

Carter's Pivot to Camp David (1977)

“No one knows for sure what will occur if President Sadat goes to Jerusalem.”

President Jimmy Carter

Why did President Carter initially prioritize the Geneva Peace Conference for a comprehensive Arab–Israeli peace?

Upon taking office in 1977, **President Jimmy Carter** sought a comprehensive Arab–Israeli settlement anchored in a reconvened **Geneva Peace Conference**, co-chaired by the **United States** and the **Soviet Union**. The concept was inclusionary: **Israel**, **Egypt**, **Jordan**, **Syria**, and some form of **Palestinian** representation would negotiate borders, security, refugees, and recognition in one framework. Carter publicly endorsed a Palestinian “homeland,” signaling U.S. willingness to address the core political issue rather than pursue another limited interim arrangement. To jump-start Geneva, Washington coordinated with Moscow on modalities, culminating in an **October 1977** joint statement of principles meant to corral the parties and keep diplomacy multilateral.

What was the “firestorm” reaction to the October 1977 U.S.–Soviet statement, and how did it affect strategy?

The **October 1, 1977** U.S.–Soviet communiqué triggered a political **firestorm**. **Israel’s** government rejected renewed Soviet co-chairmanship and feared imposed terms; in **Washington**, key members of **Congress**, pro-Israel groups, and many commentators blasted the statement as pre-cooked “dictation.” Critics warned it undercut U.S. leverage, rewarded Moscow, and bypassed direct negotiations. The backlash exposed hard limits on Carter’s comprehensive design: he needed Israeli and congressional consent to proceed. It also complicated Arab diplomacy, since some Arab states distrusted Soviet roles or doubted U.S. resolve under domestic pressure. The episode narrowed maneuver space, pushing the White House to reconsider timing, tactics, and messaging.

How did Anwar Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 alter the peace process?

Anwar Sadat’s surprise trip to **Jerusalem** (November 19, 1977) transformed the landscape. By addressing the **Knesset**, he legitimized direct **Egypt–Israel** talks and vaulted bilateral diplomacy above procedural wrangling over Geneva. The **Carter administration** praised the courage yet initially insisted the move “not substitute for Geneva,” hoping to convert Sadat’s gesture into momentum for a broader conference. Practically, the visit created an immediate channel that Washington had to service: encouraging Israeli reciprocity while assuaging Arab parties suspicious of separate deals. From that moment, U.S. strategy balanced two tracks—protect the comprehensive option rhetorically, but cultivate the unprecedented Egypt–Israel opening.

What was the central internal debate inside the Carter administration in late 1977–early 1978?

After Sadat's initiative, the **Carter team** split over strategy. One camp sought to rescue the **Geneva** track by leveraging Sadat's move to extract Israeli gestures on the **Palestinian** issue and entice **Jordan** and **Syria** back into a multilateral forum. Another, increasingly pragmatic camp argued the attainable prize was an **Egypt–Israel** deal; chasing a full settlement risked stalemate. **Zbigniew Brzezinski** pressed for creative formulas linking bilateral progress to Palestinian autonomy; others favored incremental, step-by-step diplomacy. Through early **1978**, experience—deadlock on representation, procedural fights, and Arab divisions—tilted deliberations toward the view that progress required prioritizing the bilateral channel.

Why did Carter shift from the Geneva framework to a bilateral focus on Egypt and Israel?

By early **1978**, five factors drove a pivot from **Geneva** to intensive **Egypt–Israel** mediation.

Opportunity: Sadat's Jerusalem gambit opened a unique window Carter dared not miss.

Stalemate: Geneva was paralyzed by fights over **Palestinian representation** and modalities.

Cold War: a bilateral track marginalized **Soviet** co-chairmanship, pleasing Cairo and Jerusalem while aligning with U.S. interests. **Risk calculus:** intelligence warned failure might topple Sadat or reignite war. **Domestic politics:** Congress and opinion favored an American-led breakthrough with Egypt and Israel. It also promised tangible movement where multilateralism had produced only communiqués.

How did the U.S. actively mediate between Egypt and Israel in 1978, leading toward Camp David?

In **1978**, Washington moved from facilitation to **active mediation**. It quietly backed the **Cairo Conference** (Dec. 1977) to sustain the Egypt–Israel channel; crafted **bridging proposals** (the **Nine-Point Proposal**, Feb. 1978) sketching Palestinian self-rule; and sent **President Carter** and senior envoys on repeated shuttles. Pressure fell chiefly on **Menachem Begin**—to freeze settlements, define autonomy, and map withdrawal principles—while **Anwar Sadat** was urged to widen the agenda beyond bilateral symbolism. The discreet **Leeds Castle** talks (July 1978) exposed persistent gaps, convincing Carter that only leader-to-leader, sequestered negotiations could break the impasse and produce binding, detailed texts at Camp David.

What was the significance of the September 1978 Camp David Summit?

The **Camp David Summit** (September 5–17, 1978) capped the shift to focused bilateralism and produced the **Camp David Accords**: two frameworks. The first, “**Framework for Peace in the Middle East**,” outlined a five-year **autonomy** plan for the **West Bank/Gaza** and pathways to negotiations. The second, “**Framework for the Egypt–Israel Treaty**,” specified **Sinai** withdrawal, demilitarization, peace, and normalization. **President Carter**’s personal drafting, cajoling, and sequencing were decisive—bridging textual gaps and trading side-letters. The outcome validated the U.S. mediation pivot: it did not solve every front, but it created a concrete treaty roadmap and momentum. It also anchored a U.S. broker’s central role.

8) Why were the Camp David Accords a “first step,” and what were the immediate consequences?

The **Camp David Accords** were explicitly a **first step**: bilateral peace with **Egypt** while inviting others to join later under an autonomy framework. The price was high—Egypt’s suspension from the **Arab League** and fierce Arab denunciations of “separate peace.” The **Carter administration** argued “half a loaf” was essential: locking in **Sinai** withdrawal, demilitarization, and Egyptian–Israeli normalization created stability and leverage for subsequent diplomacy on **Palestinians, Jordan, and Syria**. Immediate consequences included an intensive treaty-drafting sprint, reassessment in Arab capitals, and a durable U.S. mediator role. The approach traded scope for certainty to keep the peace process alive.

Timeline

- **January 1977:** Carter takes office; pushes a **comprehensive Geneva peace** (U.S.–USSR co-chaired) including Palestinians.
- **March–June 1977:** Publicly raises a Palestinian “**homeland**”; Geneva prep stalls over PLO/representation.
- **October 1, 1977: U.S.–USSR joint statement** on Geneva principles triggers backlash in Israel and Congress.
- **November 19, 1977: Sadat visits Jerusalem** and addresses the Knesset; U.S. shifts to **encourage the bilateral track** while keeping Geneva alive.
- **December 1977: Cairo talks** (Egypt–Israel) begin with U.S. observers; committees on military/political issues.
- **February 3–5, 1978:** Sadat at **Camp David (informal)**; U.S. floats a **Nine-Point Proposal** for five-year Palestinian self-rule.
- **March 1978: Begin in Washington;** Carter presses a **settlement freeze**, calls settlements “illegal.”
- **July 1978: Leeds Castle** secret talks (Dayan–Kamel) make only modest progress; Carter decides on personal summity.
- **August 1978:** Carter **invites Sadat and Begin** to Camp David; both accept.
- **September 5–17, 1978: Camp David Summit**—Carter shuttles between leaders, drafting texts.
- **September 17, 1978: Camp David Accords signed**:

- Framework for Peace in the Middle East (five-year autonomy & final-status talks for West Bank/Gaza).
- Framework for an **Egypt–Israel treaty** (Israeli withdrawal from Sinai).
- **September 18, 1978:** Carter addresses a **Joint Session of Congress**; Senate backs effort **95–0**.
- **Late 1978–1979:** Egypt is **suspended by the Arab League**; U.S. aid packages underpin peace; **1979** Carter in Cairo frames the treaty as the **first step** toward comprehensive peace.



Sadat and Carter

President Jimmy Carter News Conference

September 29, 1977

Question: There have been a lot of confusing statements from the White House and from leaders who have seen you recently on where exactly the United States stands in terms of Palestinians, PLO participation in a Geneva Peace Conference if one comes about. Can you really clarify this point?

The President: ... What we are trying to do now is, as a first and immediate goal, to bring all the parties in the Mideast dispute to Geneva for a conference.¹ We are dealing with Israel directly; we are dealing directly with Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt.² We are trying to act as an intermediary between Israel and each one of those Arab countries that border their own country.

There are some differences among the Arab nations which we are trying to resolve concerning a unified Arab delegation or individual Arab delegations, and the format which might be used to let the Palestinian views be represented.³

At the same time, we have a further complicating factor in that we are joint chairmen of the Geneva Conference along with the Soviet Union.⁴ So in the call for the conference and the negotiations preceding the format of the conference we have to deal with the Soviet Union as well. So on top of all that, and perhaps preeminent in my own mind, is we are not an idle observer or bystander, or mediator. We have a vital national interest in the ultimate peace in the Middle East.⁵ It is obvious to me that there can be no Middle Eastern peace settlement without adequate Palestinian representation.⁶

The Arab countries maintain that the PLO is the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian interests. The Israelis say they won't deal with the Palestinians, certainly not the well-known PLO members, because they have been identified in the past as committed to the destruction of the nation of Israel.⁷

So we are trying to get an agreement between the Israelis and the Arab countries with widely divergent views about the format of the meeting, and also who would be welcomed to the conference to represent the Palestinians.⁸

This is something that is still in the negotiating stage and I cannot predict a final outcome. We have no national position on exactly who would represent the Palestinians or exactly what form the Arab group would take in which the Palestinians would be represented. I just can't answer that question yet because the question has not been answered in my mind.⁸

Question: Does the United States recognize—"Recognize" is the wrong word—but accept the PLO as a representative of the Palestinians?

The President: We have pledged to the Israelis in the past, and I have confirmed the pledge, that we will not negotiate with, nor deal directly with, the PLO until they adopt United Nations Resolution 242 as a basis for their involvement, which includes a recognition of the right of Israel to exist.⁹ We have let this be known to the PLO leaders through various intermediaries, through the United Nations, leaders in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and so forth. **They know our position.*¹⁰

If the PLO should go ahead and say, "We endorse UN Resolution 242," we don't think it adequately addresses the Palestinian issue because it only refers to refugees, and we think we have a further interest in that; that would suit us okay.¹¹

We would then begin to meet with and to work with the PLO.¹² Obviously they don't represent a nation.¹³ It is a group that represents—certainly don't think they are the exclusive representatives of the Palestinians. Obviously there are Mayors ... and local officials in the West Bank areas who represent Palestinians. They may or may not be members of the PLO.¹⁴

So we are not trying to define an exact formula that we would prescribe for others. We are trying to find some common ground on which the Israelis and Arabs might get together to meet in Geneva.¹⁵

I think, by the way, that both groups, the Israelis and the Arabs, have come a long way. They are genuinely searching for a formula by which they can meet. They want peace. I think they are to be congratulated already because in the past number of years they have made very strong and provocative statements against one another, and now to move toward an accommodation is a difficult thing for them and we are trying not to make it any more difficult.

Question: Mr. President, what are the assurances given to the PLO in the event of accepting 242?

The President: If they accept UN 242 and the right of Israel to exist, then we will begin discussions with the leaders of the PLO. We are not giving them any further assurance than that because we are not trying to prescribe ... the status of the PLO itself in any Geneva Conference.¹⁶ But it would give us a means to understand the special problems of the Palestinians. And, as you know, many of the Israeli—some of the Israeli leaders—have said that they recognize that the Palestinian question is one of the three major elements.¹⁷ But I can't and have no inclination to give the PLO any assurances other than we will begin to meet with them and to search for some accommodation and some reasonable approach to the Palestinian question

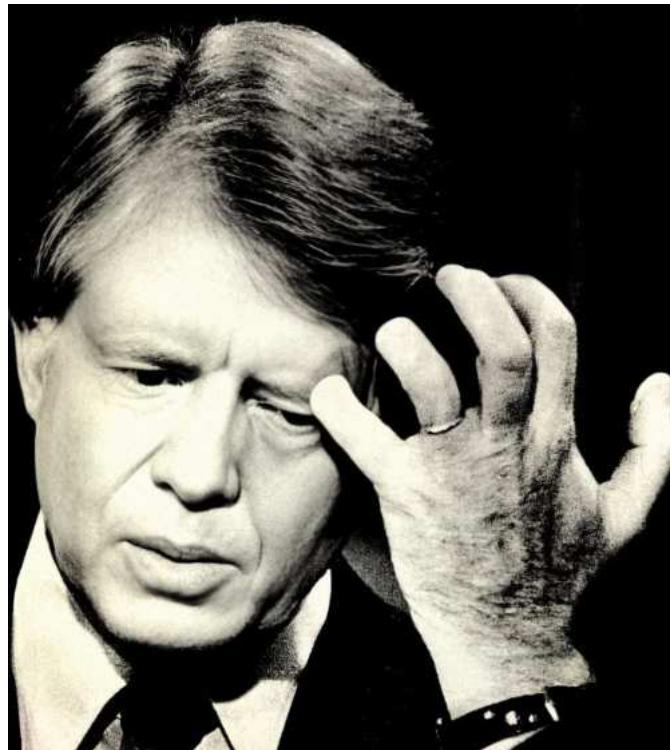
if they adopt 242 and recognize publicly the right of Israel to exist.¹⁸

Notes

1. **Geneva framework.** The **Geneva Middle East Peace Conference** first convened in **December 1973** and adjourned; Carter sought its **reconvening** in late 1977 under U.S.–Soviet co-chairmanship.
2. **The “neighbors.”** These are Israel’s immediate Arab neighbors (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt). After the **1974 Rabat Summit**, Arab states formally recognized the **PLO as sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people**, complicating **Jordan’s** role.
3. **Delegation “format.”** Ideas ranged from a **unified Arab delegation** (with a Palestinian component) to **separate delegations**, and from a **Jordanian-Palestinian** slot to some indirect channel for **PLO** views.
4. **Co-chair with the USSR.** Under the 1973 understandings, the **U.S. and Soviet Union** co-chaired Geneva. Carter’s comments came literally on the eve of the **U.S.–Soviet joint communiqué** (Oct. 1, 1977) urging reconvening—controversial in Israel.
5. **U.S. stakes.** Washington’s interests included preventing renewed war, limiting **Soviet influence**, safeguarding **oil routes/energy security**, and upholding broader **Cold War** alignments.
6. **Palestinian representation.** A notable shift from earlier U.S. formulations; in **March 1977** Carter had even spoken of a Palestinian “**homeland**,” signaling greater U.S. attention to Palestinian political rights (while still insisting on 242).
7. **Why Israel refused the PLO.** The **PLO’s** 1968 **National Covenant** rejected Zionism and did not recognize Israel; several PLO factions also engaged in **terrorist attacks**. Hence Israel’s categorical refusal to meet the PLO in 1977.
8. **Open question by design.** The administration kept **representation** ambiguous to maintain maneuvering room—e.g., **West Bank/Gaza** figures or a **Jordanian-Palestinian** delegation versus explicit **PLO** seats.
9. **The “no-talks with PLO” pledge.** Originates in U.S. assurances to Israel linked to the **1975 Sinai II** agreements: no U.S. talks with the PLO until it **accepts UNSCR 242 and recognizes Israel’s right to exist**. Carter reaffirms this.
10. **No official U.S.–PLO channel (yet).** Until **1988**, U.S. contacts with the PLO were indirect—via **UN envoys or Arab intermediaries**—because the PLO had not met the 242/recognition conditions.
11. **Limits of 242. UNSCR 242 (1967)** references a “**just settlement of the refugee problem**,” not Palestinian **national or political rights**—hence Carter’s view that 242 alone is insufficient on the **Palestinian dimension**.
12. **Would trigger dialogue.** Carter signals that **PLO acceptance of 242 + recognition of Israel**

would suffice to **open a U.S.–PLO channel**—a policy milestone that was only realized in **1988**.

13. **Non-state actor.** The PLO in 1977 was not a state; its status at Geneva would have required **special arrangements** distinct from sovereign delegations.
14. **West Bank mayors.** After the **1976 municipal elections**, several prominent **Palestinian mayors** (e.g., in Nablus, Ramallah, Hebron) emerged—many sympathetic to the PLO—highlighting alternative **Palestinian interlocutors**.
15. **From Geneva to Camp David.** Geneva did not reconvene in 1977; diplomacy shifted to **Camp David (1978)** and the **Egypt–Israel treaty (1979)**, while the Palestinian track remained unresolved.
16. **No advance guarantees.** Carter declines to **pre-assign PLO status** at Geneva; acceptance of 242 would only open **discussions**, not predetermine a **seat** or voting status.
17. **“Three major elements.”** In Carter’s framework: **(a)** territorial/borders (including withdrawals), **(b)** security/peace arrangements, and **(c)** the **Palestinian question** (self-governance/rights).
18. **Recognition + 242 as threshold.** The combination—**accept 242 and recognize Israel’s right to exist**—was the U.S. precondition for any **official engagement** with the PLO.



**Joint Statement by U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance
and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko**

October 1, 1977

1. Both governments are convinced that vital interests of the peoples of this area as well as the interest of strengthening peace and international security in general urgently dictate the necessity of achieving as soon as possible a just and lasting settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This settlement should be comprehensive, incorporating all parties concerned and all questions.¹

The United States and the Soviet Union believe that, 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;² the resolution of the Palestinian question including ensuring the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people;³ 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.⁴

The two governments believe that, in addition to such measures for ensuring the security of the borders between Israel and the neighboring Arab states as the establishment of demilitarized zones and the agreed stationing in them of UN troops or observers,⁵ international guarantees of such borders as well as of the observance of the terms of the settlement can also be established, should the contracting parties so desire. The United States and the Soviet Union are ready to participate in these guarantees, subject to their constitutional processes.⁶

2. The United States and the Soviet Union believe that the only right and effective way for achieving a fundamental solution to all aspects of the Middle East problem in its entirety is negotiations within the framework of the Geneva Peace Conference, specially convened for these purposes, with participation ... of all the parties involved in the conflict including those of the Palestinian people,⁷ and legal and contractual formalization of the decisions reached at the Conference.⁸

In their capacity as co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference the U.S. and the USSR affirm their intention through joint efforts and in their contacts with the parties concerned to facilitate in every way the resumption of the work of the conference not later than December 1977.⁹ The co-chairmen note that there still exist several procedural and organizational

questions which remain to be agreed upon by the participants to the Conference.¹⁰

3. Guided by the goal of achieving a just political settlement in the Middle East and of eliminating the explosive situation in this area of the world, the U.S. and the USSR appeal to all the parties in the conflict to understand the necessity for careful consideration of each other's legitimate rights and interests and to demonstrate mutual readiness to act accordingly.¹¹

Notes

1. **“Comprehensive” settlement.** In 1977 Washington and Moscow were pushing a **single multi-issue package** (Arab-Israeli tracks + Palestinian question) rather than separate partial deals—hence “comprehensive.” The Begin government in Israel preferred **step-by-step/partial** approaches.
2. **“Withdrawal … from territories occupied in 1967.”** The phrasing echoes **UNSCR 242 (1967)** but **omits** the article “all,” preserving the **intentional ambiguity** of 242 over whether Israel must withdraw from **all** the territories or to **secure and recognized boundaries** to be agreed. This was a key U.S.–Israeli sensitivity.
3. **“Legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.”** Stronger than 242’s “refugee” language and closer to Arab/Soviet formulations. For Washington, this did **not** pre-commit to statehood; for Moscow and many Arabs, it pointed toward **national/political rights** (and, for some, a state). Carter had already spoken of a Palestinian “**homeland**” in March 1977, signaling a policy shift.
4. **End of war / mutual recognition.** This captures the quid pro quo envisioned since 242/338: **Arab recognition and peace** in exchange for **Israeli withdrawals and security arrangements**.
5. **DMZs and UN forces.** Builds on precedents (**UNEF, UNDOF**, and later **MFO** in Sinai). Demilitarized zones and UN observers were standard tools to **verify** and **buffer** post-1967 lines.
6. **“International guarantees … subject to constitutional processes.”** Superpower participation in guarantees raised alarms in Israel (fear of **Soviet troops/roles**). “Constitutional processes” signals that any U.S. guarantee would require **domestic legal steps** (e.g., Senate advice/consent) and is **not automatic**.
7. **“Participation … including those of the Palestinian people.”** Code for including **Palestinian representation** at Geneva. The Soviets (and Arabs) read this as the **PLO**; the U.S. position remained that any PLO role required **prior acceptance of 242 and recognition of Israel’s right to exist** (per the U.S. pledge to Israel). This **ambiguity** triggered criticism in Israel and parts of Congress.
8. **“Legal and contractual formalization.”** Indicates the aim for **signed agreements/treaties**—not just declarations—emanating from Geneva.
9. **“Not later than December 1977.”** The target date reflected a U.S.–Soviet push to **reconvene Geneva** quickly. In practice, **Sadat’s Jerusalem trip (Nov 1977)** shifted diplomacy to an **Egypt–Israel bilateral** channel, sidelining a U.S.–Soviet-led Geneva track and leading to **Camp David**

(1978).

10. **“Procedural and organizational” hurdles.** Chiefly **how Palestinians would be present** (unified Arab delegation? separate Palestinian delegation? under Jordanian umbrella?) and the **terms of reference**. Israel opposed a direct **PLO** seat; Syria favored a stronger role; Jordan’s role was complicated by the **1974 Rabat Summit** recognizing the PLO as **sole legitimate representative**.
11. **Appeal for mutual restraint.** The superpowers were urging parties to accept **reciprocal compromises**: Arab acceptance of **peace/recognition/security** for Israel, and Israeli acceptance of **territorial adjustments** and a **meaningful Palestinian role**.

Aftermath/impact. The **Vance–Gromyko statement** provoked a backlash in Israel (seen as U.S. drift toward a **Soviet/Arab** line on Palestinian representation and withdrawals). Within weeks, **Sadat’s initiative** reoriented the process to **bilateral** diplomacy, and the U.S. effectively **de-emphasized** the joint U.S.–Soviet Geneva effort—though many core elements (withdrawals, peace treaties, security arrangements, Palestinian autonomy discourse) reappeared at **Camp David**.



Vance and Gromyko

Zbigniew Brzezinski (National Security Adviser)
Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977–1981

The policy on behalf of a comprehensive settlement that we had initially pursued had both a well-thought-out substantive focus and a political strategy surrounding it.¹ We understood the need for an American initiative and for American control over the negotiating process.² While realizing that not all issues could be resolved simultaneously, we also understood that they were interrelated, particularly the crucial issues of withdrawal, security, and the nature of peace.³ The Palestinian issue emerged as the most controversial of our suggestions, and in retrospect it might have been introduced more gradually, and with less emphasis on the role of the PLO.⁴ As time went on, we also began to treat Geneva as a more serious exercise, whereas in the first few months it was largely seen as part of the political strategy to get the parties to engage in the negotiating process.⁵

Perhaps the comprehensive approach never had a chance.⁶ However, it is also true that the United States did not apply enough pressure during the critical summer stage to sustain momentum, and thus gradually both the Egyptians and the Israelis became more intractable.^{7 8}

The Israelis, especially after Begin's ascension to power, became more confident that they could resist American pressure, and their experience with the White House encouraged them in that feeling.⁹ In that respect, the first Carter–Begin meeting was probably decisive in conveying the conclusion that the Administration would not force a showdown, and thus Begin could adopt the delaying tactic of focusing on procedure without too much risk.¹⁰ Our own negotiating approach also became increasingly procedural as of the late summer of 1977, and that played into Begin's hand.¹¹

The Egyptians, on the other hand, became increasingly discouraged and felt that the United States lacked the will to push through a comprehensive settlement.¹² Moreover, they were more skeptical than we of the possibility of reaching the kind of accommodation with the other Arabs which would enable the Arab side to sustain a common strategy in the course of a Geneva Conference.¹³ We probably underestimated ... the depth of the Egyptian–Syrian differences.¹⁴ Last but not least, both the Egyptians and the Israelis were suspicious of the Soviets and did not view with favor the U.S. efforts of late summer and early fall to engage the Soviets more actively.¹⁵

However, it must also be said that Carter's and Vance's efforts did have the effect of unfreezing a previously frozen situation and of stimulating the principal parties into initiatives of their own.¹⁶

Notes

1. **“Comprehensive settlement.”** Early Carter strategy sought a single multi-track package (Arab-Israeli borders, security, normalization, and the Palestinian question), not just incremental bilaterals.
2. **“American initiative ... control.”** Brzezinski's view that the U.S. should set the agenda and manage modalities/sequence, while keeping the USSR inside a limited co-chair role.
3. **Interrelated issues.** Tracks mapped to **UNSCR 242/338** logic: Israeli withdrawals balanced by security arrangements and peace/recognition.
4. **Palestinian issue / PLO.** Carter's team elevated Palestinian political rights; the **PLO**'s role was contentious given the U.S. pledge (since 1975) of **no talks** until it accepted 242 and recognized Israel.
5. **Geneva Conference.** Reconvening the U.S.–Soviet co-chaired Geneva forum (first met Dec 1973) was initially a lever to draw parties in; by mid-1977 Washington treated it more earnestly.
6. **“Never had a chance.”** Brzezinski's hindsight that regional politics and great-power cross-pressure made a single comprehensive deal unlikely in 1977.
7. **“Critical summer” of 1977.** He faults Washington for not exerting sustained pressure June–August 1977 to lock in momentum toward Geneva.
8. **Growing intractability.** Egyptian caution (inter-Arab coordination, Soviet role) and Israeli resistance (settlements, procedural debates) both increased as summer wore on.
9. **Begin's rise. Menachem Begin** (Likud) formed a government in June 1977, shifting Israel's stance on withdrawals and Palestinian autonomy/statehood.
10. **First Carter–Begin meeting.** Held July 19–20, 1977; Brzezinski argues it signaled no U.S. showdown, enabling Begin to stress **procedure over substance**.
11. **“Increasingly procedural.”** U.S. focus tilted to who attends/how Palestinians are represented (unified Arab delegation vs. separate; Jordanian–Palestinian mix) rather than core trade-offs.
12. **Egyptian discouragement.** Cairo doubted Washington would push Israel toward a comprehensive package—helping propel Sadat toward a unilateral initiative later in 1977.
13. **Arab coordination problem.** Sustaining a common Arab strategy was hard given divergent priorities (Egypt–Syria–Jordan–PLO), especially on **Palestinian representation**.
14. **Egypt–Syria rift. Sadat–Asad** tensions (since 1974) complicated both Palestinian and territorial

tracks.

15. **U.S.–Soviet engagement.** Points to the **Vance–Gromyko joint statement of Oct. 1, 1977**, urging Geneva reconvening with Palestinian participation and referencing withdrawals and Palestinian “legitimate rights”—which worried both Jerusalem and Cairo.
16. **“Unfreezing” effects.** Carter/Vance helped unlock stalemate—most dramatically **Sadat’s Jerusalem visit (Nov 1977)**—leading to **Camp David (1978)** and the **Egypt–Israel treaty (1979)**, though the Palestinian track remained unresolved.



Brzezinski and Carter

Cyrus R. Vance (Secretary of State)
Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy

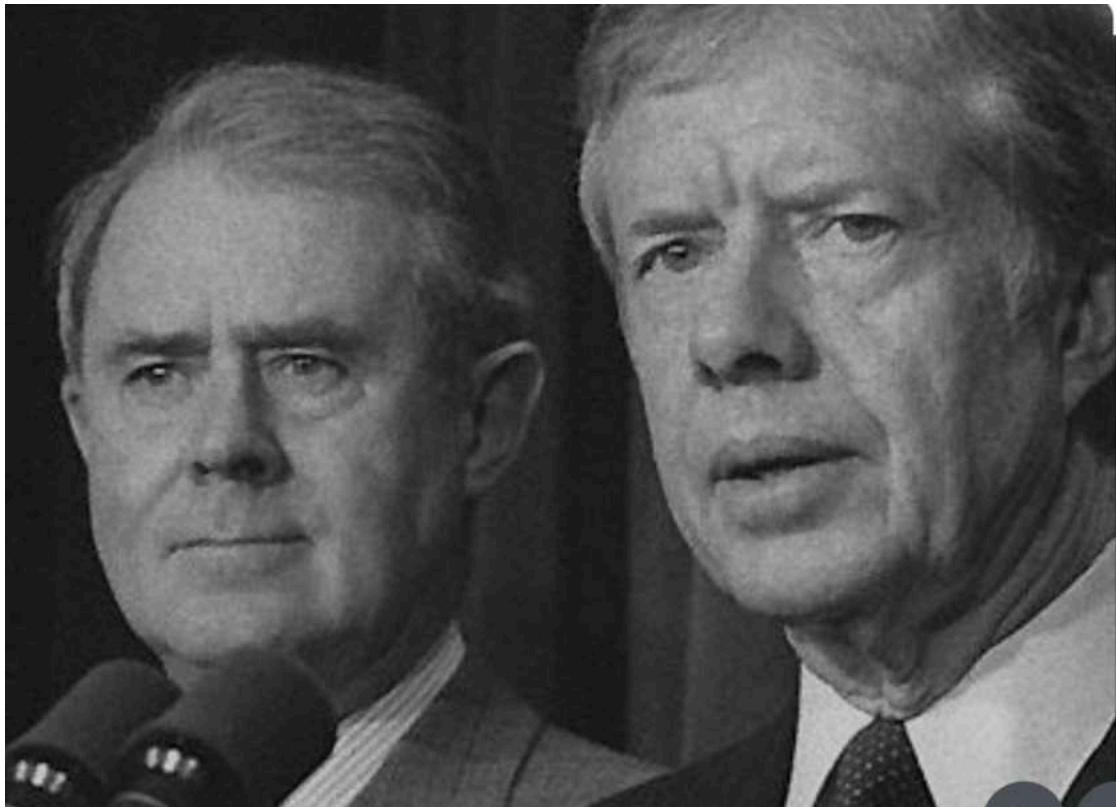
Once we had recovered from the initial surprise [of Sadat going to Jerusalem], we at once endorsed Sadat's initiative.¹ I was worried, however, that this decision, which had been taken without consultations with his Arab partners, could leave him isolated and exposed and jeopardize the prospects for a Geneva conference.² Evidently, Sadat believed he would be secure as long as his principal Arab supporters, the Saudis, did not join the Syrians, the PLO, and other hard-line Arabs in attacking the initiative.³ For the short run, this was a reasonable calculation. The Saudis, the Jordanians, and other moderate Arabs exercised public restraint while they awaited the results of his attempt to change political attitudes in Israel.⁴ It was clear, however, that the Saudis could resist pressures to denounce Sadat only if he achieved speedy and noteworthy results.⁵

Nevertheless, although the President and I agreed that our broad objective continued to be a Geneva conference and a comprehensive peace, it was clear to us that the probable outcome of Sadat's initiative would be an initial peace agreement between Egypt and Israel.⁶ Thus, from early 1978 on, we followed two parallel paths toward peace: agreement between Egypt and Israel on the bilateral issues between them, and an interim solution to the problem of a Palestinian homeland in the West Bank and Gaza.⁷ Success on both paths was an indispensable precondition to engaging the other Arab parties and attaining our ultimate goal of a comprehensive and lasting settlement for all the parties.⁸

Notes

1. **“Sadat going to Jerusalem.”** Egyptian President **Anwar Sadat’s** groundbreaking visit to **Jerusalem (Nov 19–21, 1977)** bypassed the stalled, U.S.–Soviet co-chaired **Geneva Conference** track and opened a direct **Egypt–Israel** channel. Washington quickly **embraced** the move as an opportunity to break the deadlock.
2. **Risk to Geneva/comprehensive approach.** The Carter administration’s early strategy sought a **comprehensive** settlement via **Geneva** (all fronts + Palestinian representation). A unilateral Egyptian initiative risked **Arab backlash** and undercutting the multilateral framework the U.S. had been building (e.g., the **Vance–Gromyko** statement of Oct. 1, 1977).
3. **Arab alignments.** **Saudi Arabia and Jordan** were the key “**moderates**,” often counseling restraint; **Syria** and the **PLO** led the **rejectionist** critique. Sadat counted on **Saudi political and financial backing** to blunt the charge of “separate peace.”
4. **“Changing political attitudes in Israel.”** Sadat aimed to sway Israeli public opinion and leadership toward **territorial compromise** and **peace treaty** logic by offering recognition and direct dialogue.

5. **Saudi conditional support.** Riyadh's tolerance depended on **visible progress** (e.g., withdrawal timetable, treaty milestones); absent results, Saudi Arabia faced **Arab League** pressure to **denounce** Egypt.
6. **Likely outcome = bilateral treaty first.** Vance foresaw that Sadat's move would yield an **Egypt–Israel treaty** ahead of any broader package—precisely what happened: **Camp David (Sept 1978)** and the **Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty (Mar 1979)**. The “**comprehensive**” track (Syria, Jordan, Palestinians) lagged.
7. **“Two parallel paths.”** This foreshadows the **two Camp David frameworks**: (a) a **bilateral** Egypt–Israel framework (Sinai withdrawal, peace, security); and (b) a **framework for the West Bank and Gaza** envisioning **Palestinian “self-government”/autonomy**—Carter’s preferred term earlier had been a **“Palestinian homeland.”**
8. **Comprehensive aim vs. reality.** The U.S. hoped success on both paths would **draw in** Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinians. In practice, autonomy talks **stalled**, Egypt was **suspended** from the Arab League (1979–89), and a truly **comprehensive** settlement remained elusive, even as the Egypt–Israel peace **endured**.



Vance and Carter

Stuart E. Eizenstat (Chief Domestic Policy Adviser)
President Carter: The White House Years

Mark Siegel¹ was accompanying a congressional delegation visiting Cairo, when he heard Sadat tell them: “You know I did not risk my life, and you know we did not break relations with the Soviet Union, and you know hundreds of thousands of Egyptian boys did not die—so that the U.S. government could bring back the Soviet Union to control Egypt.”² He then threw a political bombshell and declared he would travel to Jerusalem if invited.³ Siegel rushed to the U.S. Embassy; it was late at night and almost everyone had gone home, so he typed a cable alerting the State Department. Then Siegel called me while I was having lunch with Ham, and finally flew to Jerusalem to urge Lewis to arrange a formal invitation.⁴

But the Carter administration did little to adjust to events as history moved with great speed. Ham instructed Siegel: “The president wants you to low-key this. The president doesn’t want you to say anything enthusiastic or positive to the press.” Siegel was shocked: “I said: ‘Hamilton, do you know what’s going on here? I mean, this is like a miracle taking place... I have to say something positive?’ And I was told not to.”⁵ That was because Carter was still barreling ahead toward a comprehensive Mideast conference, while the only two countries actually interested in negotiating with each other had no interest in his broad-based forum....⁶

In Washington the reaction was far from jubilant. After all, Carter’s grand plan had been derailed. Sadat’s bold stroke was at first met with skepticism, which finally gave way to acceptance because there was no other choice. Brzezinski summed up the diplomatic explosion and consequent rush of events: “And then bing! Or bang! came this announcement that he’s going to go on his own [to Jerusalem]. So I think by then we were pretty wary ... [but] within a very short period of time, we concluded that, instead of opposing it, we’d better embrace it, and hopefully give it some broader dimension.” At a cabinet meeting in Washington on November 14, only five days before Sadat’s historic visit, Vance declared: “Nothing will come out of the Begin–Sadat exchange, but it is good for the atmosphere....”⁷

The president soon realized that he needed to make the most of the radically changed situation and tried to bring in the Palestinians. Years later Carter insisted to me that he had approved of Sadat’s gamble, but at the time he sounded very different. As I was heading down the narrow hallway toward the Oval Office with the president going the other way, he pointedly addressed me: “Stu, I think I am going to oppose Sadat’s visit. It will be the end of any hope of a comprehensive peace and will result only at best in a bilateral agreement between Egypt and Israel.” I was astonished and said, “Mr. President, you can’t do that. Sadat’s visit will be historic, and it will be catastrophic if you are seen as opposing the first visit of an Arab combatant to Israel since its creation.” He grumbled and kept walking.⁸

Carter finally faced reality and threw the weight of the presidency behind Sadat. Had he not done

so, said Ephraim Evron, then of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, there would have been no peace agreement because “when we were left alone with the Egyptians, nothing happened.” Even so, Evron felt that if the administration had moved more quickly to embrace Sadat’s trip, King Hussein of Jordan might have come aboard before Arab extremists had time to rally against it....⁹

I now saw in Jimmy Carter an important aspect of presidential leadership: the ability to pivot out of a dead-end policy, bounce back, and continue to move ahead in utterly unexpected circumstances. Through almost all the first year of his presidency, Carter had staked his Middle East policy on a comprehensive settlement with all of Israel’s enemies, through a reconvened Geneva conference. The president, Vance, and Brzezinski had put enormous efforts into achieving this goal, however unrealistic it might have been. Nevertheless Carter had moved the dials and helped unfreeze some positions. In one way or another, his ill-conceived Geneva peace process served as a catalyst for Sadat’s trip to Jerusalem, and then he moved to broaden a purely bilateral deal between Egypt and Israel into one that would offer the Palestinians some hope of controlling their own destiny.¹⁰

Notes

1. **Mark Siegel** — Carter White House aide (1977–78) in the Office of Public Liaison, serving as the administration’s liaison to the American Jewish community; he was in Cairo when Sadat floated the Jerusalem visit and helped spur the formal Israeli invitation.
2. **“We did not break relations with the Soviet Union.”** Sadat expelled Soviet advisers in 1972 and abrogated the **1971 Egyptian–Soviet treaty** in March 1976—his point was to preclude renewed Soviet leverage via a U.S.–Soviet–run Geneva track.
3. **“Travel to Jerusalem if invited.”** From Sadat’s **Nov. 9, 1977** People’s Assembly speech; **Begin** invited him, leading to the **Nov. 19–21** Jerusalem visit and Knesset address.
4. **Who’s who.** **“Ham”** = **Hamilton Jordan**, Carter’s top aide; **“Lewis”** = **Samuel W. Lewis**, U.S. Ambassador to Israel (1977–85).
5. **“Low-key” instruction.** Reflects the administration’s initial commitment to the **comprehensive/ Geneva** track and worry about undercutting **Arab consensus** or the U.S.–Soviet co-chair role.
6. **Comprehensive vs. bilateral.** As of early Nov. 1977 Washington was still pushing to **reconvene Geneva** (cf. the **Vance–Gromyko** statement, Oct. 1, 1977), while **Sadat and Begin** preferred a direct channel.
7. **Early skepticism at the top.** Brzezinski shifted quickly to embrace Sadat’s move; **Vance** doubted the first Sadat–Begin exchange would yield substance—captured in the **Nov. 14** cabinet discussion.
8. **Carter’s pivot.** Eizenstat recounts Carter’s initial impulse to **oppose** the visit, followed by a rapid **embrace**—a key example of his policy agility.

9. **Jordan and Arab backlash. King Hussein** stayed out as **Syria/PLO** rallied opposition; earlier U.S. enthusiasm might have drawn Amman in before the backlash consolidated.
10. **From Geneva to Camp David.** Carter's comprehensive effort helped **unfreeze** positions and catalyze Sadat's leap, after which the U.S. reframed diplomacy into the **Camp David frameworks (1978)**, producing the **Egypt–Israel treaty (1979)** and a (later-stalled) **West Bank/Gaza autonomy** track.



Carter and Eizenstat

Memorandum From Secretary of State Vance to President Carter
Analysis of Sadat–Begin Talks

November 24, 1977

We have now received reports on their talks in Jerusalem from both President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin.¹ It is apparent that a new situation has been created which requires some adjustment in our approach to Middle East peace. Briefly, the present realities seem to be:

- Egypt and Israel have agreed to continue direct contacts at the political and military levels.² Therefore, in the immediate future our intermediary role, while still important, is less central than in the past.
- Both Egypt and Israel say they want to try to work out the substance of an overall peace settlement prior to Geneva, although Israel probably hopes that talks would result in early agreement on an Egyptian–Israeli treaty.³ Therefore, an early reconvening of Geneva is unlikely.⁴
- Both Egypt and Israel believe that Syria and the Soviet Union can be ignored at present.⁵
- Sadat, however, apparently hopes to be able to show some movement on the Palestinian issue as a way of protecting himself from the charge of abandoning the Arab cause.⁶
- Saudi support for Egypt is essential, but Sadat does not want us to approach the Saudis (or the Syrians) on his behalf.⁷
- The breach between Sadat and Assad is serious, and probably cannot be healed immediately. It may have to run its course, but this does not mean that Syria will throw in its lot with the rejectionists.⁸ Indeed, it is in our interest to prevent this.
- Jordan is in a very awkward position and will fear a separate Egyptian–Israeli agreement. But Hussein is open to the idea of direct talks.⁹

Sadat has asked your advice on three points:

1. He intends to say in his speech to the People's Assembly on Saturday that the Arab–Israeli conflict should be solved directly by the parties concerned, not by outside powers.¹⁰
2. He is toying with the idea of issuing invitations to all the parties to a conference in Cairo as a substitute for Geneva.¹¹
3. He has suggested that an Israeli diplomat (not publicly identified as such) be posted to the U.S. Embassy in Cairo to facilitate direct communications.¹²

I believe that Sadat should be encouraged to place primary emphasis on direct talks among the parties to the conflict. This is perfectly consistent with our own approach. For the moment, of course, only Egypt, and possibly Jordan through established secret channels, are prepared for

such direct talks.¹³

Concerning a Cairo Conference as a substitute for Geneva, I think we should discourage Sadat from moving in this direction at this time. At this point, neither the Soviets nor the Syrians would come, and it is in fact likely that the Israelis would be the only takers. This could only serve to dramatize Sadat's isolation among the front-line Arab states.¹¹ Instead, I suggest that we tell Sadat that we are favorable to his idea of working on the substance of peace agreements through bilateral talks with Israel, and with the emphasis he has placed on the need for careful preparation prior to any multilateral conference. At some point, his idea of a meeting in Cairo might be helpful, and we would like to discuss this further. However, we think it would be desirable to continue to emphasize that the objective remains an overall settlement and an eventual peace conference open to all the parties.⁴

If you agree to this approach, I will send the attached messages through Ambassador Elts and Lewis indicating our support for the idea of bilateral Israel–Egyptian talks to prepare the way for an eventual peace conference.¹⁴ We will discourage Sadat from his specific suggestion of calling immediately for a conference in Cairo, and will sound him out on ways of insuring Saudi support and what we can say to the Saudis.

We will also want to be in touch with the Jordanians, Syrians and Soviets in the near future. A primary objective will be to prevent the Syrians from joining the rejectionists, but for the moment it does not seem as if an early reconvening of Geneva is the way to accomplish that.⁸

We will obviously need to give early thought to the longer-run implications of the situation resulting from Sadat's new approach and to adjusting our own long-term strategy to it. It is clear that Sadat himself has not thought through precisely all of the implications and that he is overly optimistic about the ease and speed with which his negotiations with the Israelis can proceed. He will almost certainly at some point come to us for help in moving the Israelis on specific issues. At this point, however, Sadat's initiative has clearly generated its own pressure on the Israelis to reassess some of their long-held positions. We will want to let that process work to see what it can produce and should not at this point ourselves begin to press the Israelis, but should rather adopt an encouraging posture toward them.¹⁵

The other area to which we will need to give attention is how we help improve the intra-Arab atmosphere, for our own interests as well as Sadat's, and how we lower expectations for an early convening of Geneva during a period when nothing very visible will be happening, and there is little concrete that can be said to others. It is clear that Israel's real objective is to engage Sadat in separate Israeli–Egyptian negotiations and that Sadat will be tempted to go that route if the other Arab parties continue to hold back. This has both dangers and opportunities, and we will need continually to keep under review how we can encourage the bilateral track while keeping alive the prospects for a comprehensive settlement.¹⁶

Finally, we will need to give some thought to how in our public statements and in our consultations with Congress we convey some of these new realities and the new emphasis in our own policy.¹⁷

Notes

1. **Context & timing.** Sadat's **Jerusalem visit** (Nov 19–21, 1977) and talks with **Begin** triggered this reassessment; Vance is reporting five days later.
2. **"Political and military levels."** After Jerusalem, the parties agreed to set up **political and military committees** (e.g., **Ismailia meeting**, Dec 25, 1977), a precursor to the **Camp David** process.
3. **Bilateral treaty aim.** Israel's near-term goal was a **separate Egypt–Israel treaty**; the U.S. still professed a **comprehensive** objective but increasingly accepted a **two-track** approach.
4. **Geneva track.** The U.S.–Soviet–co-chaired **Geneva Conference** (first convened 1973) was the formal "comprehensive" framework; Vance signals it **won't reconvene soon** despite the **Vance–Gromyko** push on Oct 1, 1977.
5. **Sidelining Syria/USSR.** Sadat and Begin both preferred to **exclude** Damascus and Moscow from shaping the initial talks—partly why Sadat's move undercut the Geneva paradigm.
6. **Palestinian dimension.** Sadat needed **visible movement on West Bank/Gaza** issues (autonomy, political rights) to avoid charges of **abandoning the Arab cause**.
7. **Saudi centrality.** **Riyadh's** political cover and financial backing were critical for Cairo; Sadat preferred to **manage Saudis himself** lest U.S. intermediation backfire.
8. **"Rejectionists."** Shorthand for Arab states/factions rejecting negotiations with Israel (e.g., **Iraq, Libya, Algeria**, and radical Palestinian groups). Vance hopes to **keep Syria** (Asad) from drifting into that camp despite the **Sadat–Asad rift**.
9. **Jordan's dilemma.** King **Hussein** feared being isolated by a **separate Egypt–Israel peace**, yet Vance notes he was **open to secret/direct talks** on the West Bank track.
10. **People's Assembly speech.** Sadat's report to the Egyptian parliament on **Nov 26, 1977**, framing the doctrine of **direct negotiations** among the parties.
11. **"Cairo Conference" risk.** A Cairo substitute for Geneva would likely draw **only Israel, highlighting Egypt's isolation** from Syria and others; hence Vance's advice to **hold off**.
12. **Israeli diplomat in Cairo.** A discreet **communications channel** proposal—before formal ties, Israel had no embassy in Cairo; this foreshadows later **interest sections** and, post-treaty, embassies.
13. **Secret Jordanian channel.** The U.S. and Israel maintained **quiet contacts** with Jordanian officials and West Bank notables regarding future **autonomy** arrangements.
14. **Ambassadors Eilts & Lewis.** **Hermann Eilts** (Cairo) and **Samuel W. Lewis** (Tel Aviv) were the

key field hands for conveying Washington's **bilateral-first, comprehensive-later** message.

15. **“Encouraging posture” toward Israel.** Vance counsels **not** to press Israel immediately; let the **political dynamics** after Sadat's move generate **Israeli reassessment** first.
16. **Bilateral vs. comprehensive.** Vance sees **opportunity** in the bilateral track but warns to **keep comprehensive prospects alive** (Camp David later institutionalized this with **two frameworks**: Sinai/bilateral and West Bank–Gaza/autonomy).
17. **Domestic messaging.** The administration needed to recalibrate **public/Congressional** expectations—from an imminent **Geneva** to a **bilateral-led process** that might look incremental but aimed ultimately at **comprehensive** peace.



Sadat and Begin in Jerusalem, November 1977