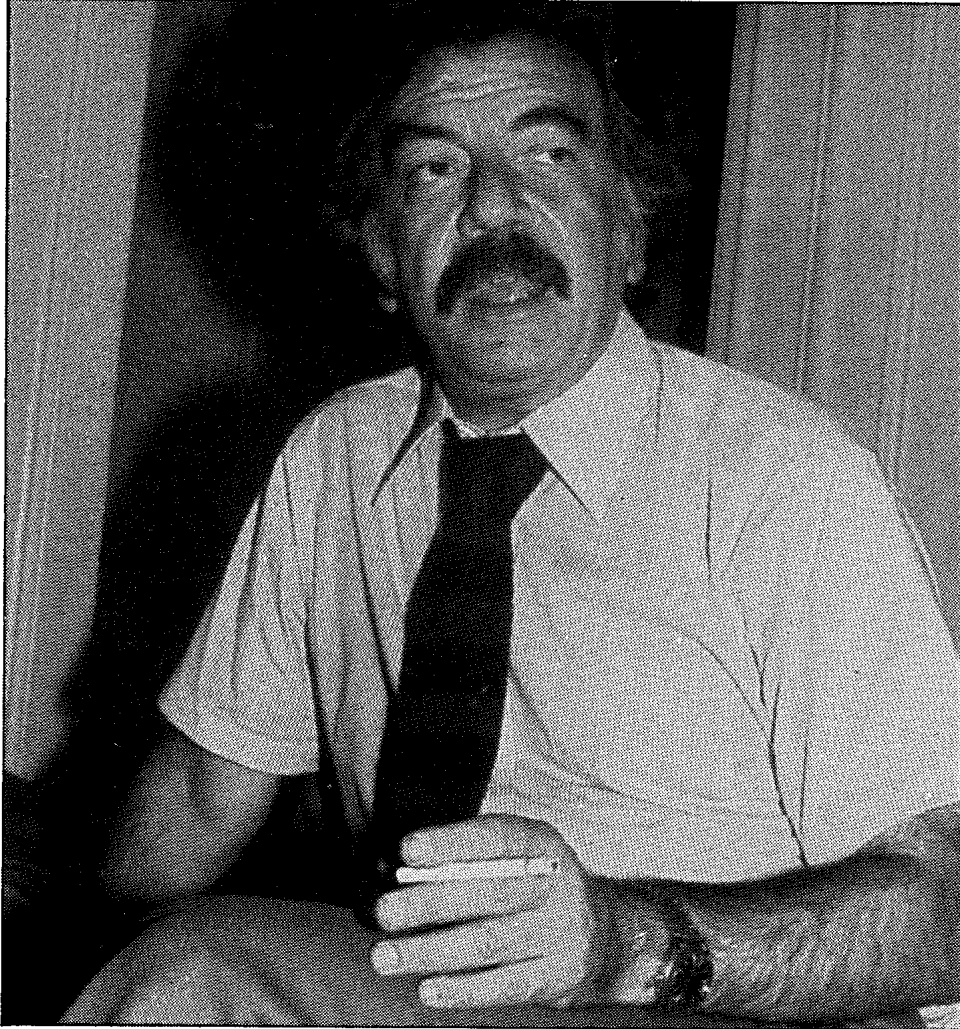


FORUM



BEGIN'S TRIUMPH, CARTER'S AND SADAT'S GAMBLE

Eric Rouleau, Middle East Editor of *Le Monde*, was one of the keynote and summation speakers at the Middle East Institute's annual conference in Washington recently. Forum Editor Mark Bruzonsky discussed with him the reasons for and the meaning of the Camp David agreements.

Bruzonsky: What's the meaning in the large, historic context of the Arab-Israeli conflict of the Camp David agreement? How are we going to look back on Camp David? What does it mean?

Rouleau: Whatever the consequence of Camp David – whether it leads to an overall settlement or to no settlement and war – I think Camp David is a turning point. It's the very first time since the Balfour Declaration that a responsible Arab government is signing a peace agreement with Israel. It's also a turning point because the biggest Arab country is getting out of confrontation with Israel in spite of the opposition of the other Arab states and without a resolution of the Palestinian problem.

It could be an even more important event – a real watershed – if it does lead to a solution of the Palestinian problem.

□ **What does it mean for the US role in the Middle East?**

○ Camp David is a manifestation of the *pax Americana* which the US would like to conclude in the Middle East. It is also the proof that some Arab leaders have been saying – that the Americans have a decisive influence in Israel and therefore the moderate Arabs should turn to the US and abandon reliance on the Soviet Union – that this is wrong. The Americans have demonstrated that they do not have much more influence on Israel than say France or Europe or even the Soviet Union. In the eyes of many Arabs, Camp David is proof that Sadat's belief that the Americans have 99 per cent of the cards is not true.

□ **Is Camp David a triumph for Begin over Carter, especially in view of Carter's policies when he first came into office?**

○ I would say yes. Carter was against a separate peace because he realised it didn't serve American interests. The US came to the conclusion that a quick and overall peace was the goal because they thought, and they still think, that strife and conflict in the Middle East is a potential threat to their interests in the area. And they believed and still believe that never in the history of the conflict have the objective conditions been so favourable to an overall settlement.

□ **But now they risk the overall settlement for the separate peace.**

○ This is why it's a victory for Begin. Since 1967 I've heard from many Israelis that a separate peace with Egypt was possible and was their objective, their dream – to cut off Egypt. I remember in 1973 just after the October war I met General Bar-Lev and he told me, to my great surprise, that Israel had very strong indications that there was a good chance for a separate peace with Egypt. And I just could not believe him.

But my argument is, what is the use of a separate peace? Of course it reduces the possibility of pressure by the Arabs. But it's not leading to the kind of settlement which can be stable in the Middle East.

□ **So why did the Americans do it? If Carter believes that stability is so essential, he's now risking that stability?**

○ He's taking a big gamble. But I don't

think he had another way of doing it, for two reasons. His two guests, Begin and Sadat, having a confrontation under his own eyes, were of unequal strength. Begin came to Camp David saying it's not the last chance, we can still wait though we would like to reach an agreement. He really felt this, it wasn't just propaganda, because he was coming from a position of force. Begin wasn't threatened if Camp David failed. On the contrary he could go back and say to the Israelis that they were trying to force me into a settlement jeopardizing the security of the State of Israel. And few Israelis would have then turned against Begin.

The person who was really threatened by the collapse of Camp David was Sadat. He had promised his people that if his initiative failed he would resign. Failure would have put him in a very difficult position. And if he did not want to resign he could have put up a show by saying he was now going to try other means - in other words go back to the Arab fold, to the people he dislikes, Syria and the PLO and especially the allies of those people, the Soviet Union, for which Sadat has an allergy.

As a matter of fact, I think one of the reasons which took Sadat to Jerusalem in November was that he wanted to break up the possibly approaching Geneva conference where he was going to find the Soviets.

So Sadat was in a far weaker position than Begin. He had to get something out of Camp David. Sadat was coming without the support of the Arab world and taking an independent path, reduced his strength. Egypt's strength is not only because of its geography and demography but because Egypt traditionally has been the leader of the Arab world and had the support of at least parts of the Arab world in which the Western world has interests. Egypt, coming to Camp David without the Arab world supporting it explicitly, had been reduced to a minor power - important, but still minor. So that also made of Sadat a weak person.

Now, to come back to your question. Carter was having these two people facing each other and one of them was giving in to the other. He could not be more royalist than Sadat. He himself was also in a weak position because on one side he had the pressures of the domestic groups - who are unconditionally for the policies of Israel - and on the other he had Arabs who did not exercise enough pressure on him. Of course, the Americans perceived a potential threat from the Arabs. But that threat was not there, it wasn't real at the time.

These abstractions, I think, do reflect reality. And Carter maybe thought that for his own good - because his image in the US would improve and because he couldn't exercise any more pressure on Begin anyway and because maybe he thought why not, let's try it, even a separate peace might lead to a comprehensive settlement - for these reasons we have had Camp David.

□ Many people have talked about "Palestinian participation" and "Palestinian self-determination". The Egyptian ambassador has even referred to the "Palestinian nation". Is there any significant likelihood in your

view that out of the Camp David framework will eventually come a real Palestinian state? I know that there's always hope. But does it make any real political sense?

○ You are right. Hopes mean nothing. Hopes can be expressed on both sides and in contradictory directions.

Let's go back to the political basics. What gives momentum? Momentum doesn't come out of a written text like Camp David. Momentum comes from a push and a push comes from political forces. The Camp David agreement could evolve into a positive momentum - and by this I mean a solution to the Palestinian problem - or it could, on the contrary, be a momentum in the other direction, a step backwards. It all depends on the balance of power.

If the Arabs, to take a scenario, organise

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themselves, unite, and exercise very strong pressures on the US, or if the Palestinians, as another example, would organise themselves and put real pressures on Israel - and pressures are not necessarily military, they could be political or economic or social or, for instance, a general strike in the West Bank - then the Camp David agreement would evolve into something else. It would no longer be Camp David, it would then be Camp David plus.

□ But you don't think there will be such strong, united Arab pressures, do you?

○ In the immediate future I don't think it can happen. Because, let us take the factors of pressure on the US and on Israel.

Saudi Arabia has condemned Camp David but has immediately, and in the very same communique, said it does not want to interfere in Sadat's getting Sinai back. This means Saudi Arabia will go on giving money to Sadat. The Saudis should be judged on their actions, not their words. And in this particular case there are just words of condemnation and real acts in the other direction. Also, Saudi Arabia has consistently in the past few years repeated it would not use oil as a political instrument. So we should exclude any pressure on the US of that nature.

Jordan also has an ambivalent position. Even Syria, although it has taken a very hard line in appearance, is keeping its channels of communications with the US. And we know the Israelis are prepared to give back the Golan Heights to Syria on the

same basis as Sinai to Egypt - in other words another separate peace and leave the Palestinians to their fate. I don't think Syria will go as far as this, it's impossible for many reasons. But anyway, Syria's position is really not a hard-line position.

□ Isn't there a potential for the Soviet Union to put it's foot down?

○ Of course. This is the factor which hasn't been discussed very much and it's very important.

The Soviet Union, because it has lost a lot of its influence in the area, is thought by many people to be finished. But, it's not finished, it's still a factor in the Middle East. It's not only in Iraq, in Syria and in South Yemen. It is also everywhere else in the Middle East in forms which are not obvious or visible.

More important, the Russians are on the periphery of the Middle East. They have good influence in Afghanistan and in Ethiopia and maybe tomorrow in Iran, we don't know. It's not out of the game.

It's just being blind to say we can do it alone and without the Soviet Union. In fact, it was this US administration's point of view in the beginning that it would be a fatal mistake to exclude the Soviet Union. The opinion of this administration was to bring in the maximum of powers to guarantee a peace. But again, the US has given in to double pressure - not only Sadat who doesn't like the Russians, but also Begin. Carter seems to have departed from his path under pressure from his minute allies, small countries such as Egypt and Israel.

□ Carter has returned to the Kissinger approach hasn't he - by saying he will not deal with the PLO, by trying to keep the Soviets out and by accepting a step-by-step process!

○ I think so, yes.

□ So Henry is the real winner of Camp David?

○ Yes, you are right. The Camp David agreement is just an outgrowth of Kissinger's policies, a continuation of those Kissinger policies which were condemned by this administration. Yes, Camp David seems to go counter to what Carter has been saying about a settlement.

□ You have warned of the risks of Camp David saying we might regret what we have done. What are these dangers and risks?

○ If we have to look at the pessimistic side - and I don't say this will happen, but only that there are real risks - the following could happen:

1. The complete isolation of Sadat - what I call pushing Sadat into the ghetto, the same ghetto where Menahem Begin is. In other words, a man and a country could be burned and they could have played a very important role as go-between between Israel and the more hard-line Arab states. Sadat could have been much more useful to both the US and Israel if he remained in a middle-man position. His usefulness will be completely lost if he can't convince other states to come into the process. This is why I say Israel is being short-sighted. They think that cutting off Egypt is a good thing. But they should have preserved Egypt's

legitimacy in the Arab world. The consequences could be that Sadat's regime could destabilise and fall.

2. The second risk is that of division of the Arab world into two camps. As you know it was decided at the Damascus "steadfastness" conference practically to create another Arab League outside of Cairo. Let us suppose they are able to do it - thus creating two Arab Leagues. When you divide the Arab world, you make a settlement with Israel much more difficult. Because you create a polarised situation where overbidding and exaggeration are the rule as you have to demonstrate that you're a better Arab than the next. We knew a period like this in the 1960s. When you polarise, in other words, you invite the big powers into a struggle which would look very much like the cold war. So, by doing this, you are substituting from a situation in which the big powers throughout the Arab world were agreeing in principle to make peace with Israel and conclude peace treaties to a new situation in which you have two Arab worlds - one so-called hard-line linked with the Soviet Union and the other so-called moderate linked with the US. So you are postponing peace and opening the way for strife and possibly military conflict. If this does happen then it would be preferable to have had no Camp David.

□ If you were Yasser Arafat, responsible for making decisions fateful for the Palestinian people, how would you react to Camp David?

○ Well, nothing is offered to Yasser Arafat as a PLO leader, except, there's one thing in which he can play a role - the elections.

Now if, and I say if, those elections are completely free, then I believe it is a basic right of anybody, whether PLO or not, to play the game of the elections. This is not just an abstract democratic right. It is a way of making the voice of your own people heard to the whole world.

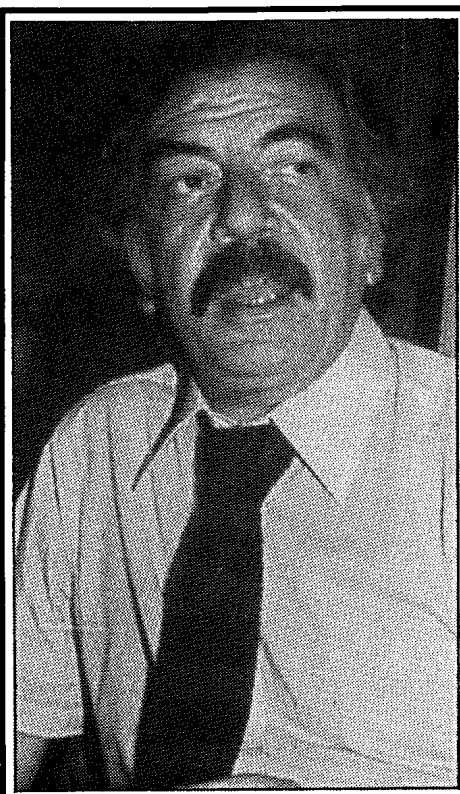
In this way elected persons might be able to stand up and say they are for an independent state. And saying this would be a victory for those like Yasser Arafat who believe that this is the only solution.

□ Does Begin intend to maintain Israeli settlement rights and land purchase rights in perpetuity?

○ Of course he will try. His whole life has been based on that. There was even an exchange of letters with Carter to dispute terminology, Begin saying the West Bank means Judea and Samaria. This made me laugh. If they can't even agree on the name of the West Bank it shows how deep the conflict is. Begin is so adamant about it he even got Sadat to use the term Judea and Samaria back at Ismailiya last Christmas.

So, Begin will try to keep Judea and Samaria Jewish, not just settlements. He may also try to bring back what he suggested publicly in December - his plan which contains the idea that the territories will never be given back to the Arabs but the inhabitants will chose a nationality, some Jordanian and some Israeli.

□ About the settlements. Has Camp David superceded 242 in the following way - not legally but politically? Before Camp David Israeli settlements were



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not only illegal, but the terms of 242 implied withdrawal of settlements along with withdrawal from territories. After Camp David, we have only discussion of future settlements and no discussion of present settlements which implies de facto acceptance.

○ Not a definitive one. The great success of Begin at Camp David is to have obtained acceptance of the settlements for another five years at least. What the Americans and the whole world were asking before was to get the settlements out right away. Today there is a kind of legitimacy given to Mr Begin's policies. In a way this has neutralised the 242 resolution, creating a new legal framework superceding 242.

□ Even though it would be denied because 242 is mentioned in the Camp David formula. It's not a legal change, but a political change?

○ It's more. It's a legal change for at least five years. Nobody is going to ask Begin now to take away those settlements for five years at least.

Suppose that Begin agrees to freeze new settlements, which is the maximum that he

can accept. Then the trade-off is no new settlements and for those there nothing more will be said.

And if negotiations don't succeed in five years then things remain as they are. And maybe they'll expand the settlements to 30,000 from today's less than 10,000 settlers. This will make it more difficult to reach a settlement.

□ What about Jordan? Do you conceive of any circumstances under which the Camp David agreements can be modified with Israeli approval so that King Hussain would take the risk of joining the negotiations?

○ First, there is no unanimity within Jordan to get back the West Bank. Crown Prince Hassan and others are telling the King to forget about the West Bank, that it will be a source of trouble and that Jordan is doing okay now. Let the Palestinians be Israel's neighbour they argue.

The King himself though is interested in the West Bank but he's being very cautious. The King cannot look as if he's selling out Palestinian rights. He can still envisage himself at the head of a unified Jordanian kingdom if he can get the minimum of what the Palestinians are demanding today. But you can't ask him to go against both members of his family and parts of the Arab world and then give him half of the West Bank as the Labour Party wanted to do and no East Jerusalem!

At this point, it is certain that he doesn't want to risk too much.

□ What's your judgement if the Americans do decide to take Begin on about the settlements issue?

○ Well, it seems now that many people do consider this issue of a freeze on settlements and especially the right of any West Bank autonomous government to have a right of veto over settlements as the crucial test for Carter.

Let me tell you a story which I hold as authentic and which came from very good sources.

At Camp David when Sadat called his Foreign Minister, Mr Kamel, to say that he was going to agree, Kamel protested. He said that this is the very agreement we've refused for 12 days so why are we accepting it today?

Mr Sadat's answer was, well, we have to help President Carter who's been so good to us and anyway he's given me his word of honour that he will stand on our side and press Begin into making more concessions leading to a solution in the West Bank and Gaza. And Kamel's answer was that however good the President of the United States and however much we like him, we cannot base the policy of the state of Egypt and our future on the basis of the word of one man, or trust in one man. And he resigned.

In other words, I want to say, if Mr Carter cannot get his own way on a freeze on settlements, the whole basis on which Mr Sadat agreed to sign the accord is collapsing. If he can't get this, how can he get anything else for Sadat or the Palestinians or the Jordanians or whoever it is. So it's considered a test case both by Sadat and Hussain and probably by the Saudis and other Arabs. □