



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter

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1. Jimmy Carter and the Arab-Israeli Dispute

By Galen Jackson

In *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, Jørgen Jensehaugen explores the fundamental paradox of President Jimmy Carter's approach to Arab-Israeli peacemaking. As Jensehaugen points out on the very first page of the book, "the Palestinian issue was a cornerstone of President Carter's Middle East policy," which, given the political context in the United States as it related to this whole issue at the time, was "almost revolutionary."¹ But ironically, one of the most important legacies of Carter's Middle East policy was that the Palestinians, more than any other party involved, suffered significant setbacks during his presidency. The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty dramatically reduced the Palestinians', and the other Arab states', negotiating leverage vis-à-vis Israel by removing Egypt, the strongest Arab state militarily, from any coalition Israel might face in a future war. That outcome, Jensehaugen implies, was all the more disappointing because, in his view, conditions were relatively favorable to a comprehensive Middle East agreement when Carter entered office.² The Americans and Palestinians, he concludes, "missed a historic opportunity in the Carter years."³

Could Carter Have Accomplished More?

The three reviewers in this roundtable, Craig Daigle, Alexandra Evans, and Jeremy Pressman, all agree that Jensehaugen has produced an important study. The book, Daigle writes, is "impressively researched" and represents a "significant contribution." It is, Evans agrees, "a valuable addition" that "cogently and concisely distill[s] the complex negotiations." In Pressman's view, the book is "excellent," "comprehensive," and "compelling." Likewise, all three reviewers agree with Jensehaugen that the "looming question in this story is whether Carter realistically could have done more to change the

¹ Jørgen Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter: The US, Israel and the Palestinians* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 1.

² Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 181–82.

³ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 177.

outcome of the peace process.”⁴ But, as is usually the case, they do not accept all of Jensehaugen’s arguments.

For his part, Daigle thinks that Jensehaugen is overly critical of Carter’s performance. One of the book’s key claims, Daigle notes, is that the president’s failure to produce a better outcome for the Palestinians was in large part due to “domestic political constraints.” But in Daigle’s view, the better explanation is that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s decision to, in effect, pursue a separate peace agreement with Israel basically left Washington with few options to achieve a comprehensive Middle East settlement. “[W]hat,” he asks, “was Carter supposed to do?” Having been given the chance to reach a deal between Israel and the most important Arab state involved in the conflict, it is difficult to fault the president for accepting the deal that Sadat had made possible. And, Daigle emphasizes, it is important to remember that, whatever the shortcomings, Egyptian-Israeli peace more or less eliminated the prospects for another major Arab-Israeli war.

Evans, in her thoughtful review, also focuses on this question. The book, she writes, “introduces more questions than [it] answers.” Although Jensehaugen emphasizes the role played by domestic political considerations in shaping Carter’s basic approach, in Evans’s view that sort of claim requires more detailed discussion. As she puts it, “Precisely how the Carter administration integrated domestic factors into its foreign policy decision-making is often assumed rather than explained.” And because the book does not describe in great detail the administration’s internal deliberations, readers are left wondering what exactly Jensehaugen’s bottom line is. Was Carter simply overly cautious and not politically skilled enough to move the peace process in the direction he preferred? Or were the structural obstacles he faced basically insurmountable? Unfortunately, Evans concludes, these sorts of questions are largely left unaddressed.

In Pressman’s view, this whole debate raises a number of interesting counterfactual questions. Would American pressure on Israel at this time have led that country to alter its negotiating stance? Might it have resulted in the collapse of the government of Menachem

⁴ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 194. Other analysts also view this as the key question. For example, see, William B. Quandt’s review in *H-Diplo Roundtable Review* XX, no. 36, May 6, 2019, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/4083976/pdf>.

Begin, the hardline Israeli prime minister who categorically rejected Carter's approach? Would such pressure have signaled to other Arab states, like Jordan, that joining the Camp David process might produce results and thereby have transformed the dynamics of the negotiations? And what if Carter had agreed to direct talks between the United States and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)? Would such a dialogue have changed anything? One suspects that Pressman's answers to these questions is "no." The Begin government, he writes, was simply not going to budge when it came to the Palestinians. Moreover, in his view Egyptian-Israeli peace produced "substantial gains" for Egypt, Israel, and the United States. There was, then, only a "narrow" space in which Carter could have maneuvered for a more fundamental settlement.

Evaluating Carter's Diplomacy

As Daigle and Pressman emphasize, one should not downplay the strategic significance of Egyptian-Israeli peace for the United States. Drastically reducing the chances of another Middle East war obviously was of great importance. But I tend to agree with Jensehaugen that Carter might have accomplished more on the Palestinian issue.

For most experts, there are three possible explanations for why the administration was unable to achieve more than it did. The first is that several of the parties involved in the problem, especially the PLO, Syria, and the Soviet Union, simply could not be dealt with on a reasonable basis because they were offering totally unacceptable terms for a comprehensive agreement.⁵ Of course, if that indeed were the case one could hardly fault the Americans for failing to secure a broader Middle East agreement.

To be sure, neither the Syrians nor the PLO were willing to make major concessions without quite substantial assurances that they would be met in return with the fulfillment of their

⁵ On Syria, see, for example, Hermann Frederick Eilts, "The Syrians Have Been Their Own Worst Enemies," *New York Times*, Jan. 12, 1982; Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam, 1982), 286. American criticism of Soviet policy in the Middle East became especially strident after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War. On this point, see, for example, John Rosenberg, "The Quest Against Détente: Eugene Rostow, the October War, and the Origins of the Anti-Détente Movement, 1969-1976," *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 4 (2015), 720-44, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhu042>.

main objectives.⁶ The PLO, in fact, refused in advance of negotiations even to accept United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 or to recognize Israel's right to exist.⁷ In that sense, one could certainly fault them, and especially the PLO, for, as Jensehaugen notes, failing to give the Carter administration some diplomatic ammunition with which it could have more effectively shaped Israeli behavior.⁸

Even so, Jensehaugen's research suggests that these problems, had certain conditions been met, might have been surmountable. With respect to Damascus, he points out, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad would not settle with Israel for less than its full withdrawal from the Golan Heights and a solution that satisfied the moderate PLO position. The fundamental problem, however, was that Damascus ultimately drew the conclusion that, due to domestic pressure, Carter was not going to be able to deliver such an agreement.⁹ Indeed, Assad saw Carter's "statements as a zig-zag," and his conclusion was that "the [Israeli] lobby will shoot down any peace settlement which includes Israeli withdrawals from the Golan and the West Bank."¹⁰ In short, it certainly seems possible that if the Americans could have actually demonstrated to the Syrians their ability to deliver a comprehensive settlement, the latter would have accepted such an outcome.

One can make similar points with respect to the PLO. Again, the organization, and its chairman, Yasser Arafat, missed an opportunity to take advantage of Carter's sympathy by not taking a more forthcoming position. On the other hand, the PLO shared many of Syria's concerns, especially after Carter retreated in the wake of the issuance of a joint statement by the United States and the Soviet Union on Oct. 1, 1977. Although that document "had created great expectations," the Saudi foreign minister told Carter, American backsliding had "shocked people, especially the Palestinians, who had gone so far as to praise the US-

⁶ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 6, 44, 58-61.

⁷ Resolution 242, which had been adopted unanimously in November 1967, was the main framework within which Arab-Israeli peace negotiations were conducted.

⁸ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 98.

⁹ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 68-71.

¹⁰ Telegram from the Embassy in Jordan to Brzezinski, "Subject: Zaid Rifai-Asad Visit," Nov. 23, 1977, NLC-16-41-3-21-3, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia (JCL).

Soviet communiqué.”¹¹ And, as Jensehaugen points out, all the PLO would get for making these concessions — which, given its relative weakness, represented “one of its most important negotiating cards” — was a dialogue with the United States, “hardly sufficient inducement.”¹²

As for the Soviets, Jensehaugen’s book shows that it is very difficult to sustain the argument that they were pursuing an unhelpful policy in the Middle East. Moscow, he observes, was deeply interested in cooperating with Washington to secure a comprehensive Arab-Israeli agreement. Moreover, the Kremlin, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski noted in March, was taking a position that was more or less identical to the one favored by the Americans.¹³ The Soviets, Jensehaugen also points out, were quite clearly trying to push the PLO in a more moderate direction. Finally, Moscow’s support for the October 1 statement clearly demonstrated that it wanted to cooperate with the Americans.

Another common explanation is the one favored by Daigle, namely, that Sadat was uninterested in the comprehensive option and therefore torpedoed Carter’s efforts once he came to believe they might jeopardize his own core objectives. This is certainly an argument that must be taken seriously, for some important evidence suggests that the Egyptian president, whose top priorities were the return of the Sinai and an alliance with the Americans, was willing to abandon the Palestinian cause to achieve those goals, provided he could credibly claim that he had first worked for a more general settlement. As early as December 1977, Sadat had reported to the Americans that what he really needed was “cover” for a separate agreement. He had said, in fact, that “he secretly had no problems if the West Bank eventually went to Israel.”¹⁴

But I think Jensehaugen is correct in saying that comprehending Sadat’s thinking is difficult, for there is also quite a bit of evidence that suggests he *did* care about the

¹¹ Memorandum of Conversation (Memcon), “Subject: President’s Meeting with Saud ibn Faisal al-Sa’ud, Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs,” Oct. 27, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1977-August 1978* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2013), 721.

¹² Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 64.

¹³ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 41.

¹⁴ Quoted in Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 106.

Palestinian issue — not for any principled reasons, granted — but because he understood that Egypt’s position in the Arab world would be seriously damaged by a purely separate agreement. Moreover, Sadat obviously would have preferred a comprehensive peace if that were possible and, in that sense, his views were very much aligned with Carter’s.

It is worth mentioning a few points related to this whole question. For starters, it is possible that Sadat pursued his Jerusalem initiative because he miscalculated that his dramatic gesture would lead to an overall settlement. In Jensehaugen’s view, his “euphoric optimism [was] detached from political reality.” The Egyptian president, he writes, wanted Israel in the aftermath of his Jerusalem gambit to declare its willingness to withdraw to the 1967 lines and to resolve the Palestinian question.¹⁵ Brzezinski even wondered if Sadat was “losing his sense of reality.”¹⁶ Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that when he decided to go to Jerusalem Sadat had been led to believe that doing so would unlock these Israeli concessions.¹⁷ It is possible, then, that, as Jensehaugen puts it, “Sadat was trapped by his own initiative.”¹⁸

Indeed, it is by no means clear that Sadat, had he known what the ultimate outcome of the peace process would be, would have acted as he did in November 1977. Even his August 2 meeting with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, during which he had said “emphatically” that he could live with a bilateral deal, does not really support the view that the Egyptian leader was mainly interested in a separate deal with Israel. All Sadat had said, in fact, was that he would accept such an outcome *if the other Arab parties were offered reasonable terms but nevertheless refused them*. “In so far as the West Bank and the Palestinian issue is concerned,” he told Vance, “the Israelis must give up the West Bank, except for minor

¹⁵ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 95, 101.

¹⁶ Quoted in Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 89.

¹⁷ On this point, see for example Lawrence Wright, *Thirteen Days in September: The Dramatic Story of the Struggle for Peace* (New York: Vintage, 2014), 49, 77, 391.

¹⁸ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 118–19. For similar views, see, for example, Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, 77; Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 228.

border rectifications.”¹⁹ That, of course, was the same sort of policy Sadat had been pursuing for several years.

With that in mind, the explanation provided by William Quandt, a key adviser to Brzezinski, of Sadat’s behavior in the wake of the October 1 U.S.-Soviet joint statement is, to my mind, compelling. It was not, he observes, the joint statement itself — and its call for a multilateral conference — that rattled the Egyptian president, but Carter’s subsequent retreat from it in the face of domestic pressure.²⁰ Jensehaugen downplays Sadat’s comment to Carter four months later that he had viewed the statement as “marvelous” because the former “had a clear interest in pleasing Carter at that point,” but his reaction had been the same at the time the statement was issued.²¹ The Egyptian leader’s decision to go to Jerusalem, the U.S. ambassador in Cairo, Hermann Eilts, later wrote, had been taken to facilitate a comprehensive agreement, not to block one. The joint statement, Sadat had told him, was a “brilliant maneuver.”²²

Thus, Sadat’s impression of Carter’s retreat mirrored that of Syria’s and the PLO’s. As he later explained, he had at the time “felt the weight of the Zionist lobby in the United States.”²³ “I took the initiative,” he said at one point, “because Carter was under attack from the Jewish lobby and also in the Arab world.”²⁴ His hope, he told Eilts in December, was “that his actions have given President Carter ‘full maneuverability’ to urge the Israelis to be responsive.”²⁵

¹⁹ Telegram from Vance to the White House and the Department of State, Aug. 2, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, 381–82.

²⁰ William B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1986), 123–25.

²¹ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 77. For Sadat’s comment, see, Memcon, “Subject: President’s Meeting with President Anwar Sadat,” Feb. 4, 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, 989.

²² Quoted in Eilts, “The Syrians Have Been Their Own Worst Enemies.”

²³ Memcon, Feb. 4, 1978, 992.

²⁴ Memcon, April 9, 1980, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 9: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, August 1978-December 1980*, Second, Revised Edition (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2018), 1153.

²⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, Dec. 27, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. 8, 902.

Finally, there is the possibility that Sadat believed the Camp David summit would result in the U.S.-Israeli “showdown” that he had always wanted. As Quandt writes, “Sadat ... almost certainly expected much more out of Camp David than he got.”²⁶ To be sure, the Egyptian president was willing, as he told Carter on the first day of the conference, to accept a separate agreement, but by that time he had little leverage left and probably still believed he would get more on the Palestinian issue than he ultimately did.²⁷ Thus, Quandt, who was at Camp David, recalls that Sadat, who had signed the Accords wrongly believing that Carter had at least gotten Begin to agree to a settlements freeze, was “quiet, almost grim.” “There was,” he writes, “no sense of victory or elation.” Sadat’s advisers, he adds, were also “keenly disappointed.”²⁸

In short, the evidence on Sadat is mixed. Daigle and others are certainly correct in pointing out that, in terms of his hierarchy of objectives, getting back the Sinai and establishing a close strategic partnership with the United States were at the top. Nevertheless, the Egyptian leader obviously would have preferred a comprehensive deal, which would have avoided the rest of the Arab world’s hostile reaction to the Camp David agreement. More importantly, some important evidence suggests that such a settlement, or at least an outcome different from what was ultimately negotiated at Camp David, had been his goal even after his Jerusalem initiative.

So neither of the first two explanations is entirely satisfying — though, to be sure, they capture parts of the story — and that means that the third one, which has to do with American domestic politics, deserves serious attention. Indeed, this is Jensehaugen’s focus in his book. His argument, in brief, is that, due to the American domestic political context, Carter simply lacked the ability to press Israel to accept comprehensive terms that the Arabs could realistically accept.²⁹ Thus, for Jensehaugen, the answer to the question of whether Carter could realistically have achieved more than he did is ultimately unknowable. What is clear in his view, however — and here he seems to take a more critical

²⁶ Quandt, *Camp David*, 208.

²⁷ For Sadat’s discussion of this issue with Carter, see, Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 134.

²⁸ Quandt, *Camp David*, 251 n. 14, 253, 255.

²⁹ Other writers, like Quandt, have taken this argument even further. See, for example, Quandt, *H-Diplo Roundtable Review*; Quandt, *Camp David*.

stance — is that the administration never even attempted to make use of America’s considerable leverage to pressure Israel to accept a comprehensive formula.

Jensehaugen is basically correct that the domestic political aspect of this whole story was of fundamental importance.³⁰ Nevertheless, I think that the administration might have achieved more than it ultimately did had it managed its domestic constraints more competently.³¹ It was abundantly clear, after all, that a broader peace agreement would not be possible without a U.S.-Israeli confrontation, especially after Begin’s election in May 1977.³² And administration officials likewise should have recognized — as, indeed, they ultimately would — that they could not prevail in such a showdown without strong domestic support at home. But Carter quickly stumbled in this area, in part because he had not been particularly concerned with the domestic aspect of the issue when he took office.

Perhaps the administration could have reversed the damage it had done to its efforts with a major push to mobilize support at home for its policy. U.S. officials, in fact, had a number of ideas for how this might be done, as a detailed paper prepared prior to the Camp David summit reveals.³³ In the end, however, the administration made no such effort. This “dog that didn’t bark” is rather perplexing, for Carter had several opportunities to try to move the situation domestically in his favor. Perhaps the most important of these came in early 1978, when Begin was on the defensive both in Israel and the United States, because of his rigidity over the twin issues of Resolution 242 and settlement expansion.³⁴

³⁰ For a fuller discussion of my own views in this area, see, Galen Jackson, “The Showdown That Wasn’t: U.S.-Israeli Relations and American Domestic Politics, 1973-75,” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 130-69, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00201; Galen E., Jackson, “Strategy and Two-Level Games: U.S. Domestic Politics and the Road to a Separate Peace, 1977-1978,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 3 (Summer 2017), 160-95, https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00757.

³¹ This is the basic argument I advance in, Jackson, “Strategy and Two-Level Games.”

³² See, for example, Department of State Briefing Memo from Assistant Secretary of State Harold Saunders to Vance, “Subject: How Will Geneva Decisions Affect the Begin Government?” July 16, 1977, NLC-15-21-8-34-7, JCL.

³³ “Possible Courses of Action in the Event of Stalemate in the Egyptian-Israeli Negotiations,” undated, NLC-6-52-5-9-4, JCL. Jensehaugen also discusses this document. See, Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 128.

³⁴ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 116, 121, 129-30.

Yet not only was the opportunity not seized, but Carter basically guaranteed that he would not prevail by choosing precisely this moment to force a very controversial arms sale to Saudi Arabia through Congress.³⁵ The main effect of this decision was to exhaust the president's political capital at what might have been the critical moment in the peace process. As a May 30 strategy paper acknowledged, Congress would now feel that something had to be done "for Israel ... rather than asking more *from* Israel. There will therefore be a reluctance to back the Administration in yet another showdown with the Israelis." A few months earlier, the paper added, Carter seemed to be gaining the upper hand, but the sale had now moved "attention from the core issues on which the Begin Government was heavily on the defensive."³⁶

What this sort of dynamic, which Jensehaugen is right to emphasize throughout the book, ultimately meant was that Carter was never in a position to exert real pressure on Begin. The president considered this option on a number of occasions but never followed through, believing he was not well positioned at home for a confrontation. It is, in this sense, perhaps unsurprising that Begin concluded that Carter was a "cream puff."³⁷ Toward the end of the president's term in office, in fact, one Israeli official went so far as to declare openly that he was basically unconcerned that American aid to Israel would ever be threatened.³⁸

It is certainly possible that the domestic structure of the problem was more or less insurmountable without dramatic gestures from the Syrians and the PLO, along the lines of Sadat's Jerusalem initiative. But my reading of the evidence suggests — and here I tend to agree with Jensehaugen — that if Carter had employed a better domestic political strategy, the outcome might have been different. Begin, after all, was on the defensive on certain key issues, especially his expansion of settlements. With this in mind, Carter might have succeeded in enforcing a settlements freeze as part of the Camp David agreement if he had been better positioned politically. This point cannot be underestimated, given that nothing

³⁵ On this issue, see, Daniel Strieff, "Arms Wrestle: Capitol Hill Fight Over Carter's 1978 Middle East 'Package' Airplane Sale," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 3 (June 2016): 475-99, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhvo04>.

³⁶ Quoted in, Jackson, "Strategy and Two-Level Games," 188.

³⁷ Quoted in, Quandt, *Camp David*, 83 n. 22.

³⁸ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 175.

did more to discredit that agreement than Israel's continued settlement activity, especially in the West Bank.

Conclusion

Like Daigle, Evans, and Pressman, I believe that Jensehaugen has written an excellent book. It lays out the basic story very clearly, focuses on the central questions, and offers a number of important insights about them. As Evans suggests, the study would be stronger if Jensehaugen had laid out his main conclusions and takeaways more explicitly, but overall, he has made an important contribution to our collective understanding of this whole story.

Likewise, this roundtable shows just how much analysts can benefit from coming together to discuss these sorts of issues. By each making a number of key points about the book, Daigle, Evans, and Pressman, all first-rate scholars, have brought the major issues Jensehaugen raises to the surface and forced those of us interested in this topic to consider important questions. I, for one, have certainly learned an enormous amount from engaging both with Jensehaugen's book and the other contributors' discussion of it.

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2. How Jimmy Carter Failed the Palestinians

By Craig Daigle

When former President Jimmy Carter made his first visit to the West Bank as a private citizen in March 1983, angry demonstrators greeted him and his wife, Rosalynn, wherever they traveled. A mob of teenagers at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem threw bottles and smashed cars, while chants of “Carter is a Zionist” and “Carter Go Home” rang throughout the streets. After a visit to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, one member of a local village held a placard calling on him to speak to the “true representatives of the Palestinian people.” David K. Shipler’s story in the *New York Times* the following day aptly captured the Palestinian frustration. “The demonstrators were protesting the Camp David accords,” he wrote, “because they contain what many Palestinians believe is a prescription for unending Israeli sovereignty in the occupied territories.”³⁹

The blistering attacks on Carter were particularly noteworthy given his record of tirelessly striving for Arab-Israeli peace. As president, he spent more time working on the “riddle” of Middle East peace than any other international issue, often to the detriment of his own political career, and certainly to the neglect of other international issues that deserved his attention.⁴⁰ Both Arabs and Israelis, moreover, praised Carter for helping to bring about the Camp David Accords and the subsequent Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, believing that without his “indefatigable” efforts to bridge the psychological differences between the two sides, Egypt and Israel would not have been able to reach a successful conclusion to a long negotiating process.⁴¹ The Norwegian Nobel Committee noted these many efforts by

³⁹ Douglas Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter’s Journey Beyond the White House* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 108; David Richardson, “West Bank Violence Greets Jimmy Carter,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 10, 1983, 1; David K. Shipler, “West Bank Arabs Protest Carter’s Visit,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1983, A3.

⁴⁰ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 429.

⁴¹ For praise of Carter’s efforts, see, Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt-Israel Peace Negotiations* (New York: Random House, 1981), 155; Ezer Weizman, *The Battle for Peace* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 343–82; Anwar Sadat, *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 302.

awarding its 2002 peace prize to Carter for his decades of work to resolve conflicts through mediation, international cooperation, and respect for human rights, citing Carter's diplomacy at Camp David as chief among the reasons he deserved such recognition.⁴²

But, as Jørgen Jensehaugen, a senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, argues in his impressively researched new book, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter: the US, Israel, and the Palestinians*, the Camp David agreement between Israel and Egypt tells only part of the story. The Palestinians, whom Carter promised at the beginning of his presidency to include in a comprehensive peace settlement, were largely abandoned by the Carter administration in order to secure a separate peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. Although Carter may have been the first U.S. president to call for a Palestinian "homeland,"⁴³ and began his presidency with a "hyperactive period of constructing a comprehensive peace edifice,"⁴⁴ Carter's policies toward the Palestinians, much like his predecessors in the White House, only facilitated Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian land, ignored the plight of the Palestinian refugees, and marginalized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

The Tools in Carter's Toolbelt

In viewing Carter's Arab-Israeli diplomacy in the context of the Palestinian issue rather than Egyptian-Israeli peace, Jensehaugen joins a chorus of recent scholars critical of Carter's treatment of the Palestinians.⁴⁵ At the heart of Jensehaugen's criticism of Carter

⁴² Jeffrey Gettleman, "Nobel Peace Prize Awarded to Carter with Criticism of Bush," *New York Times*, Oct. 12, 2002, A1.

⁴³ Jørgen Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter: The US, Israel, and the Palestinians* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 40.

⁴⁴ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 182.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Craig Daigle, "Beyond Camp David: Jimmy Carter, Palestinian Self-Determination and Human Rights," *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 5 (November 2018): 802-30, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhy001>; Jeremy Pressman, "Explaining the Carter Administration's Israeli-Palestinian Solution," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 5 (November 2013): 1117-47, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht056>; and Victor V. Nemchenok, "'These People Have an Irrevocable Right to Self-Government': United States Policy and the Palestinian Question, 1977-1979," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 20, no. 4

was his decision to adhere to the “Sinai II pledge,” made to Israel by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger during the 1975 disengagement negotiations, in which the United States refused to negotiate with the PLO so long as it refused to recognize Israel’s right to exist and accept U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.⁴⁶ This decision essentially ensured that PLO leaders would be left out of any negotiating process for the occupied Palestinian territories unless their leaders accepted a U.N. resolution that failed to acknowledge the Palestinians as a people.⁴⁷ “The contradiction of Carter’s goal of including the Palestinians and the premise that the United States could not communicate with the PLO is key to understanding why Carter failed to get the PLO on board,” Jensehaugen insists.⁴⁸ Instead, the Carter administration relied on a number of ineffective backchannels to communicate with the PLO, in the hope that they could convince its leaders to modify their positions toward Israel and join in the peace negotiations.

By linking the Carter administration’s failure to achieve a comprehensive settlement to the Nixon and Ford administrations’ policies, Jensehaugen echoes some of Salim Yaqub’s conclusions in his recent study of Arab-American relations during the 1970s. For Yaqub, Kissinger “deliberately” focused on limited bilateral agreements to avoid a comprehensive peace settlement and ensure “Israel’s indefinite occupation of Arab land,” a policy that he believes the Carter administration followed in lockstep.⁴⁹ Jensehaugen largely agrees with this, but he believes that Carter compounded the mistake of adhering to Kissinger’s diplomacy, and particularly the Sinai II pledge, by failing to use the full weight of his office to compel Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories.

Carter, says Jensehaugen, could have conditioned U.S. aid to Israel on the implementation of restrictive Israeli settlement policies, supported United Nations Security Council

(2009): 595–618, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592290903455717>.

⁴⁶ For a text of the agreement, see, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1969–1976, vol. XXVI, ed. Adam M. Howard, doc. 227.

⁴⁷ Resolution 242, passed by the United Nations Security Council on Nov. 22, 1967, refers to the Palestinians only as “refugees.” The text of the resolution is printed in, David W. Lesch, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 222–23.

⁴⁸ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 184.

⁴⁹ Salim Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 13, 149.

resolutions critical of Israeli policies, or publicly shamed Prime Minister Menachem Begin for impeding progress in the negotiations as a means of pressuring the Israelis to modify their positions. At the very least, Carter could have walked away from the Sinai II pledge to make it clear to the Israelis that a future settlement must deal with the PLO. Instead, Jensehaugen writes, “Carter did not utilize his full toolset. ... It is clear that, while Carter worked very hard to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, there were many measures left untried.”⁵⁰

The reason Carter failed to demand concessions from Israel is quite simple: domestic political constraints. Israel’s supporters in the United States, Jensehaugen argues, applied “persistent” pressure on Carter and compelled him to retreat from his commitment to the pursuit of a comprehensive peace settlement. Following Begin’s stunning electoral victory in May 1977, for example, the new prime minister demanded that the PLO be excluded from the Geneva Summit and announced that Israel had no intention of turning the West Bank over to either the Palestinians or Jordan. Carter could have stood his ground, but intense pressure from congressional leaders forced Carter to reverse course. This “diplomatic dilemma” revealed the impossible position Carter found himself in throughout his presidency: “Pressuring Israel might be good foreign policy, but it was a nightmare for domestic policy.”⁵¹ Instead, says Jensehaugen, Carter “compensated for the hardened Israeli approach” by asking Arab leaders to make concessions, a pattern that he would continue through the Camp David summit and beyond.⁵²

The picture that Jensehaugen paints of Carter in his book is quite unflattering. In fact, he often refers to the president as a “weak” and ineffective leader who frequently “caved” and “buckled” to Israeli pressure during the many negotiations that led to the accords and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.⁵³ Carter, for example, initially opposed Begin’s “mind-boggling”⁵⁴ home-/self-rule plan for the Palestinians when he introduced it in December 1977, but because of Begin’s unyielding positions in the discussions, the president largely

⁵⁰ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 179–80.

⁵¹ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 188.

⁵² Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 54.

⁵³ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 188.

⁵⁴ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 103.

accepted it as a “starting point” by the time the Camp David summit began.⁵⁵ During the summit, moreover, Carter mistakenly agreed to a three-month moratorium on Israeli settlement construction, believing that Begin had committed to a five-year period instead. Carter could have demanded a change in a side agreement, but seemed reluctant to engage in a lengthy debate with Begin over the issue. The episode, Jensehaugen writes, reaffirmed to Begin that Carter was a “cream puff” who could be easily “outmaneuvered,” and he returned from Camp David determined to “exploit Carter’s perceived weakness,” which he then did by expanding settlements.⁵⁶

Carter Couldn’t Walk Away from Peace with Egypt

It is certainly true, as Jensehaugen asserts, that Begin’s rigid intransigence and “tiresome nit-picking”⁵⁷ irritated Carter. And there is little question that by the time he reached Camp David in September 1978, Carter had backed down from his commitment to Palestinian self-determination that he had spoken about in the early months of his presidency. In fact, Carter’s personal notes, written upon his arrival at the summit, acknowledged that he planned to get both Egyptians and Israelis to accept a common definition of peace that left “no independent Palestinian State” and excluded the PLO in any future Palestinian government.⁵⁸ To be sure, this was not where Carter positioned himself in the first months of his administration.

But I disagree with Jensehaugen that Carter had given up on the pursuit of a comprehensive settlement simply because of Begin’s intransigence or U.S. domestic pressure. The more likely explanation is that Carter abandoned his efforts at a comprehensive peace settlement, and chose instead to pursue a bilateral agreement between Egypt and Israel, because Egyptian President Anwar Sadat presented him with an opening that he simply could not ignore.

⁵⁵ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 177.

⁵⁶ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 142, 185.

⁵⁷ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 157.

⁵⁸ Personal Note Prepared by President Carter, n.d., *FRUS*, 1977–1980, vol. IX, Arab-Israeli Dispute, August 1978–December 1980, ed. Alexander R. Wieland (Washington, DC, 2014), doc. 27; Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 325–27.

Indeed, it was Sadat, even more than Begin and Carter, who prevented any chance of a comprehensive agreement by launching his own initiative in November 1977 and becoming the first Arab leader to officially visit the Jewish state. Sadat's historic trip to Jerusalem, just weeks after Soviet and American leaders had called for the resumption of an international peace conference at Geneva, was the most overt signal he could send to Washington that, while he was committed to resolving his dispute with Israel, he had no intention of getting entangled in a comprehensive process that was bound to take years and would most likely fail due to longstanding disagreements among the Arab states. Sadat had made it clear to Carter administration officials in early 1977 that he had grown far more concerned with events in Africa than about his conflict with Israel, and he therefore needed a quick settlement with Israel so he could focus on problems in Libya, the Horn, Sudan, and Zaire.⁵⁹

Jensehaugen faults Carter for playing Sadat's game and accepting a separate peace between Egypt and Israel, rather than pushing for the comprehensive settlement. But what was Carter supposed to do? Reject a chance for peace between Israel and the most populous Arab state and instead hope for the highly unlikely possibility that the PLO would accept Resolution 242, recognize Israel as a state, and accept Begin's self-rule plan that left the Palestinian people stateless? A comprehensive peace was certainly a noble goal, but unfortunately it was not tied to the reality on the ground. As Carter quickly discovered, the Israelis firmly objected to a comprehensive settlement that would involve the PLO, while the Arab states had widely divergent views about the independence and composition of a future Palestinian state and the extent of Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories. Caught among these various positions, Carter took the deal that he could get even if that deal was far from one he had envisioned at the outset of his administration, leaving the Palestinian issue unresolved.

Finally, I would quibble with Jensehaugen's description of the separate peace between Egypt and Israel as a "failure"⁶⁰ because it did not measure up to Carter's own standards of

⁵⁹ Craig Daigle, "Sadat's African Dilemma: Libya, Ethiopia, and the Making of the Camp David Accords," *Cold War History* 19, no. 2 (2019): 295–313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2018.1547710>.

⁶⁰ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 179.

what he had hoped to achieve at the outset of his administration. Although Jensehaugen is certainly correct that the Camp David Accords and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty left the Palestinian issue unresolved, it significantly altered the Arab-Israeli conflict as it had existed since 1948. By helping to remove Egypt from the Arab military coalition, Carter successfully reduced the likelihood of another *regional* Arab-Israeli war and the potential for a superpower confrontation in the region. As Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan said, “‘If you take one wheel off a car, it won’t drive.’ If Egypt is out of the conflict, there will be no war.”⁶¹ Indeed, this was a major diplomatic achievement. It would have been a mistake for Carter to hold out for a comprehensive agreement when it was clear Sadat wanted to make peace without the Palestinians.

These minor disagreements, however, should not take away from the significant contribution Jensehaugen has made with *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*. In fact, his book demonstrates quite convincingly that much scholarship remains to be done by future historians on the U.S. relationship with the Palestinians and how policies in the White House, which have continued in the Trump administration, lean overwhelmingly in favor of Israel at the expense of the Palestinian people and sustain Israel’s firm grip over the occupied territories.

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⁶¹ Memorandum of Conversation, October 4, 1977, *FRUS*, 1977–1980, vol. VIII, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1977–August 1978, ed. Adam M. Howard (Washington, DC, 2013), doc. 124.

3. Carter's Compromise: Cowardice or Calculation?

By Alexandra T. Evans

On March 16, 1977, just two months into his administration, President Jimmy Carter declared his support for establishing a “homeland” for the Palestinians. The unscripted announcement, issued during a town hall in Clinton, Massachusetts, marked a stark departure from the United States’ traditional treatment of the Palestinian question as a humanitarian, rather than political, matter.⁶² Yet, this was only the beginning of Carter’s envisioned shift toward a new multilateral peacemaking approach that called for the inclusion of Palestinian representatives and direct engagement with the Soviet Union. Carter, as Jørgen Jensehaugen demonstrates in *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter: The US, Israel, and the Palestinians*, entered office determined to secure a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict — one he hoped would address all of the parties’ outstanding grievances, defuse a persistent source of instability in the Middle East, and help reduce Cold War tensions.⁶³

The final agreements Carter oversaw, however, bore little resemblance to the vision that he had outlined in Massachusetts. The 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, as well as the Camp David Accords that preceded it, were momentous diplomatic achievements, but they stopped well short of Carter’s initial ambitions. Carter’s success, Jensehaugen notes, belied a sad irony: “he had attempted to break with traditional US policy but ended up fulfilling the goals of that tradition, which had been to break up the Arab alliance, side-line the Palestinians, build an alliance with Egypt, weaken the Soviet Union and secure Israel.”⁶⁴

In this slim but comprehensive history, Jensehaugen seeks to explain why the Carter administration, which “went further than any previous US government in pushing the

⁶² Jimmy Carter, “Clinton, Massachusetts Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at the Clinton Town Meeting,” March 16, 1977, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/243090>.

⁶³ Jørgen Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter: The US, Israel and the Palestinians* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 8.

⁶⁴ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 178.

Palestine question to the fore,”⁶⁵ ultimately reverted to a policy that excluded Palestinian representatives, shut out the Soviet Union, and stopped short of securing a Palestinian homeland. Drawing on extensive research in U.S., British, and, to a lesser extent, Israeli government archives, Jensehaugen reconstructs the Carter administration’s “Rubik’s-cube diplomacy,”⁶⁶ swiftly guiding readers through Secretary of State Cyrus Vance’s early 1977 trip to the Middle East, the White House’s ill-fated effort to open back channels to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s historic visit to Jerusalem, the Camp David negotiations and the ultimate signing of an Egyptian-Israeli agreement, and the faltering effort to encourage parallel talks on Palestinian autonomy. What results is a meticulous autopsy of Carter’s vision for a comprehensive settlement and a valuable contribution to a burgeoning effort to reevaluate the president’s human rights legacy.⁶⁷

From the beginning, Jensehaugen demonstrates, Carter’s plan for a comprehensive agreement faced formidable obstacles. American domestic forces, including a reticent Congress and well-organized interest groups, resisted the president’s efforts to pressure Israel and reinforced an established U.S. policy that restricted official contact with the PLO. Well aware of these domestic constraints on the White House, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who replaced the more sympathetic Yitzhak Rabin shortly after Carter’s pronouncement in Massachusetts, embraced a hardline position on Palestinian representation, settlement construction, and Israel’s claim to the West Bank and Gaza. The threat of an Egyptian withdrawal from the process might have prompted Begin to moderate his position had not Sadat, determined to cement an alliance with the United States and defuse tensions with Israel, proved ambivalent toward Palestinian interests. Meanwhile, worsening divisions within the Arab camp and dissension within the Palestinian movement undermined regional leaders’ willingness to gamble on an uncertain process. And all the

⁶⁵ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 63.

⁶⁶ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 87.

⁶⁷ See, for example: Yael S. Aronoff, “In Like a Lamb, Out like a Lion: The Political Conversion of Jimmy Carter,” *Political Science Quarterly* 121, no. 3 (Fall, 2006): 425–49; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20202726>; Nancy Mitchell, *Jimmy Carter in Africa: Race and the Cold War* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Craig Daigle, “Beyond Camp David: Jimmy Carter, Palestinian Self-Determination, and Human Rights,” *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 5 (November 2018): 802–30, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhy001>.

while, the dissolution of détente, economic crises at home, and the emergence of new crises in Iran and Afghanistan tugged at the president's attention, weakening his resolve to see the negotiations through. No factor alone pre-determined the outcome of the negotiations, but together, Jensehaugen argues, they limited Carter's chance of securing a comprehensive agreement.

Still, Jensehaugen contends that the Carter administration's strategic errors were the most critical for the comprehensive approach's ultimate failure. By October 1977, it was already apparent that Israeli intransigence and "the disinclination of the Arab states to agree amongst themselves" made substantive discussion of Palestinian representation at future negotiations nearly impossible.⁶⁸ But "the problem was compounded by the fact that Carter was unwilling to invest the political capital required to confront Israel" over the major stumbling blocks: direct U.S. communication with the PLO, settlement construction in the West Bank and Gaza, and Palestinian representation at an eventual international conference.⁶⁹ "The idea behind the comprehensive peace was founded upon a break with previous US approaches," Jensehaugen points out, "but Carter was unwilling to break with the political restrictions which had shaped the previous approach... . Carter was working for a comprehensive peace but unwilling to fully activate a comprehensive approach."⁷⁰ Unable to break free of this "straitjacket,"⁷¹ Carter missed the opportunity to take advantage of a temporarily favorable balance within the Palestinian leadership and was forced to accept the lesser prize of a bilateral Egyptian-Israeli agreement.

What Was Going On Inside the Carter Administration?

Why did Carter not press the Israelis further? Here, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter* introduces more questions than answers. Jensehaugen highlights multiple missed opportunities when Carter and his advisers could have demanded concessions from Begin or his deputies but instead chose to push Arab leaders to concede to Israeli demands. In part, this was the product of American officials' perception that the latter option marked the path

⁶⁸ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 35.

⁶⁹ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 64.

⁷⁰ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 64.

⁷¹ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 69.

of least resistance (a gamble seemingly validated by Sadat's eager cooperation). Yet, Jensehaugen also emphasizes that domestic calculations, whether a concern for congressional or public opinion (two forces the author, at times, conflates), forced Carter to retreat at each opportunity.

Precisely how the Carter administration integrated domestic factors into its foreign policy decision-making is often assumed rather than explained.⁷² With rare exceptions, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter* is more concerned with the administration's actions than its internal deliberations, a decision that allows the book to move swiftly through the complex negotiations but leaves readers with little insight into how American decision-makers defined or chose between their various options. This perspective would have been particularly valuable because of Carter's reputation as a president who resisted his advisers' pleas to consider popular or congressional opinion, particularly on matters of foreign policy. This, after all, was a man who ran for his Georgia Senate seat despite physical threats from the local political establishment; advocated for radical energy reforms despite extraordinary resistance from Capitol Hill and corporate lobbies (and almost no support from the general electorate); and expended extraordinary political capital on the Senate battle to ratify the Panama Canal Treaties, along with other contentious issues like civil service restructuring.⁷³

⁷² The book's discussion of the Carter administration's September 1977 reversal of its initial decision to accept a message from PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat if it were transmitted through the Syrians (the so-called "postman" model) offers one illustrative example. Jensehaugen first states that "it is unclear why the administration changed its mind." In the next paragraph, however, he asserts without substantiation that "this about-face" was the result of "domestic political considerations" and "showed the dampening effect which domestic politics had on U.S. foreign policy." See, Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 69–70.

⁷³ As Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser, quipped: "Carter, rarely, if ever, thought of foreign policy in terms of domestic politics, while [Vice President Walter] Mondale rarely, if ever, thought of it otherwise." See, Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), 35. For Carter's relative disinterest in public and congressional opinion, see, for example, Kenneth W. Thompson, ed., *The Carter Presidency: Fourteen Intimate Perspectives of Jimmy Carter* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), particularly page 243; Michael W. Link and Betty Glad, "Exploring the Psychopolitical Dynamics of Advisory Relations: The Carter Administration's 'Crisis of Confidence,'" *Political Psychology* 15, no. 3 (September 1994): 461–80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3791567>; Aronoff, "In like a Lamb, Out like a Lion," 496; Galen E. Jackson, "Strategy and Two-Level Games: U.S. Domestic Politics and the Road to a Separate Peace, 1977–1978," *Journal*

Indeed, Jensehaugen ascribes Carter's initial willingness to rethink U.S. policy toward the Palestinians to his status as a "political outsider."⁷⁴

Why, then, was Carter so cautious on this issue — one which Jensehaugen maintains the president viewed as a "strategic necessity" for his administration?⁷⁵ Here, more detailed discussion of the administration's other legislative priorities and the activity of pro-Israel interest groups — which are ascribed significant influence over the administration's policy at various points in the book but whose activities are described only briefly — would have deepened readers' understanding of the potential risks and trade-offs. The book's brief section on the administration's contentious 1978 "package" airplane sale to Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia might also have provided an opportunity to discuss the administration's relationship with Congress in greater depth.⁷⁶ Why was the president willing to fight over this dimension of his peacemaking strategy but not others? Who were the White House's allies on the Hill? Could the administration have sold a more confrontational policy to Congress or the American public?

The possibility of a different outcome is a key theme throughout the book, albeit only implicitly. Jensehaugen has a sharp eye for moments when the Carter administration might have used its "leverage" to soften Israel's negotiating stance, and he bemoans Carter's failure "to utilise his full political toolset."⁷⁷ Yet, whether U.S. officials recognized the extent of their potential influence is unclear. Without a consistent view into the administration's internal deliberations, it is difficult to determine whether the proposed options — imposing conditions on U.S. military sales or economic aid; a suspension in military assistance; a public statement chastising the Begin government — were identified and debated by policymakers at the time and, if so, why they were discarded. In discussing Begin's request for economic

of Cold War Studies 19, no. 3 (Summer 2017), particularly pages 181 and 191,

https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00757.

⁷⁴ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 2.

⁷⁵ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 3.

⁷⁶ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 123–24. For an insightful study of the Carter administration's legislative strategy, see, Daniel Strieff, "Arms Wrestle: Capitol Hill Fight Over Carter's 1978 Middle East 'Package' Airplane Sale," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 3 (June 2016): 475–99,

<https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhvo04>.

⁷⁷ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 194.

aid to counterbalance the cost of withdrawing from Sinai, for instance, the author notes that “Carter clearly had it [leverage], but despite his deep frustration with Begin, he declined to use it.”⁷⁸ But whether Carter himself recognized the opportunity and, if so, why he chose to let it pass, is not articulated.

As a result, readers might leave the book with two very different assessments of American influence in the Middle East. On the one hand, Jensehaugen implies that Carter could have overcome tremendous domestic and international pressure and forced a comprehensive settlement *if* he had only had the political will and savvy. On the other hand, the author’s insightful analysis of the regional negotiations — particularly in the year preceding Camp David — illustrates how the other parties pursued interests independently of (and at times in direct conflict with) Washington’s wishes. Jensehaugen persuasively demonstrates that the Carter administration’s achievements fell far short of the president’s initial ambitions. But whether the president could have acted quickly enough to seize the fleeting opportunity is less clear.

Nonetheless, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter* is a valuable addition to the literature on American peacemaking efforts, one that deepens our understanding of the difficult choices future administrations will confront in their effort to defuse the Arab-Israeli conflict. The virtue of Jensehaugen’s book lies in the author’s ability to toggle between multiple perspectives and to explain the compounding effect of conflicting domestic, regional, and international pressures. Expert and student readers alike will benefit from his ability to cogently and concisely distill the complex negotiations. Indeed, in the end, Jensehaugen’s assessment of the Carter administration’s negotiating strategy is simple: “the Americans were out of tune with their own ambition.”⁷⁹

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⁷⁸ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 151.

⁷⁹ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 114.

4. What If? Missed Opportunities in the Carter Administration

By Jeremy Pressman

Jimmy Carter’s administration made notable strides in addressing the Arab-Israeli conflict. By the end of his presidency, Egypt and Israel had signed a peace treaty, a remarkable diplomatic achievement. At the same time, none of Carter’s efforts managed to transform the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Jordan remained outside the peace process, and the autonomy talks, mediated by Carter administration officials, stalled.

Understandably, it is this very tension — peace versus continued conflict — that has been the focus of much of the scholarship on Carter, Camp David, and the peace process.⁸⁰ Jørgen Jensehaugen’s latest book — an excellent, comprehensive contribution to this discussion — raises important questions about what was possible in the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian arena from 1977 to 1981.⁸¹

Jensehaugen argues that when Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin expressed hardline positions on the Palestinian question, Carter could have chosen to pressure him to entertain real compromises. For example, Begin gave Carter potential leverage when he asked for compensation for Israel’s withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula and the loss of that region’s oil fields.⁸² Washington could have been less protective of Israel at the United

⁸⁰ Jørgen Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter: The US, Israel, and the Palestinians* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 1-2, 178.

⁸¹ Other recent works include Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Craig Daigle, “Beyond Camp David: Jimmy Carter, Palestinian Self-Determination, and Human Rights,” *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 5 (November 2018): 802–30, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhy001>; Khaled Elgindy, *Blind Spot: America and the Palestinians, From Balfour to Trump* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019); and Gerald Steinberg and Ziv Rubinovitz, *Menachem Begin and the Israel-Egypt Peace Process: Between Ideology and Political Realism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019).

⁸² Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 150.

Nations, threatened deeper engagement with the PLO, or curtailed arms sales to Israel.⁸³ Would such pressure have worked? “We simply do not know,” Jensehaugen writes.⁸⁴

We do know that over and over again, Begin reiterated that the West Bank, which he referred to as Judea and Samaria, were not up for grabs.⁸⁵ His autonomy plan of December 1977 was a conceptual anchor for continued Israeli occupation and a de-nationalized approach to the Palestinian future. He compared the PLO to Nazis, a reference clearly suggesting Israel should not compromise with the PLO.⁸⁶ “It is unlikely,” then, “that [Carter] could have changed Begin’s mind on the Palestinian territories.”⁸⁷

A History that Might Have Been

Let’s step back and ask why the answer to the hypothetical question of whether pressure on Israel would have worked is important. Maybe because, if the answer is “yes,” it would mean that this was a missed opportunity for successful conflict resolution: If only Carter had pressured Begin, the Palestinians themselves could have been negotiating on behalf of the Palestinian cause 15 years earlier than the start of the Oslo process in 1993. Perhaps if Carter had pressured the government of Israel he could have structured a negotiating process less advantageous to Israel than the one that actually emerged from Oslo.⁸⁸

But even if such pressure did not change the Begin government’s policies, it might have produced other results. One possibility is that it could have led to different leaders taking power in Israel. After all, this is what happened when President George H. W. Bush’s pressure on the Shamir government influenced the outcome of the 1992 Israeli election. And yet, Carter did interact with Yitzhak Rabin, an Israeli prime minister from the Labor

⁸³ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 171, 179, 194–95.

⁸⁴ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 194.

⁸⁵ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 55, 136, 144, 171, 196.

⁸⁶ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 53.

⁸⁷ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 7.

⁸⁸ On Oslo, see, Hilde Henriksen Waage, “The ‘Minnow’ and the ‘Whale’: Norway and the United States in the Peace Process in the Middle East,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 2 (2007): 157–76,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13530190701427917>.

Party, before Begin's election, and Rabin took a hard line too, rejecting both PLO participation and the idea of a "separate Palestinian state on the West Bank."⁸⁹ For the Carter administration, neither a political circumvention à la Bush nor a conceptual transformation came about in the late 1970s.⁹⁰ Alternatively, perhaps the United States pressuring Israel would have sent an important, enticing signal to Arab parties like Jordan and the PLO that declined to join the Camp David process and especially the autonomy talks.

Another counterfactual question raised in *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter* is slightly less explicit than the one dealing with Carter pressuring Begin, but nonetheless represents a useful thought exercise: What if Carter had disregarded the limits on talking to the PLO, limits that he had inherited from the Ford administration and the 1975 Sinai II agreement? Carter thought not talking was, as Jensehaugen writes, "a hopeless policy."⁹¹ But the president only pushed back against this policy on the margins: He was only willing to open a U.S.-PLO dialogue in exchange for PLO acceptance of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. Had the PLO agreed, and dialogue commenced, this would have been a lower bar than Nixon and Ford officials had stipulated.

But that is not what happened. One theory for why is that the PLO wanted more than just dialogue in exchange for accepting Resolution 242. It wanted to be included in any future Geneva peace conference and it wanted support for a Palestinian state. So, instead of direct talks, Carter officials used indirect channels that Jensehaugen chronicles nicely. One problem with such channels is that they had a greater risk of sowing confusion, like in the game of telephone. Backchannels were "slow and contradictory," writes Jensehaugen.⁹² In discussions about Resolution 242, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat complained that he was getting different U.S. messages via Egypt and Saudi Arabia.⁹³

⁸⁹ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 42.

⁹⁰ Jeremy Pressman, "Explaining the Carter Administration's Israeli-Palestinian Solution," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 5 (November 2013): 1141-44, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht056>.

⁹¹ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 187.

⁹² Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 184.

⁹³ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 60.

In contrast, direct talks would have allowed longer, deeper engagement between Washington and the PLO. When the U.S.-PLO dialogue did come a decade later, it was one of several factors that generated momentum first toward the Madrid conference in 1991 and then toward the Oslo process in 1993, as each party got a better, though still imperfect, sense of what was possible and what was not.

In the absence of actual PLO participation in the U.S.-led negotiations, Carter was stuck in the messy middle, neither advocating for an independent Palestinian state (as the PLO favored) nor fully rejecting the idea of Palestinian self-determination (as Israel favored). Jensehaugen documents Carter's exploration of that space, including his March 1977 Palestinian "homeland" comment, his use of the phrase Palestinian "legitimate rights," and the ever-so-brief cooperation with the Soviet Union as expressed in the U.S.-Soviet communiqué of Oct. 1, 1977.⁹⁴ The autonomy talks of 1979–80 also played out in this messy middle, with Egypt, and to a lesser extent the United States, trying to advance the Palestinian nationalist cause within the strict confines of the Camp David Accords and the Begin government's opposition to Palestinian nationalism.

What Camp David Did Achieve

Hypothetical questions aside, Jensehaugen's excellent book makes one thing crystal clear: The three countries that came to Camp David in September 1978 achieved substantial gains.

Egypt was trying to re-orient its foreign policy toward the United States and the West and away from the Eastern Bloc. Anwar Sadat developed warm ties with Carter and, through peace with Israel, secured massive amounts of U.S. aid that continues to this day. Egypt also wanted the return of the Sinai Peninsula, which was sovereign Egyptian territory. By 1982, Israel had fully withdrawn from Sinai, including both its military assets and its settlements. Egypt was whole again, providing further stability for the economically vital Suez Canal. Sadat, Jensehaugen argues, would have been happy with a comprehensive

⁹⁴ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 5, 76–77.

peace — meaning one that included the Palestinians too — but he was willing to move ahead without it.⁹⁵

For Israel's part, Camp David ended the Arab conventional military threat by removing Egyptian forces from the Arab front. After fighting five wars in 25 years, Egypt and Israel were finally at peace.⁹⁶ It was also a success for the Begin government in terms of what did *not* happen: Israel was able to secure that peace without ceding any ground on the Palestinian question. The Israeli government did not accept the Palestinian right to self-determination and nothing in the process led Israel to alter that position.

Carter did not get a comprehensive peace, but the United States secured a tremendous diplomatic achievement. Coupled with the Panama Canal Treaty, Carter achieved two of the most significant diplomatic breakthroughs of the post-World War II era. His investments of time and political capital in the Arab-Israeli arena paid off, something that appeared highly uncertain both in September 1978 at Camp David and in March 1979 when Carter traveled to both Egypt and Israel. U.S. officials cemented a new Mideast ally, Egypt, just as a former stalwart ally, the Shah's Iran, became a hostile rival.

Of course, the PLO, and thus the Palestinian people, were left out. Israel did not want the organization at the table, and Egypt and the United States would not go to the mat to include it or any other Palestinian delegation. At any time, the PLO could have accepted the U.S. stipulations and directly joined the process. But even had it done so, it would have been joining a process that had little room for genuine Palestinian self-determination.

Jensehaugen calls the proposal for Palestinian self-rule a “ruse.”⁹⁷ I'm slightly less certain about it. There was a possibility that Carter's approach might have transformed Israeli perspectives or led to the circumvention of the Israeli right.⁹⁸ But it was a slim possibility. As Jensehaugen reminds us again and again in this compelling book, the Israeli government

⁹⁵ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 190.

⁹⁶ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 179.

⁹⁷ Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy Under Carter*, 197.

⁹⁸ Pressman, “Explaining the Carter Administration's Israeli-Palestinian Solution.”

simply was neither interested in mutual compromise nor in making concessions on the Palestinian front.

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