

Viewpoints
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An American Journalist Looks Back: Sadat, Begin, and the Palestinians, The Gamble That Helped Spawn a 40-Year Peace

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When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the predictable sense is that neither side has a strong leader able to make compromises, the facilitator in the White House is new to the task, and trust between Israelis and Palestinians has withered in the wake of recent violence. Nonetheless, despite continued Palestinian-Israeli hostilities and Sadat's assassination, the vision of Sadat and the risk-taking of Begin has flourished. Despite dire predictions of failure in 1977, after 40 years, for both Egypt and Israel, the October War is still the last war.

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Egyptian President Anwar Sadat (left) and Prime Minister Menachem Begin in serious talks at the King David Hotel dinner in Jerusalem, 1977. Courtesy of the Press Office of the Government of Israel.



If you had asked Egyptian President Anwar Sadat 40 years ago how his historic visit to Jerusalem was going at its midpoint, on Nov. 20, 1977, chances are he would have scowled. So might Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

Both leaders had delivered speeches in the Knesset, Israel's Parliament, and both had talked boldly of avoiding war, but none of their other goals seemed attainable based on what they heard the other speaker say.

Announced only 11 days earlier, the surprise visit seemed doomed to failure. At a dinner the night of the 20th, "Everyone seated at the table – Egyptians no less than Israelis – looked as though they had just returned from a funeral," said Israeli Defense Minister Ezer Weizman.

Nevertheless, barely ten months after his visit, Sadat and Begin signed the Camp David Accords, and six months later, their two countries agreed to a formal peace treaty. Both men won the Nobel Prize and more importantly, despite all the dour expectations, Egypt and Israel have not gone to war in the 40 years since.

How did they succeed when prospects seemed so dim?

"Clearly, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was built on a stunning deal that surprised the world," said Aaron David Miller, scholar and longtime State Department advisor on Middle East peace negotiations.

"In exchange for returning Sinai to Egypt and dismantling all Israeli settlements, Israel got a peace treaty with the largest and most important Arab state, that has held these many years," Miller said.

One other factor played a role, as I discovered when I arrived to cover the impact of the visit for ABC News. I saw the astonished, approving reaction of ordinary Israelis and Egyptians who watched Sadat and Begin on live television. The sight of the two leaders facing each other in open, honest debate changed attitudes at the street levels of both countries.

Much of the change came from Sadat's choice of words.

"The October War," he said, "should be the last war."

The Egyptian President, an Arab, was sitting at a table among Jews in the Knesset, smiling and nodding and smoking a pipe. His listeners applauded vigorously.

He had made his visit a "sacred" mission, Sadat said, because "the alternative is horrible." Indeed, four years earlier, some 18,000 Egyptians and Israelis had perished in 19 days of battle. Since 1948, there had been at least four wars in 29 years.

As Sadat spoke in 1977, I stood on the streets of Tel Aviv, a foreign journalist seeking comment.

To be sure, there was doubt. At a television store in Tel Aviv on that final day, crowds pressed against the glass and watched.

"I'm a little skeptical," said a young man in his twenties, "because they don't say anything. I mean they don't say they achieve anything."

But an Israeli widow whose fighter pilot husband died in the 1967 Six-Day War told me she thought Begin and Sadat had talked boldly in public so they could agree quietly in private.

"I think Sadat did a wonderful, wonderful thing in taking this initial step," said Yael Artzi, the widow, "and I keep on hoping that all those people who died did not die in vain."

And at a school for immigrants learning Hebrew, an Israeli teacher told me classes had been stopped while students watched a man they had been taught to hate.

"Suddenly they saw he spoke beautifully," she said, "he was a human being suddenly and it was a wonderful thing to see the change in the children from one day to the next day."

In 1999, Benny Morris, one of Israel's most respected historians, re-examined the 1977 Israeli reaction and concluded: "the visit was a major milestone on the road to peace."

Months later, Israel withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula, which was demilitarized.

"But the significance of the visit went far deeper," Morris wrote.

"The Israelis, long fed on a diet of unswerving Arab enmity and barbarism," he said, "now came face to face with the most important leader in the Arab world."

They discovered "a smiling, somewhat paternal, soft-spoken, dignified idealist who clearly wanted peace and was willing to put his life on the line to achieve it."

One final exchange in the Knesset had an indelible impact around the globe. With Sadat sitting beside Moshe Dayan, the revered Israeli military leader, Golda Meir, the former prime minister, blurted out an affectionate gibe:

"You always called me an old lady!"

The trio erupted in laughter.

Then Meir turned serious.

"Mr. President," she said, "I want to see the day of peace between you and us, a peace between all our neighbors and us,"

As their expressions grew sober, Meir switched directions again.

"And Mr. President, as a grandmother to a grandfather, may I give you a little present for the new granddaughter?"

Then, leaning forward, Meir pressed a small, wrapped package into Sadat's hand. The assembled Jews and Arabs broke into laughter and applauded together.

To those of us watching, it seemed as if the notion of family and personal friendship had overcome the barriers of nationality and nationhood.

Several hours later, Sadat approached the steps of his jetliner to fly back to Cairo. Suddenly, he turned and leaned, smiling, toward his hosts.

"Thanks for everything," he said, speaking with a surprisingly American-sounding accent. "Thanks for everything."

In Egypt, ordinary citizens reacted positively. While Sadat was immediately denounced as a traitor by Arab leaders, he was welcomed home to Cairo by cheering young people carrying makeshift signs.

"The visit broke a psychological barrier," Morris wrote in *Righteous Victims*, his epic history. "The Egyptians were clearly won over by the warm welcome accorded to their president," he said, noting that Cairo radio stations soon started calling Israel the "rival" rather than the "enemy."

Soon, however, there was violence between Israelis and the Palestinians, who were left out of the process. Four months after Sadat flew home, 11 Palestinian terrorists hijacked a bus on the coastal road to Haifa and killed 38 Israelis, including 13 children, and wounded 71.

"These people are shooting at us and you know what's in my head?" Sharona Tel-Oren, a symphony musician, told me. "Sadat, where are you? Is this the outcome of your visit?" Her son Imre Tel-Oren, 14, died in the attack.

Two years later, a car bomb blew off the foot of a Palestinian mayor active in attempts to halt a surge in Israeli settlements on the West Bank.

Palestinians were angry because Sadat did not negotiate an Israeli withdrawal from the lands they lost to the Israelis in the 1967 war.

“Sadat could have been more instrumental to peace if he insisted to solve the Palestinian problem first,” a Palestinian Anglican priest, Audeh Rantisi, told me in 1982. “He was working only for himself.”

“Sadat was not a peacemaker?” I said. “Peace?” he said. “P-I-E-C-E. His own piece.”

Only Yael Artzi, the pilot’s widow, saw much hope.

“I don’t think five years is long enough,” she told me when I returned in 1982 to assess Sadat’s legacy in the wake of his assassination. Sadat’s visit to Israel started a process that did not end with his death, she said.

Peace on the Israeli border with Egypt was proof to her of progress. “Sadat gambled and Begin gambled at the same time,” Artzi said, “And we’re definitely in a much better position today than we were ever before.”

Still, there was one wildly unpredicted reaction. In his 1989 memoir, *Warrior*, Ariel Sharon, the Agriculture Minister, wrote that beginning from the moment of Sadat’s arrival at Ben-Gurion Airport on Nov 19, 1977, “the momentum toward agreement was unstoppable and it was this more than anything else that dictated a rapid realization of the settlement plan.”

“The end result,” Sharon revealed, “was that I moved ahead just as fast as I was able.” In the next four years, by Sharon’s own count, he established no fewer than 64 settlements on the West Bank.

That Israeli reaction dashed the hopes of Palestinians who wanted to recover land taken by Israel in the 1967 War. At the same time, it heartened the spirits of Israelis who wanted to occupy what they saw as their Biblical birthright.

I learned about one of the new settlements the day Sadat arrived, Nov. 19, 1977. As an ABC News correspondent, I was sent to cover an emergency meeting of Palestinian mayors in Ramallah, on the West Bank. The subject of alarm was Nabi Saleh, a small nearby village where a group of armed Israelis had taken control of a hilltop a few days earlier.

Now, just hours before Sadat’s arrival, a young Palestinian teacher walked me along a barbed wire barrier strung by the settlers.

"While they are waiting for Sadat," said Hussein Tamimi, 31, "they are occupying and taking by force my land, which is my land, and I want to die in it and I want to give my life to it."

Suddenly, a dozen settlers appeared, carrying rifles as they crossed a barren hilltop, accompanied by their wives and children. They told me they would not answer my questions because it was the Sabbath but that they planned to watch Sadat's arrival on television and welcomed his visit.

For years, Nabi Saleh's residents staged protests against the settlement on the hilltop. It became known as Halamish.

Jonathan Blass, the settlement's rabbi, insisted that the occupation was a legal takeover of public property.

"There are no cases where Arabs had their land taken away, appealed to the Supreme Court of Israel, and didn't get redress," he told an ABC News producer who visited the settlement in 1991.

"I imagine that nine-tenths of these cases have proved to be false claims."

Tamimi conceded his family had no legal claim to the land because it had no proof of ownership. The reason, he told me, was that the Ottoman Empire's tax records had been taken back to Turkey after the Empire, which occupied Palestine, collapsed following World War 1.

Within the first dozen years after Sadat's visit, Halamish's settlers constructed about 200 modern homes on paved, comfortable streets. Today, its population is estimated at about 1,200 people.

In 1991, as peace talks got underway in Madrid, Tamimi mentioned he had never visited the settlement nor met any of its residents. It was as if someone had taken his coat, he said, and refused to let him wear it.

"Every minute, every hour, every day, every week of the year, I'm living here, it's the same feeling," he said. "My land is in front of me. I don't own it. How do you feel? It's the same feeling."

"What would you like to see happen?" I asked.

"I'd like to take my land back," he said. "But if the Palestinian government wanted to take it, I would be satisfied."

I pressed to see what room there might be for an amicable arrangement with the Israelis.

What if the Palestinian government wanted to let the settlers keep his land in exchange for a peace agreement?

"It's their decision," Tamimi said.

"Would you accept that?" I said. "Yes, I'll accept it," he said.

The opportunity never arose. Tamimi died 15 years ago.

Over the years, Nabi Saleh has become a symbol of the standoff between Palestinians and Israelis on the West Bank. In 2009, its villagers began mounting weekly protests on the road leading into the settlement. Israeli troops often scuffled with the protestors.

In 2011, a Belgian filmmaker began interviewing villagers and settlers and videotaping the demonstrations. His documentary, "Thank God It's Friday," was issued in 2013.

That same year, Ben Ehrenreich, an American writer, wrote a *New York Times* magazine article on the village and the Tamimi family.

"All of Nabi Saleh's 550 residents are related by blood or marriage and nearly all share the surname Tamimi," he reported. Last year, based on his research, he published a book, "The Way to the Spring: Life and Death in Palestine."

Violence continues to this day. Last spring, on May 12, 2017, Agence France Presse reported that a Palestinian villager named Saba' Nidal Obaid, 20, was shot and killed by an Israeli soldier during a protest outside the settlement.

This summer, on July 21, 2017, the Associated Press reported that a Palestinian teenager from another West Bank village, angered by Israeli security restrictions at a mosque, entered the Halamish settlement and stabbed to death three residents.

The question today is whether new generations of Palestinians and Israelis will somehow discover and heed the Sadat-Begin example, learning that unexpected benefits can emerge when adversaries confront issues in an honest, face-to-face dialogue visible to the public.

It's easy to assume there will be no breakthrough soon in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The conventional wisdom is that neither side has a strong leader able to make compromises, the potential mediator in the White House is new to the task, and trust between Israelis and Palestinians has withered in the wake of recent violence.

Even so, despite continued Palestinian-Israeli hostilities and Sadat's assassination, the vision of Sadat and the risk-taking of Begin has succeeded.

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