



Land for Peace: Lessons from Israel's Withdrawal from Sinai, Egypt

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Forward

In honor of the 30th anniversary of the Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty, signed on 26 March 1979, this paper examines whether the 1979–1982 withdrawal from Sinai, Egypt, compromised Israel’s security. The debate in Israel at the time was whether Israel could secure a lasting peace with Egypt, a country that had refused to recognize Israel’s legitimacy, or whether the return of the Sinai Peninsula, territory Israel had taken from Egypt in the 1967 Six-Day War, would compromise Israeli security. Did the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula weaken Israeli security? The evidence shows conclusively that it did not. The most important factor ensuring the success of the withdrawal was the signing of the 1979 Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty before the withdrawal from Sinai took place.

Background on the Sinai Withdrawal

Before the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai transpired, in 1979–1982,^[i] Egypt and Israel had fought several wars: the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, the 1956 Suez War, the June 1967 Six-Day War, the War of Attrition and the October 1973 War. Until the 1973 War, Israel had been the victor in all of these conflicts. In the Six-Day War, Israel took the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, which had the effect of both doubling Israeli territory and wounding Egyptian pride (Shlaim, *Iron Wall*, 320). The October 1973 War was a turning point for Egypt because Egyptian forces successfully surprised Israelis and crossed over the Suez Canal into the Israeli-held Sinai Peninsula. This war ended with United Nations (U.N.) Security Council Resolution 338, which called on all parties to end hostilities and start implementing U.N. Security Council Resolution 242. The preamble of U.N. Security Council Resolution 242, following the Six-Day War, emphasized the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force and the need to work for a just and lasting peace. Article 1 stated that a just and lasting peace should include two principles: (1) “Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict” and (2) “Respect for the right of every state in the area to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force” (Shlaim, *Iron Wall*, 338). In the aftermath of the October 1973 War, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat realized that he had a new opportunity to engage Israel in peace negotiations from a position of strength.

The signing of the 1974 Israeli–Egyptian Disengagement Agreement paved the way for Sadat’s announcement in November 1977 that he would travel to the *Knesset*^[ii] to begin peace negotiations with Israel. Following this historic visit, a process began which would culminate in the signing of the 1979 Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty. This treaty changed the balance of power in the Middle East, because, for the first time, an Arab country recognized, and signed a peace treaty with Israel. In order to obtain this peace, the treaty negotiated by Sadat, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, and U.S. President Jimmy Carter mandated that Israel withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula. Begin, the leader of the right-wing *Likud* party, agreed to this condition. By the end of April 1982, Israel had withdrawn all its military forces and settlements, and the Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt.

The 1979 Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty

The largest factor that ensured Israeli security in the post-withdrawal period was the 1979 Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty, which was based on the principles established in the Camp David Accords. Among its provisions, the most salient were: a military annex; an annex dealing with relations between Egyptians and Israelis; agreed “minutes” interpreting the main articles of the treaty; the withdrawal schedule from Sinai; exchange of ambassadors; security arrangements; and the agreement relating to the autonomy talks.^[iii] This treaty did two things that helped to guarantee Israeli security: It established peace between Egyptians and Israelis by mandating that the parties “Bring to an end the state of war between them and . . . establish a peace in which every state in the area can live in security.”^[iv] It also outlined concrete steps that would be taken in the periods preceding and following withdrawal to ensure Egyptian and Israeli security. It mandated the establishment of normal and friendly relations upon the “interim withdrawal” of Israeli troops from Sinai.^[v] This article worked to the advantage of both the Israelis and the Egyptians. Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula to the Egyptians, and Egypt assured Israel of diplomatic relations. Both countries were satisfied, because they received things they valued in exchange for their concessions.

A security plan was put in place following the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai. Limited-force zones were established in Egyptian and Israeli territory; U.N. forces and observers were deployed; and a joint commission was established to facilitate the implementation of the treaty.^[vi] This last factor was one of the largest that contributed to strengthening Israeli security in the post-withdrawal period from Sinai, because specific measures were in place to ensure Israeli security in the post-withdrawal period.

The Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty was the culmination of several prior accords and agreements: the 1974 Israeli–Egyptian Disengagement Agreement, Sinai II, and the Camp David Accords. Part of the reason it was successful in strengthening Israeli security was that it was part of a multi-staged process that occurred over a long period of time that allowed the parties to develop trust along the way. The Israeli–Egyptian Disengagement Agreement was signed in 1974, and the Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty was concluded in 1979. There was a five-year period in between that allowed both Egyptian and Israelis to “warm up” to the idea of peace. By this time, particular points of contention had already been eliminated. Two of the largest disagreements, over the status of Jerusalem and the dismantling of the Israeli settlements in Sinai, had been resolved in the Camp David Accords. It was therefore easier for the Egyptians and Israelis to sign a peace treaty normalizing their relations. This was part of the reason the treaty was successful in strengthening Israeli security, because negotiations occurred over a long period of time and difficult issues had already been resolved.

The Role of the Demilitarized Zones

Another factor that contributed to Israeli security in the post-withdrawal period was the Israeli realization that withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula did not compromise Israel’s strategic depth. Strategic depth is the distance between a country’s vital centers and its borders. After

the June 1967 War, Israel had enlarged its strategic depth from the 1949 Armistices Lines by gaining territory in the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, the West Bank and the Sinai Peninsula (Horowitz, 23). Because of this increase in land, Israel's important centers were now farther away from its borders.

In the aftermath of the 1973 War, the value of strategic depth lost its importance. Even with Israel's enlarged borders, the Egyptian army crossed the Suez Canal into Israeli-held territory,^[vii] captured the Bar-Lev line, advanced a certain distance into Sinai and inflicted heavy losses on Israeli tanks, aircraft and manpower. The belief that Israel's enlarged depth would help strengthen Israeli security was disproved. In the war's aftermath, Israeli military leaders began examining the idea of a demilitarized zone (DMZ), a weapons-free zone between Egypt and Israel.

Both Sinai II and the Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty were based upon the idea of a DMZ (Horowitz, 23). The exchange of strategic depth for a DMZ buffer made it possible for Israel to withdraw from Sinai without compromising its security, because there would be a designated non-military zone between Egyptian and Israeli territory, which was overseen by a third party. Both in Sinai II and the Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty, the DMZ was under the auspices of the U.N. Both the Egyptians and Israelis were allowed to maintain early-warning stations near the zones, and the U.S. maintained a presence near them by manning the Sinai Field Missions.^[viii] In the event that either nation violated these agreements, it would be an illegal, hostile action, because it was forbidden for either state to cross into the DMZ. The other nation would then be justified in responding militarily as an act of self-defense. The DMZ increased Israeli security because it separated Egyptian and Israeli forces. Both nations now had a “barrier” between them that they were forbidden to enter. Strategically, Israel realized that by withdrawing from territory, and losing land, it did not compromise its security. The DMZ was a more successful way for Israel to maintain its security in the post-withdrawal period.

The United States' Support in Maintaining Israeli Security

One of the largest reasons the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai did not weaken Israeli security in the post-withdrawal period was U.S. military and economic support in maintaining normal relations between Egypt and Israel. One example can be seen in the Sinai II Agreement signed on 4 September 1975. Sinai II was signed in the aftermath of the October 1973 War and a year after the conclusion of the 1974 Israeli–Egyptian Disengagement Agreement. The processes leading up to the 1974 Egyptian–Israeli Disengagement Agreement and Sinai II were overseen by U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. In Sinai II, the U.S. agreed to oversee the Sinai Field Missions, early-warning stations located in the DMZ in the Sinai Peninsula between Egyptian and Israeli territory. In exchange for the U.S. agreement to man the Sinai Field Missions, the Israelis agreed to withdraw from strategic areas in the Sinai Peninsula.

By manning the Sinai Field Missions, the U.S. had a distinct role in maintaining security. This would directly contribute to strengthening peace in the post-withdrawal period because it deterred both parties from initiating aggressive actions in Sinai. In the 1979 Egyptian–Israeli

Peace Treaty, “Both parties [Egypt and Israel] request the United States–operated Sinai Field Mission to continue its operations in accordance with previous agreements until completion of the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai. . . .”^[ix] Both before and after the evacuation from Sinai, the U.S. monitored security activity in the Sinai Peninsula, which helped to guarantee Israeli security after the Israeli evacuation from Sinai occurred.

On top of agreeing with Israel and Egypt to administer the Sinai Field Missions, the Americans signed a separate Memorandum of Agreement with the Israelis in September 1975. This agreement detailed U.S. commitments to Israel following Sinai II. The memo pledged U.S. support “On an ongoing and long-term basis to Israel’s military equipment and other defense requirements, to its energy requirements, and to its economic needs.”^[x] This showed the Americans had an interest in maintaining Israeli security because they provided Israel with military equipment and defense requirements. If the Egyptians chose to attack, Israel was guaranteed to have weapons to respond to this aggression. The memo costs the U.S. around \$4 billion annually.^[xi] The U.S. was helping to ensure Israeli security by strengthening the financial and military ties between Israel and the United States. Israel was more eager to strengthen its relationship with the U.S. than it was in signing political agreements with Egypt.^[xii] Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who succeeded Golda Meir in June 1974, knew the economic agreement with the U.S. would strengthen Israeli security because it would reinforce the relationship between these two nations.

Another Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Israel and the U.S. in accompaniment of the 1979 Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty. This memorandum guaranteed Israel’s oil supply for the next 15 years and assured Israel of U.S. support in the event of any Egyptian treaty violations and a continued commitment to be “responsive” to Israel’s military and economic requirements.^[xiii]

On top of these factors, the U.S. helped to broker peace negotiations at Camp David. President Carter was instrumental in working out compromises between Begin and Sadat. Carter intervened in the Egyptian–Israeli peace process when other efforts to solidify peace failed.^[xiv] He applied extreme pressure on Begin to dismantle the Israeli settlements in the Sinai Peninsula.^[xv] Carter let Begin know that if he failed to compromise, there would be severe consequences for the Israel–U.S. relationship. Under pressure, Begin agreed to the dismantling of the settlements. Egyptian and Israeli differences nearly ended the Camp David negotiations. Begin demanded that Jerusalem remain the undivided capital of Israel; Sadat wanted East Jerusalem included with the West Bank in a Palestinian Autonomy Agreement.^[xvi] The Egyptian delegates were packing their bags to leave when the crisis was resolved by an exchange of letters.^[xvii] Carter proposed that Begin and Sadat each give him letters stating their positions, while Carter gave Sadat a letter stating the U.S. opposition to the Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem. The Camp David Accords provided the principles for the 1979 Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty. Israeli security was strengthened because specific points of contention, the status of Jerusalem and the Sinai settlements, had been resolved through U.S. mediation, making it less likely that either party would attack the other in the future.

Confidence-Building Measures

Further strengthening Israeli security in the post-withdrawal period from Sinai were confidence-building measures taken by Egyptians and Israelis. In most political negotiations between two enemy states, a psychological barrier must be removed before negotiations can occur; parties to a conflict commonly use confidence-building measures to facilitate the resolution of the conflict (The Public International Law and Policy Group). In 1977, Sadat announced to the Egyptian Parliament, “I am prepared to go to the end of the earth for peace, even to the Knesset itself.”^[xviii] Four days later, Begin extended an invitation to Sadat. Sadat’s visit to Israel helped to break down the psychological barrier between the Israelis and the Egyptians, because it proved to the Israelis that the Egyptians desired peace.^[xix] Israelis’ perceptions of Sadat changed because of his visit to Israel. In the eyes of Israelis, “Sadat’s interview with ABC’s Barbara Walters in Jerusalem, where he laughed as he sat next to Israeli Prime Minister Begin, transformed the Arab–Israeli conflict from an intractable dispute into a manageable disagreement” (Tenenbaum). This was an essential factor that contributed to changing the Israelis’ opinions of the Egyptians. By visiting Israel, Sadat showed Egypt was serious about achieving peace. A small measure of trust was restored between two enemy nations, and an emotional barrier was removed.

Conclusions: Aftermath and Strategic Considerations

The Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula helped to strengthen Israeli security. This withdrawal occurred because Israel realized it was more strategic to relinquish the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt rather than have a neighboring enemy state. This realization resulted from the prior hostilities that occurred between the Egyptians and the Israelis. The Sinai withdrawal provided Israel with a more favorable political situation under the auspices of the 1979 Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty. This peace treaty was the most important factor in guaranteeing Israeli security in the period following the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai. It helped to strengthen Israeli security in the post-withdrawal period by mandating the establishment of peaceful relations between Egyptians and Israelis. It also outlined a post-withdrawal security plan: limited-force zones were established in Egyptian and Israeli territory; U.N. forces and observers would be deployed; and a joint commission would be established to implement the treaty.^[xx] By withdrawing from Sinai, Israel recognized that a political treaty guaranteed Israeli security better than permanent military engagement. Israel had neutralized its largest military foe.

The one major issue of contention that remains between Egyptians and Israelis is the border smuggling that takes place between the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. Terrorists smuggle illegal objects, including sophisticated weaponry, and large amounts of money from the Sinai Peninsula through underground tunnels into the Gaza Strip. Israel argues that Egypt should do more to stop this illegal smuggling. Egypt claims that Israel exaggerates this threat however they have taken steps to stop the smuggling (Sharp). This factor continues to compromise

Israeli security today. This was one of the reasons that led Israel to initiate the 2008 Gaza War following the August 2005 Israeli unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip. [\[xxi\]](#)

In the aftermath of the 2008 Gaza War, Yuval Diskin, chief of Shin Bet, the Israeli General Security Services, reported that Egyptian efforts to curtail the smuggling across its shared border with Gaza have improved (Barak). This is not to detract from the fact that illegal resources are still being smuggled into Gaza through Egypt. However, since the 2008 Gaza War, Egypt has begun mobilizing its forces on the border to prevent further smuggling into Gaza (Sharp).

Looking Ahead

In the aftermath of the 2005 Gaza disengagement, the Israeli public seems hesitant to support any future unilateral withdrawals. In a July 2007 poll in the Israeli newspaper *Maariv*, fifty-nine percent of Israelis regarded the unilateral disengagement from Gaza as a failure (Pfeffer). The same survey found that seventy-four percent of Israelis opposed making any further unilateral withdrawals. Because the Gaza withdrawal was perceived as a failure, the majority of Israelis view unilateral disengagements as unsuccessful (Freilich). This makes it unlikely that any Israeli policy maker will engage in a unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank.

One thing is clear to me after conducting this research. Due to the demographic problem which Israel faces, Israel must remove itself from the Palestinian territories in order to remain a Jewish and democratic state. According to a 13 May 2009 article in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, Palestinian and Israeli Jews will reach equal numbers by 2016. If Israel does not address this demographic issue, it may soon find itself in a situation where a minority group of Jews is ruling over a majority group of Palestinians. A new path forward must now be found to resolve how Israel can successfully disengage itself from the Palestinian territories without compromising its security. Based upon this case study, I would argue that Israel must engage diplomatically with Lebanon, the PLO, and Syria to strengthen its security. Otherwise, I believe Israel will have to continuously engage in battles like the 2008 Gaza War to uphold its deterrence. This is a short-term solution to a problem which has now existed for over sixty years. In order for peace and security to be achieved and maintained in the Middle East, Israel will have to negotiate treaties with its aforementioned neighbors. The 1979 Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty is a good example of what diplomacy can achieve. Otherwise, Israel may find itself in a demographic situation that compromises the existence of the Jewish state.

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[i] From this point forward, this withdrawal will be referred to as the 1979 withdrawal from Sinai.

[ii] The Knesset is the Israeli Parliament.

[iii] Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Israel Egypt Peace Treaty." 26 March 1979.

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace%20Process/Guide%20to%20the%20Peace%20Process/Israel-Egypt%20Peace%20Treaty>. 6 August 2008.

[iv] Ibid.

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] Israel had captured the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt in the June 1967 Six-Day War. The Bar-Lev line was Israel's defensive line in the Sinai Peninsula against Egyptian forces.

[viii] The Sinai Field Missions were U.S.–controlled early-warning stations located in the demilitarized buffer zone in the Sinai Peninsula, between Egyptian and Israeli territory.

[ix] Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Israel–Egypt Peace Treaty."

[x] Another separate, secret memorandum was signed between the U.S. and Israel, in which the U.S. pledged not to negotiate or recognize the Palestinian Liberation Organization, to initiate any moves in the Middle East without first speaking to Israel or to diverge from U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 as the basis for Arab–Israeli peace negotiations.

** Shlaim, Avi. *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*.

[xi] *Ibid.* Page 338.

[xii] *Ibid.*

[xiii] *Ibid.* Page 380.

[xiv] Some of these included: Sadat's Peace Conference in Cairo (1977), Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan and Egyptian Vice-President Dr. Hassan Tuhami's meeting in Morocco, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin's meeting with U.S. President Carter in Washington, D.C., Begin's plan for Palestinian Autonomy, the Ismailia Summit, and the appointment of Political and Civil Working Groups in Jerusalem and Cairo.

[xv] After Israel conquered the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt in 1967, Israel built settlements in Sinai to serve as a buffer zone between Egyptian and Israeli territory. When Israel withdrew from Sinai in 1979, all of the settlements were dismantled except Ofira (Sharm el-Sheikh), which was given to Egypt.

[xvi] Due to pressure from other Arab states, Sadat was unable to sign a peace treaty with Israel without an accompanying document addressing the Palestinians' demands.

[xvii] Shlaim, Avi. *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*. Page 374.

[xviii] *Ibid.* Page 359.

[xix] *Ibid.* Page 360.

[xx] Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty."

[xxi] Hamas is a Sunni Muslim, Palestinian liberation organization that includes a paramilitary force. They have governed the Gaza Strip since June 2007. Several countries, including the U.S. and Israel, consider it a terrorist organization.

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