

THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION'S ATTEMPT TO RECONVENE THE GENEVA MIDDLE EAST PEACE CONFERENCE**

Abstract: *When the Carter administration assumed power in 1977, it prioritized the achievement of Middle East peace as its foremost task. It endeavored to facilitate a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace by reconvening the Geneva Middle East Peace Conference and inviting representatives from Israel, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine to negotiate a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict in Geneva. However, the Carter administration encountered challenges in its Arab-Israeli diplomacy, particularly regarding substantive and procedural issues related to restarting the conference. It struggled to reconcile differences between the Arab and Israeli sides on crucial peace-related matters such as borders and the inclusion of Palestinian delegates. Additionally, it faced difficulties in assisting Arab countries in resolving internal contradictions regarding their participation format. Ultimately, the Carter administration's efforts to reconvene the Geneva Peace Conference fell short. This failure was attributed to several factors, including the deep-seated psychological divide between Arabs and Israelis, internal contradictions among Arab nations, the significant influence of pro-Israel forces in the United States constraining pressure on Israel, and President Carter's limited experience in international affairs, coupled with underestimations of the complexities inherent in the Arab-Israeli conflict.*

Keywords: *Reconvening the Geneva Middle East Peace Conference, Substantive issues, Procedural issues, The Palestinian representation.*

Introduction

The Arab-Israeli conflict stands as one of the most enduring, complex, and far-reaching regional issues of the 20th century, serving as a primary source of ongoing instability in the Middle East. Rooted in the Arab countries' resistance to the establishment of a Jewish state in the Palestinian territory, the conflict also reflects the deep-seated tensions between Zionism and Arab nationalism that have escalated over the

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past century. Following the founding of Israel in May 1948, tensions between Arab nations and Israel escalated, resulting in three major Arab-Israeli wars between 1948 and 1977, preceding the Carter administration's tenure.

Recognizing the strategic significance of the Middle East to American interests, the Carter administration prioritized the pursuit of Middle East peace upon assuming office in 1977. With this aim, it sought to reconvene the Geneva Middle East Peace Conference, bringing together representatives from Israel, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories in Geneva to negotiate a comprehensive resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Despite concerted diplomatic efforts throughout 1977, the plan to reconvene the Geneva Peace Conference ultimately faltered. This paper seeks to provide a detailed analysis of the Carter administration's endeavors to reconvene the Geneva Middle East Peace Conference, along with an exploration of the factors contributing to its failure, drawing insights from newly declassified U.S. diplomatic documents and other relevant sources to illuminate this pivotal moment in international diplomacy.

Jimmy Carter's new Middle East strategy

Following the conclusion of the Fourth Middle East War in 1973, Henry Kissinger, then U.S. Secretary of State, employed a focused and incremental shuttle diplomacy strategy in the region. This method systematically addressed and mitigated sources of conflict, resolving them individually. Notably, the resolution of one aspect of the conflict did not hinge upon the resolution of others, and initial steps were not necessarily tied to the ultimate outcome. Through active mediation by the United States, significant progress was achieved as Syria and Israel, along with Egypt and Israel, each signed three separate disengagement agreements. These agreements played a crucial role in stabilizing the volatile situation in the Middle East. However, by the close of 1975, Kissinger's step-by-step diplomacy had reached an impasse, necessitating a fresh approach to advance the Middle East peace process.

On January 20, 1977, Jimmy Carter assumed office as the new President of the United States. Recognizing the Middle East conundrum as a pivotal aspect of his foreign policy agenda, he advocated for a fresh approach aimed at achieving a comprehensive resolution to the region's challenges. Carter contended that a departure from Kissinger's incremental diplomacy was necessary to break the impasse in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Inspired by the recommendations outlined in the 1975 report 'Toward Middle East Peace' by the Brookings Institution Research Group, Carter, alongside his national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, identified shortcomings in the previous step-by-step methodology. Firstly, they noted that this approach demanded concessions from

Israel at each stage, with the promise of legitimacy only upon completion of all steps and the signing of a peace treaty with neighboring states, rendering negotiations non-negotiable at that juncture. Secondly, the step-by-step approach failed to adequately address the core issue of Palestinian aspirations, crucial for the establishment of genuine peace (Spainier 1992, 255).

In response, the United States proposed a resumption of negotiations in Geneva, advocating for the reopening of the 1973 Geneva Peace Conference under the auspices of the United Nations. This initiative aimed to foster an inclusive platform for all involved parties to engage in dialogue, with the ultimate goal of achieving a comprehensive settlement to the Middle East dilemma.

However, the resumption of the Geneva Conference encountered numerous challenges, both in terms of substance and procedure. These challenges included divergent perspectives on the nature of peace, borders, and the Palestinian question among the Arab-Israeli parties and within the Arab states.

Procedurally, some key issues emerged. There was the question of Palestinian representation: Who would represent the Palestinians at the Geneva Conference? How would they participate? Would they form a separate delegation or be part of a pan-Arab delegation? Should a delegation be organized by country, which nation would it represent?

The Arab States Summit held on October 28, 1974, in Rabat recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Consequently, Arab countries insisted that only the PLO could represent Palestine at the Geneva Conference, threatening to boycott the conference if the PLO was not present. However, Israel vehemently refused to engage with the PLO, citing its involvement in terrorist activities and its avowed aim of Israel's destruction.

Moreover, Israel argued that acknowledging Palestinian rights as individuals was acceptable but rejected the notion of Palestinian rights or statehood. Throughout much of 1977, the Carter administration's diplomatic efforts to reconvene the Geneva Conference in the Middle East were hindered by substantive issues and the dilemma of Palestinian representation. Despite these efforts, no significant breakthroughs were achieved, rendering Carter's new strategy in the Middle East fraught with frequent challenges.

The Carter Administration's dilemma in reopening the Geneva multilateral Conference

The Carter Administration's new strategy crystallized through a series of three meetings: an informal gathering on January 30, 1977, a Policy Review Committee session

on February 4, and a National Security Council assembly on February 23. During these meetings, participants unanimously acknowledged the paramount importance of initiating a peace initiative in the Middle East (Brzezinski 1983, 85-86).

At the February 4 meeting, the Policy Review Committee recommended to the president that the Middle East be addressed as an urgent priority. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was designated to embark on immediate discussions regarding both procedural and substantive issues in the region. In mid-February, Vance commenced a trip to the Middle East to check leaders' perspectives and explore potential common ground for Arab-Israeli peace. Subsequently, Arab-Israeli leaders were invited to Washington for discussions with the new president. Upon Vance's return, President Carter chaired a National Security Council meeting on February 23 to receive a report on Vance's trip. Vance outlined the common ground and differences among the Arab-Israeli parties on substantive and procedural issues. The parties expressed willingness to attend the Geneva Conference later in 1977, potentially in September, provided procedural issues were resolved. They envisaged discussing a comprehensive solution at the Geneva meeting, addressing substantive matters without preconditions (United States Department of State 2013, 131-132).

In the months that followed, the Carter administration's strategy was to try to use the influence of the presidency in a highly public way, to discuss sensitive issues personally, and to hold meetings with Middle Eastern heads of state to break the deadlock on substantive issues. Carter first welcomed Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in Washington on March 7. The talks did not go well, with the two men unable to establish a good personal relationship and neither able to suppress his antipathy toward the other. Rabin stated Israel's view of the three elements of peace (the nature of peace, peaceful borders, and the Palestinian question); Carter agreed with Israel's view of the nature of peace (establishment of diplomatic relations, normal Arab-Israeli exchanges), but considered Israel's settlement activity in the occupied territories illegal and agreed to Israel's security lines in areas such as the West Bank and Gaza. Some international troops might be stationed, but at the same time Israel would insist on withdrawing from most of the occupied territories. Finally, Carter also wanted the Palestine Liberation Organization to join the Arab delegation to the Geneva peace talks (United States Department of State 2013, 132-156).

At the banquet to welcome Rabin, Carter mentioned that Israel could have 'defensible borders' (United States Government Printing Office 1977, 330). Two days later, at a presidential press conference, he spoke of 'an end to Arab-Israeli hostilities, recognition of Israel's right to exist and to live in peace, open borders, free trade, and

communication; this would involve a significant Israeli withdrawal from the territories it currently controls and some minor adjustments to the 1967 borders, but this would be negotiated; settlement of the Palestinian question' (United States Government Printing Office 1977, 342-347). The announcement had particularly worried American Jewish groups, which suspected a shift in the U.S. Middle East policy. Secretary Vance denied this when he met with a delegation of prominent American Jews.

A few days later, in Collington, Massachusetts, on March 16, Carter reiterated these points, outlining them in his three principles for Middle East peace, namely, that the first prerequisite for peace was 'recognition by Israel's neighbors of Israel, Israel's right to exist, Israel's right to exist forever, and Israel's right to exist in peace.' He defined it as 'the borders of Israel and Syria, Israel and Lebanon, Israel and Jordan, Israel and Egypt must be open to travel, tourism, cultural exchange, and trade, so that, whoever the leaders of these countries may be, the people themselves will develop a sense of mutual understanding and a sense of common purpose in order to avoid the repeated wars and deaths that have long afflicted the region.' The second precondition was 'the establishment of Israel's permanent borders.' And the Palestinian question was the third precondition. Speaking on the issue, Carter publicly stated: 'The Palestinians have until now declared that Israel has no right in Palestine, that the land belongs to the Palestinians, and that they have never renounced their professed commitment to the destruction of Israel. This has to be overcome. There should be a home for the Palestinian refugees, who have suffered for many years. The exact way to solve the Palestinian problem is to deal immediately, first, with the Palestinians themselves and the Arab states, and second, with the Arab States and Israel negotiating the Palestinian problem' (United States Department of State 2013, 164-165; United States Government Printing Office 1977, 386-387). Carter's 'homeland' statement was like dropping a giant bomb at the time, stirring up all sides. The Arabs were encouraged, and it was not long after Carter's speech that the importance of the word 'homeland' prompted a response from the PLO. Yasser Arafat, the PLO leader, praised the president's announcement on CBS's '60 Minutes' television program. Political observers initially interpreted Mr. Carter's reference to a Palestinian homeland as an endorsement of a Palestinian state, angering Israelis and their American supporters. American Jewish leaders angrily attacked Mr. Carter. They and the Israelis were already convinced that the new American administration was distancing itself from Israel. Israel was founded on the grounds that it was the homeland of the Jewish people, and by associating the word with the Palestinians, Carter seemed to imply that there should be a similar Palestinian state. Mr. Brzezinski hastened to clarify the situation, assuring Simcha Dinitz, the Israeli ambassador, that the reference to the homeland had 'no

particular political meaning' (Brzezinski 1983, 91; Gwertzman, 1977). President Carter's use of the term 'Palestinian homeland' also angered Rabin, who was busy fighting for his political life in the Israeli elections and felt severely weakened. The opposition Likud party campaigned on Labor's difficult relationship with the new U.S. administration.

Over the next three months, Carter met with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Jordan's King Hussein (April 24-27), Syrian President Hafez al-Assad (May 9), and Saudi Crown Prince Fahd (May 25). At each meeting, three substantive issues—peace, border security, and the Palestinian question—were explored in greater depth, along with the procedural question of how the Palestinians would be represented in the upcoming negotiations.

In early April, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat visited Washington. Carter's welcoming speech at his first meeting with Sadat on April 4 was warm and generous, in contrast to his frosty attitude toward Rabin a few weeks earlier. Carter saw Sadat as a 'shining light' illuminating the prospects for peace in the Middle East and, more practically, as a potential friend and ally who was fascinated by Sadat (Carter 1982, 282). In their talks, Sadat suggested that there might be some minor changes to the 1967 Arab-Israeli lines, at least in the West Bank but not in Sinai. He also said that if the United States offered Israel a defense deal, he would not oppose it. Then, while expressing support for the idea of a Palestinian homeland, he said such a Palestinian state should have some kind of connection to Jordan. But he insisted on two points: that Israeli soldiers could not remain on Egyptian soil, and that opening the border and diplomatic relations involved national sovereignty and could not be part of the negotiations. For the Geneva conference, Sadat insisted that peace in the Middle East should be achieved under American auspices. If the United States could come up with some proposals before the Geneva conference, they would be accepted, and Egypt would go to Geneva just to sign the agreement. Sadat could go to Geneva and negotiate with Israel; that process would take 10 years, and Egypt would get nothing. Sadat, who apparently shared Carter's sense of urgency, said that an agreement should be reached in 1977 and implemented before the 'expiration' of the second disengagement agreement in October 1978. In addition, Sadat's opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's call for a separate delegation of Arab states to attend the Geneva conference reduced his flexibility. Sadat also reiterated that it was impossible to open the borders for the free movement of people and goods. Carter strongly disagreed. Carter said Israel should withdraw its troops in exchange for peace and open borders. With regard to the exchange of ambassadors, Sadat insisted that peace could not be imposed (Quandt 1986, 50-51). Sadat also brought the very good news that the PLO leader had spoken to him privately about the PLO's desire for peace (Carter

2010, 39). Carter just raised the possibility of a meeting with Arafat. In his view, this could be a crucial question.

In late April, Jordan's King Hussein visited Washington, and while his initial meeting with Carter was cordial, it yielded limited progress. Discussions primarily revolved around the contentious issue of Palestinian representation at the Geneva conference. Reports suggested that Arafat insisted on a separate Palestinian delegation, whereas Hussein advocated for a unified Arab delegation that included Palestinians.

Following two days of deliberations at the White House on April 26, Hussein conveyed to reporters that a lack of thorough assessment of the challenges and opportunities could render the Geneva conference futile. He urged Israel to 'take a leap of faith towards peace' by consenting to withdraw to the pre-1967 borders (Fine and Himmelfarb 1979, 130).

After meeting with Assad in Geneva, Carter completed his first round of talks with the leaders of all countries scheduled to attend a future peace conference in Geneva. Carter's meetings with Crown Prince Fahd of Saudi Arabia and the incoming prime minister of Israel would follow, but the groundwork was laid in mid-May. Only four months into his tenure, Carter's views on the Arab-Israeli conflict had come into sharp focus. The president publicly pledged that the United States would play an active role in breaking the deadlock in Arab-Israeli peace talks. He believed that the Middle East dispute was closely related to the energy crisis and the danger of superpower confrontation. He was also convinced that progress had to be made in 1977 or else the chance for peace might be lost.

Carter made clear to each leader his desire for a comprehensive peace agreement, but he also acknowledged that Arabs and Israelis had very different goals and different ideas about how to achieve them. The Arabs wanted an end to the existing state of war, the return of all occupied territories, and the establishment of a Palestinian entity. Any other progress towards the normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab States would be an issue that each Arab State could pursue according to its own sovereign aspirations and needs. However, the Israelis were not interested in any agreement that did not include the normalization of relations, nor did Israel want to simply withdraw to the pre-1967 borders. There were also procedural issues that will determine the format of the Geneva conference. Israel did not want to negotiate with the PLO, but according to a 1975 Arab League decision, the PLO was the only organization authorized to speak on behalf of the Palestinian people. Moreover, the Israeli Government preferred to negotiate with each Arab country individually, as it believed that any conference with a single Arab delegation was bound to fail from the outset due to squabbling among Arab states (Stein

1999, 192-198). Even the Arabs could not agree on the form of Arab representation in Geneva. Syria wanted a unified Arab delegation to eliminate Egypt's bargaining power; Egypt, for its part, wanted to represent every Arab delegation because it feared a delegation could lead to infighting that would prevent any agreement. Jordan wanted 'a single pan-Arab delegation that can be divided into functional commissions to deal with each issue' (Vance 1983, 176).

American Arab-Israeli diplomacy after the Israeli election

The politics of the Middle East were unpredictable, and the good times were short-lived. In the Israeli general election of May 17, 1977, the Labor Party, which had been in power for nearly 30 years since the establishment of the state of Israel, suffered a crushing defeat, with Menachem Begin's Likud bloc shocking all sides with a surprise victory. In a statement on the day of the vote, Begin said he would never give up 'Judea and Samaria' (the biblical name for the West Bank) or withdraw Israel to the 1967 lines (Washington Post 1977, May 19). He also said he supported the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and would not attend the Geneva conference where the PLO was represented (Newsweek May 30, 1977, 36-37).

As Carter contemplated the gravity of Begin's vision, the Middle East team, increasingly under the guidance of Secretary of State Vance, began to develop concrete strategies to further the peace process. At the Policy Review Committee meeting on June 10, it was felt that Begin should be invited to Washington as soon as possible. On procedural matters, the committee recommended that Mr. Vance should travel to the Middle East in August and then schedule informal meetings with foreign ministers in the United States before the Geneva meeting. For the time being, the Palestinian question would be shelved, and the Soviet Union should not introduce talks. Vance also raised the possibility of trusteeship and referendums on the West Bank and Gaza at the meeting. The idea was considered worthy of further study (Quandt 1986, 70). The Carter administration had begun looking for ways to inject the concept of a transition phase into the West Bank talks and sidestep the question of PLO participation by raising the possibility of a referendum.

After much preparation for Begin's visit, the Carter administration welcomed Israel's new prime minister and his wife on July 19. Despite all the predictions, Carter found Begin to be amiable, sincere, religious, and decent, and it became clear that changing his position would not be easy. After Carter elaborated the position of the United States, Begin talked about Israel's position on peace, borders, and the Palestinian issue and put forward the procedural proposals and options for convening the Geneva conference (United States Department of State 2013, 352-353). Later in the day, Vance

also discussed with Begin the five principles proposed by the United States for agreement before the Geneva conference: a comprehensive peace based on UN resolutions 242 and 338; the definition of peace will be very broad; when the parties demonstrate their good faith, peace will involve a phased withdrawal from the occupied territories and the acquisition of borders; and the creation of a Palestinian entity (United States Department of State 2013, 359-360). Begin agreed to all the principles except for the Palestinian entity. Begin wanted Carter to stop publicly mentioning Israel's withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines and adjustments. Carter's discussions with Begin made him happy and encouraged by Begin's apparent desire to work with the United States. But the goodwill generated by Begin's visit to the United States did not last long, and the optimism was short-lived. Upon his return to Israel, Begin recognized three controversial new settlements in the West Bank as permanent and legal, prompting the U.S. State Department to issue a strong statement expressing deep regret (Carter 2010, 71). Carter also criticized efforts to make settlements permanent or build new ones at a July 28 news conference (Medzini 1981, 55). Begin's insistence on building settlements and his unwillingness to accept the principle of withdrawal from the West Bank under any circumstances became a source of conflict between the United States and Israel over the next two years.

In early August 1977, Vance embarked on his second trip to the Middle East in nearly two weeks. He brought with him five principles revised by the United States in consideration of Begin's views, four options for Palestinian attendance at the Geneva Conference,¹ and proposals for transitional arrangements between Gaza and the West Bank, which he intended to discuss with the leaders of Egypt, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon. During Vance's talks in Egypt, Sadat was anxious about the shift to discussions that were largely procedural rather than agreeing on principles before the Geneva conference. In his view, the Geneva conference agreement should be a document that had been agreed upon before signing. Sadat had no patience for negotiations with Israel, preferring the United States to come up with a plan, and all sides followed suit. To make the idea work, Sadat presented Vance with a highly classified document in Alexandria (United States Department of State 2013, 381; Fahmay 1983, 216-219). It was a draft of the peace treaty Sadat was prepared to sign, but he did not want any of the other

¹Four options were considered for Palestinian participation: 'Seek PLO acceptance of Resolution 242, with a reservation on the Palestinian issue; a single Arab delegation at Geneva, including PLO representatives; Palestinians as part of a national Arab delegation; agreement by Israel and the Arab states to begin negotiations at Geneva without the PLO, but to invite the PLO later when the Palestinian issue is dealt with.' United States Department of State, 2013, 326; Brzezinski, 1983, 102.

parties to know of its existence. Likewise, he asked Vance to let Israel submit a draft of their treaty, and then Vance could produce the Egyptian draft, which would eventually produce an American compromise. In his talks with the Egyptians, Vance was also encouraged to believe that the PLO was about to change its position on UN Resolution 242. To get them to do so, Vance advised President Carter to reiterate that the United States was willing to engage in high-level dialogue with the PLO if it accepts Resolution 242, despite professing reservations. A few days later, on August 8, Carter made this statement in Plains, Georgia (United States Government Printing Office 1977, 1459). Vance was in Saudi Arabia at the time and received a cold reception when he arrived in Israel. However, Israel agreed to submit a draft peace treaty to the United States and to participate in further talks between Vance and several Arab foreign ministers in New York during the September session of the United Nations General Assembly.

September 1977 was an extraordinary month in the evolution of Carter's Middle East strategy. According to William Quandt, a Middle East expert on the National Security Council at the time, the US would pursue 'four parallel and possibly conflicting objectives' simultaneously (Quandt 2001, 186). The first objective was to obtain a draft peace treaty from the parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The second objective was to find a Palestinian representation acceptable to all Arab-Israeli parties. The third objective was to achieve as much consensus as possible on the Geneva negotiating procedures. The final goal was to begin thinking about including the Soviet Union in the peace process as the fall deadline Carter had set for the Geneva conference approached. On the first goal, the Israelis eventually submitted their draft to the Carter administration, but according to Quandt, it was very 'legalistic' and 'muddled delicate issues like borders and the status of Sinai settlements.' The Israeli draft lacked a timetable for withdrawal and does not link the withdrawal to the normalization of relations. Carter called that 'not enough.' Syria and Jordan did not submit a draft treaty, but they both eventually provided Carter with a list of principles they believed a peace settlement should contain. In mid-to-late September, Carter administration officials held a new round of intensive discussions with the foreign ministers of Israel, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan to discuss the second and third objectives of Carter's Middle East strategy, amid disagreements between the two sides and among Arab states over the PLO's participation in the Geneva conference and the continuing controversy over the Geneva negotiating process. The Carter administration's fourth goal, to bring the Soviet Union into the Middle East peace process, ended up dropping the 'bomb,' the joint US-Soviet Declaration, in October.

Meanwhile, as the US administration tried to reconvene the Geneva conference, Israel and Egypt began to search for other ways to achieve their national goals. Egyptians

feared that the conference may not be possible. Moreover, Israel, fearing that full negotiations would force it to withdraw from large parts of the West Bank, wanted bilateral talks with Egypt. In the preceding months, Begin and Sadat had traveled to Romania one after another (which had good relations with both countries) and held talks with President Nicolae Ceausescu. Begin convinced Ceausescu that he was willing to meet with Sadat and was serious about seeking a peace agreement. Ceausescu told Sadat: 'Let me tell you clearly that he (Begin) wants peace' (Stein 1999, 207). Additionally, in early September, King Hassan of Morocco extended an invitation to Israeli Foreign Minister Dayan to visit Rabat, with the aim of facilitating a meeting between Israeli and Egyptian representatives. Israel and Egypt agreed to meet secretly in Morocco on September 16. Although Dayan had proposed a meeting between Sadat and Begin, King Hassan told him that the Egyptians wanted Dayan to meet with Dr. Hassan Touhamy, Deputy Prime Minister of Egypt and Secretary General of the Islamic Conference. In a secret meeting between Dayan and Touhamy in Morocco, Touhamy stated Egypt's position that peace could only be achieved by Israel's complete withdrawal from all occupied territories, and Sadat demanded that Israel agree to this principle before negotiating other issues such as security guarantees for the Palestinians and Israel. However, Touhamy also told Dayan that Sadat had great faith in Begin's government (unlike previous Israeli governments) and believed that the two sides could reach a mutually agreed solution without direct American involvement. Sadat, however, did not want to cut the United States out of the process entirely. Touhamy suggested that Israel and Egypt exchange peace proposals and present them to the Carter administration. Then, at another bilateral meeting, the proposals could be discussed. Dayan responded that he was 'just an emissary of Begin' and therefore could not speak on his behalf, but that Israel's democratic process requires the Knesset's approval to approve any deal. He would therefore convey to Begin everything Touhamy had said, but he was certain that Begin would have to meet with Sadat in person before any solution could be reached. Dayan also assured Touhamy that he believed Sadat, unlike Assad, could be relied upon and trusted. If Begin and Sadat agreed, Dayan and Touhamy would meet again in Morocco two weeks later. A key outcome of their discussions was that Touhamy believed that at the end of the day, Israel would completely withdraw from Sinai in exchange for a peace treaty. In response, Touhamy hinted that Egypt would be willing to sign such a peace treaty if progress toward the Geneva conference was halted. After the meeting, the two envoys returned to their countries to brief their leaders on the outcome of the talks (Dayan 1981, 46-52; Meital 1997, 161-163; Indyk 1984, 35-36; Stein 1999, 207).

The Geneva multilateral peace conference entering setbacks

A significant aspect and innovation of the Carter administration's Middle East policy was the reassessment of the Soviet factor to foster a comprehensive resolution of the Middle East issue. In the early stages of his administration, National Security Advisor Brzezinski advocated for maintaining communication with the Soviet Union regarding Washington's endeavors to convene a Middle East peace conference in Geneva. Secretary Vance similarly emphasized the necessity of involving the Soviets in Middle East peace negotiations, recognizing the importance of mitigating their potential to disrupt the process.

By September, the Carter administration, considering that it would be difficult to resolve all the issues related to the Geneva conference smoothly without agreement among the Arabs, tried to bypass the Arab-Israeli parties, which were locked in a dispute over the procedural issues of the Geneva conference, and worked with the Soviet Union to formulate a joint invitation to the conference. Vance hoped that the joint U.S.-Soviet Union invitation would help resolve procedural issues and would put pressure on Syria and the PLO in particular.

At the same time, as the Arab-Israeli peace talks proceeded, the Soviet Union became increasingly eager to participate in the process leading up to the Geneva conference, having been excluded from the Middle East peace process for so long. During a meeting with Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador to the U.S., on August 29, Vance learned that Soviet Foreign Minister Mikhail Gromyko wanted to issue a joint U.S.-Soviet Union statement on the Middle East. At Carter's direction, Vance replied in the affirmative and asked the Soviets to draft a possible statement. On September 10, Dobrynin handed Vance a draft of the Soviet-American Joint Communiqué on the Middle East. Vance expressed interest and assigned Assistant Secretary of State Alfred L. Atherton, Jr., to meet with Soviet diplomat Mikhail Sytenko. By September 27, Atherton reported to Vance that his work with Sytenko had come close to completing an acceptable draft. Both the United States and the Soviet Union made some compromises in terms of content. The Carter administration was pleased with the Soviet language changes, arguing that while they were small, they were significant and represented genuine cooperation between the two superpowers (Stein 1999, 213). The Americans hoped the joint communiqué would put pressure on Syria and the PLO, as it was a clear demonstration of Soviet Union-U.S. cooperation, as Syria and the PLO argued over procedural issues and were seen as using pedantic arguments to thwart the resumption of the Geneva conference (Quandt 1986, 122).

On October 1, 1977, the U.S.-Soviet Union Joint Communiqué was issued by U.S. Secretary of State Vance in New York and Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko in Moscow. It said, 'Within the framework of a comprehensive settlement of the Middle East problem, all specific questions of the settlement should be resolved, including such key issues as withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the 1967 conflict; the resolution of the Palestinian question, including ensuring the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people; termination of the state of war; and establishment of normal peaceful relations on the basis of mutual recognition of the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence... .' (United States Department of State 2013, 634)

The communiqué caused a storm of controversy in the U.S. Congress, the American people, and the Middle East. The PLO welcomed the announcement, and Sadat called it a 'brilliant ploy,' presumably because he saw it as an effort to pressure Syria (Quandt 1986, 122). Sadat's reaction, however, was still surprising because his emissary, Touhamy, had recently told Moshe Dayan in Morocco that he did not want to attend the Geneva conference or that the Soviets would attend (Zion and Dan 1979, 20). The Israeli government reacted strongly and completely rejected the Soviet-American statement. Israeli Prime Minister Begin issued a statement he drafted on October 2, making it clear that the joint statement made no mention of the peace treaty nor of resolutions 242 and 338, which served as the basis for the 1973 Geneva Conference. While the statement did elaborate on the issues discussed in Geneva, it only strengthened the Arab position. Moreover, this statement would only make the process of peacemaking more difficult (Medzini 1981, 133).

The Israel lobby was also furious about the communiqué. American Jewish critics accused the United States and the Soviet Union of trying to impose a settlement instead of encouraging the parties to negotiate face-to-face. Alexander Schindler, president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, saw the statement as an abandonment of U.S. assurances to Israel (Jewish Telegraph Agency 1977, October 3). The pro-Israel camp was mobilized and went all out. Henry Jackson, a Democratic senator from Washington State, and George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO, both criticized the president's 'overtures' to the PLO (United States Department of State 2013, 802). Senator Jackson told NBC television's Meet the Press:

'The fox is back in the henhouse. The American people must ask why they let the Russians in when the Egyptians threw the Russians out (Jerusalem Post 1977, October 3). The Conference of Presidents held an emergency meeting on October 3 to deal with the Carter administration's 'betrayal' of Israel (ibid). Pro-Israel groups in the U.S. launched a further 8,000 phone calls to the White House criticizing the U.S.-Soviet communiqué. Mark Siegel, the White House's liaison with the Jewish community, receives 170 'angry' phone calls a day. Meanwhile, the president's overall approval rating in the poll is just 46 percent (Newsweek 1977, October 17).

The Carter government did not anticipate the strong reaction to the joint communiqué and was discomfited. In his memoirs, Brzezinski admitted that he had made a mistake. The most serious mistake, however, was the failure to consult domestic political advisers about the possible consequences of the statement, a situation compounded by the fact that the administration did not give any briefing to the media, Congress, or American Jewish leaders before the report was released (Brzezinski 1983, 108-10; Quandt 1986, 123). In the face of suddenly strong pro-Israel pressure in the United States and abroad, Carter retreated.

In a speech to the United Nations on Oct. 4, Carter reiterated the need to negotiate a binding peace treaty based on UN resolutions 242 and 338. He also reaffirmed the United States' unshakable commitment to Israel's security, explaining that the 'legitimate rights' of the Palestinians must be determined by the parties in negotiations, not by the United States (United States Government Printing Office 1977, 1720-1721). After his speech at the UN, Mr. Carter met Dayan at a hotel in New York's Union Square. He described it as an 'unpleasant meeting.' Carter explained that his position was made difficult by criticism of his policies from American Jews and Congress and that he felt vulnerable because he could not fight back. He said it was important to show the world that the United States and Israel were trying to work together to advance peace talks. Instead of sympathizing with Carter's vulnerability, Dayan deftly exploited it, explaining that if Carter reaffirmed all his past commitments to Israel and promised not to impose peace or cut aid to pressure Israel, a deal would be possible. Dayan also wanted the United States to recognize Israel's right to oppose a Palestinian state and said Israel did not have to retreat to the 1967 borders or accept the U.S.-Soviet declaration. In return, Dayan said, he would tell Israel's supporters

that Israel was satisfied with the agreement reached with the United States. Dayan warned of conflict if Carter did not accept the conditions. Carter said such a confrontation would not serve the interests of either country and agreed to a joint U.S.-Israel statement (Quandt 1986, 130-131; Zion and Dan 1979, 47). The joint statement issued by the United States and Israel on October 5 declared that Resolutions 242 and 338 remained the basis for the resumption of the Geneva Peace Conference and that acceptance of the joint statement by the United States and the Soviet Union would not be a precondition for the resumption of the conference (United States Government Printing Office 1977, 677). The statement reinforced the perception that the Israel lobby could force the president to back down if he comes under enough pressure.

Carter and Dayan also reached an understanding during the meeting, which was known as the working paper between Israel and the United States on the Geneva Conference ('Working Paper on Suggestions for the Resumption of the Geneva Peace Conference,' referred to as the 'U.S.-Israeli Working Paper'). Dayan presented it to his government, and the Israeli Cabinet approved the 'working paper' on October 11. The document included a unified Arab delegation attending the opening ceremony, followed by division into several working groups consisting of Egypt and Israel, Syria and Israel, Jordan and Israel. These working groups would convene meetings 'for the negotiation and conclusion of peace treaties.' In this document, Israel effectively rejected the joint communiqué and insisted on Resolution 242 as the basis for negotiations, but stated that 'Resolution 242 does not mean a territorial withdrawal.' There was no mention of the PLO, and there would be no Palestinian state (United States Department of State 2013, 676-677).

On October 14, President Carter sent the U.S.-Israeli working paper to Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, Jordan's King Hussein, and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. In addition to sending working papers, Carter wrote personal letters to each of the leaders in an attempt to overcome procedural issues in order to convene a new Geneva conference. When the Arab countries saw that the 'U.S.-Israeli working paper' proposed by the United States was significantly different from the first draft,¹ the

¹ On September 29, Vance forwarded the text of the working paper on suggestions for the resumption of the Geneva Conference, which listed three points. First, 'The Arab parties will be

Arab world's sense of disillusionment deepened, and they were disappointed with the 'U.S.-Israel working paper', and successively expressed their different opinions and changes to the Carter administration. In the face of the rejection of the U.S.-Israeli working paper by Arab countries, the continued pressure of pro-Israel forces in the United States, and Carter's reluctance to revise the U.S.-Israeli working paper again, he feared that 'the whole process is collapsing'(Carter 1982, 295). On October 21, he appealed to Anwar Sadat for strong public support and statesmanlike gestures to help restore momentum towards the Geneva conference path. Sadat replied in early November. He proposed to convene a meeting of the leaders of China, Egypt, France, Britain, Israel, Jordan, the PLO, Syria, the United States and the Soviet Union in East Jerusalem to resolve the Middle East issue (United States Department of State 2013, 741-743). Carter wrote back to object, and he, Mondale, Vance, and Brzezinski agreed that Sadat's proposals were unlikely to be constructive and that such a summit would be fruitless, not to mention the specific problems of the PLO. They worried about Sadat and wondered whether the Egyptian president had 'lost his sense of reality' (Brzezinski 1983, 111).

It was against this complex background that Sadat, in his speech to the Egyptian People's Assembly on November 9, unexpectedly decided to bypass the Geneva Conference and go directly to Jerusalem to negotiate a separate peace directly with the Israelis. The Americans were taken aback and had to adjust their strategy once again. It took several weeks for American officials to come up with a correct estimate of Sadat's reason for going to Jerusalem, and by early December the consensus within the administration was that Sadat's plan should be strongly supported. This essentially abandoned the reopening of the Geneva Middle East Peace Conference, and the Carter administration retreated from a comprehensive peace settlement at the beginning of its term to a Kissingerian partial settlement - a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace.

represented by a unified Arab delegation for the opening sessions at Geneva. Within the delegation there will be Palestinians, who may include not well-known members of the PLO.' The second point read, 'The working groups or subcommittees for the negotiation of peace treaties will be formed as follows: A. Egypt-Israel, B. Syria-Israel, C. Jordan-Israel, D. Lebanon-Israel, E. The West Bank, Gaza, The Palestinian Question and the Question of Refugees will be discussed among Israel, Jordan, the Palestinians, and perhaps others as determined at the opening sessions of the Geneva Conference.' The third and final point read, 'The working groups of subcommittees will report to the plenary.' United States Department of State, 2013, 624-625.

Conclusion

From the beginning of 1977 to November 1977, the new Carter administration took the settlement of the Middle East issue as an important priority and intended to comprehensively resolve the issue by reopening the Geneva Middle East Multilateral Peace Conference and bringing the Arab-Israeli parties together in Geneva. However, due to the continuous differences between the Arab-Israeli parties and the Arab countries on the substantive and procedural issues of convening the Geneva Conference, the peace process promoted by the Carter administration was gradually in trouble, and its multilateral and conference approach of Arab-Israeli diplomacy in Geneva was thwarted. This period was also the background and incubation stage of the next phase of bilateral peace talks between Egypt and Israel. Looking back at the whole process, it is not difficult to see why it failed.

Firstly, there existed a profound psychological estrangement and mutual distrust between Arabs and Israelis, compounded by longstanding contradictions among Arab countries. Decades of conflict since Israel's establishment in 1948 have entrenched this divide, and bridging the psychological gap required time and sustained effort. Israel, having endured four Middle Eastern wars, distrusted Arab states' genuine intentions for negotiation and achieving peace. Meanwhile, Arab nations, having suffered multiple defeats and territorial losses, were unable to militarily defeat Israel. Influenced by widespread Arab nationalism and for the sake of their own regime stability, they dared not openly acknowledge Israel and negotiate with it, maintaining a state of ceasefire between Israel and Arab nations.

Secondly, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin maintained a firm and unyielding stance throughout negotiations. On substantive issues, no progress has been evident since Begin and Carter's initial meeting in July to present the Israeli peace plan. Due to religious beliefs and party principles, Begin had consistently advocated for Israel's retention of the West Bank of the Jordan River, opposed Palestinian statehood, and expanded settlements on Arab-occupied territory. This had deepened Arab countries' distrust and hostility towards Israel.

Regarding procedural matters, Israel did not wish to negotiate with all Arab countries simultaneously but only agreed to engage in separate bilateral negotiations with each Arab nation. Israel understood that once it entered the Geneva Conference, the unified Arab bloc and the combined pressure from the United States and the Soviet Union would put it in a difficult position, forcing it to make more concessions. Israel also opposed the participation of representatives from the PLO in the negotiations because the PLO had consistently refused to recognize Israel and had sought its destruction, whereas

Arab nations only recognized the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. In this light, Begin became the primary obstacle to Carter's efforts to advance the peace process. As the stronger party in the Israeli-Arab conflict, Israel was unwilling to compromise on key issues, creating significant challenges for the Carter administration.

Thirdly, contradictions within Arab countries further complicated the situation. These nations grappled with a dual obligation: safeguarding the collective interests of Arab nations while simultaneously advocating for the legitimate rights of Palestinian Arabs. However, these objectives often clashed, fostering duplicity within Arab states.

For Egypt, Sadat faced serious domestic economic issues and military burdens, eager to consolidate his regime and in urgent need of U.S. economic and military aid to regain the Sinai Peninsula while maintaining his influence in the Arab world. Therefore, Sadat participated in Carter-led Israeli-Egyptian peace efforts on the one hand, while hedging his bets by clandestinely contacting Israel. When the peace process stalled due to American-Israeli working papers, Sadat decided to directly visit Israel and reconcile, effectively ending Carter's attempt to reopen the Geneva multilateral summit.

As for Syria, President Assad was Sadat's primary competitor in the Arab world. His regime was stable, and he was not in a hurry to reclaim the Golan Heights or achieve Israeli-Syrian peace. Besides expanding Syria's influence in the Arab world, he was more concerned about Syria's influence in Lebanon and controlling the PLO. He supported the PLO's uncompromising stance, particularly regarding UN Resolution 242.

Disagreements persisted over the composition of the Arab delegation to the Geneva conference, with Egypt advocating for a separate delegation while Syria favored a unified Arab representation. Syria's apprehensions stemmed from concerns that Egypt might pursue peace with Israel without consulting other Arab states, as evidenced by the Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement of 1974.

In addition, the strong influence of pro-Israel forces in the United States constrained the Carter administration's pressure on Israel. Since the 1960s, the United States and Israel had gradually developed a strong special relationship, with Israel becoming America's closest ally, leveraging pro-Israeli sentiments within the United States to influence its Middle Eastern policies. Israel mobilized pro-Israeli forces in the United States multiple times in 1977 to pressure the Carter administration, enabling it to resist pressure from the Carter administration.

In a memo to Carter in June 1977, Hamilton Jordan, President Carter's adviser on domestic political issues, specifically reminded Carter of the importance of pro-Israel forces in the Middle East, represented by American Jews and their groups. The memo

noted that Carter received 94 percent of the black vote and 75 percent of the Jewish vote during his 1976 presidential campaign, and that more than 60 percent of big donors to the Democratic Party that year were Jewish.

Lastly, Carter's personal demeanor and approach warrant consideration. President Carter's relative lack of experience in international affairs, coupled with imprudent public statements, often resulted in unintended consequences and sparked significant discontent among pro-Israel factions domestically. Additionally, Carter underestimated the intricacies of the Arab-Israeli conflict, later acknowledging his limited understanding of Middle East politics. At the time, conditions were not conducive to a comprehensive solution, with only Egypt demonstrating the willingness and courage to initiate reconciliation with Israel. In contrast, Syria and Jordan hesitated to pursue reconciliation due to the influence of pan-Arabism and internal considerations.

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