

The Visit: How Sadat's Visit to Jerusalem Changed the Israeli-Egyptian Conflict and the Course of History in the Middle East

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After three decades of war since the establishment of the state of Israel, Prime Minister Begin received Egyptian President, Sadat, in Jerusalem for what unfolded to be a historic visit. Through a review of the relevant preceding history, a description of the central individuals, the itinerary, and the momentous consequences of the visit, this paper categorizes this historic encounter of leaders of estranged nations and cultures as a standard of hope for peace in the Middle East.

Rarely do peace initiatives amount to the significance of Egyptian President Muhammad Anwar El Sadat's visit to Jerusalem on 19-21 November 1977, at the invitation of the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Indeed, these two nations had been at war for three decades. Yet, Sadat's willingness to visit Jerusalem, and Israel's hospitality shook the status quo of the Middle East and cracked the impasse in peace negotiation. Most importantly, they created the platform for lasting peace between two enemies by deconstructing the illusions of each other. Also, the context of history preceding the visit illustrates, through contrast, how revolutionary the visit was: the Khartoum Conference after the 1967 War, Resolution 242, Sadat's expulsion of Soviet advisers from Egypt in 1972, and the Yom Kippur War in 1973. A background of both of these leaders also illustrates why the world was in utter disbelief at the emergence of this new hope for peace. Furthermore, a close analysis of how the visit unfolded, the invitations, the itinerary, the reaction of the public in both these countries and around the world, and Sadat's speech in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament,

demonstrates its significance. Lastly, an examination of its legacy establishes the visit as a vital step towards the Camp David Accords, and a beacon of hope for peace in the Middle East, despite provoking retaliation from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and unease from the Arab world.

A brief historical overview of the years preceding the 1977 visit, signifies its coming as an important change in the status quo of the Middle East. For instance, at the Khartoum Conference in late August of 1967, most heads of Arab states united to gain collective leverage against Israel in peace negotiations (Syria boycotted the conference as it preferred direct military action). The conference concluded that, by uniting, they sought to “ensure the withdrawal...from Arab lands” occupied in the Six Day War.¹ This political effort would be done “within the framework of the main principles by which the Arab states abide, namely, no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it, and insistence on the rights of Palestinian people in their own country.”² Sadat threatened to violate all of the “three no’s” by visiting Jerusalem and seeking peace. The Khartoum Conference’s declaration appeared to allow for participation in third party negotiations, namely with the United Nations, but avoided any specific concession, such as peace agreements with Israel and disallowing any unilateral Arab move towards partial peace with Israel for the return of one country’s land. In contrast, “Israel refused intermediaries, fearing outside attempts to compromise their position,” making it more beneficial for Israel to negotiate directly with individual Arab states.³ Furthermore, Israel was in a position of power after the Six-Day War and was in no rush to return land without secure

¹ Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2013), 304.

² Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 304.

³ Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 305.

assurance that the exchange of land for peace would provide more than the return of Israel's status to pre-June of 1967. Therefore, the main reason for the impasse in peace negotiations was that the Arab states "stressed Israel's withdrawal from the territories as a precondition for the tacit recognition of Israel's right to exist, whereas Israel demanded explicit recognition in return for partial withdrawal from the lands they had acquired;" The United Nations argued that the priorities of both these groups need not be in conflict with each other.⁴

In order to make that argument, the United Nations put forward its own attempt to resolve Israeli occupation of Arab lands which came in the form of Resolution 242, passed by the Security Council on 22 November 1967. In summary, it emphasized the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war" and therefore required the "withdrawal of Israel from territories occupied in the recent conflict' and for 'termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of every state in the area...'"⁵ Inconsistencies between interpretations arose from the phrase "withdrawal of Israel from territories occupied" because the Soviet—American negotiated draft phrased the clause "from the territories," indicating all the territories acquired by war but the "the" was strategically excluded from the final clause because "Israel refused to agree to withdraw from all the territories it had taken."⁶ The Israeli Government viewed the resolution with open interpretation of which territories were to be returned while the Arab countries were assured by the Security Council that any border change from the map before the 1967 War would be

⁴ Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 305.

⁵ Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 306.

⁶ Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 306.

minor. For instance, Jordan signed the resolution because of American assurance that the U.S. would endeavour to return the West Bank to Jordan.⁷ Discrepancies in translation led to different understandings of responsibilities. It is strange how the omission of the word “the” gambled the fate of all Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Though a U.N. negotiator was appointed, the talks fell through over the next few years because of American contested interests due to their involvement in the Vietnam War and opposition from Syria and the PLO.

However, in Egypt, there was a crucial change in regimes after Gamal Abdel Nasser died of a heart attack in 1970. In his book *Thirteen Days in September: Carter, Begin and Sadat at Camp David*, Lawrence Wright argues that Sadat took the presidency as a mere placeholder, but proved himself to be “a master of the unexpected.”⁸ For instance, in 1972 “he expelled fifteen thousand Soviet troops and military advisers from Egypt” compromising the Soviet “foothold in the Middle East.”⁹ Israel did not consider Egypt a threat without Soviet support; however, in early October of the next year, the Egyptian army managed to cross the Suez Canal. Sadat’s objective in this maneuver was not to attempt to win a war “which he knew to be unrealistic”; rather, he sought to “erase the Egyptian (the Arab) inferiority complex vis-à-vis Israel,” in order to set a new “psychological balance” for the coming negotiations.¹⁰ Despite not having Soviet support, the Egyptian army still shattered the notion of Israeli military superiority. The Yom Kippur War was, ironically, another of Sadat’s deliberate steps towards peace between these two

⁷ Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 306.

⁸ Lawrence Wright, *Thirteen Days in September: Carter, Begin, and Sadat at Camp David* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 20.

⁹ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 20-21.

¹⁰ Ennio Di Nolfo, “The Cold War and the Transformation of the Mediterranean, 1960-1975” *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*. Vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 251.

nations. However, to the eyes of an onlooker, without the benefit of knowing the future, this would not seem to be a step towards peace, but rather another act of violence between two enemies.

Also, the personal backgrounds of President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin seem *prima-facie* like the least likely leaders of Egypt and Israel to forge a peace treaty. For instance, twenty years after the end of the Second World War, a Cairo magazine asked prominent Egyptians to write a letter to Hitler, published in 1953. Some of Sadat's letter follows below:

My Dear Hitler,

I admire you from the bottom of my heart. Even if you appear to have been defeated, in reality you are a victor. You have succeeded in creating dissensions between the old man Churchill and his allies, the sons of Satan...Germany will be reborn in spite of Western and Eastern powers...You did some mistakes...but our faith in your nation has more than compensated for them. You must be proud that you have become an immortal leader of Germany.¹¹

This letter highlights some of what Sadat saw as valuable in a leader of a nation: sovereignty and independence from "Western and Eastern powers," and an indelible legacy. These priorities are evident in his rule. How ironic it is that the author of this letter would later tour the Holocaust Memorial along side with Begin, who had lost his parents and his older brother in the Holocaust.¹² It is also essential to note that the main political platform of Begin's carrier was "to expand Israel's borders" for national security, which contrasts greatly with his final decision (with the

¹¹ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 13 (cited in *Man of Defiance*, Israeli, 19).

¹² Lawrence Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 26.

support of the Knesset) to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in the Camp David Accords.¹³ It is in this context of history then, that the world was so surprised at Sadat's announcement that he was ready to "travel to the ends of the earth if this will in any way protect an Egyptian boy, soldier, or officer from being killed or wounded...Israel will be surprised to hear me say that I am willing to go to...the Knesset...and debate with them."¹⁴ Even his audience, Egyptian parliamentarians and Yasser Arafat (present as a guest) regarded the statement as an empty gesture.¹⁵ Less than two weeks later, Sadat "held the world spellbound" when he arrived at Ben Gurion Airport.¹⁶

There are discrepancies in historical accounts on what the American reaction was to Sadat taking this initiative. For instance, in his book *Diplomacy of Surprise: Hitler, Nixon, Sadat*, Michael Handel states that Washington was displeased because direct contact between Israel and Egypt "endangered American leverage in the Middle East and wreck[ed] the American plan to prepare for the comprehensive approach at Geneva," but there was also worry of security: both for Sadat's life and for the danger of a coup d'état in Egypt.¹⁷ Similarly, in *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining*, Shibley Telhami accounts that Sadat's surprise "had stolen political initiative in a manner that could have undermined American strategy for a comprehensive settlement."¹⁸ However, in *Peace*

¹³ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 31.

¹⁴ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 31.

¹⁵ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 20-21.

¹⁶ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 21.

¹⁷ Michael I. Handel, *The Diplomacy of Surprise, Hitler, Nixon, Sadat* (Cambridge: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1981), 331.

¹⁸ Shibley Telhami, *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining: the Path to the Camp David Accords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 137.

Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967, William B. Quandt contends that with progress in resolving the impasse moving at glacial speed, President Carter sent a handwritten note to Sadat in late October appealing to the mutual promise, made earlier in the year, “to do all they could for peace. Carter came across as saying that he has little more to offer and that the time had come for a bold move by Sadat. No specifics were mentioned, but the point was clear: if further progress was to be made, Sadat would have to take the initiative.”¹⁹ Quandt also notes that when Sadat did announce his willingness to go to Jerusalem, Washington was caught by surprise and was forced to “adjust its strategy because events in the Middle East that had proved to be beyond its control.”²⁰ Furthermore, after Begin extended a formal invitation to Sadat to come and debate in the Knesset on 12 November, The New York Times reported that when President Carter was “asked if he were pleased by Israel’s invitation, Mr. Carter replied ‘Yes.’ He said Israel had not consulted the United States on the matter.”²¹ Therefore, it may be safely concluded that although the White House might have been taken by surprise by the expressed willingness to visit Jerusalem and the extended invitation, this new development was nonetheless an important measure en route to amity.

The details of the visit beg for analysis because the manner in which it unfolded shows how unexpected this dauntless journey was. For instance, there were sharpshooters “stationed on the rooftops...in case terrorists suddenly emerged from the

¹⁹ William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli since 1967* (Washington D.C.: The Bookings Institution, 2005), 191.

²⁰ Quandt, *Peace Process*, 191.

²¹ Anonymous, “Begin Invites Sadat to Visit Jerusalem for Talks on Peace.” *New York Times*: 1977.

presidential plane rather than Sadat himself,” emphasizing the level of distrust that the Israelis held in the hope for peace.²² It is important to realize how revolutionary this visit truly was. Wright claims that by “presenting himself to Israel, Sadat was introducing two cultures that were almost completely unknown to one another,” and changing the course of history.²³ For the Egyptians at home watching on television sets, seeing Sadat “staring into the faces of the enemy—until now figures of legend—suddenly and unsettlingly humanized the Israelis in the Egyptian mind,” prompting the nature of the conflict to undergo a metamorphosis. The word “humanized” is vital in understanding the impact of the visit; it changed the public’s understanding of who the enemy was on both sides of the Egyptian-Israeli border from an abstract notion of an impersonal threatening force to human beings with lively interests. Handel notes that “Sadat’s peace initiative was intended to bring immediate and concrete results...[the visit] was of intrinsic value, calculated to shock and prod others into action,” showing Sadat’s extraordinary flair for foresight.²⁴ In addition, Telhami claims that when “Sadat finally visited Jerusalem, Israelis danced in the streets in near euphoria, shockwaves rattled the Arab world, and the international community watched in disbelief.”²⁵ Telhami also emphasizes how, since the official beginning of the state of Israel, Egypt had “been its most avowed regional enemy, and major wars has been fought between the two nations in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973. A generation of Egyptians had grown up

²² Also, since the Israeli military orchestra did not have the sheet music for the Egyptian national anthem they had to learn to play it by listening to Cairo radio. Lawrence Wright, *Thirteen Days in September: Carter, Begin, and Sadat at Camp David*, 21.

²³ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 22.

²⁴ Handel, *The Diplomacy of Surprise*, 332.

²⁵ Handel, *The Diplomacy of Surprise*, 332.

knowing Israel as an ‘illegitimate, temporary, Zionist entity.’”²⁶ This notion of betrayal of Arab unity through the violation of the “three no’s” of the Khartoum Conference is in distinct contrast with the joyous celebration which took place in Israel.

There are also a few more details of the visit that exhibit its significance; for instance, as Sadat made his way towards Jerusalem, crowds along the highway sang and openly wept. And when Sadat arrived at the historic King David Hotel, which Begin had participated in bombing years before, a carillon at the YMCA played “Getting to Know You.” One of Sadat’s bodyguards died of a heart attack at the hotel and his “corpse was smuggled into a cargo plane to keep rumours of assassination from taking root,” knowing that death could be so easily misinterpreted with the whole world watching.²⁷ These circumstances show an awareness of the importance of the history unfolding in Jerusalem. Sadat, as has already been mentioned, was a master of flabbergasting moves strategically planned for impact. It is no coincidence therefore, that the visit took place during one of the holiest days in Islam: “Eid al-Adha.” This feature further compounded the insult for the Arab world.²⁸ Not only was Sadat’s visit threatening to violate all of the “three no’s” of the Khartoum Conference, but he was doing so on a Muslim holiday.

Furthermore, the itinerary for the visit is also of enormous symbolic value. Sadat started the day with dawn prayers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and his “presence in this sacred space sent electrifying currents throughout the Muslim world, alternately of hope and betrayal.”²⁹ It was that same mosque in which a Palestinian tailor killed King Abdullah I of Jordan in 1951

²⁶ Telhami, *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining*, 6-7.

²⁷ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 22.

²⁸ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 21.

²⁹ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 25.

because “he dared to negotiate with the Israelis. The bullet holes were still visible.”³⁰ He went on to the Dome of the Rock, and then went on to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where Palestinians began to break through security ranks and called out saying “Sadat, what do you want from us.... We are against you. We don’t want you here.” Indeed, there was controversy over whether Sadat had intentionally forsaken the Palestinians in order to gain the peace Egypt desperately needed to fix its economy. However, in the Camp David Accords, President Carter and Sadat made constant efforts to include Palestinian rights as part of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, against Begin’s legendary negotiation tactics. Sadat then laid a wreath at the memorial for Israeli soldiers who had died since Israel had become a state. Afterwards, alongside Prime Minister Begin, Sadat toured the Holocaust Memorial and wrote down the following note in the guest book: “May God guide our steps towards peace. Let us put an end to the suffering of mankind.”³¹ In the article “Sadat Street,” a journalist for the Jerusalem Report, who previously was the director of Government Press Office and part of the team of Israeli officials in charge of the arrangements for the visit, wrote about how the itinerary developed:

“Let’s take him to Yad Vashem,” someone suggested, and we all laughed. The idea of an Arab leader, especially one who had supported Germany during World War II, touring the Holocaust memorial seemed absurd. Still, we didn’t know what else to propose and so...we conveyed the invitation. Within a short time the answer arrived: President Sadat would be honored to visit Yad

³⁰ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 25.

³¹ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 26.

Vashem. We were amazed and delighted. “Maybe we should ask him if he wants to lay a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier,” someone said, and once again we all laughed. Sadat was the enemy; many of the unknown soldiers commemorated died fighting on the Egyptian front. In a spirit of curiosity we forwarded the suggestion...President Sadat would be gratified by the chance to lay a wreath on the memorial.³²

The invitation to these two symbolic sites of Israeli history and the leader of the “enemy” supererogatorily honouring them are fascinating examples of the revolutionary nature of the visit.

Yet, the most important element of the visit was Sadat’s speech at the Knesset. He began with a statement that can almost be read as a proclamation of his intention of the visit: “Ladies and gentlemen, there are moments in the life of nations and peoples when it is incumbent on those known for their wisdom and clarity of vision to overlook the past, with complexities and weighing memories, in a bold dive towards new horizons.”³³ He used circumspect diplomatic language speaking to the leaders of Israel, aware that he was actually speaking to the rest of the world, especially the Arab world. For instance, the differentiation between the “life of a nations” and “life of...a peoples” reflects the second “no” of the Khartoum Conference, “no recognition of Israel” and casts vigilant ambiguity of the legitimacy of the state of Israel.³⁴ Furthermore, as Thomas L. Friedman later noted in his article “the Sadat Standard” for the Foreign Affairs section of the New York Times, Sadat firstly assured the Israelis of what was most important to them by saying that in “all sincerity, I tell you, we welcome you among us, with full security and safety,”

³² Ze’ev Chafets, “Sadat Street,” *The Jerusalem Report* Oct. 1991: 22.

³³ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 28.

³⁴ Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 304.

before continuing with his demand.³⁵ Then he added “I have not come here for a separate agreement between Israel and Egypt,”³⁶ encompassing the Palestinian rights with his demands. As for return of territory, Sadat argued:

Peace cannot be worth its name unless it is based on justice, and not on the occupation of the land of others. It would not be appropriate for you to demand for yourselves what you deny others.... You have to give up, once and for all, the dreams of conquest, and give up the belief that force is the best method for dealing with the Arabs.³⁷

Wright notes that it is bizarre for the (four-time) defeated party to come to the parliament of the victors and lay down the terms for peace. When Sadat finished his speech, Begin did not applaud. The debate on peace terms did not take place and instead, he insisted on Israel’s right to exist by saying “No sir, we took no foreign land... We have returned to our homeland,” and referencing how the generation of survivors of the Holocaust “swore an oath of allegiance: never again shall we endanger our people.”³⁸ Begin perhaps felt the responsibility for that promise more than anyone else in the world at that time as the leader of the Jewish Homeland and himself a Holocaust survivor. With these deep discrepancies in foundation of the leaders’ respective national identity, official peace between Israel and Egypt was still many months away.

The consequences of the visit included acts of terrorism, the Camp David Accords, and the murder of Sadat, who paid for peace with his life and the hatred of much of the Arab world. The

³⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, “The Sadat Standard.” *New York Times*: 1998.

³⁶ Friedman, “The Sadat Standard.”

³⁷ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 28-29.

³⁸ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 29-30.

PLO perpetrated two infamous terrorist attacks in retaliation to Sadat's visit and what it symbolized. The first started when on 18 February 1978, two Palestinian terrorists murdered Youssef el-Sebai, a newspaper editor and a good friend of Sadat who had accompanied him to Jerusalem. The terrorists declared that everyone "who went to Israel will die...including Sadat."³⁹ The second attack became the worst terrorist attack in Israeli history: eleven Palestinian militants landed their boat 40 miles of their intended destination, Tel Aviv. After killing an American photographer they encountered, they made their way onto the highway and attacked cars with their rifles and grenades. They then hijacked a taxi and two buses, killing most of those on board. Thirty-eight Israelis, including thirteen children were killed, and many more wounded.⁴⁰ These attacks were meant to enflame Begin into zealous vengeance, and therefore, beckon the Arab world to retaliate. Three days after the coastal highway attack, the Israeli army marched into southern Lebanon "with the declared mission of punishing Palestinian forces there, but in the process kill[ed] more than a thousand civilians, leaving hundreds homeless, and escalat[ing] Arab fears the Israel would annex the southern part of the country."⁴¹ Peace was still far away. However it did come: the Camp David Accords did establish a lasting peace between the two nations. Furthermore, in the document's preamble, the third listed guide for peace in the Middle East references Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and Begin's later visit to Ismailia as having "created an unprecedented opportunity for peace which must not be lost if this generation and future generations are to be spared the tragedies of war."⁴² This assured the significance of the visit in the process for peace

³⁹ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 40.

⁴⁰ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 40-41.

⁴¹ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 41.

⁴² Telhami, *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining*, 225.

between Egypt and Israel.⁴³ Arab leaders did rally in Tripoli, on 1 December 1977, to attempt to prevent Sadat from “making a feared separate peace with Israel,” a Washington Post reporter testified. He also noted the pressure on the Syrian President Hafez Assad to at once coerce Sadat, while prudently avoiding “a complete break with Egypt, the Arab heartland,” but the Arab League headquarters were moved from Cairo.⁴⁴ When the headquarters were eventually reinstated in Cairo (as Sadat had predicted), they were not far from the Israeli embassy, which was established by the Camp David Accords.⁴⁵ After Sadat’s murder, President Hosni Mubarak eagerly worked to repair relations with the Arab world that Sadat severed in the Egyptian-Israeli peace process because Egypt received the Sinai Peninsula gradually. This was due to the joint efforts of President Carter, Prime Minister Begin, and President Sadat and their respective administrations.⁴⁶

Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem and Begin’s hospitality are exceptional models of effort between strangers and previous enemies to put their lives, careers, and military supremacy at risk in order to guide their nations to peace in a region of the world that has often seen the turmoil of war. The visit defied the context of history and inspired the leaders of nations to work diligently to bring about tangible peace. Although it met vigorous opposition and it was not a perfect peace, as it neglected to achieve the prescribed rights of the Palestinians, the visit transformed what ignorance had labeled a blood feud into diplomatic negotiations with a future.

⁴³ Telhami, *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining*, 225.

⁴⁴ Jonathan C Randal, “Anti-Sadat Arabs Meet in Tripoli.” *The Washington Post*: 1977.

⁴⁵ Chafets, “Sadat Street.”

⁴⁶ William E. Farrell, “Sinai After April 25; News Analysis.” *The New York Times*: 1982.

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