

# H-Diplo

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**Jeremy Pressman. "Explaining the Carter Administration's Israeli-Palestinian Solution."**

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Reviewed by **Daniel Lieberfeld**, Duquesne University

“Explaining the Carter Administration’s Israeli-Palestinian Solution” considers why the Carter administration endorsed the agreement it mediated between Egypt and Israel at Camp David in 1978, despite the fact that the agreement only partially resolved the Arab-Israeli conflict and failed to substantially advance Palestinian national goals. It considers why the Carter administration opted for a gradual approach to resolving the Palestinian problem, rather than pushing for final-status talks on Israel’s withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip and on Palestinians’ political status. Analyzing these decisions, the author states, affords a basis for understanding U.S. policy toward the conflict in the thirty-five years since the Camp David Accords.

The article argues that President Jimmy Carter’s motivations are widely misunderstood and sets out to refute the contention that he and his administration sought to further the policy goals of the Menachem Begin government in Israel and deliberately allowed Israel an indefinite prolongation of its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Rather, the author maintains, Carter and his team believed that Israeli leaders’ intransigence regarding the West Bank and Gaza and their aversion to the fulfillment of Palestinian national goals made the Accords’ aspirational reference to an “elected self-governing authority in the West Bank and Gaza” all that could be achieved on behalf of Palestinian political rights. The U.S. team also thought and hoped that the less-than-robust and unenforceable germ of Palestinian self-determination outlined in the Accords might, over time, develop into something more tangible, particularly when a different administration took office in Israel.

The author usefully recalls Carter’s essential pragmatism, along with his relative willingness, for a U.S. president, to push back against expanding Israeli settlement in the

Occupied Territories.<sup>1</sup> The author's interviews and archival research, as well as quotes from the participants' memoirs, provide evidence that "Carter officials took the Palestinian question seriously" (1128)—that is, that the administration was not, in fact, merely paying lip service to Palestinian aspirations while secretly plotting to support Israeli policy goals.

The article at times appears to deal with two questions that, while linked, may best be addressed separately: it considers why the administration prioritized the Egyptian-Israeli settlement at the expense of more specific commitments by Israel regarding Palestinian rights. The article then appears to shift focus, investigating why the administration did not impose sanctions when Israel continued its settlement expansion—the analytic emphasis here seems to refer to the period after the signing of the Camp David agreement (the chronology of the policy debates under discussion could be clarified in the article). The second question, concerning why Israel was able to continue settlement-building in the post-agreement phase and why the U.S. did not impose sanctions (such as threatening to suspend some types of security cooperation), is perhaps not directly relevant to the original question of why the accords reflected a gradual, partial approach to conflict settlement, and its inclusion tends to make the article's main point more diffuse.

The author posits that there is a prominent interpretation of Carter's policy that blames him for perpetuating the subjugation of the Palestinians, and that some critics also blame him for facilitating Israel's mid-1980s invasion of Lebanon (due to Israel's improved security situation with Egypt in the wake of the Accords). However, it is not clear that those who have criticized the limitations of the Camp David accords are actually contending that Carter deliberately sought to further the Begin administration's interests at the expense of the Palestinians, which is the proposition that the author refutes. Indeed, the examples provided do not seem to indicate that most of the Accords' critics actually attribute to Carter any intentionality regarding their effects on the Palestinians. The criticisms of the Accords that the author cites are, in the main, potentially consistent with the judgment that Carter did not deliberately promote a policy that harmed Palestinian interests. Nor do the criticisms specify any policy that Carter should have followed instead of the one contained in the Accords.

The argument of Camp David's critics was that the Carter administration provided "cover for Israeli expansionism" (1135). Those cited as adherents of this view are nearly all Arab politicians, such as Jordan's King Hussein, and Palestinians with official positions in political structures, such as the academics Edward Said and Fayez Sayigh, who were members of the Palestine National Council. Among the critical scholars mentioned, Noam Chomsky is highlighted. That is, the author uses a historian's methodology to

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<sup>1</sup> Only the George H. W. Bush administration in 1992 actually went so far as to impose even modest economic sanctions on Israel for contravening U.S. policy against settlements.

counter a polemical argument that was neither made by professional historians nor based on historical evidence, much less a comparison among alternative achievable diplomatic outcomes.

Among mainstream historians there seems to be little debate concerning Carter's motives in initiating Camp David and endorsing a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace: His priority was to end the inter-state rivalry that had fed multiple, increasingly destructive wars, the last of which, in 1973, had threatened to draw the militaries of both superpowers into the region. The impetus for negotiations came from Egypt, and secondarily from Israel, not from the Palestinians, whom all three parties at Camp David obviously considered less of a priority. Further, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was a non-state actor; the "Jordanian option" for Palestinian representation was still potentially viable; and the PLO's internal divisions left Yasir Arafat unable (until 1988) to endorse either UN Resolution 242, recognizing Israel in exchange for the return of captured territory, or, as it transpired, the autonomy arrangements sketched out in the Camp David Accords. Palestinian leaders also found it unacceptable that the Accords relegated their national movement to a "refugee problem"; however, in retrospect, some Palestinian analysts have assessed that PLO and Jordanian rejection of Camp David may have been a missed opportunity in the struggle for statehood.

There is general agreement among historians that Carter did, in fact, prefer and seek an agreement that advanced Palestinian national interests and reversed Israeli control of the Occupied Territories, but instead adopted the limited, gradual language of Camp David after Prime Minister Menachem Begin proved intransigent on the Palestinian issue, thus "trad[ing] the Palestinian issue for an Egyptian-Israeli deal" (1123). It is not clear that the question of Carter's motives is sufficiently controversial as to necessitate the defense of a judgment—"the evidence suggests Carter administration officials were serious in their effort to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" (1118)—that falls well within the historiographic mainstream. One can better appreciate the possibility of debate concerning the Accords' ambiguous results than debate over the administration's motives for signing them.

The author maintains that Carter administration ideas formed the basis for the Oslo process from 1993-2001—the "largest effort to date" (1117) to address the conflict. This is an interesting point (although the U.S. did not participate in the Oslo talks) and there are certainly continuities, such as Israel's insistence on gradualism in agreements involving land-for-peace—partly in order to test the sincerity of the other side. The idea of continuities between Camp David and the present day and the lessons of Camp David for U.S. foreign policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be further developed in the article.

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