On this day 40 years ago, I brought together President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel for peace talks at Camp David, Maryland. We and our advisors would spend thirteen days in difficult and intense negotiations and would emerge with “A Framework for Peace in the Middle East,” better known as the Camp David Accords. This required courage and sacrifice on the part of the signers, Begin and Sadat. It was a significant achievement for peace and changed the reality of the Middle East.

I commend all of you who have gathered at the University of Maryland to commemorate this anniversary and further assess its meaning. I am grateful to Professor Shibley Telhami, the occupant of the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, for hosting this special conversation. Over the years I have witnessed his contributions to scholarship and the quest for peace. He and my great friend Dr. Jehan Sadat hosted me at the university some years ago when I delivered the Anwar Sadat Lecture for Peace.

Before the Camp David Accords and the subsequent Treaty of Peace Between Egypt and Israel, these two nations had fought four major wars in 30 years. Since then, despite significant changes of government in both countries and multiple regional crises that have tested the relationship, the agreement of peace between the two countries has been honored and peace upheld. Countless lives have been saved. Precisely because the Accords were so central in anchoring a new political order, their contribution almost has come to be taken for granted.

I must point out that our aspirations at Camp David were greater than what has been achieved. I admit a lingering disappointment, which I have expressed over the years. The Accords included both the bilateral understandings between Egypt and Israel and a framework for resolving “the Palestinian problem in all its aspects.” The latter encompassed achieving autonomy for the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, territories that were occupied by Israel after the 1967 war. While Israeli-Egyptian peace was essential, I always believed that the Palestinian issue was fundamental to achieving a comprehensive peace in the region—and for Israel to survive as a democratic state. Many Israelis have shared my view, and Anwar Sadat always stressed this point, beginning with his historic speech at Israel’s Knesset and also at Camp David.

Sadat’s life was taken before the objectives of the Accords could be fully achieved. I feel strongly that, had Anwar Sadat’s life not been cut short, we would be in a much better place today. At times I have been optimistic that peace between Israelis and Palestinians was within their grasp. But, sadly, the situation today makes optimism very difficult. Israeli settlements in the West Bank have expanded substantially over the past four decades, Palestinians have
fundamental differences among themselves, and Israel’s democracy is increasingly undermined by the weight of occupation.

When I first met Anwar Sadat, he was fond of saying that 99% of the cards were in the hands of the United States. He certainly exaggerated, but he was right that the United States had a significant role to play, not only as an influential superpower, but also as a strong supporter of Israel which also has interests across the region. The United States had, and still has, an obligation driven by both strategic and moral imperatives. To succeed, we must be an honest broker and be guided by a sense of fairness, and respect for human rights and international agreements and obligations. We must maintain credibility not only with all sides of the conflict, but also with the broader international community whose support will ultimately be needed to anchor any historic peace agreement. I regret to say that the United States currently does not appear to be pursuing the role of honest broker.

I am pleased that you have assembled an outstanding panel to discuss the implications of the Camp David Accords for American foreign policy. Joining Professor Telhami are three scholars I respect who have engaged in Middle East policymaking for the United States. William Quandt, I know best, because he was an important member of my negotiating team at Camp David. He, Ellen Laipson, and Daniel Kurtzer served numerous presidents, both Republican and Democratic. They bring perspective and experience, and I know that you will have an illuminating conversation, and I look forward to reading the transcript.