

ISRAELI PEACE INITIATIVES

Peace with Egypt

Every government in Israel's history has declared its desire to live in peace with all Arab states. The Israel-Egypt peace agreement was a watershed event and marked the first such agreement between Israel and an Arab state. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin joined U.S. President Jimmy Carter at the "Camp David Accords" in September 1978. Israel agreed to withdraw from all of the Sinai within three years and to dismantle its air bases near the Gulf of Aqaba and the town of Yamit; Egypt promised full diplomatic relations with Israel, and to allow Israel passage through the Suez Canal, the Straits of Tiran, and the Gulf of Aqaba. On March 26, 1979, the two countries signed a peace treaty on the White House lawn. Sadat, having gone out on a limb for the peace treaty, was vilified in the Arab world, and was assassinated in 1981.

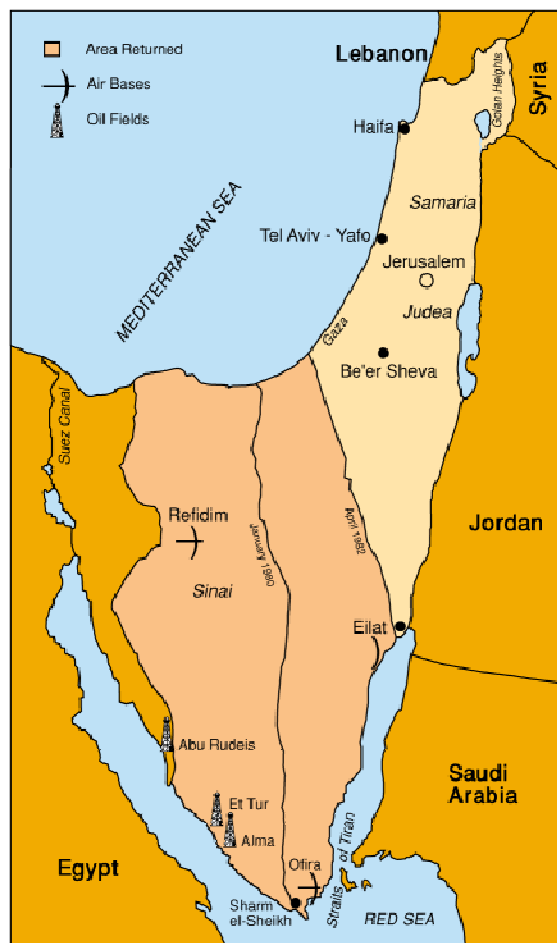
The groundbreaking Israel-Egypt peace paved the way for subsequent Israeli negotiations and treaties with Jordan and the Palestinians. In recent years, Egypt has played a key behind-the-scenes role in facilitating Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and helping prepare the Palestinian Authority for the Israeli disengagement from Gaza. In December 2004, Israel, Egypt and the U.S. signed a joint free trade agreement.

Peace with Jordan

Israel and Jordan had long maintained warm secret relations, even following the Israeli conquest of the West Bank and Jerusalem in the 1967 6-Day War. As soon as it appeared that elements of the peace process were in place with the Palestinians, Jordan and Israel were able to quickly conclude a formal treaty. The treaty involved very minor changes in the borders, and included a guaranteed supply of water by Israel to Jordan. On October 26, 1994, Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty, bringing peace along Israel's longest border.

The Oslo Accords

In August 1993, secret negotiations in Oslo, Norway, between high-level Israelis and Palestinians, led to the first Israeli-Palestinian agreement. The talks, initiated months earlier under the auspices of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, had begun informally with low level Israeli and Palestinian diplomats and academics. But with growing success in the drafting of an agreement, the talks were upgraded and soon were conducted by high-level Israeli and Palestinian officials. On September 9, Israel and the PLO exchanged letters of mutual recognition to precede the official signing of an agreement. In his letter to Prime Minister Rabin, Chairman Yasir Arafat recognized Israel's right to exist "in peace and security." Arafat renounced "the use of terrorism and other acts of violence." Arafat also pledged to revoke articles in the Palestinian National Covenant which deny Israel's right to exist. In a response to Arafat's letter, Rabin confirmed that "in light of the PLO commitments included in your letter, the Government of Israel has decided to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and commence negotiations with the PLO within the Middle East peace process." On September 13, 1993, the Israel-Palestinian Declaration of Principles (DOP) was signed by Prime Minister Rabin and Chairman Arafat in the presence of U.S. President Bill Clinton on the White House lawn amidst tremendous fanfare.



Withdrawal from Sinai Following the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty

The DOP, the first in a series of what are known as the Oslo Accords, consisted of a carefully constructed two-phased timetable. The rationale behind the two-phased plan was to save the most difficult issues for last. While the drafters of the DOP did not believe these issues would be easily resolved, it was hoped that after building confidence and cooperation through the interim period, Israel and the Palestinians would be better able to tackle the most complex and divisive issues in the conflict.

Over the next six years a series of further interim agreements were signed, most significantly the September 1995 Oslo II Agreement and the October 1998 Wye River Accord. Following the implementation of these agreements, as of September 2000, over eighty-five percent of the Gaza Strip and 39.7 percent of the West Bank were under the control of the Palestinian Authority. Ninety-nine percent of the Palestinian population resided under the Palestinian Authority's jurisdiction.

The negotiations were supported by the majority of the Israeli population who believed that Israel needed to make difficult territorial concessions in the pursuit of peace. Throughout the interim period Palestinian terrorist groups conducted scores of terrorist attacks against Israeli civilian targets. Over the years, Israelis grew increasingly disenchanted with the Palestinian Authority who did little-to-nothing to control terrorist organizations, and continued to spread anti-Israel and anti-Semitic propaganda.

The disengagement from Gaza – June 2005

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's proposal for a full Israeli withdrawal from the entire Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank (Judea and Samaria) was referred to as the "disengagement" initiative. The plan involved dismantling the homes and communities of about 9,000 Israelis who had lived in those areas for three decades. The areas that were evacuated included 17 settlements in southern Gaza, known as Gush Katif; four settlements in northern Gaza; and four settlements in the West Bank.

The plan was first introduced during a speech by the Prime Minister in December 2003 at a conference of top Israeli and international leaders. The disengagement came at a time when there was no Palestinian partner for peace, the security of Israelis living in Gaza was difficult to insure and Israel, wishing to remain a democracy, did not want to permanently rule over millions of Palestinians.

The disengagement plan caused massive economic losses for Israel's agricultural sector. For example, 60 percent of Israel's cherry tomato exports had come from Israeli farmland and hothouses in those areas and 70 percent of Israel's organic produce was grown in Gaza. When Israelis left Gaza as part of the disengagement, they abandoned almost 1,000 acres of greenhouses.

Prime Minister Sharon cited Israel's willingness to make painful sacrifices for peace, its security and its image within the international community as major factors that contributed to his decision to support what many believed was the most significant Israeli initiative for peace in the past two decades. Although there was intense opposition, the majority of Israelis supported the pullout.

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