Viewpoints Special Edition

The Legacy of Camp David:
1979-2009

The Middle East Institute
Washington, DC
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The Legacy of Camp David: 1979-2009
The year 1979 was among the most tumultuous, and important, in the history of the modern Middle East. The Middle East Institute will mark the 30th anniversary of these events in 2009 by launching a year-long special series of our acclaimed publication, Viewpoints, that will offer perspectives on these events and the influence which they continue to exert on the region today. Each special issue of Viewpoints will combine the diverse commentaries of policymakers and scholars from around the world with a robust complement of statistics, maps, and bibliographic information in order to encourage and facilitate further research. Each special issue will be available, free of charge, on our website, www.mei.edu.

In the second of these special editions of Viewpoints, we turn our attention to the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in Washington, DC on March 26, 1979. The treaty inaugurated an official peace between the two countries that had gone to war four times since Israel's founding. This issue of Viewpoints examines the mixed results and legacy of the bold steps towards peace that were taken 30 years ago this month.

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Egypt's Role, 30 Years after Peace with Israel

Shibley Telhami

When Anwar Sadat waged peace with Israel 30 years ago, Egypt’s position in the Arab world had already declined despite its surprisingly effective performance in the 1973 war, or maybe because of it. The spike in oil prices that came after the war transformed the economic distribution of power, turning Egypt — by far the largest Arab state — into the fourth ranked economic power in the Arab world. Egypt needed to rebuild its military following the war, which required half of its budget and made it more dependent for economic support on the very countries that it historically had sought to lead. These circumstances were certainly factored into Sadat’s calculations. But there was another strategically significant factor behind Egypt’s move to liberate the Sinai Peninsula and to reconfigure the regional picture in its favor: the role of the United States.

Sadat believed that “99% of the cards” were in held by the United States, which had the upper hand globally and regionally and was the only country in a position to influence Israel. In the context of the Cold War, he believed that Egypt was in a good position to compete strategically with Israel as the key American ally in the region. At Camp David, both Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin arrived with the primary mission of leaving the summit with improved relations with the United States at the expense of the other — even more than reaching an agreement with each other.

While the thought of a serious Egyptian-Israeli competition for alliance with the United States seems odd in 2009, the picture looked different in 1978. Former Defense Minister Ezer Weizman expressed his concerns this way: “My objections to excessive American involvement in the negotiations with Egypt stemmed from a simple consideration: I foresaw that US interests lay closer to Egypt’s than to ours, so that it would not be long before Israeli negotiators would have to cope with the dual confrontation as they faced a Washington/Cairo axis.” In the end, President Jimmy Carter was able to use this competition to help clinch a deal.

The most important accomplishments for Egypt have been to regain the Sinai and to maintain a state of peace. In contrast to the 30 years preceding the Camp David Accords, during which Egypt fought four major wars, the period since has been marked by relative peace and stability, despite major regional and global upheavals. Although Egypt was isolated in the Arab world immediately after the Accords, it slowly regained its influence — in large part owing to the disastrous policies of Saddam Husayn toward
Iran and Kuwait. And the relationship with the United States has remained relatively strong, despite short-term tensions, with Egypt receiving significant American economic and military aid and the United States receiving important military and political cooperation. But at another level, Egypt’s relative regional and global position has eroded.

To begin with, the thought that Egypt can compete with Israel has been fully discarded since the end of the Cold War, with many Egyptians concerned that the relationship with the US has become primarily a function of the relationship with Israel. Although many in the American military and intelligence establishments have continued to value the role that Egypt plays in America’s Middle East policy, this view has been less prevalent in Congress and the American media.

Regionally, Egypt has remained an important player, but is far from playing the leadership role to which it aspired. In part, the decline of Iraq — a powerful Arab state that had aspired to compete for Arab leadership and had taken the lead in securing Arab opposition to Egypt following the Camp David Accords — created a vacuum of power in the Arab world that inevitably raised the relative importance of Cairo. Egypt will always be an influential Arab state. But even in the absence of Iraqi competitive power, smaller regional players have been visibly influential on issues of the day. In addition to Saudi Arabia, which has by far the largest Arab economy and the influence that goes with it, Syria, and even small but rich Qatar have demonstrated the ability to influence regional politics and Arab public opinion.

But the most striking aspect of the regional distribution of power is the relative decline of Arab state power and influence — even with the Arab public. The rise of Iranian power and the growing engagement of Turkey in Arab affairs after the 2003 Iraq war have been increasingly visible. For Egypt, this has been both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge was demonstrated particularly in the 2006 Israeli-Lebanese war and the 2008-2009 Gaza war.

Historically, Egypt’s Arab leadership was driven by its political and military advantages, especially with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict, which has been the prism through which most Arabs view the world. Prior to the 1979 peace treaty, Egypt was the only state with a powerful enough military to successfully fight Israel. During the era of peacemaking in the 1990s, Egypt played a central role, mostly because Cairo could argue that its influence with the United States and Israel could help the Arabs, especially the Palestinians, by delivering Arab-Israeli peace. So long as progress seemed possible, Egypt was seen as important.

Since the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in 2000, however, it has been clear that Arab leverage broadly, and Egyptian leverage in particular, has not been able to deliver. The wars in Lebanon and Gaza highlighted the frustration of the public, as well as elites, with the limited clout that Arabs could bring to bear either politically or militarily. The most striking example of these consequences have been the ascendance of Turkey and its Prime Minister, Recep
Tayyip Erdogan, in Arab public eyes as well as the increasing influence of Iran, which has backed Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. There was particular anger with Egypt for its perceived hostility to Hamas, which has become popular across the region, for its inability to stop the fighting early and for its perceived reluctance to open the Gaza-Egypt border.

These challenges also have again brought the Palestinian issue close to home with Egyptian concerns that the absence of Palestinian-Israeli peace will push Gaza on Egypt’s lap with far-reaching consequences, including for Egyptian domestic politics. These challenges have propelled Egypt into a new diplomatic role to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, at a time when the new Obama Administration in the United States has signaled greater interest in Middle East diplomacy. Egypt also sees an opportunity in the broader Arab decline and the rise of non-Arab states, Turkey and Iran; the Egyptian discourse is heavily focused on the perceived Iranian threat and even includes emerging expressions of concern about “Ottoman ambitions.”

But in the end, the regional assessment will be made on objective instruments of influence and on what is delivered. As Egypt approaches the post-Mubarak transition, Egyptian elites are uneasy about where Egypt is today — apart from its domestic political and economic challenges. Egypt’s regional influence will remain tied to what happens on the Israeli-Palestinian front, where the two-state solution — the basis of policy since Camp David — is near the end of the road. What happens on that front will inevitably be central to the triangular Egyptian-Israeli-American relationship that resulted from the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty 30 years ago.

The entire collection is located at: http://www.mei.edu/Portals/0/Publications/Legacy-Camp-David.pdf