiative petered out into nothing.

Within the Carter administration there was no agreement as to how to proceed. In a note on the negotiation impasse, National Security

Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski commented, 'The Camp David Accords created the impression that in fact a separate peace between Egypt and Israel was acceptable to both the US and to Egypt – and for a while I even thought that perhaps you [Carter] and Sadat had secretly agreed on this.'¹¹⁹ It seemed as though Sadat did not care about the Palestinians at all. Could the US leadership actually be more pro-Palestinian than the Egyptian president? Certainly not in practice. It was unimaginable that Carter would publicly press hard on Begin to secure gains for the Palestinians if, at the same time, Sadat declined to pursue the issue. But it was not easy to just let it go either. Brzezinski was worried about the regional fallout if the United States failed to deliver on linkage, and he informed Carter that a separate Egyptian–Israeli peace was a 'worst case scenario' on par with a collapse of the Shah regime in Iran.¹²⁰ Within the next year, the Americans would have both those worst case scenarios on their hands.

To counter the claim that Israel was not doing enough on the West Bank and Gaza, Begin informed Sadat that there was no reason to move beyond the letter of the framework:

At Camp David we agreed on autonomy, on full autonomy for the inhabitants of Judea, Samaria and Gaza. We did not agree on sovereignty. We did not agree on a 'Palestinian state,' nor on a nucleus for such a 'state.'¹²¹

While Carter and Sadat hoped that the spirit of Camp David would prevail, Begin, ever the legalist, was adamant that only the letter of Camp David carried weight. There was a massive gap between the spirit and the letter, of course. In an attempt to wrap things up, Vance was sent on a new Middle East tour.¹²² Sending the secretary of state to the Middle East had become almost a routine procedure for the Carter administration.

The positions Vance encountered in Egypt and Israel had not moved.

Sadat demanded a timetable for the Palestinian issues, and Begin stood his ground.¹²³ Vance was exasperated by the Israelis. He considered it unfair of Israel to demand timelines for all their concerns, while rejecting timelines for any Arab concerns.¹²⁴ Together with the Egyptians, he therefore formulated a timeline for the West Bank and Gaza negotiations. It stipulated that the negotiations would

start one month after the peace treaty was signed, and that the self-government elections would be held by the end of 1979.¹²⁵ This was a long-standing US position.

As should have been expected, Begin rejected the timetable and all the other agreements Vance made in Egypt.¹²⁶ Begin could easily reject the timeline on purely formal grounds, in fact, because there was no reference to a timetable at Camp David. It was the US negotiation team which had refused to include such a timetable, ironically, having refuted the suggestion on four occasions during the drafting process at Camp David.¹²⁷ That decision had come back to haunt them.

There goes the deadline

As the three-month negotiation deadline passed, the US administration noted that while there was near agreement on the treaty package as a whole, it was all or nothing, and the remaining gaps therefore stopped the whole process.¹²⁸ Cyrus Vance was very upset with Israel and made public statements to that effect. As had become the normal routine, Israel's supporters in the United States jumped on the statement, heavily criticising the Carter administration for what they claimed was its anti-Israeli position.¹²⁹ With regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, US domestic politics were intimately intertwined with the relevant foreign policy, as Begin was well aware. Begin knew that it would cost Carter if he, or anyone in his administration, was too critical of Israel.¹³⁰

The high political cost of fighting against the Israeli position helps explain why Vance decided to further tone down the Palestinian issue. Vance's strategy paper to Carter therefore contained several shifts which accommodated Israeli demands. For example, each time he mentioned the West Bank and Gaza, he suggested that they should at least aim for progress on Gaza, and Vance suggested that Israel had to be assured about progress on normalisation which was independent of other developments.¹³¹ Sadat's idea of moving on Gaza first, which the Americans had initially rejected, was reintroduced and explored through several channels at this time.¹³²

While Vance betrayed his gradual shift away from concern for the Palestinians, Brzezinski went all the way. He argued that it was time to move past the focus on the Palestinian issue, and instead frame the peace process as part of a regional security strategy.¹³³ This was a significant

strategic shift. In the initial Carter strategy, one of the reasons behind the focus on the Palestinians was that a solution to the Palestinian problem was seen as a key to regional peace. With a separate Egyptian–Israeli peace in sight, the uniting of the Arab rejectionists, and troublesome developments taking place in Iran, it seemed better to work on securing Egyptian–Israeli peace quickly rather than struggling uphill towards an increasingly unlikely overall solution.

Brzezinski's desire to disengage from the Palestinian issue was understandable. Developments in both the Palestinian camp and in the region as a whole had made solving the Palestinian issue even more difficult. The PLO, in response to the Camp David Accords, had moved in a rejectionist direction. The 14th Palestinian National Council (PNC), held in Damascus on 15–23 January 1979, issued a declaration that was anti-Camp David and anti-self-rule, featured an increased emphasis on armed struggle, and did not contain formulations which might imply an acceptance of a two-state solution, as had been the case for the 1974 and 1977 PNCs.¹³⁴ Furthermore, in Iran, a revolution was underway, by which the US administration had been caught completely off guard. Iran had been in a state of martial law since September 1978, and the Shah left Iran for exile on 16 January 1979. He had been one of the central pillars of US Middle East policy. Once his regime crumbled, the United States lost one of its most stable allies in the region. The ramifications were regional instability and rising oil prices.¹³⁵ The Palestinian issue promptly plummeted down the priority list.

Given the drastic developments in Iran, Carter could not afford to drop the ball on the Israeli–Egyptian peace negotiations. It would be highly detrimental to US regional interests if the Americans both lost Iran as an ally and failed to secure an Egyptian–Israeli peace. With the heightened regional stakes, it was hard to push for a Palestinian solution if that meant risking the whole peace process. The administration opted to secure the separate Egyptian–Israeli peace through a trilateral meeting at the ministerial level, with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Foreign Ministers Moshe Dayan and Mustafa Khalil. If the meeting was successful, then Begin and Sadat could be brought in to finalise the deal.¹³⁶ It would not be that simple.

Carter sent a new set of personal letters to Begin and Sadat, urging them to join him in a renewed attempt to push the peace process forward.¹³⁷ The

US administration increasingly leaned towards getting something on Gaza first and finding a mechanism to get Sadat 'off the West Bank hook'.¹³⁸ The move towards a 'Gaza first' option is indicative of the low level of linkage demanded by the administration at this time. Desperation for an agreement was sinking in. Still, it did not mean that Israel would yield.

Despite the shift in US thinking, the Israelis were disappointed after four days of the ministerial negotiations. According to Dayan, 'there has been no progress this week; if anything, the other way'.¹³⁹ The Americans were equally frustrated. Ambassador Samuel Lewis summed up the talks as 'a real mess [...] Carter was banging his head against two stone walls for a couple of days'.¹⁴⁰ What had gone wrong?

While Mustafa Khalil had full authority to negotiate for Sadat, Dayan remained on a tight leash from Begin.¹⁴¹ This was the normal pattern. While Sadat did not concern himself with the details of the talks, Begin was extremely detail-oriented and would not allow Dayan to take any initiatives or make any concessions. Basically, Begin 'ruled with an iron rod'.¹⁴² The Israeli position in the negotiations came from him directly, and any decisions had to be cleared by him. Unless Egypt would concede on every point, then, there would be no result from any negotiation which did not include Begin himself. Carter therefore declared that talks had to be upgraded to heads-of-state level.¹⁴³

Despite the fact that Carter made this declaration publicly, and that it had been cleared by Dayan, Begin declined the invitation.¹⁴⁴ This was a direct insult to Carter, but, rather than make Begin feel the heat, Carter bent over backwards to satisfy him, because it was the most painless way to move forward. Sadat seemed willing to accept almost anything, as long as the peace treaty with Israel was brought to fruition, whereas Begin remained unwilling to move an inch on anything outside the Sinai. Carter could either accommodate Begin or apply large amounts of pressure to Israel. The latter would be difficult, and there was no guarantee for success, so he once again chose the former.

Begin in Washington

Carter then invited Begin to meet with him personally, without the Egyptians.¹⁴⁵ Preparing for this talk, Brzezinski's analysis was that Begin was convinced that he could withstand US and Egyptian pressure, because both Sadat and Carter needed success, while he could tolerate

failure. This was the same analysis Brzezinski had provided prior to Camp David, and he had been proven correct at that time. Begin had withstood US pressure for two years, and with the US election season approaching, time was on Begin's side again. The opposite was true for Sadat and Carter. As US elections approached, it would be increasingly difficult for Carter to pressure Begin, thanks to the domestic support for Israel in the United States. As for Sadat, Egypt was increasingly isolated after the Camp David Accords, and he still had nothing to show for that work in return. Begin, for his part, would prefer failure over a deal which forced Israel to accept that the Egyptian-Israeli peace would be explicitly linked to movement on the West Bank and Gaza, and, given the political situation, he was willing to risk failure because the odds were largely in his favour. Brzezinski was therefore pessimistic. He proposed that a settlement freeze could be used as a litmus test: 'If the answer [from Begin to a freeze] is negative, we are kidding ourselves if we think the next phase of negotiations is going to succeed.'¹⁴⁶

Talks between Begin and Carter started in Washington on 1 March 1979. As expected, Begin pushed hard to further reduce any existing potential linkage between the two treaties and to hinder any new links from evolving. Furthermore, he rejected any changes to the original Camp David Accords, and therefore any notion of separating Gaza from the West Bank.¹⁴⁷ Amplifying the effects of his legalistic approach in negotiations, Begin made a distinction between the side-letters exchanged at Camp David and the agreement which had been reached there. The former, he argued, had no legal value. He thus rejected all the non-Sinai gains Egypt had made. He also flatly rejected the 'one-year target date'.¹⁴⁸ Carter was dumbstruck. Begin was once again withdrawing commitments Carter thought Begin had made. Technically, however, Begin was not doing so – he had skilfully ensured that his concessions would be less *legally* binding than the Egyptian concessions. He was perhaps not negotiating in good faith, but, in any case, Israel was not legally obligated to implement those concessions.

If there was any doubt as to exactly what Begin had agreed to for the self-governing authority, he nailed it down now:

If the administrative council one day proclaims a Palestinian state, we will arrest them. [...] After five years [...] Israel must have

iron-clad guarantees that there will be no Palestinian state. [...] We are not talking about autonomy for or to the West Bank and Gaza, but only for the inhabitants.¹⁴⁹

Begin's concept of autonomy was conceptually complicated, to say the least, but it rested on two key pillars – the status of the land would not change, and there would be no Palestinian state. The land, according to Begin, was eternally Israeli, and the autonomy proposal merely postponed Israel's claim of sovereignty. The Palestinians would have personal autonomy, but the territory would remain Israel's in all but name.¹⁵⁰

Vance expressed his exasperation clearer than anyone when he told Begin: 'I have been trying to find a way to help. I have been breaking my back doing so. We made changes in this draft, and you rejected all of them [...] I have run out of ways to help. You have rejected everything.'¹⁵¹ Carter was hardly less frustrated. He opened the 4 March meeting by stating: 'This is the most stubborn problem that I have ever dealt with. We made little progress.'¹⁵²

Having gained no ground in Washington, the Carter team decided that the president needed to go to Israel and Egypt to make a final push for peace. If those talks failed, Carter told Sadat, he would 'let the public know we [Sadat and Carter] stand together as partners'.¹⁵³ Sadat was elated. He had already accepted the treaty text, and, like Carter, he was thinking of broader regional security.¹⁵⁴ The ongoing revolution in Iran meant that the regional power balance was eroding, that oil prices would be rising and that both the United States and Egypt had lost a stable and close ally. It was time to secure peace with Israel.¹⁵⁵

As of 10 March 1979, the only formal tie between the peace treaty and the West Bank and Gaza negotiations was that the latter would start one month after the ratification of the peace treaty. Any semblance of a specific deadline had been replaced with vague formulations.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, when Carter went to Israel, Begin started to chip away at the treaty draft. He ensured that the West Bank and Gaza letter was very weak, and that the timeline was diffuse. The two men agreed only that the five-year transition period would start after the self-governing authority had been established.¹⁵⁷

Verbatim records of the 11 and 12 March meetings between Carter and Begin illustrate Begin's tiresome nit-picking, and the effect it

had on the negotiated outcome. He rejected the US/Egyptian proposal of changing the words 'does not derogate' to 'is not inconsistent'. The two terms are synonymous, and Begin struggled to explain the difference between them. It was the mere fact that Sadat had changed the text, even if those changes were insignificant, that gave Begin an excuse to push the Americans yet again. Begin used the same technique when it came to the letter tying the peace treaty to the autonomy negotiations. He reacted against the formulation 'at the earliest possible date thereafter', since he had previously agreed to the formulation 'as expeditiously as possible'.¹⁵⁸ While these word games were substantively meaningless, they served a purpose: They took time and energy which could otherwise have been used to haggle over actual issues.

Begin also insisted on 'ironclad guarantees' that there would be no Palestinian state. He demanded that the mention of 'self-government authority' be followed by the phrase 'administrative authority', so as to ensure that the body would have no legislative power. Begin also flatly rejected the application of autonomy to Gaza first, and the possibility of having any Egyptians stationed in Gaza. Carter insisted that these were important issues, however, because closing off the possibility of solving Gaza first would hamper the autonomy negotiations. Of particular importance to Carter was the opening of Gaza to Egyptian representatives during the autonomy negotiation period, so that they could facilitate Palestinian participation. This did not faze Begin, who steadfastly refused to accept Egyptian liaison officers in Gaza, but he did suggest a new vague formulation regarding Gaza first: 'Should Egypt propose the introduction of the autonomy in Gaza first, Israel will be prepared to consider this proposal during the negotiations.'¹⁵⁹ Put simply, rather than agree to a specific solution, Begin agreed to the possibility that Israel could eventually consider a solution.¹⁶⁰ Quandt called this session one of Begin's 'most remarkable performances' – one in which he 'took negotiations to the brink of failure before edging back just enough to ensure success on his terms'.¹⁶¹

After negotiating with Begin for four tiresome days, Carter went to Sadat.¹⁶² Despite some protestation, Sadat accepted the new treaty text.¹⁶³ Carter was tired of negotiating and needed to close the Egyptian–Israeli treaty so that he could focus on other important issues. He therefore refused to go back to Israel with any new demands: 'For the

last 18 months I, the President of the most powerful nation on earth, have acted the postman. I am not a proud man – I have done the best I could – but I cannot go back to try to change the language.¹⁶⁴ It was a take it or leave it offer to Sadat, and Sadat could not afford to leave it.

Once again, problems with the agreement arose quickly as Israeli politicians promptly began to draw distinctions between the treaty and the side-letters, exactly as they had done with the Camp David Accords. For example, Dayan argued that Israel had made no commitment on 'unilateral steps' for the West Bank and Gaza. These steps had been an important issue in the final negotiations, and Carter had managed to get Begin to agree to some steps which would give the Palestinians something concrete. They were, however, only part of a side-letter and the Israelis argued that even the precise formulations of that letter were undecided.¹⁶⁵ The Egyptians were furious that Israel could make such statements after an agreement had been reached.¹⁶⁶ Once again, however, the United States and the Egyptians had already accepted the condition that the gains for the Palestinians amounted to vague formulations packed away in side-letters rather than in the treaty itself. Begin's legalism ensured that his concessions were symbolic and would have few real consequences.

The peace treaty between Egypt and Israel was signed in Washington on 26 March 1979. It was a purely bilateral peace treaty through which Israel would gradually withdraw from the Sinai in return for peace and normalisation with Egypt. What remained of any linkage was an agreement to start negotiating self-rule for the Palestinians within one month of the ratification of the peace treaty. The United States sweetened the deal with Israel and Egypt by supporting them with military purchases valued at \$2.2 billion and \$1.5 billion respectively. Other economic sweeteners included an \$800 million grant to Israel to pay for relocation of evacuated Sinai air bases and \$300 million to Egypt in economic aid.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, the United States promised to pay for the establishment of new airfields in Israel to replace those left behind in the Sinai, and to guarantee that Israel could buy oil from Egypt. If Egypt failed to deliver on this, then the United States would step up and sell the same amount to Israel.¹⁶⁸ The US cost of subsidising the withdrawal and the added aid to Egypt and Israel, then, was \$4.8 billion.¹⁶⁹ Whereas Carter had been unwilling to threaten Begin by withholding

funds in order to get a better deal, he was very willing to compensate Begin once the deal had been made.

Arab reactions

Despite its shortcomings, the peace with Israel was a huge victory for President Anwar Sadat. Egypt would regain the Sinai, huge amounts of US aid came in, and Egypt had secured a close political relationship with the United States. However, there was also a massive cost, as Egypt became ostracised in the Arab region. The PLO was furious and called for an Arab foreign ministers meeting in light of what it described as 'a serious escalation of the U.S.-Zionist plot against the Arab cause and the Palestinian question'.¹⁷⁰ Likewise, the Palestinian leadership on the West Bank denounced the peace treaty, rejected the self-rule proposal and affirmed that only the PLO could represent the Palestinians.¹⁷¹

Sadat was boisterously defiant regarding the Arab opposition. He called Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi the 'boy in Libya', and argued that King Hussein was schizophrenic and opportunistic, and that 'Iraq and Syria are of no real significance', adding '[d]o not fear the scarecrows'.¹⁷² The United States appealed to the Arab heads of state, pointing out that the treaty sought forward movement on granting the Palestinians full autonomy.¹⁷³ This had no effect, nor was it very credible.

Between 27 and 31 March 1979, Arab leaders gathered in Baghdad to discuss how to punish Egypt for signing the peace treaty with Israel. They decided that all their ambassadors would be withdrawn from Egypt and recommended that political and diplomatic relations with Egypt should be cut. Furthermore, they expelled Egypt from the Arab League, moving its headquarters to Tunis. All financial aid to Egypt was to be halted, and oil transfers were cancelled.¹⁷⁴ Arafat joined in this hard-line response, even calling for the Arab leaders to boycott the United States.¹⁷⁵ Returning from Baghdad, however, Arafat informed the Fatah leadership that international terrorism would not be resumed, and that the PLO should remain ready to negotiate if the United States were to issue an invitation.¹⁷⁶

Sadat had gotten his peace treaty with Israel, but Egypt was isolated in the region as a direct result. Unless he could get something for

the Palestinians in the months ahead, it would stay that way. Begin, however, had gotten all he wanted – a separate peace with Egypt and increased US aid – and he was not going to give any leeway on the Palestinian front. Carter, who had initially been the most ambitious of the three heads of state, had failed to get his comprehensive peace, but he had secured the separate peace and secured an alliance with Egypt – no small feat. But, if he were to follow up on his own stated ambitions, Carter had to make the autonomy negotiations lead to some form of Palestinian self-rule. This would have been difficult in the best of times, but in the spring of 1979, regional events would take a turn for the worse, and election season was approaching in the United States. Against this background, making gains for the Palestinians would be neither easy nor politically prioritised.

CHAPTER 8

WHERE DO WE GO NOW, BUT NOWHERE?

The Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty was a major accomplishment and could not have been achieved without the indefatigable efforts of President Jimmy Carter. At several key moments, notably at Camp David and in Jerusalem, he worked tirelessly to push through a deal. Both the Camp David Accords and the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty, however, fell far short of Carter’s ambition of a comprehensive Arab–Israeli peace. Nominally, Carter insisted that negotiations would continue until a solution to the Palestinian problem was found. In practice, however, Carter no longer had the time or the energy to really push for a Palestinian solution. Global developments, most notably in Iran and Afghanistan, would consume him from this point forward. That is not to say that Carter had entirely given up on the Palestinians. If he could stop Begin’s settlement expansion, it would be a good starting point. Still, this would not improve the situation but only stop it from getting worse. It would be, as Brzezinski had suggested, a litmus test. Yet even the modest goal of curtailing the Israeli settlement project would demand much of Carter. It would also be a goal which he would ultimately fail to achieve.

Begin launched new settlements and expanded existing ones at regular intervals, knowing full well that this made Palestinian autonomy all the more difficult to achieve, and ensured enhanced Israeli control over the occupied territories. The Israeli government acted as though there were no contradiction here. Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan

declared that the autonomy negotiations would not change the status of the settlements and that, even after the five-year period, all the settlements would remain.¹ Such statements came in tandem with new settlement launches. For example, Israel decided to establish a new settlement near Nablus, Elon Moreh.² This was particularly provocative since Nablus was a major Palestinian city. The US State Department issued a short statement criticising both the action and the timing of the establishment of the settlement.³

Paradoxically, there was no negative public reaction from the Egyptian leadership. It is difficult to know for certain why this was so, but it is at least evident that Sadat wanted the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai to precede as expeditiously as possible, and he had ceased to care about the Palestinian issue, particularly if it threatened the prospects for moving quickly on Israeli withdrawal from occupied Egyptian territory. This passive Egyptian position made it difficult for the US government to harshly criticise Israel. If the Americans did so, they would seem more pro-Arab than the Arabs. Vance and Carter therefore had to take the unusual step of urging the Egyptians to criticise Israel.⁴ The political situation was unfortunate for the Palestinians. Election year was approaching in the United States, which meant that Carter had less room for manoeuvre, and his ability to work for an unpopular policy, such as the Palestinian issue, was very limited. The fact that Egypt would not step up compounded the problem. The Palestinians, then, were largely on their own.

Finding some Palestinians, *any* Palestinians

One key to gaining any ground on the autonomy negotiations was to get Palestinians on board. There was no easy way to do this. The United States did not talk to the PLO, and even the most moderate Palestinians rejected Begin's autonomy plan. Furthermore, all the Arab states, as well as the Palestinians themselves, insisted that only the PLO could negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians.⁵

Whereas the Palestinian question had initially been a priority for Carter, he was now reluctant to put political weight behind these autonomy negotiations. One very clear indication of the way in which Carter had toned down the importance of the negotiations was his decision to appoint a special negotiator rather than handle the

negotiations himself. Robert Strauss, the lawyer and once chairman of the Democratic party, was appointed to the position on 24 April 1979.⁶ No matter how active such a special negotiator was, it was a huge step down from secretary of state and president of the United States.⁷ Over the last two and a half years under Carter, but also with Kissinger before that, the parties to this conflict had been spoiled by regular and direct access to US top decision-makers, such as the national security advisor, the secretary of state and even the president. This downgrade sent a very clear message about the lack of priority assigned to the Palestinian autonomy talks. It reflected the fact that Carter was entering election season, and that other foreign policy issues had become much more important. The special negotiator functioned as a domestic 'political shield' for Carter.⁸

To make the downgrading of US priorities even more obvious, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance proposed that the United States should step back from the negotiations and allow Egypt and Israel to lead their own negotiations. If need be, the United States could engage at a later stage.⁹ The ambition was at this point reduced by so many notches that there was no reconciling it to the early Carter days. Jerusalem had become an issue whose 'deeper aspects' did not need to be addressed. Palestinian representation, as well, had been reduced to gradualism – the Palestinians would not participate at the outset, but, perhaps by the end of the year, some Palestinians who were acceptable to the PLO could be induced to participate.¹⁰

In his diary, Carter noted that PLO representatives 'are sending feelers [...] wanting a means by which to consult. We will do as much as possible within the bounds of our promise to Israel.'¹¹ This was not saying much. Landrum Bolling, the American Quaker who had previously delivered messages from Arafat, again went to see him in April 1979. Vance asked Bolling to inform Arafat that the United States was looking for 'responsible Palestinians' to bring into the negotiation process.¹² In mid-May, Arafat tried to establish contact with the US ambassador to Lebanon, John Gunther Dean, but Dean declined.¹³ Landrum Bolling also met with Arafat in July and reported that Arafat was interested in a new UNSC resolution which would affirm the main principles of UNSC Resolution 242.¹⁴ None of these talks produced any breakthroughs, though – no direct channels of communication were opened, and the PLO did not accept non-PLO Palestinian participation

in the autonomy negotiations. The Palestinians in the occupied territories also consistently insisted that the PLO was their sole legitimate representative, and that they would only accept a solution which granted Palestinian statehood.¹⁵

The difficulty Carter had in engaging with the Palestinians was most famously illustrated when the US ambassador to the UN, Andrew Young, met with PLO members in New York. Israel and its supporters in the United States were enraged. Young first denied that the meeting had taken place, then had to resign when it turned out that this was not true.¹⁶ Carter was unhappy with the situation. Not only was the Young affair difficult to navigate as a foreign policy issue, but also Carter had a personal relationship with Young, and Young was considered a domestic political asset because of his prominent standing in the African-American community.¹⁷

Carter noted in his diary: 'It is absolutely ridiculous that we pledged under Kissinger and Nixon that we would not negotiate with the PLO; but our country's honor is at stake.'¹⁸ Carter was abiding by Kissinger's pledge more strictly than had actually been intended. The pledge opposed political negotiations with the PLO but did not forbid all US officials from meeting with the PLO.¹⁹ No matter what the pledge actually stated, though, meetings with the PLO represented a highly sensitive issue. While Carter could technically have defended Young, it would have cost him domestically. Furthermore, since Young had lied about the meeting, it was all the more difficult to shield him.

Starting the Palestinian autonomy talks

Begin's actions during this period show that he was convinced that he was off the West Bank hook. He appointed Israeli Interior Minister Yosef Burg to head the autonomy talks, a political choice which showed that Israel had no intention of ceding power in the West Bank and Gaza. Assigning his interior minister in this way demonstrated that Begin considered the West Bank and Gaza to be domestic issues. Furthermore, Burg was the leader of the National Religious Party and thus connected with the Gush Emunim settlement movement, which opposed any West Bank compromise. The inclusion of settlement stalwart Ariel Sharon on the negotiation team also sent a very strong signal regarding Begin's intentions to retain control over the West Bank and Gaza.²⁰

This did not bode well for the autonomy talks, which started in Beersheva on 25 May, coinciding with the return of Al Arish to Egypt.²¹ This timing was important, since Israel was gradually handing back Egyptian territory as the autonomy talks took place. If Sadat were to pressure Israel on autonomy, there was a real possibility that Israel would postpone the Sinai evacuation. Since Sinai was what really mattered to Sadat, he would not take that risk.²²

Opening the autonomy talks, Cyrus Vance pointed out that all negotiations would be based on UNSC Resolution 242, land for peace on all fronts, and the Camp David framework formulation 'resolution of the Palestinian problem in all its aspects'.²³ It was an ambitious start. Making that argument and trying to get Israel to agree to it, however, were very different things. As always, the Egyptians and Israelis had very different starting positions. The Egyptians insisted that Palestinian self-determination was 'god-given'. Furthermore, the Egyptians insisted that the talks had to be based on the inadmissibility of acquiring territory by war, that this principle must be valid for the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and that all Israeli settlements were illegal. The Israelis, on the other hand, insisted that they were only negotiating for the establishment of an administrative council which would not be allowed to develop into a Palestinian state. The main conclusion of this first round of talks was an agreement that they would meet again in Alexandria.²⁴

The total lack of movement in the first round was indicative of how the talks would progress throughout. The autonomy talks initially took place every second week. After the talks in Alexandria on 11–12 June, new rounds followed in Herzliya on 25–26 June, then in Alexandria on 5–6 July and in Haifa on 5–6 August 1979.²⁵ The regularity of these summits did not mean that they were significant, however. In fact, the CIA was convinced that the autonomy talks represented a charade from Begin: 'There can be little doubt that the Begin government is determined to retain control over all the crucial powers in the occupied territories [...]. Its tactics will be to drag out negotiations over details.'²⁶ Charade or not, the autonomy talks dragged on, with no end in sight.

The Middle East was in flux, and it was hard to see which direction the region would go. The massive opposition against the Israeli–Egyptian peace, exasperated by Begin's continued settlement expansion, meant that old enemies, such as Syria and Iraq, found common ground.

The most secure way for the Americans to regain Arab support was to make progress on the Palestinian issue, stop Israeli settlements, find a way to talk to the PLO and make Jerusalem part of the West Bank negotiations.²⁷ However, while Carter and his foreign policy team continued to claim that these were important issues, they were unwilling to take the steps necessary to moving those Palestinian questions forward. Adapting to regime change in Iran, for example, was far more important than obtaining autonomy for the Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza.

Furthermore, Sadat's focus was on extending US aid rather than pushing for an autonomy settlement.²⁸ Israeli Defense Minister Ezer Weizman knew that Sadat would not raise difficulties in the negotiations and told Vance that 'Israel would have fewer problems with Egypt in the negotiations than with the United States.'²⁹ This position was frustrating for the Carter administration. Since Egypt did not pressure Israel, it was hard for the United States to be more critical of Israel than Egypt was. Israel therefore enjoyed free reign in expanding settlements in the occupied territories.

While Carter struggled with the prospect of being more critical of Israel than Egypt, Israel took a step further to the right, hardening its position regarding the West Bank in particular. At the end of October 1979, Moshe Dayan resigned from the Begin government, in protest at Begin's lack of sincerity about making Palestinian autonomy work and at the settlement expansion policy. Begin handed the position of foreign minister to Yitzhak Shamir from Likud, another far-right politician.³⁰ The Israeli government then drastically increased the pace of its settlement programme. On 15 November 1979, the Israeli 'special ministerial committee' decided to proceed with building 19 settlements which had already been decided on, to transform 12 military settlements into civilian ones, to launch five completely new ones and to expand already existing settlements.³¹

As though matters were not difficult enough for Carter, on 4 November 1979 radical Iranian students seized the US embassy in Tehran, taking the embassy staff hostage. This started an ordeal that would last for the remainder of Carter's presidency – a total of 444 days. Although it was not initiated by the Iranian political leadership, the attack on the embassy was quickly supported by it, making it a question of prestige for the new Iranian regime.³² Senator Robert Byrd (D)

accurately described the effect of the crisis on Carter: 'The Ayatollah Khomeini doesn't just have fifty-three hostages. He also has the President hostage.'³³ Many of the important foreign policy people in the administration who could otherwise have worked on the Palestinian autonomy talks were overloaded by the job of trying to solve the Iranian hostage crisis.³⁴ The hostage crisis, and Carter's deep involvement in it, sapped his energy, making it almost impossible for the hands-on president to focus on the Palestinian question.

In November 1979, Sol M. Linowitz, who had been central to negotiating the 1979 Panama Canal treaty, replaced Robert Strauss as the special negotiator. Strauss had become impatient with the negotiations and was needed in Carter's re-election campaign.³⁵ Carter needed all the help he could get, since he even faced a challenger from within the Democratic party: Ted Kennedy. While Sol Linowitz had mediation experience, he was no Middle East expert.³⁶ Furthermore, when he started his mission with a trip to the region on 6–13 December 1979 to become acquainted with the views of the parties in the autonomy negotiations, he made it clear that those parties were, in fact, only Israel and Egypt. Revealingly, he informed the regional US ambassadors that 'I have not included any activities with Palestinians, which I felt would be counterproductive on this first visit.'³⁷ The regional ambassadors, except those to Egypt and Israel, disagreed with Linowitz's approach. They argued that the most productive thing Carter could do at this stage would be to engage directly with the PLO.³⁸ They might have been right, but Carter was not going to take that step.

The change in special negotiator did not alter the fact that there was no movement in the autonomy talks. The Israeli, Egyptian and US negotiators could not even agree on the size of the proposed elected self-governing authority. While Egypt wanted this body to be large, Israel wanted it to be as small as possible so as not to resemble a parliament. If the governing body of the self-governing authority resembled a parliament, they argued, the self-governing authority would resemble a state.³⁹ Such a resemblance was a red line for Begin.

During December 1979, Begin again asked Carter for an increase in US aid to Israel.⁴⁰ This once again provided Carter with the possibility of pressuring Begin, but, as noted previously, there is a difference between having leverage and using it, and Carter was not prepared to use it. Quite the contrary: despite having to make deep budgetary cuts,

Carter agreed to try to increase the amount of aid given to Israel.⁴¹ Ensuring an Israeli sense of security in a troubled region trumped the possibility of using such funds to pressure Israel into making concessions, particularly as US elections were approaching. As time went by, whatever pressure there was on Begin abated, and there was even less incentive for him to make concessions.

Carter admitted to Israeli Minister of Defense Ezer Weizman that he would have to put his involvement on the backburner but promised that, if he was re-elected, the Middle East peace talks would be a top priority.⁴² This was ominous. All the diplomatic breakthroughs had come as a result of direct presidential involvement, whether at Camp David or elsewhere during the last push before the signing of the peace treaty. With Carter out, an increasingly right-wing Israeli government, and an Egyptian president who did not care about finding a solution for the Palestinians, there was no reason to expect much progress.

From bad to worse in the Middle East and beyond

Meanwhile a series of events unfolded which made the region all the more unstable. In November 1979, the grand mosque in Mecca was captured by Sunni Islamic militants, leading to a prolonged fight with the regime in Saudi Arabia. This event, coupled with the revolution in Iran, which had brought to power a radical Shia regime, made the Saudi regime even more insecure about its regional position, faced as it was by emboldened enemies both abroad and domestically. These fears seemed to be confirmed when the Shia population in the eastern parts of Saudi Arabia held protests. Then, in late December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, ostensibly to protect the Afghani government.⁴³

The world as it had been when Carter came to power in 1977 was spinning out of control. Carter's inability to sustain stability in that region, as well as the rising oil prices, was terrible news for Carter's re-election campaign. It also massively limited his ability to engage in the autonomy negotiations. In January 1980, the president launched the 'Carter doctrine', declaring that 'an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force'.⁴⁴ The president who had come to power hoping that the cold war could be

sidestepped was reacting just like a typical cold war president.⁴⁵ Yet another of the foundations of his original approach to the Middle East – namely that the Soviet Union could be a partner in guaranteeing the peace – was long gone.

These global events affected not only Carter. In such an unstable regional environment, there was no way Begin would gamble with the security of a territory he considered to be an integral part of Israel.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the Palestinian issue once again dropped drastically in relative importance. None of the central actors would prioritise standing up for the Palestinians while the Soviet Union was invading Afghanistan, Carter was trying to free US hostages in Iran and Saudi Arabia was fighting domestic discontent.

Meanwhile, the autonomy talks dragged on as an ever more futile exercise. A round took place from 31 January to 1 February 1980 in Herzliya, and another in The Hague on 27–28 February 1980.⁴⁷ Much as it had been in the months prior to Camp David, the parties were talking in circles.⁴⁸ In effect, Egypt was hardly negotiating with Israel at all, leaving the United States to take the brunt of the disagreement with Israel. Perhaps the most astonishing thing was that Khalil, representing Egypt, offered to reject the US proposal to ‘help us [the United States] out with the Israelis’.⁴⁹ This was a peculiar way of showing that, for Egypt, it was far more important to secure US goodwill than to actually make progress on Palestinian autonomy.

The Middle East experts in the US administration were deeply pessimistic.⁵⁰ Harold Saunders urged that the PLO slowly be brought on board, or that the Palestinians should at least be convinced that they were ‘part of the picture’.⁵¹ In reality, though, they were not part of the picture, and they had not been for a very long time.

Begin the builder

Begin was far from helpful. His cabinet supported the building of an Israeli settlement inside Hebron – the was the first one inside a densely populated Palestinian area.⁵² Sol Linowitz informed Begin that Carter would react strongly, and that Israel was losing staunch supporters in the United States over these settlements. Begin’s response was defiant. He lambasted the United States for wanting a Palestinian state.⁵³ Begin had no backing for this claim, but over the last three years he had learned

that he could push back when Carter tried to corner him, and that Carter would not stand his ground. Begin even successfully resisted the US attempt to obtain a two-month moratorium on settlement expansion.⁵⁴

The number of settlements being built by the Begin government was staggering. According to a US report, Israel had constructed 36 new settlements in the three years Begin had been in power. The West Bank settlement population, excluding Jerusalem, had increased almost three-fold.⁵⁵ Although the United States vocally fought these expansions at every turn, they never put any real pressure on Israel or attached any tangible consequences to the construction. Instead, the United States continued to protect Israel at the UN, to refuse to talk to the PLO, and to supply Israel with both monetary and military aid.

Since October 1978, Sadat had tried to convince the United States and Israel that they could implement the autonomy plan in Gaza first, then move on to the West Bank once this had been proven to work.⁵⁶ While the United States and Israel had both initially been negative, Sadat had not given up. In July 1979, November 1979 and February 1980, respectively, he had pushed the Gaza first idea.⁵⁷ In March 1980, Sadat tried again. At this point the United States was willing to seriously consider it.⁵⁸ Begin, however, did not even respond to Sadat's initiative.⁵⁹

Due to this new deadlock, Carter once again tried to get personally involved. He invited Sadat and Begin for separate visits to Washington.⁶⁰ Illustrative of the sorry state of the negotiations, the only realistic option was to work towards a more detailed framework to form the basis for further negotiations.⁶¹ After over three years of negotiating, the ambition had become simply an agreement to keep negotiating.

Carter admitted to Sadat that he did not think Begin even wanted the self-governing authority to be established at all.⁶² Everything pointed in this direction. For starters, the US embassy in Tel Aviv reported that Begin was not prepared to concede an inch. By their assessment, Begin felt that he enjoyed a strong position in the United States, given the country's pro-Israel inclination. Furthermore, the embassy claimed that Begin felt that conceding anything would push him in the direction of accepting a Palestinian state.⁶³ Since this was an absolute red line for Begin, there was no realistic way to pressure him to accept anything he considered to facilitate the creation of such a state.

The US plan was therefore to find out what Begin thought of a Gaza first scheme, whether he could accept a settlement freeze, and how the self-governing authority could be constituted if Begin refused voting rights to the Palestinians in East Jerusalem.⁶⁴ Begin promptly refused to budge on anything related to Jerusalem, and Carter was once again unable to get him to agree to a settlement moratorium.⁶⁵ Begin also rejected the existing negotiation deadline and instead suggested that talks carry on for over a year – in other words, through and beyond the US election. It was evident that Begin wanted to extend the talks indefinitely, so that the parties would never actually reach the point of implementing autonomy.⁶⁶ This was bad enough, but the real test would be the way in which East Jerusalem would be treated.

Carter argued that taking East Jerusalem out of the self-governing authority would fatally undermine the concept, but Begin would not budge. He countered that allowing Palestinians in East Jerusalem to vote would be equivalent to 'destroy[ing] Israel's connection with Jerusalem'.⁶⁷ All US drafting of agreements after this point tried to square the circle by finding a solution through which the Palestinians would believe that Jerusalem would be open for future negotiations and Begin would believe that Jerusalem would never be divided.⁶⁸ These two positions were irreconcilable, of course, and again illustrated the problem of what happened when Carter tried to work around Begin's intransigence rather than tackle him head on. Carter could use harsh words when arguing with Begin, but unless he was willing to actually follow up on his threats, or break with some of his self-imposed restrictions – such as not talking to the PLO – there was no reason for Begin to suddenly change his position and make compromises. While Carter might once have had political room to manoeuvre for pressuring Begin – a possibility Carter never truly utilised – that moment had passed, well into the US election year.

Things fall apart

On 24 April 1980, the United States sent a rescue mission to Iran in an attempt to free the US hostages. The mission failed miserably, and Carter ordered the team to withdraw. As it did so, two US aircraft collided, killing eight Americans.⁶⁹ Vance had strongly opposed the launch of the rescue mission and resigned in protest following it. He was replaced as

secretary of state by Senator Edmund Muskie, a choice which showed that Carter was in political trouble and wanted Muskie's influence in domestic politics.⁷⁰ Vance had been one of the architects of the comprehensive approach, but Muskie would not take up that flag.

Carter's position had never been more difficult. The tragedy in Iran was quickly followed up by the resignation in Israel of Ezer Weizman, perhaps the most flexible politician in the Israeli government. Weizman had also been the only person there to support the Gaza-first idea. Weizman and Moshe Dayan, who had resigned in October 1979, had been Begin's flexible ministers. With both of them out, Begin could be even more rigid.⁷¹

With these developments as a backdrop, Linowitz tried to get more talks going by taking a ten-day trip to the Middle East.⁷² As expected, however, there was no progress while Linowitz was in the region.⁷³ Carter was on the brink of admitting failure, and Begin was being unusually difficult, which, in Carter's own words, was 'really saying something'.⁷⁴ Sadat was also tired of the whole affair and, in mid-May 1980, he announced that he would postpone autonomy talks due to an accumulation of Israeli actions hampering negotiations and limiting Palestinian rights.⁷⁵

The PLO saw no hope at all of being allowed to participate in the diplomatic process. They also realised that the process had reached a dead end. The organisation therefore reverted to the hard-line position of wanting to liberate all of historical Palestine, and Fatah even called for 'an escalation of armed struggle'.⁷⁶ One US assessment said that this was both an expression of Fatah's frustration with the political situation, and an attempt by Arafat to 'outmaneuver his extremists'.⁷⁷ Behind the scenes, though, Arafat tried not to burn bridges with the West.⁷⁸ The problem for Arafat was that, since the hard-line statements were public, Begin could easily use them to dismiss the PLO as a legitimate political actor.

A last try

In July 1980, with the negotiation deadline long past, talks were held in Washington to agree on the terms for restarting autonomy negotiations. While both parties disagreed with the US proposals, they did agree to restart negotiations.⁷⁹ But there was absolutely

no reason for optimism. The Israelis were busy finalising a Knesset bill which would assert Israeli sovereignty over the whole of Jerusalem. If this resolution passed, it would make it very difficult for Egypt to participate in further negotiations at all.⁸⁰ The international community was also strongly against such an Israeli move.

This did not deter Israel, and the Knesset passed the Jerusalem bill into law on 30 July 1980, effectively making all of Jerusalem Israel's capital.⁸¹ The UN Security Council passed a resolution condemning the bill, with the United States abstaining.⁸² The PLO was furious and blamed the United States for providing Israel with resources and political backing, which allowed Israel to push forward with the 'aggression against Jerusalem'.⁸³ Carter acknowledged that the Jerusalem bill 'puts the final nail in the coffin of the Camp David negotiations'.⁸⁴

While Sadat had ceased working for real Palestinian gains, this Israeli move was a step too far. Sadat's response to the Jerusalem bill was a strongly worded letter informing Begin that his actions in the Palestinian territories had gone against both the letter and the spirit of Camp David, and that they were a breach of UNSC Resolution 242. He ended the letter with a plea:

I am certain that you know, deep in your heart, that it is virtually impossible to continue the negotiations if the present attitude continues. [...] I urge you to take the remedial action which is necessary for the removal of the obstacles which have been placed on the road to peace in the past months. [...] If we fail to remove those obstacles in due time, we will be reducing the vital process of negotiations to a meaningless exercise in futility which would be a disservice to our cherished ideal of peace. [...] I hope to receive a positive reply from you so that the negotiations could proceed in a promising atmosphere and as soon as possible.⁸⁵

Carter's penned note on his copy of the letter is as follows: 'The situation is discouraging. Well worded, very good message.'⁸⁶

The fact that Carter agreed with Sadat had no consequence. As Israeli Foreign Minister Shamir told the Herut Central Committee:

Israel's relations with the United States over the years, have known ups and downs. [...] notwithstanding differences of opinion [...] We have heard [...] solemn assurances that U.S. military and economic aid to Israel will remain unaffected and will never be used as a means of exerting pressure on Israel. We have heard too, that the United States will always oppose attempts to impose sanctions on Israel.⁸⁷

As we have seen throughout Carter's term in office, this assessment hit the mark.

In early November 1980, the US administration put forth a last 'non-paper' devoted to the autonomy framework. According to this proposal, the goals were full Palestinian autonomy based on UNSC Resolution 242; the 'legitimate rights of the Palestinian people'; and Palestinian participation in the next phase of negotiations.⁸⁸ Importantly, the United States insisted that the autonomy arrangements would fall within a five-year transition formula, after which the self-governing authority and Israel would negotiate final status questions. Also, the US paper proposed that after the self-governing authority had been inaugurated, Israel would withdraw its military forces, except for those to be redeployed 'into specified security locations'.⁸⁹ Neither Israel nor Egypt accepted the document.⁹⁰ This was the last attempt the Carter administration would make to get an agreement for the West Bank and Gaza. There would be no agreement and no Palestinian self-governing authority.

The Egyptians rejected the paper because they did not consider it to 'meet the minimum standards which [...] would be necessary for either Palestinian or Arab public opinion'.⁹¹ One Egyptian representative summed up his view of the negotiations: 'If the GOE [Government of Egypt] wanted 90 per cent and Israel wanted 20 per cent the U.S. position was at 25 per cent although he acknowledged that the Israelis might be willing to raise hell over the 5 per cent gap between their position and the United States paper.'⁹² While this statement obviously reflects Egyptian frustration, it would be more precise to point out that the US position was much closer to Egypt's position, but that each time Begin 'raised hell', Carter backed down.

On 4 November 1980, Jimmy Carter lost the US presidential election to Republican candidate Ronald Reagan. Carter had run out of time, and

he had no more political capital to spend. Reagan was a strong supporter of Israel and had no political interest in solving the Palestinian issue.⁹³ Shortly after entering office, Reagan stated publicly that he did not consider the Israeli settlements to be illegal.⁹⁴ It seemed as though Carter's policies were going to be reversed, and Begin would be home free. However, as fighting intensified in Lebanon, the Reagan administration did become engaged in the Arab-Israeli conflict and, on 24 July 1981, even mediated a cease-fire between Palestinian guerrillas and Israel. Then, in August 1982, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the United States helped to mediate the PLO evacuation from the country. Once Reagan got engaged in the Arab-Israeli conflict, interestingly, he tried to go all the way and, a month later, in September 1982, he launched his own peace plan. To Israel's great dismay, it was based on the autonomy proposal, which Begin had thought was a dead letter after Carter had lost the election. This time, Israel simply rejected the proposal outright, rather than try to drag out negotiations as it had under Carter. This seemed to work. Reagan abandoned his peace proposal without putting up much of a fight.⁹⁵

The autonomy proposal, however, had a strange way of reappearing at regular intervals, despite the fact that the Palestinians had consistently rejected it and that Israel, which had originally suggested autonomy, also shunned it. When the Palestinian Intifada broke out in 1987, it was once again obvious that something had to be done, and, during the spring of 1988, the Reagan administration launched the Shultz peace plan. Here, too, Palestinian autonomy was a central component, and once again, both the PLO and Israel rejected the proposal.⁹⁶

In September 1993, however, Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo treaty.⁹⁷ While there are clear differences between the Oslo treaty and Begin's self-rule proposal, it is clear that Begin's concept of Palestinian autonomy formed the basis for the Oslo treaty.⁹⁸ The Oslo treaty, like the autonomy negotiations which took place during the last year and a half of Carter's presidency, has been bogged down by the fact that the transitional phase was never really accepted as such. The transition from autonomy, in the form of the Palestinian Authority, to Palestinian statehood has now become a purely theoretical concept. Well over two decades have passed since the Oslo treaty's five-year transition period began, and there is no end to it in sight.

CHAPTER 9

A FAILED AMBITION

Both the United States and the Palestinians missed a historic opportunity in the Carter years. President Jimmy Carter entered office in January 1977 with great ambitions for the Middle East, aiming to solve the Arab–Israeli conflict in its entirety. Importantly, Carter identified the Palestinian issue as the core of that conflict and sought to solve it as part of the peace process, rather than postpone it until all the other issues had been dealt with. It was never exactly clear what Carter proposed for the Palestinians, but he wanted to include acceptable Palestinian representatives in the negotiations, so that they could participate in determining their own future. Furthermore, while Carter never supported a Palestinian state, he supported full Israeli withdrawal with only ‘minor modifications’ and a Palestinian ‘homeland’. All of this represented a break with traditional US Middle East policies.

When the comprehensive process derailed and the Sadat–Begin talks developed, Prime Minister Menachem Begin launched his self-rule scheme as a smokescreen to avoid making real concessions on Palestinian issues, while providing Egyptian President Anwar Sadat with cover to proceed with a separate Egyptian–Israeli peace. Carter disliked Begin’s self-rule proposal for the Palestinians, because it failed to grant them the rights to which they had a legitimate claim. In September 1978, Carter told Begin: ‘What is important is whether these people [the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza] have an irrevocable right to self-government. If I were an Arab, I would prefer the present Israeli occupation to this proposal of yours.’¹ The more the talks dragged on, however, the more Carter came to accept self-rule as a starting point.

Once Carter had come to that conclusion, however, Begin began to stall and provoke, ensuring that even that limited proposal never came into being, until the concept was revitalised a decade later in the Oslo treaty.

When Carter left office after four years, in January 1981, he had secured an Egyptian–Israeli peace, but a broader Arab–Israeli peace had proven elusive. The Palestinians had made no gains, and Carter had failed to negotiate with the PLO. Carter was in an odd position – he had attempted to break with traditional US policy but had ended up fulfilling the goals of that tradition, which had been to break up the Arab alliance, side-line the Palestinians, build an alliance with Egypt, weaken the Soviet Union and secure Israel.

The Carter legacy

Within the existing literature, there are two broad approaches to ranking President Jimmy Carter as a peace-maker in the Arab–Israeli conflict. The first, and most common, is to see him as a successful mediator of an Egyptian–Israeli peace.² The second is to see him as a failure because he made no progress on the Palestinian front.³ The former ranks him primarily according to what he achieved, while the latter ranks him primarily according to his intentions. A third approach, recently represented by Hazem Kandil, sees a separate Egyptian–Israeli peace as Carter's intention all along, but this is simply not true. Not only does the archival material fail to support this theory, but even Kandil's source for his argument actually says the opposite of what he claims.⁴ In his seminal book on Carter's Middle East diplomacy, William B. Quandt concludes that, given how the deck was stacked against him, Carter could realistically have tweaked his policy only very slightly in order to increase linkage.⁵ In other words, a comprehensive peace was unrealistic, but it might have been possible to achieve a little more than the very limited separate peace which emerged in March 1979. Recently, Nathan Thrall has posited that Carter might serve as a model for how US presidents can pressure Israel to make concessions.⁶ As this study has demonstrated, though, Thrall largely overstates Carter's pressure on Israel.

This academic debate aside, President Jimmy Carter's legacy in the Middle East is clearly based on his achievement, not on his intentions. He is not remembered as the first US president to focus on the

Palestinian issue, or for his use of the term 'homeland', but rather as the US president who secured a separate Egyptian–Israeli peace. There is no denying that the Camp David Accords and the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty constitute an impressive accomplishment. Since 1948, when Israel was established, Egypt had been Israel's principal enemy. The two states had been at war several times, most importantly in 1948–49, 1956, 1967 and 1973, but also during the war of attrition in 1968–70. The Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty not only ensured that there would be no more wars between Israel and Egypt but also that the Arab states could no longer engage in direct war with Israel, since Syria – Israel's other main adversary – needed Egypt to have a chance against the vastly superior Israeli forces. Carter was decisive in bringing those Egyptian–Israeli treaties to fruition. Had it not been for his persistence, there would have been no such agreements. Still, while this acknowledgment is important, it disguises the fact that, measured against Carter's own standards of what he sought to achieve, the separate peace was a failure.

Perhaps that is an unfair standard, however. It can easily be argued that Carter's ambition was an impossible one – that the conditions were simply too difficult for there to be any realistic chance of a comprehensive peace. I contend that this argument is too simplistic, because it is built on a premise which cannot be tested. It might well be that even *if* Carter had tried all the political tools available in his toolset, then the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty might still have remained the maximum of what he could have achieved.

The problem is that we have no way of knowing this for certain. What we do know, however, is that Carter did not utilise his full toolset. He could have conditioned US aid to Israel on the implementation of restrictive Israeli settlement policies, thus heightening the cost to Begin of expanding settlements (President George H. W. Bush did this in the run-up to the Madrid conference a decade later.) Carter also could have gone further in opening up a US–PLO dialogue, either in response to Israeli policies or by endorsing a broader interpretation of the Sinai II promise regarding the PLO. Carter could have supported UN Security Council resolutions on settlement construction and the Jerusalem bill, but, apart from the resolution on Lebanon, he made no such push in the UN. Lastly, Carter could have gone public with how obstinate Begin was, and thereby attempt to secure US domestic support for more pressure on Israel or a more generous PLO policy. This 'fireside chat' was

indeed considered but never implemented. It is impossible to know whether any of these policies would have had any positive effects, but it is clear that, while Carter worked very hard to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict, there were many measures left untried.

Changing conditions

Carter's comprehensive approach represented a major change in how the US addressed the Middle East. Previous US presidents had viewed the Arab–Israeli conflict according to a set of principles which shaped their negotiations. Firstly, the conflict was viewed as part of the cold war rivalry. This meant that the United States and the Soviet Union competed both in war and in peace, and that the regional conflict was a zero-sum game in which the superpowers competed for influence. Securing the position of their regional allies, then, tended to supersede the desire for regional peace. Secondly, the conflict was seen primarily as one between the Arab states and Israel. This meant that all negotiations were state to state, aimed at solving border questions between the states in question. Thirdly, the Palestinians were politically excluded as a political party, because they were seen as either a humanitarian issue (as refugees) or a security issue (as terrorists). Previous US approaches had thus failed to address the core Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Carter attempted to break with all of these assumptions. He intended to cooperate with the Soviet Union in arranging a broad conference at Geneva. The idea was that Soviet participation would increase the likelihood of success, because it would transform the superpower rivalry which had hampered previous peace-making efforts into superpower cooperation, through which the United States and the Soviet Union could help bring each other's allies to the table and serve as guarantors afterwards. Carter tried to break with the two other assumptions by including the Palestinians both as an issue (West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem and refugees) and as a political actor in the negotiations.

The latter goal was one of the most difficult aspects of Carter's overall approach. Though the Arab states and the Palestinians considered the PLO to be the 'sole representative' of the Palestinians, the United States had promised Israel not to negotiate with the PLO, as part of the 1975 Sinai II disengagement agreement. According to this pledge to Israel, the United States could only negotiate with the PLO if the PLO

recognised Israel and UNSC Resolution 242.⁷ Carter and his foreign policy team were, nevertheless, prepared to attempt to bridge that gap and find creative ways of including the Palestinians in the talks. In the end, though, Carter's main accomplishment reflected the previous US approaches to the conflict far more than they resembled Carter's ambition. The peace between Egypt and Israel was a separate peace which dealt exclusively with Israel and one Arab state: Egypt. The Palestinians were excluded as a party to the talks, though they were the *theme* of the unsuccessful self-rule negotiations.

The goal of reaching a comprehensive peace was not going to be an easy task, as Carter quickly discovered. Nonetheless, some of the important conditions for such a grand scheme were actually present when Carter entered office in January 1977. Globally, the United States and the Soviet Union were in a period of *détente*. This meant that it was possible to get the Soviet Union on board as a co-chair of a Geneva conference, and that the two superpowers could cooperate in developing their diplomatic approach. The Soviet Union, for example, was willing to help Carter communicate with the PLO in an attempt to get the organisation to assent to a UNSC Resolution 242 formula which was acceptable to the United States. According to this formula, the United States would recognise that the resolution did not adequately address the Palestinian issue.⁸

Regionally, the overall situation was stable, apart from the civil war in Lebanon. Both Egypt and Syria had recently signed disengagement agreements with Israel, meaning that the two leading Arab confrontation states had broken the taboo of negotiating with Israel. These agreements had confirmed to these states that it was possible to regain land through negotiations, and that the United States could serve as a mediator, despite its bias in Israel's favour. Furthermore, while the PLO had not gone the full distance towards committing to recognising Israel and accepting UNSC Resolution 242, the organisation had recently moved in that direction. At the Palestine National Council (PNC) in 1974, the PLO had vaguely, and implicitly, accepted a two-state solution.⁹ It would confirm that move at the 1977 PNC.

In Israel, the Labour Party was still in power when Carter started his term. While the Labour Party leaders had supported the establishment of settlements in the occupied territories since 1967, they were not

proponents of a strong ideological claim to those territories. Negotiations could thus have a security-oriented focus.

Domestically, Carter was a newly elected president with the popular mandate this status entailed. He had considerable room for manoeuvre, in terms of changing approaches to foreign policy, particularly since both the Nixon and Ford administrations had become so unpopular. Furthermore, while previous US governments had failed to include the PLO in peace-making, there had been a gradual move in the United States to accept the PLO as a legitimate political party. Such a development was found in State Department deliberations, in the so-called Saunders document presented to the US House of Representatives in November 1975, and in the 1975 Brookings Institution report, amongst others.¹⁰ The Brookings report in particular had been instrumental in bringing the argument for a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, to the fore in US foreign policy circles. Several of the authors of the report gained prominent positions in the Carter administration, including National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and his Middle East advisor William B. Quandt. While including the Palestinians in Middle East peace-making did remain controversial in the United States, Carter and his foreign policy team were not starting from scratch.

The conditions which had been promising when Carter moved into the White House withered over time, and almost none of them remained in place at the end of his tenure. There was obviously some interplay between Carter's approach to the Middle East and the changes in these conditions. Some of the conditions changed as a result of Carter's policies, whilst other were shaped by external events – which were often outside Carter's control, and this would, in turn, alter Carter's policies towards the conflict. The changing conditions form one important explanation for why Carter failed to deliver on his comprehensive approach.

Building a house of cards

The first nine months of Carter's tenure in office can be described as an almost hyperactive period of constructing a comprehensive peace edifice. The combined effort of President Carter and Secretary of State Vance in putting together all the pieces is staggering. Only three weeks along,

in February 1977, Vance went on an eight-day Middle East tour to develop the common ground on which a Geneva conference could be based. On 16 March 1977, Carter famously and controversially declared that he supported a Palestinian 'homeland'. 'Homeland' was a vague term, and Carter did not go so far as to support a Palestinian state. The term did, however, imply a degree of self-determination, and Carter would also accept a federative solution with Jordan. He also demanded Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, with only minor modifications.¹¹

This was a radical step by a US president. It set off alarm bells in Israel and amongst pro-Israeli groups in the United States. On the other hand, it gained Carter support from the Arab states, the Palestinians and the Soviet Union. In March 1977, the PLO confirmed its stance at the 1974 Palestine National Council which implied an acceptance of a two-state solution.¹² This was not enough for the United States to open direct contacts with the PLO, because the PLO still rejected UNSC Resolution 242 and did not recognise the state of Israel. The fact that Carter was going further than previous US presidents in acknowledging the importance of the Palestinian question, and the reactions this raised in the United States, demonstrated the inherent tension between US domestic and foreign politics with regard to the Arab–Israeli conflict. Attempting to shift US policy in a direction which accommodated the Palestinians was highly unpopular domestically and created tension between the Carter administration and Israel.

In the period surrounding the homeland declaration, Carter hosted the Middle East heads of state, to further develop the prospects for holding a Geneva conference. Already at this point Carter clashed with the Israeli leadership, which was still led by a Labour government and was in a tight spot. Facing domestic problems, and with elections approaching, it was in no position to make concessions.¹³

Meanwhile, Carter and his foreign policy team explored various ways to get the PLO on board in the negotiations. For one thing, Carter pressed all the regional heads of state on this issue. Israel was adamantly against including the PLO in any way. Despite the fact that Carter strongly disagreed with the Israeli approach to the Palestinians, he strictly adhered to the 1975 Sinai II promise and did not speak to the PLO. He did, however, cultivate a series of back-channel approaches towards the Palestinian organisation. These back-channel intermediaries

included Palestinian intellectuals in the United States with ties to the PLO, US Quakers, a US journalist (Sheehan), a US Congressman (Findley), the Soviet Union and the various Arab states. The Carter administration's indirect communication with the PLO, in the hopes of getting it to accept UNSC Resolution 242 and thus become an acceptable partner in the peace process, was a highly unusual and controversial US policy. At the same time, Carter's strict adherence to the Sinai II promise meant that, while he intended to break out of the diplomatic mould by including the Palestinians in peace-making, he remained bound by the premises of that mould. He would never really challenge the Sinai II pledge and actually adhered to it much more strictly than even Henry Kissinger had intended. This was perhaps the biggest contradiction in Carter's approach.

The contradiction between Carter's goal of including the Palestinians and the premise that the United States could not communicate with the PLO, is key to understanding why Carter failed to get the PLO on board. The various back channels were slow and contradictory. The PLO was also torn 'inside and out' between the radicals and the moderates.¹⁴ The organisation was comprised of a large variety of groups with divergent interests, and coordinating a common political stance was exceedingly difficult for it. Furthermore, the PLO was at the mercy of its various interlocutors, and neither the United States nor the PLO could actually get a clear sense of how far the other was willing to go. What would the PLO get in return for accepting UNSC Resolution 242? Could the PLO accept being part of a unified Arab delegation at Geneva? If the PLO did everything the United States asked, would Israel accept the PLO's participation in a Geneva conference?

Carter had no clear answers to these questions. While the United States agreed to communicate with the PLO, if the PLO accepted the UNSC Resolution 242 formula which the Carter team developed, the administration refused to commit to anything beyond that. The PLO leadership therefore had no clear notion of what such communication could lead to. Accepting UNSC Resolution 242, and implicitly recognising Israel, was considered a high price to pay with few concrete returns. This made it difficult for the moderate Palestinian leadership to convince the more radical Palestinian groups and individuals of the merits of accepting UNSC Resolution 242. It was also hard for the PLO leadership to convince its various Arab benefactors, such as the Syrian

regime. The Syrian regime insisted that the PLO had to get more than a mere promise of contacts with the United States in return for accepting the resolution.¹⁵

On shaky ground

The Israeli answer to the question of conditional PLO participation had been a clear 'no' under the Labour government, and, as it turned out, that no would become even clearer. In June 1977, Likud took power in Israel under the leadership of Menachem Begin. This changed the political situation decisively. Unlike the late Labour government, Begin's government had a strong mandate and a strong leader. While this meant that Likud was in a better position to make difficult decisions, the government was also harder to work with due to its staunch ideological position regarding the Palestinians and the Palestinian territories. Many of the Arab states and the PLO backtracked on their compromises when faced with the harsh Likud rhetoric, the ideological claim Begin made regarding the West Bank and Gaza, Begin's insistence that the Palestinians were not a people, and, lastly, Carter's inability to rein in Israel.¹⁶ Begin even insisted that the PLO was a reincarnation of the Nazis.¹⁷

Carter had taken the position that Israeli settlements were illegal, as well as obstacles to peace. This, combined with the fact that he appeared to open the door for the PLO to join negotiations, made Israel and its US supporters strongly sceptical of Carter. He therefore tried a soft approach towards Begin, hoping that he could win more by not confronting him. It had the opposite effect. Begin returned to Israel convinced that Carter was weak and describing him as a 'cream puff'.¹⁸ Begin then tried to exploit Carter's perceived weakness and challenged him by expanding settlements. This challenge, and Carter's inability to stop it, set the tone for the tense relationship between Carter and Begin, as well as the later encounters between the two. Begin had seen that he could push Carter and make gains and, when Carter tried to push him back, he could stand his ground without cost. This dynamic gave the Arab heads of state the impression that Carter was not able to support their claims when faced with Begin.

This impression was confirmed when, before Begin's visit to Washington, the Carter administration asked the Arab heads of state for

concessions, because it was seen to be almost impossible to make Begin budge. The result was that the PLO and the Arab states became sceptical as to how realistic Carter's comprehensive approach was. To accommodate the needs of Israel was to estrange the Arab position. While the internal discussions from this period show that the US administration considered talking to the PLO if Israel refused to budge, Carter never dared make that move, due to certain domestic constraints.¹⁹ Not talking to the PLO was a fundamental cornerstone of US Middle East policy, and breaking with that policy would have been extremely unpopular in the United States. Similarly, Carter had ways to pressure Israel, but refrained from doing so. These unused tools included withholding US funds, supporting UN Security Council resolutions and publicly blaming Begin for blocking progress in the negotiations.

Instead, Vance went on a new tour of the Middle East, to develop the comprehensive approach further. Despite having hardened somewhat in reaction to Begin, Vance found that, in general, the Arab leaders were constructive. August and September 1977 was the moment in the Carter presidency when the United States came closest to opening political talks with the PLO. For a short while, Vance, through various intermediaries, argued over the semantics of a PLO statement which would have allowed for direct talks. The United States would accept a formula which stated that the PLO supported UNSC Resolution 242 but recognised that it did not adequately deal with the Palestinians as a political entity. The PLO, however, insisted on first pointing out that UNSC Resolution 242 did not recognise their political rights; if it did, on the other hand, the organisation would recognise it.²⁰

The PLO proposed the following formulation: 'Had resolution 242 dealt with the Palestinian question as a cause of a people that has its national rights and aspirations to establish its state in its homeland and not as a problem of refugees, the PLO would have accepted it.'²¹

The Carter administration could not accept that formulation and suggested an alternative:

The PLO accepts UN Security Council Resolution 242, with the reservation that it considers that the Resolution does not make adequate reference to the question of the Palestinians since it fails to make any reference to a homeland for the Palestinian people.

It is recognized that the language of Resolution 242 relates to the right of all states in the Middle East to live in peace.²²

Later the Carter administration tried another formulation:

The PLO accepts UNSC Resolution 242, recognizing that it relates to the right of all states in the Middle East to live in peace, with the following reservation, the reservation of the PLO regarding resolution 242 is that it does not establish a complete basis for the Palestinian issue and for the national rights of the Palestinians, it also fails to refer in any manner to a national homeland for the Palestinian people.²³

The PLO did not accept these formulations, and the 242-with-reservations debate ultimately led nowhere. While Carter thought that not talking to the PLO was a hopeless policy, he considered keeping the promise a question of national honour. This debate nonetheless shows how close Carter was to opening direct communication with the PLO. In the history of US–PLO relations, this was remarkable, but it did not cut it.

Sadat's initiatives

While Begin stood his ground against Carter, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was desperate for peace. Economically, Egypt was not doing well. Sadat wanted to reorient his regime away from its long-time Soviet ally and towards the United States, and he wanted to regain the Sinai. Peace with Israel was essential to ensure success in these overarching aims.²⁴ Sadat therefore gave Carter concessions which Carter had not even asked for. Sadat's strategy was to try to become as close to the United States as possible. For Sadat peace-making with Israel was also alliance-building with the United States. Begin, on the other hand, did not have to compromise to please the United States, because the US–Israeli alliance was well cemented. Carter could vocally challenge Begin but would not put any political weight behind that challenge, unless a situation arose in which Carter could convincingly argue that Begin was the roadblock to peace. It never became clear exactly how obdurate Begin had to be before Carter felt that such pressure would be warranted. This difference

between Sadat and Begin's position vis-à-vis the United States is essential to understanding the development of the peace talks. Begin was a hardliner who knew that his alliance with the United States was secure. Sadat, on the other hand, needed to compromise, precisely to secure support from the United States. This dynamic greatly benefitted Begin.

In a major attempt to push the peace process forward and please the United States, Sadat handed Vance a draft for an Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty in August 1977. Sadat suggested that the United States should collect similar drafts from the other involved states. Carter and Vance were elated, and the focus of the talks shifted to a multi-bilateral approach. Rather than focus on one complete deal involving all the parties, this model aimed for several parallel treaties. In most aspects, this shift from a comprehensive approach to a multi-bilateral approach was a minor procedural shift, but for the Palestinians it was a major substantial shift, since they were not a state, and this model applied only to states.

September 1977 went by with little progress. Israel built more settlements, and argued strongly against Palestinian participation. On 1 October, the disagreements between Israel and the Carter administration came to a head with the release of the US–Soviet joint communiqué. The communiqué stated that the common goal of the United States and the Soviet Union was a comprehensive peace, to be obtained through the participation of all the involved parties, including the Palestinians. The communiqué stressed that such a solution must be based on Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines.²⁵

While US–Soviet cooperation was part and parcel of the comprehensive approach, Israel was strongly against this move and mobilised massive support, particularly within the United States. Brzezinski described Israel's pressure as 'blackmail'.²⁶ Carter caved in, scrapping the joint communiqué and accepting an Israeli working paper for how to proceed with the negotiations. This working paper ensured that Israel would negotiate with each of the Arab states separately and once again proved to Begin that Carter could be pressured. Israel's ability to mobilise domestic opinion in the United States was one of Israel's greatest assets, particularly in comparison to the Arab states. To say nothing of how this imbalance tipped in Israel's favour compared to the Palestinians. Israel had a high level of influence on US domestic politics,

while the Arab states had almost no access. This imbalance favoured Israel, particularly in moments such as the joint communiqué debate, because the communiqué contained elements which were domestically unpopular in the United States. It was seen as inviting the Soviet Union back into Middle East diplomacy, and it accepted the Palestinians as a legitimate party to the conflict. Israel's know-how in effectively using US domestic policies to its advantage helped the Israelis outmanoeuvre both the Arab states and the Carter administration.

Syria and the PLO were particularly dissatisfied with the scrapping of the joint communiqué, as well as the working paper which replaced it. The situation became completely deadlocked, and the comprehensive approach was clearly falling apart as Carter gave in to Israeli pressure. Then, Sadat and Begin undermined the comprehensive approach further by establishing secret and direct lines of communication. When Carter appealed to Sadat to help him push the process forward, Sadat decided to go to Jerusalem and break the psychological barrier between Israel and Egypt. With this Jerusalem initiative in November 1977, any hope of keeping the process comprehensive went out the window. Once Sadat had opened direct contact, thus implicitly recognising Israel, the other Arab states and the PLO wanted no part in the political process. A particularly important result of this was that Sadat became increasingly isolated in the Arab world. Sadat was essentially faced with the choice of either breaking with the Israeli–Egyptian peace process in order to reconcile with the Arab states and the PLO or continuing with the peace process and breaking with the other Arabs. Given that he was realigning his main alliance towards the United States he was disinclined to consider the former.

Fascinatingly, Carter and his team were slow to realise that their comprehensive approach was no longer viable. Instead, they struggled to find a way to keep the process going.

The cards fall down

Based on the archival material, we can be sure that Carter wanted a comprehensive peace. We can be far less sure of what Sadat wanted. He was vocally supportive of the comprehensive approach for a long time, and with some exceptions, until the very end of Carter's presidency, Sadat generally insisted that peace with Israel was part of a

broader peace. However, in late December 1977, Sadat claimed that the Palestinian issue was a mere 'cover' for him.²⁷ Later though, he reverted to arguing that it was central. In sum, it is reasonable to assume that Sadat would not have minded achieving a broader Arab-Israeli peace, but that he became less and less willing to risk anything in order to secure it. What really mattered to Sadat was to make peace with Israel, to regain the Sinai, and to secure an alliance with the United States. The more the Arab states and the PLO condemned Sadat, the less he was willing to heed their demands.

While Sadat's trip to Israel derailed the comprehensive peace, and ensured that there was an open and direct contact between the Israeli and Egyptian leadership, it did not pave the way for an easy peace process. In this period, Sadat generally acted against US advice. It is difficult to assess what Sadat was thinking at the time, but it appears that he was, at the very least, naively optimistic regarding Israel. Realising – very slowly – that this bilateral approach was the new name of the game, the Carter administration investigated the possibility of a separate peace plus. This would entail an Egyptian-Israeli peace which included an adequate Palestinian solution. As had been the case with the 'homeland' term, it was not entirely clear what was understood to be an adequate Palestinian solution. It had to be something which the other Arab states, and some of the Palestinians, could accept as a starting point, and which could therefore help to legitimise Sadat's peace with Israel. This would then form the first step in a broader peace process.

The concept that would tie this together was linkage – that is, a certain degree of formal connection between an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and a broader peace between Israel and the other Arab states, as well as a solution to the Palestinian issue. How much linkage would be enough to satisfy the Arab states in general, and Egypt in particular? Furthermore, could Israel be made to accept the degree of linkage which was seen as a minimum by the Arab states and the Palestinians?

Begin realised that he was under a certain amount of pressure to provide something on the Palestinian front, in order to facilitate a separate peace with Egypt. In December 1977, therefore, he launched his 'self-rule' proposal, hoping that it would be just enough to satisfy Carter and Sadat. The self-rule proposal would give the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza autonomous rights as individuals, but they would not gain any national rights, nor could they claim sovereignty over the land.

This was a non-starter for the Palestinians, and it should have been clear that this was not enough to appease any of the Arab states, including – at least initially – Egypt. For lack of better options, however, the idea would gradually sink in with both Sadat and Carter.

The first half of 1978 was an *annus horribilis* for Carter in the Middle East. Begin refused to budge and also expanded Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and, in March, Israel invaded Lebanon in retaliation for a PLO terrorist attack in Israel. For the Palestinian's, the process had become one of negotiation without representation, and they would have none of it. Isolated from the political process, the PLO reverted to violence in order to assert its importance in the conflict. While the PLO attack on Israel did indeed prove the PLO's relevance, it further excluded them from the negotiations.

When Israel invaded Lebanon, causing over a thousand deaths, Begin had crossed a red line. He was condemned in the UN, and ordered out of Lebanon by a UN Security Council resolution supported by the United States. While the IDF did not immediately heed the order, this showed that the United States could exert pressure on Israel in the UN if Israel committed acts which were adequately reprehensible. This was a step Carter would take only if Begin really pushed it. A large-scale military incursion into Lebanon was such a case, whereas settlement expansions were not. This gave Begin a good indication of his room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis Carter.

When Carter tried to get Begin to accept that negotiations had to have some semblance of comprehensiveness, Begin knew he could stand his ground, aside from offering the elusive self-rule concept. In March 1978, faced with Begin's intransigence, on the one hand, and Sadat's increasing willingness to work towards a peace with Israel, on the other, Carter admitted that a separate peace was the only realistic option.²⁸ Begin's self-rule had become the accepted starting point for a negotiation of what 'linkage' would entail in practice.

Camp David

After having banged his head against a wall for months on end, Carter invited Sadat and Begin to Camp David for a closed conference. The format was highly unusual, but by September 1978 Carter had tried virtually everything else and badly needed a breakthrough.

His administration had invested too much time, prestige and energy on the peace process to let it fade into oblivion.

The Camp David format had several advantages. First, it was top-level, so major decisions could be made on the spot. Second, the fact that the conference was secluded and closed meant that domestic pressure was reduced. Third, since the US president himself was host and main negotiator, the cost of failing to make compromises was high. None of these premises was enough to make the process easy. There was also a clear imbalance with regard to how these factors affected the respective parties. On the Egyptian side, Sadat was the individual who was most willing to compromise and the most intent on securing a close relationship with the United States. The lack of any corresponding US domestic pressure and a fear of disappointing Carter increased Sadat's willingness to make serious compromises. Begin, on the other hand, was a hardliner, and he knew that the US-Israeli relationship was stable. While the reduced role of domestic pressure meant that he was free from the pressure of the most inflexible Israelis, it also meant that he was under less pressure to compromise. He also risked far less than Sadat with regard to the US relationship. This gave him much more room to manoeuvre, and he could take negotiations to the brink of collapse in order to secure his position. While Carter's stance on the desired outcome from Camp David was much closer to Sadat's, he needed success. Since it was easier to pressure Sadat than Begin, Carter was inclined to lean on Sadat.

The gruelling 13 days of negotiations at Camp David ended in a framework agreement between Egypt and Israel, known as the Camp David Accords, which stipulated a separate peace between the two countries and provided the framework for negotiating a solution for the West Bank and Gaza. While the Israeli concession of agreeing to cede the Sinai was major, Begin made the greatest gains with regard to everything outside the Sinai. He minimised the degree of formal linkage between the Egyptian-Israeli peace and the development of Palestinian autonomy on the West Bank and Gaza. Carter believed that Begin had agreed to a moratorium on settlements for a longer period, but Begin insisted that he had only agreed not to launch new settlements for three months. In addition, Begin had ensured that any references to Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, to a division of Jerusalem or to Palestinian self-determination, were either

entirely removed from the text, or packed away in separate side-letters with a low judicial value.

Despite the Camp David Accords of September 1978, Israel and Egypt negotiated until March 1979 before they signed a peace treaty. Those months included several tough rounds of negotiations, and Begin continuously managed to weaken the degree of linkage between the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty and the Palestinian autonomy negotiations. After the peace treaty was signed, negotiations for Palestinian autonomy slowed down almost immediately. Begin had gotten what he wanted – peace with Egypt without substantial concessions on the West Bank and Gaza. Giving up the Sinai was the most he was willing to offer to ensure those gains. Sadat, too, had gotten what he primarily wanted – peace with Israel, regaining the Sinai, and an alliance with the United States. As for the remaining issues, Sadat was angered by the vociferous Arab reaction to his peace treaty with Israel and became far less inclined to push for Palestinian gains. In addition, Sadat feared that if he pushed on the Palestinian issues, Begin would slow down the return of the Sinai. Sadat therefore allowed Begin to expand the Israeli settlements without complaining.

Carter, for his part, was tired of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Instead of being personally involved in further engagements or sending Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, he appointed special representatives who lacked an intimate knowledge of the situation. The Carter administration was sapped of energy, and had to direct its focus towards issues which were far more important than securing autonomy for the Palestinians. Oil prices were rising, the economic situation was becoming more difficult, US election season was approaching, and the Middle East was in turmoil. In Iran, a stable US ally was ousted and replaced by a radical anti-US regime led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Things took a turn for the worse when US embassy personnel were taken hostage in November 1979. Furthermore, the lull in the cold war ended abruptly with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 and the launch of the Carter doctrine.

When Carter lost the US presidential election in November 1980, it seemed to be the end of the story. Carter and his call for a comprehensive peace had been the best shot the Palestinians would get for at least a decade. Begin knew that once he had outlasted Carter, the pressure on Israel to provide Palestinians with a self-governing authority would be

gone. Since neither the Palestinians nor the other Arab states supported the idea, and since Sadat was disinterested, there was no impetus to keep negotiations going. Those negotiations had been kept artificially alive by Carter in 'a semi-comatose state' during the last months of his tenure.²⁹ With Carter out of the White House, the autonomy negotiations lost their life support. Twice during the following eight Reagan years, however, the autonomy proposal would resurface, but each time both Israel and the PLO rejected it. The PLO wanted a state, and autonomy would not cut it.

Whither the pressure

The looming question in this story is whether Carter realistically could have done more to change the outcome of the peace process. The key to the answer resides in the power structures between Egypt and Israel. Israel was the strongest regional power, and Sadat had come to realise that the Sinai could only be regained via diplomacy. Since war was no longer an option, and since Egypt had become isolated in the Arab world, Sadat lacked leverage over Israel. Begin was able to use this fact to maximise his advantage in the negotiations. Sadat could only hope that Carter could use the leverage the United States had over Israel to alter the balance of power in the negotiations, but he would be disappointed. In theory, the United States had massive leverage over Israel, but there is a difference between having leverage and using it. While internal US documents are full of thoughts about how and when to pressure Israel, the Carter administration never took those steps. As I have argued at length, it is simply too easy to dismiss Carter's project as impossible from the start. We simply do not know if the result would have been different if Carter had taken steps to pressure Israel, or to facilitate a proper US-PLO dialogue. What we do know is that he failed to utilise his full political toolset.

Not only did Carter not pressure Begin in any substantive way – though the two had several heated encounters – but he also increased the amount of aid given to Israel, paid for the withdrawal from the Sinai, sold Israel a large number of the most advanced fighter jets and generally protected Israel at the UN. This reveals an inherent tension in the policies of the Carter administration. On the one hand, the Carter administration represented a break with the past, in that it sought to

solve the Arab–Israeli conflict in a way which greatly displeased Israel; on the other hand, the Carter administration represented a great degree of continuity with the past, in that it continued to arm Israel and refused direct communication with the PLO. This contradiction encapsulates the difference between Carter the idealist and Carter the realist. While he may have entered the White House as an idealist, set on solving the conflict in its entirety, he gradually became a realist, as difficulties mounted both at home and abroad.

Still, we must not dismiss the fact that the Carter administration did consider ways to apply pressure on Israel and alternatives for how to include the Palestinians in negotiations. One of the keys to understanding why Carter's team considered pressure on Begin but never applied it is Sadat's terrible sense of timing. At several important junctures in the talks, the Carter administration was prepared to place the blame on Begin, consider opening talks with the PLO, vote against Israel at the UN and undertake a variety of other soft options. Hard pressure, though, such as withholding money and ceasing to supply Israel with arms, was never really considered at all.

In each of the cases where Carter considered using soft pressure on Israel, a central premise was that talks had reached a deadlock for which Begin clearly bore responsibility. If such a situation were to occur, the US domestic resistance against pressuring Israel would have been reduced, and it would have been easier for Carter to stand up to Begin. Each time they approached such a moment of truth, though, Sadat jumped the gun and cancelled talks. While Sadat was not aware that Carter was preparing to move against Begin, his decisions caused ire with Carter, who withdrew the threat of blaming Begin. One such example was in July 1978, when the State Department had prepared a stalemate paper which predicted that Sadat would accept the US proposal while Israel would refute it. The stalemate paper therefore laid out ways to blame Israel and pressure Begin both domestically and internationally. Before Begin had time to react to the US proposal, however, Sadat pulled out of the talks.³⁰ The same thing took place at Camp David.

Another important aspect of the power balance between Sadat and Begin is the way in which each man related to Carter. While Begin had a quarrelsome but professional way of approaching Carter, Sadat was always amicable. Begin gave Carter nothing for free, whereas Sadat

handed him secret concessions. On a personal level, Carter favoured Sadat, and this helped Egypt draw closer to the United States. In terms of negotiating, however, Begin's strategy paid off. Since Begin hardly moved an inch, and since Sadat handed Carter concessions before negotiations even started, Carter fell into the habit of applying pressure on Sadat, whom he knew would concede.

William B. Quandt summarised Begin's negotiation technique: '[He] knew how to turn to good advantage his reputation for intransigence. He would resist mightily making even the most insignificant verbal concessions, so that when he would finally decide to give an inch it would seem like a yard.'³¹ Begin was, quite simply, a superior negotiator who utilised all of the tools at his disposal. For example, while his claims to the West Bank and Gaza were rooted in the deep ideological argument that those territories were eternally Jewish, he used a legalistic argument when negotiating. He claimed that, according to international law, Israel was allowed to annex territory which had been acquired by defensive war. He claimed that the Six-Day war was a defensive war, and that Israel could annex the territory it had won. Even Meir Rosenne, Begin's legal advisor at Camp David, admitted that this was untrue, and that no legal experts supported Begin's interpretation.³² Whether Begin had legality on his side or not is irrelevant when judging his brilliance in negotiation. While Begin was among the most frustrating opponents one could have had across the negotiation table, he got what he wanted, because he held the best cards and played them well. Sadat, a friendlier negotiating partner, got far less than he wanted because he had a weaker hand and he played it erratically. One of Begin's strengths was that he was able to identify exactly how little Sadat needed. He never gave an inch more than necessary.

Carter, for his part, was slow to realise that Sadat was willing to go it alone, and he failed to appreciate how deeply ideological Begin's claim to the West Bank and Gaza was. What Carter perceived as a bargaining position was, in fact, an ideological red line for Begin. By the end of his term, Carter was sick and tired of Begin. At one point, he informed the full Egyptian team, including Sadat, that he had no recollection of Begin ever being helpful in the negotiation process.³³ But Carter failed to transform his frustration into any productive pressure. Instead, he grudgingly let Begin get his way, since it seemed to be the only means of obtaining any agreement at all. Since Sadat was willing to accept a

separate peace, Carter was willing to acknowledge that this was as much as he was going to get. A comprehensive peace would have demanded much more, both to make Israel concede and to get the other Arab states and the PLO back into the process. This would have been difficult at the best of times, but with the re-emergence of the cold war, chaos in the region and dwindling domestic support, Carter was no longer in any such position.

Unsurprisingly, the Palestinians were the biggest losers in this process. The self-rule proposal, which none of the Palestinians had accepted, was a ruse. Their concerns were kicked further down the road, and it would take a war in Lebanon, yet another state of exile (in Tunisia) and an intifada before they would finally be allowed to participate in negotiations. Even then, the result was not a state, but a Palestinian Authority. It is no overstatement to say that Begin's legacy looms large over the West Bank and Gaza to this day.

NOTES

Chapter 1 President Carter and the Palestinians

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Chapter 2 US Presidents and the Palestinians

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Chapter 4 Clinging to Comprehensive Peace

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112. Dayan, *Breakthrough*, 38–54; Weizman, *The Battle for Peace*, 82–83; Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 255–57; Mohamed Ibrahim Kamel, *The Camp David Accords* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 34, 79.
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118. Jimmy Carter to President Sadat, 21 October 1977, JCL, Vertical Files Box 109, Sadat, Anwar al.
119. SecState WashDC to White House, 28 October 1977, JCL, NLC-16-109-3-5-6. The text of the letter in the referenced file is not official, but there is no indication that the text was changed in the version which was ultimately

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 132. Cobban, 168–92; Lesch, *Political Perceptions of the Palestinians on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip*; Emile A. Nakhleh, *The West Bank and Gaza Toward the Making of a Palestinian State* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1979), 4, 64–65.

Chapter 5 The Jerusalem Bombshell

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3. DepState to the Embassy in Egypt, 5 November 1977, *FRUS 1977–80, Vol. VIII*, 745; Heikal, *Secret Channels*, 257.
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5. Brzezinski to the President, 10 November 1977, JCL, White House Central File, Subject File Box CO-23, CO45 Executive 4-16-77 – 12-31-77.
6. Embassy in Egypt to DepState, 9 November 1977; Embassy in Egypt to DepState, 10 November 1977, *FRUS 1977–80, Vol. VIII*, 748–53.
7. Carter, *White House Diary*, 132–34.

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Chapter 6 The Torturous Road to Camp David

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90. See, for example, David Aaron who viewed all non-security concerns as based on security, not ideology. David Aaron to the White House, 6 July 1978, JCL, NLC-7-7-4-5-8; Harold H. Saunders to the Secretary, 28 July 1978, JCL, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Box 13, Middle East – Negotiations [1-78-7-28-78].
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Chapter 7 Camp David and the Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty

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35. A Framework for Peace in the Middle East Agreed at Camp David, 12 September 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, NLC-128-9-7-4-9. See also the discussion on refugees in MemCon, 11 September 1978, *FRUS* 1977–80, Vol. IX, 164–71.
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Chapter 8 Where do we Go Now, but Nowhere?

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70. Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled*, 206–08; Carter, *White House Diary*, 420–23; Vance, *Hard Choices*, 410–12; Emery, 'United States Iran Policy 1979–1980,' 633. In his memoir, Brzezinski frequently notes that Muskie lacked experience and expertise in international affairs, and that Christopher had to supply him with both. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*.
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94. Lenczowski, *American Presidents and the Middle East*, 256; Seth Anziska, 'Autonomy as State Prevention,' 300.
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Chapter 9 A Failed Ambition

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4. Kandil, *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen*, 151. This is a common misunderstanding of Carter. Pressman, 'Explaining the Carter Administration's Israeli–Palestinian Solution,' 1121–24.
5. Quandt, *Camp David*, 324–27.
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