

**Algeria versus the United States:
Their Policies towards the Egyptian-Israeli
Peace Treaty, 1977-1979**

Résumé

L'article revoit le développement de l'Accord de Paix entre l'Égypte et Israël durant la phase finale des négociations entre 1977 et 1979 pour l'intérêt qu'il a suscité pour la diplomatie algérienne. Cet événement a remué les relations arabo-américaines dans toute leur profondeur. L'article met l'accent particulièrement sur les positions algériennes et américaines quand à leurs réactions à la situation de crise créée par l'entreprise du traité de paix générée essentiellement par le Président Sadat. Le traité s'est révélé graduellement comme un bradage gratuit des droits arabes au profit l'état sioniste. Cette donne politique allait contre les principes historiques de l'Algérie à défendre les intérêts arabes sans compromissions ou complaisance. En revanche, les États-Unis ont investi toute leur énergie diplomatique pour faire aboutir l'Accord de Paix en question et emporter cette bataille stratégique. Ainsi, l'article démontre le bien-fondé de l'approche algérienne telle que conçue par le Président Boumediène et exécutée par Benjedid.

Mots clé : Algérie, États-Unis, Boumediène, Benjedid, politique étrangère, Égypte, Israël, traité de paix.

ملخص

يبين هذا البحث ظهور فكرة 'مبادرة السلام' و تطورها الى معاهدة سلام بين مصر وإسرائيل. في محاولة تعقب مراحل تلك العملية. يوضح البحث أدوار المشاركين الرئيسيين في مسار السلام و يركز على التغييرات التي حولت مبادرة السلام تدريجيا الى عملية استسلام بحكم تقديم تنازلات أحادية من الجانب المصري. برز دور الجزائر بين الدول العربية في الفترة الممتدة من 1977 إلى 1979 لمعارضتها الشديدة لخروج مصر عن الإطار المشترك في الدفاع عن الحق العربي و الأراضي المسلوبة سواء في عهد الرئيس بومدين أو الرئيس بن جديد. و لهذا ظهر الاختلاف المبدئي و العملي بين الموقف الجزائري و موقف الولايات المتحدة التي أشرفت على تحقيق معاهدة السلام المصرية-الإسرائيلية مع ما للموقف الجزائري من صحة و حصافة.

Introduction

There is no exaggeration to say that 1977 was particularly such a bad year in post-World War II Arab history. Not only did inter-Arab relations witness hard times because of the ongoing Palestine problem and the numerous crises of the 1950's and 1960's, but the Arab countries had also to confront the new crisis of President Anwar Sadat's peace-seeking efforts between Egypt and Israel of the 1970's. It all began with his surprise visit to Jerusalem in November 1977. But, it was to take another one and a half years of critical inter-Arab quarrels and misunderstandings before Sadat concluded the signing of his controversial Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty in March 1979. Sadat's bewildering crisis worsened in 1978 coincidentally at a time when Algerian President Houari Boumediene was passing away and thereby closing an era of Algerian history with his departure. Hence, Algerian politics continued under his successor, Chadli Benjedid, who took over in February 1979. The Peace Treaty was signed just four months after Boumediene's death. Therefore, it befell President Benjedid to shoulder Boumediene's legacy on the Middle East crisis and add his personal touch to the inherited policy. Understandably, as Algeria had long been concerned with the Arab cause and Egypt's role in particular, notably in the two major wars of 1967 and 1973, she naturally had to take a stand on the new Middle Eastern situation. This paper aims to review American and Algerian attitudes towards the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty in the period 1977-1979.

The Beginning

There are varied histories and accounts in the memoirs and biographies of the politicians who directly contributed to the episode of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty, but they all give a concordant

tale about its development. The first steps came in the wake of the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973 when indirect contact between Egyptians and Israelis was engineered by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger for the implementation of bilateral troop withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. Thus, the initial Egyptian-Israeli intercourse happened during President Gerald Ford's presidential term in 1974-1975 and can be considered as the genesis of all the process that led to the final peace agreement in 1979. On leaving the White House in January 1977, Ford left the Egyptian and Israeli leadership more sanguine for peace talks than they had ever been in the past. However, the determinant moves towards real peace came during the Carter presidency in the period 1977-1980. In other words, there was a kind of continuity in the two administrations' handling of the Arab-Israeli problem.

Carter came to power obsessed with the subject of Palestine and was particularly willing to consider the Arab stand on the issue after the previous presidents had proven shamelessly biased in supporting Israel. In confirmation of this new focus on the subject, Zbigniew Brzezinski –Carter's National Security Advisor- wrote that the President did not spend much time on any issue as he did on peace for the Middle East¹. Actually, early in his term, on 27 June 1977, Carter declared his opposition to Israel's use of land occupation tactics as a bargaining tool, and expressed the necessity for Israel to consider leaving the territories obtained in the 1967 War². With this resonant new approach, Carter's Middle East policy was bound to intrigue many Arab governments, notably Algeria, which had despaired of America's negative role so far.

Following that new twist in the Middle East drama, and only five months after Carter's declaration on the necessity of reaching peace, the Arab world experienced the most shocking regional event since the 1967 War. On 19 November 1977, it was announced that President Sadat went to Israel in answer to an invitation by Israeli Prime Minister Menahem Begin. Soon thereafter, there was Camp David I on 17 September 1978, and then the final Peace Agreement (Camp David II) on 26 March 1979³. In other words, the post-1973 War period was used to push the peace process at the fastest

speed and almost in total unawareness of Arab leaders about the new direction of events.

So, how did Sadat fool the Arab leadership in concocting his plan to seek peace with Israel? A review of the preparatory stages in the pre-1977 period highlights a precipitated course encompassing the following major milestones. Historically, the idea of a 'provisional' Arab-Israeli peace agreement goes back to the Rogers Plan of 1969 whose failure caused Sadat to announce a personal project called 'the Peace Initiative' in February 1971⁴. It was a most daring enterprise for including the offer of prolonged peace to Israel on the condition of evacuating the Arab lands occupied in June 1967.

However, neither the two superpowers nor Israel were attentive to Sadat's provocative proposal. On the one hand, there was the priority of Vietnam for the United States, and on the other hand there was the position of military superiority and arrogance of Israel because of its rising hegemonic power in the Middle East. As for the Soviets, they doubted the soundness of Sadat's initiative just as they had frowned on the Rogers Plan before that; preferring to keep Egypt under their influence as she had always been since Nasser's days. Indeed, the U.S.S.R had the major leverage of controlling Egypt's military needs which were supplied in drop-feed manner. Egypt simply depended helplessly on Soviet goodwill to cater for its national defence and support for its foreign policy towards the United States. In the Arab world, Sadat's 'Peace Initiative' was received rather casually as no one believed that Israel would understand another language other than force.

As the Peace Initiative was snubbed from all quarters, Sadat turned to the option of starting another war against Israel in an attempt to break the deadlock of the Middle Eastern situation. It is a fact that the prevailing mood in the whole Arab area in the early 1970's was one of general stalemate with no visible way out in the horizon. The Arab countries were living the lingering trauma of the defeat of 1967, and the Egyptian army in particular needed to shed its military humiliation to come back to life. In that context, the coming of the 1973 War was not only a miraculously unexpected move, but it was also an act of brave defiance of the superpowers' long-held control

over Middle Eastern initiatives. Indeed, they used to have the last say in any development and meant to continue as before especially after their achievement of a historic Détente in May 1972. Egypt and the Arab world were not supposed to fight with Israel again until such time when the superpowers might accept it.

Obviously, Sadat's initiative to go to war in solo in 1973 was even more troubling because beginning in 1971 he had to fight his enemies inside and outside the country. In Egypt, economic conditions were deteriorating and the Nasserite elements in Sadat's government notably the 'Sabri Team' wanted to topple him. Similarly, in foreign policy, Egyptian-Soviet relations were collapsing fast in the years 1971-1972 over the issue of bilateral military cooperation. Sadat's high sense of national pride caused him to attempt to impose his will on the Soviets. Ultimately, in July 1972, Sadat got rid of Soviet paternalistic influence in Egypt by ending their military presence in the country.

From then on, Egypt turned gradually to the United States as its main partner in foreign policy with Henry Kissinger supervising the earliest courting manoeuvres at the turn of 1972-1973⁵. The Peace Initiative passed its first stage with the endorsement of the Six-Point Programme at the close of 1973. In the next stage, American-Egyptian relations improved further particularly following the completion of the troop disengagement operations during President Ford's term. All along, Sadat kept doctoring his peace plan to make it more convincing to the United States, and even more appealing to Israel. For example, in 1975, he declared that he would not resort to war to solve problems with Israel. Yet, until then, Sadat believed in two overriding objectives; namely: a Palestinian state and the recovery of the occupied territories.

In plotting the new course of American-Egyptian relations, in 1975, Kissinger announced the end of the step-by-step diplomacy and the shift towards the larger aim of general Middle East peace. In the past, the process had only consisted of a series of controlled sequential phases and limited meetings such as the Rogers Plan ceasefire, the Geneva Conference in 1974, the Disengagement operations and other limited Egyptian-Israeli diplomatic protocols.

Therefore, the signing of the Disengagement Agreements in the years 1974-1975 ended the second stage of the Peace Initiative.

At this point, Sadat's peace programme began to alienate him from fellow Arab leaders though not in a radical way yet. Not only was he seeking a solution that increasingly took the character of an exclusively American peace, but he also was pushing the peace offer at the expense of the age-old stated Arab interests, especially the principle of collective Arab peace conditions and bargaining. The fact of the matter was that Sadat's original Peace Initiative was being transformed rather reductively as he strove towards an elusive goal. It is not that Sadat denied the legitimacy of Arab rights or the centrality of the Palestinian Question to any Middle East solution, but rather the problem became his obsession to make peace with Israel even if it would trim the viability of these rights per se.

In fact, Sadat's obsession with peace affected him so deeply psychologically that he came to believe in himself as having special powers to succeed in the task more than anyone else⁶. The irony in this tragi-comical drama is that no one was following Sadat in the search for peace after 1975. Not on his terms anyway. Neither the Palestinians, nor the Syrians, the Jordanians, the Lebanese or the other Arab countries were convinced by his single-handed peace moves. Thus, they were not parties to the ongoing meetings such as Geneva, or the intermediary military agreements taking place between Egypt and Israel. In fact, the P.L.O simply came to view the whole Disengagement process as equivalent to 'dumping Arab and Palestinian rights'⁷. The situation was evolving so rapidly that few Arab leaders could really see what was going on or figure out Sadat's true intentions. They simply had little clue about it and much less choice in the matter. They had either to adjust to the sprouting peace programme or stay out of it.

From Camp David to the Peace Treaty

With the rise of President Carter to power in January 1977, Sadat's pace went faster. Now he embarked on the third and final stage of the Peace Initiative. In February 1977, when meeting Carter, he submitted a complete plan of his peace proposal⁸. Then,

in September, Sadat received a special feedback letter from Carter on the topic⁹. In the following two months, he reached the climax of his peace plan by adding the incredible stunt of visiting Israel on 19 November 1977. Next, there were the last touches of the peace accords on 17 September 1978 and the final signing of the agreement on 26 March 1979. The overall picture suggests that by early 1977 Sadat was going it alone in total disregard of the opposing views and sentiments in the Arab world. Indeed, the Egyptian Foreign Minister during the period from December 1977 to September 1978; namely: Mohammed Ibrahim Kamel, asserted in his memoirs that the division of Arab ranks began with the Disengagement operations [in 1975]¹⁰. In other words, Sadat may have reached the decision to break with the collective Arab approach and made up his mind for separate peace with Israel sometime in 1976 while keeping surface symbolic relations with fellow Arab leaders in the hope to win them over to his idea. In this line of logic, it is tempting to conjecture that Sadat may have reached the point-of-no-return to make peace with Israel by early 1977.

At any rate, Carter's presidency saw United States efforts engaged by American administrations since WWII finally reach a solution to the Middle East problem. He managed to tame post-Nasser Egypt, split Arab unity and take control of the Arab-Israeli problem to the detriment of Soviet interests in the region. Undoubtedly, his policy towards the Arab cause was bound to have repercussions across the Mediterranean and beyond; both in the short and the long run. However, Carter denies having influenced Sadat in any sense. As it happens, Sadat seems to confirm this view and admits in his autobiography that [by 1977] he had considered many scenarios for the implementation of his peace strategy. At one point, he had thought of gathering the big five heads –U.S, U.S.S.R, France, Britain and Germany along with the Arab leaders of the front line countries in a major summit in Jerusalem to pressure Israel to settle for peace. But, later, he reviewed his plan and decided to make the trip alone to Jerusalem to lay his proposal in person straight to the Israelis. The plan was surreal even for his closest collaborators and government ministers. Thus, on the very day of the trip, his Foreign Minister -Ismail Fahmi- chose to resign. He was followed by his

deputy and other leading officials who could not fathom Sadat's surreal improvised plans. President Hafedh Al Assad was informed by Sadat in Damascus only on the 16th November and was so shaken by the news that he left Sadat to face the press on his own ¹¹.

The problem with Sadat's Peace Initiative is that he had always voiced his opposition to any separate peace with Israel, but he ended up doing just the thing on his own. What was worse, Israel was behaving as though having exclusive veto power over the whole peace process. It assented or rejected agenda items as suited its interests leaving it to Sadat to adjust his demands and positions rather submissively to the American-Israeli negotiation framework. William B. Quandt -N.S.C. member in Carter's government- summarized the point succinctly when he wrote that Sadat 'could take whatever pressure'¹². In other words, Sadat's peace was a general sell-out of rights and interests. In describing the final talks in Washington, Mohammed Ibrahim Kamel -Egyptian Foreign Minister- went to the extent of claiming that the Peace Treaty was – an Israeli text- substituted for the original American draft which had been sent to Cairo before travelling to Camp David. The Egyptian delegation discovered the cheat too late once in the United States .¹³ One has to remember that by then the Egyptian Foreign Ministry and the Foreign Service with all the related structures inside and outside the country –like the watching Arab leaders- were going through a period of turmoil and disarray that left them numb and unable to intervene against the unfolding peace process.

In the Arab camp, the Peace Initiative gradually uncovered its ugly reality and entailed much reaction; official and unofficial. To begin with, there was a general opposition to Sadat's trip to Jerusalem from governments and public¹⁴. Media programmes and mass demonstrations spread throughout the region. Then, resentment ran so high in some radical Arab countries that action was undertaken. For example, in July 1977, Libya crossed swords with Egypt militarily across the border because Kaddafi allegedly planned to assassinate Sadat for his 'collaboration' with the enemy. Likewise, Algeria stood against Sadat's deviation and decided to break relations with Egypt on 5 December 1977. Thereafter, it boycotted the Arab

Ministerial Meeting of 27 March 1978 at Cairo. Then, it participated in the creation of the Arab Front of Steadfastness and Confrontation in September 1978¹⁵. However, it must be pointed out that there was a variety of opinions among Arab countries on Sadat's actions which can be grouped into three categories. There were the radical countries which included Algeria, the P.L.O, Syria, Iraq, Libya and South Yemen whose interactive dynamism led to the formation of 'the Front of Steadfastness and Resistance'. There were the moderate countries consisting of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Gulf States which opposed Sadat but waited for further developments. And, there were the countries with undeclared sympathy for Sadat such as Morocco, the Sultanate of Oman and Sudan. Here, it should be noted that Morocco mediated in arranging contact between Sadat's representative Hassan Touhami and Israeli government representative Moshe Dayan in September 1977¹⁶.

Not unexpectedly, Algeria had been in the forefront of the opposition to Sadat's sell-out of the Arab cause from the start. President Houari Boumediene kept the same line through his death in December 1978. Next, Algeria joined the anti-Sadat camp at the Baghdad meeting in November 1978 which was upheld once more at the Tripoli meeting in December 1978. In confirmation of this general break-up of inter-Arab relations, beginning on 5 November 1978, all Arab League Offices were moved out of Egypt towards other Arab capitals. Naturally, all economic aid to Egypt and trade relations were suspended as a consequence¹⁷. When Boumediene died on 27 December 1978, he left it to his successor to continue Algeria's struggle against Israeli aggression and Egypt's collaborationist policy. To honour that trust, in November 1979, President Benjedid declared his opposition to Camp David by saying: "...Algeria is against the politics of defeatism and partial solutions...."¹⁸. Thereafter, his view remained that the Egyptian regime should be condemned for strengthening its ties with [American-Israeli] international imperialism¹⁹. Hence, Algerian-Egyptian relations remained cut off for a decade. Their restoration in November 1988 was possible only because there was a major turning point in Arab history brought about by the announcement of the creation of the State of Palestine. Just one month earlier, in October 1988, the P.L.O

had proclaimed the new Arab state from Algiers as a reminder of Algeria's continuous symbolisation of revolutionary ideals and anti-colonial struggle. The Palestinian cause required therefore to turn a page and open a new chapter in Arab relations.

Concerning the United States, President Carter managed to pull the prize of an historical peace agreement in a record time in such a volatile region as the Middle East. Post-war American leaders had good reason to be proud of that record. Whether partial or complete in scope, the peace treaty was still an achievement that brought Israel more security and new economic opportunities than it had ever got since the creation of the Jewish state in 1948. Furthermore, the United States succeeded to bring about such a drastic transformation whereby Egyptian military power was so masterfully pacified. In that respect, Nixon wrote that after the 1973 War, the [military] danger that Egypt represented was definitely neutralised²⁰. Similarly, Carter commented that with the signing of the bilateral peace treaty, Menahem Begin removed Egypt's capability from the military equation in the Middle East²¹. Indeed, one cannot miss the strategic advantages that Sadat's peace showered on the Israelis at the expense of the Arab cause.

Conclusion

In reviewing the Camp David question, it is safe to say that Sadat's Peace Initiative started in 1971 as a visionary hopeful offensive to end the Arab-Israeli problem for good. In fact, it was strengthened by the timely victory of the 1973 War. However, in implementing the Peace Initiative, Sadat transformed the plan into a peaceful surrender to the enemy. Hence, the precipitated Peace Treaty narrowed down to the following results: first and foremost, Egypt's recognition of the State of Israel; secondly, the recovery of the Sinai desert by Egypt; thirdly and more importantly, the renunciation of war as a means to solve Egyptian-Israeli disputes; fourthly, cooperation in security matters and border control.

Beyond these immediate Egyptian-Israeli bilateral concessions, all other issues fell in limbo. Thus, the frontline countries such as Syria, Jordan and Lebanon were asked to join the Peace Treaty when

they wanted to. As for the Palestinians, it was agreed that talks would continue towards the aim of achieving self-government in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It was estimated to take between three to five years to reach a settlement, but the agenda was so laden with conditions that made the promised solution timework at best and impossibility at worst. In reality, Palestine was put under an indefinite trilateral regime of trusteeship that reinforced United States, Israeli and Egyptian influence over the area.

For Algeria which had always upheld the legitimacy of the Arab cause, notably the right of Palestinians to recover their homeland, the Camp David Agreement smacked of treasonable surrender to the enemy by the very person who claimed to be the saviour of national pride and legitimate heir to Gamal Abdunnasser's pan-Arab leadership. Therefore, when reviewing the overall picture of the Egyptian-Israeli accords, one can see that the American and the Algerian approaches stood at opposite ends on the whole process from the Jerusalem visit in November 1977 to the signing of the Peace Treaty in March 1979.

Notes

¹ Hazem Saghiah, Trans., William B. Quandt, Camp David: Assiyassa wa Son' Assalam, (Camp David: Politics and the Making of Peace), (Beirut: Dar Al Matbouaat Al Sharkia, 1988), p. 23. (Arabic)

² International Herald Tribune, 28 June 1977, p. 5.

³ See both texts of the Peace Agreement in Mohammed Shadid, The United States and the Palestinians: Between Assimilation and Extermination, (Beirut: Al Muassassah Al Arabia Li Dirasat wa Nashr, [1982?]), pp. 267-274, and Mohammed Ibrahim Kamel, [Memoirs] Assalam Al Dhahi Fi Ittifakiat Camb David, [The Lost Peace of the Camp David Agreement], (Riyadh?: AL Sharika Al Saudia Lil Abhath wa Tawthiq, n.d.), pp.76-77. (Arabic)

⁴ Anwar El Sadat, In Search of Identity: An Autobiography, 2nd ed, (Glasgow: William Collins Sons Ltd & Co, 1981), pp. 323, 353.

- ⁵ Ibid, p. 278.
- ⁶ M. I. Kamel, pp. 213 ff.
- ⁷ Keesing's Record of World Events ...Vol. 21, November 1975, p. 27432.
- ⁸ Saghiah, p. 44.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 11 (margin), p. 461. On Sadat's trip to Israel, see: Wilton Wynn, "Aboard a Historic Flight", Time, [Weekly], November 28, 1977, Vol. 110, p. 18.
- ¹⁰ M. I. Kamel, p. 213. See also: Wynn, p. 19.
- ¹¹ El Sadat, In Search , p.366.
- ¹² Saghiah, p. 342.
- ¹³ M. I. Kamel, p. 533.
- ¹⁴ 'Sadat's Sacred Mission', Time [Magazine], November 28, 1977: 29. See also: Saghiah, Trans., pp. 350, 359.
- ¹⁵ Shadid, p. 200.
- ¹⁶ M. I. Kamel, pp. 62, 316. See also: David Hirst and Irene Beeson, 2nd ed, Sadat, (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), p. 284.
- ¹⁷ Saghiah, pp. 358-59.
- ¹⁸ 'Ziarat Al Rais Li Souriya' [The President's Visit to Syria], 22-24 March 1980, Khotob Al Raiis Chadli Benjedid, 15 January-31 December 1980, (Volume 2), [Addresses of President Chadli Benjedid], (Algiers: Wazarat Al I'lam wa Thaqafah, 1981), p.56. See also: Volume 1, 4 November 1979, p. 44. (Arabic).
- ¹⁹ 'Ziarat Al Rais Li Wilayat Batna', [The President's Visit to the city of Batna], 25 February 1981, Khotob Al Raiis Chadli Benjedid, 15 January-31 December 1981, [Addresses of President Chadli Benjedid], Volume 3, (Algiers: Ministry of Information, 1982), p.52. (Arabic).
- ²⁰ Richard Nixon, The Real War, (London: Sidgwick and Jackson Limited, 1981), p.101. Paperback.
- ²¹ Saghiah, p. 476. Footnote 3.

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