

# Peace talks in a war of egos

Camp David was Carter's diplomatic coup, writes Burhan Wazir

**Thirteen Days in September: Carter, Begin and Sadat at Camp David**  
Lawrence Wright,  
Knopf Publishing Group,  
£15.20

The Middle East is a landscape littered with unrealized peace treaties, broken promises and failed intentions. In the four years since uprisings and reprisals took hold of Egypt, Syria, Libya, Bahrain, Oman and Tunisia, two diplomatic constants have dominated: The limited influence of American power, and a dearth of leadership in the region. Political intransigence and sectarian violence weren't always the norm in the Middle East. Lawrence Wright's new book, *Thirteen Days in September*, chronicles an era, almost four decades ago, when compromise was considered an asset. Over 13 days at Camp David in Maryland in 1978, US President Jimmy Carter was able to extract a peace treaty from Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin. The accord is still the most lasting achievement to emerge from the Arab-Israeli conflict of the 20th century.

Talks began against a background of violence and counter violence. Sadat and Begin represented countries which had gone to war on four occasions. In 1967, Israel destroyed the Egyptian air force in a pre-emptive strike on an Arab coalition that was preparing for invasion. In

1973, Egypt briefly recaptured the Sinai Peninsula. The humiliation in Israel was enough to force the resignation of prime minister Golda Meir, paving the way for the election of Likud's Menachem Begin.

A peace treaty negotiated by Begin and Sadat was always going to be overshadowed by centuries of suspicion between Jews and Muslims. Both leaders displayed extraordinary reservoirs of egoism, each considering himself a transformative figure in the Middle East. Sadat's destiny was ingrained in his mind at an early age. Once, when playing with some children near an irrigation canal, Sadat leapt into the water with his friends. He couldn't swim. 'If I drown, Egypt will have lost Anwar Sadat!' he shouted.

Begin was a tenacious adversary and equally boastful. A Holocaust survivor and the former leader of the Zionist militant group Irgun, he displayed an overbearing manner which could alternate between rage, sarcasm and exaggeration.

'Begin simply drives anyone who disagrees with him up the wall,' said Samuel Lewis, the American ambassador to Israel. The expansion of Israel's borders was Begin's sole political doctrine, and the horrors of the Holocaust marked his world view. 'Against the eyes of every son of the nation appear and reappear the carriages of death,' he said.

If both men considered

themselves integral to the fate of nations, their host was a perplexing figure. A Southern Baptist liberal, Carter had struggled to define a vision since he assumed office. Within the White House, he was noted for obsessing over minutiae, compiling lists without priorities and correcting memos sent to him by his staff. Like President Obama, he was criticized by the media who condemned him as distant and aloof and incapable of overcoming challenges at home and abroad.

As the leaders gathered at Camp David, Iran was hurtling towards a religious revolution which would see the Shah, America's key ally, forced out within months. In the US, inflation had reached double digits and petrol prices were climbing. One of Carter's first acts as president had been to order the sale of Camp David in an effort to cut back on unnecessary government spending. White House staff persuaded him to drop the idea, explaining that Camp David was where presidents would be

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evacuated in the event of nuclear war.

The Carter who emerges in *Thirteen Days in September*, however, is both passionate and pragmatic: a skilled chess master who flatters and threatens Begin and Sadat into a lasting compromise. Negotiations immediately got off to a rocky start. On arrival, Begin and Sadat avoided all eye contact.

Carter's pleas for an informal dress code were ignored as both politicians insisted on wearing suits and ties. Whenever the Egyptians and Israelis prepared to quit talks, Carter begged them to stay. His resolve ultimately triumphs over both men and is central to the book.

Wright, who has previously published acclaimed investigations into Scientology and Al-Qaeda, is most effective when detailing a minute-by-minute account of the talks at Camp David. He views the events of through centuries of Muslim-Jewish differences. He also draws a parallel between the shared faiths of the three men: between them, they represented the dominant strands of the Abrahamic faiths.

The book, however, has an episodic feel, like a series of acts, which can prove distracting. *Thirteen Days in September* originated as a play called *Camp David*, suggested to Wright by Carter's White House communications director, Gerald Rafshoon.

For all three men at Camp David, the accords were



loaded with infamy and tragedy.

While both Begin and Sadat earned the Nobel Peace prize, the Israeli leader resigned in disgrace after the the massacres of Palestinians by Israel's Phalangist allies during its invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Sadat was assassinated at a military parade in October 1981 by members of Egyptian Islamic Jihad. And the greatest achievement of Carter's time in office would be overshadowed by Democrats losing the White House to Republicans for 12 years.

In the end, the Camp David agreement was an inconclusive victory. Begin succeeded in keeping any meaningful commitments to resolve the fate of the Palestinians out of the agreements.

In the 36 years since, Israel has witnessed two Palestinian intifadas. Five US presidents have had little or no success in brokering a workable peace deal. The Arab world has all but retreated from a policy of engagement with Israel, and Israeli society has veered towards the right to shore up security.

Yet the treaty brokered at Camp David has been honoured by both countries to this day. Much of the credit has to go to Carter. In an era marked by diplomatic fatigue, *Thirteen Days in September* is a persuasive argument for his rehabilitation.

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