

Smokescreen diplomacy: Excluding the Palestinians by Self-Rule

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Abstract: *For the US and the Palestinians, 1977 was a diplomatic opportunity due to changes within both the PLO and the US. President Carter aimed for a comprehensive peace to solve the entire Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel balked. Instead of blocking the process entirely, Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin launched Palestinian “self-rule”. This enabled a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace process. Self-rule was nominally a Palestinian solution, but it obfuscated continued Palestinian political exclusion and barred Palestinian statehood indefinitely.*

President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) was the first US President to work for a full Arab-Israeli peace process that included Palestinians. This new US approach occurred at the same time as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was moving in a moderating direction and had received international legitimacy. This meant that the early months of 1977 were a window of opportunity for a broader Arab-Israeli peace process. The “comprehensive approach” propagated by President Carter was welcomed by the Arab leaders, but Israel was alarmed from the start. The reason was obvious, Carter demanded that Palestinians had to be included in the peace process and that Israel had to commit to full withdrawal on all fronts, including the West Bank and Gaza. This was a diplomatic worst-case scenario for Israel, particularly after Menachem Begin came to power (June 1977) since his vision of *Eretz Israel* was one in which the West Bank and Gaza were indivisible parts of the whole. Unlike his predecessors Carter was not only working for partial solutions in the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula. Instead, he aimed to solve all the core questions of the conflict. Israeli prime ministers, first Yitzhak Rabin, and then Menachem Begin, resisted Carter’s grand approach as best they could.

Tiring of what became a deadlocked peace process, Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat took matters into his own hands, and went to Jerusalem in November 1977. This jump-started a process of separate negotiations between Egypt and Israel, but it torpedoed Carter’s comprehensive approach. Despite this shift in the process, Carter continued to insist that the Palestinian issue had to be linked to this Egyptian-Israeli peace process. Begin wanted no such linkage but realized that he had to provide something for the Palestinians, even if it was a smokescreen. The answer he came up with was the Palestinian self-rule scheme, which he first launched in December 1977. Despite initial protests from both the Sadat and Carter foreign policy teams, it was gradually integrated into the peace process. The negotiations about how to tie the negotiations over self-rule to the Israeli-Egyptian peace lasted until that treaty was signed in March 1979. Thereafter the autonomy negotiations, as they were called, lasted until November 1980, when they ended unsuccessfully.

While a Palestinian self-governing authority was not established until the Oslo treaty over a decade later, Begin’s self-rule scheme served its purpose. Merely launching the proposal, and developing it as a possible Palestinian solution, gave Begin the leeway he needed to negotiate a separate peace treaty with Egypt. Despite not being implemented, the self-rule scheme deserves serious attention both for how it functioned as a diplomatic smokescreen and for how it illustrates the way Begin, and his Likud party, understood Israeli and Palestinian

territorial and national claims. Under no circumstances would conceding sovereignty have been a possibility for Menachem Begin. So what did Begin's idea of self-rule really mean, and how was this concept developed? And, furthermore, how was it received by the Carter Administration and the Egyptian leadership?

Existing literature on the self-rule proposal is mostly outdated. Some contemporary analysis was done on the proposal when it was launched.¹ While many of these are excellent studies the authors lacked access to the top-level archival documents that have only recently been declassified. This article is based on those diplomatic documents and is able to provide a much more in-depth analysis of how the self-rule proposal functioned within the top-level negotiations.

The most recent study of the self-rule proposal is Seth Anziska's article "Autonomy as State Prevention: The Palestinian Question after Camp David, 1979–1982."² Seth Anziska's focus is on the period after the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was signed and on the long-term effects of the self-rule proposal. While this article agrees with many of Anziska's conclusions, the focus of this article is on the period directly leading up to the peace treaty and the short-term function of the self-rule proposal within these negotiations. Another significant article, "Bridging the Gap: Palestinian and Israeli Discourses on Autonomy and Statehood" by David Newman and Ghazi Falah, places the self-rule proposal of the Camp David Accords within a larger historical discourse between the Palestinian desire for statehood and the Israeli claim that they should have only autonomy. While conceptually insightful it does not provide an in-depth study of the Camp David period.³

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¹ See e.g. "Autonomy-Israeli Style," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 9, no. 1 (1979): 142–45; Mark Heller, "Begin's False Autonomy," *Foreign Policy*, no. 37 (1979): 111–32; David H. Ott, *Palestine in Perspective: Politics, Human Rights and the West Bank* (London: Quartet Books, 1980).

² Seth Anziska, "Autonomy as State Prevention: The Palestinian Question after Camp David, 1979–1982," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 8, no. 2 (2017): 287–310; The theme is also covered in Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

³ David Newman and Ghazi Falah, "Bridging the Gap: Palestinian and Israeli Discourses on Autonomy and Statehood," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 22, no. 1 (1997): 111–29.

In general, studies of Carter's Arab-Israeli diplomacy tend to focus on the Egyptian-Israeli peace process, and not on the Palestinian questions.⁴ Very recently a series of studies have started to investigate Carter's focus on the Palestinian question.⁵ While these in general are excellent studies which utilize much of the same top-level diplomatic documents as this article, and many of them point out how Carter's focus on the Palestinians was gradually watered down, none of them focus primarily on how Begin's self-rule scheme was the very mechanism for ensuring this dissipation.

This article's main contribution to the existing literature then is two-fold. First, it adds archival evidence to support some of the findings from those preliminary studies produced in the late 1970s. Second, and more importantly, it adds to the Carter-Palestine literature by focusing on the self-rule proposal as a successful Israeli diplomatic mechanism for blocking progress on the Palestinian issue.

Palestinian exclusion

Since the early days of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Palestinians were excluded as a legitimate political party. In 1947, when the UN Partition Plan was voted over at the UN General Assembly, neither Palestinians nor Israel had a vote.⁶ When, after the 1948 war the armistice treaties were negotiated, Palestinians were not invited to the negotiating table. This was true even for those armistice negotiations dealing with the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem.⁷ The

⁴ Classic studies include William B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1986); Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (London: Routledge, 1999); Shibley Telhami, *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining: The Path to the Camp David Accords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Ilan Peleg, *Begin's Foreign Policy, 1977-83: Israel's Move to the Right* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process, 1977-1982: In Search of Legitimacy for Peace* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

⁵ See e.g. Victor V. Nemchenok, "'These People Have an Irrevocable Right to Self-Government': United States Policy and the Palestinian Question, 1977-1979," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 20, no. 4 (2009): 595-618; Jeremy Pressman, "Explaining the Carter Administration's Israeli-Palestinian Solution," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 5 (2013): 1117-47; Jørgen Jensehaugen, "Blueprint for Arab-Israeli Peace? President Carter and the Brookings Report," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 25, no. 3 (2014): 492-508; Jørgen Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter: The U.S., Israel and the Palestinians* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2018); Craig Daigle, "Beyond Camp David: Jimmy Carter, Palestinian Self-Determination, and Human Rights," *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 5 (2018): 802-30; Darren J. McDonald, "Blessed Are the Policy Makers: Jimmy Carter's Faith-Based Approach to the Arab-Israeli Conflict," *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 3 (2015): 452-76; Seth Anziska, "Autonomy as State Prevention"; Anziska, *Preventing Palestine*, 17-161.

⁶ Jørgen Jensehaugen, Marte Heian-Engdal, and Hilde Henriksen Waage, "Securing the State: From Zionist Ideology to Israeli Statehood," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 23, no. 2 (2012): 280-303.

⁷ Jørgen Jensehaugen and Hilde Henriksen Waage, "Coercive Diplomacy: Israel, Transjordan and the UN – A Triangular Drama Revisited," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 39, no. 1 (2012): 79-100; Hilde Henriksen

same was true for the period between 1949 and the 1967 war. During this period several initiatives were launched for solving the Palestinian refugee problem, but Palestinians were not included in these talks either. For the first 20 years of the Arab-Israeli conflict, then, Palestinians were treated as a humanitarian issue, and not a political one.⁸

When the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded in 1964, this did not alter the political treatment of the conflict. To a certain extent the Palestinians themselves played into this structure since the original political vision of the PLO was to subsume the Palestinian national struggle into the broader Arab struggle, in the spirit of pan-Arab nationalism.⁹

Discussing what to do with the West Bank and Gaza in the immediate aftermath of the 1967 war the Israeli cabinet mulled over various Palestinian options, including independence in parts of the West Bank, limited self-rule or a Palestinian “canton”. In the end, however, the cabinet made the “decision not to decide”.¹⁰ In the diplomacy following the 1967 war, the lack of political engagement with the Palestinians was grounded in UN Security Council Resolution 242. This is perhaps the most important document in Arab-Israeli diplomacy as it forms the basis for the land for peace formula. It has only this to say about the Palestinians: “Affirms further the necessity [...] for achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem”.¹¹ The rest of the resolution refers to political questions between the existing states in the region. For Palestinians this made the resolution particularly problematic. In sum, the PLO did not accept Resolution 242 both because doing so implied recognizing Israel, and because the resolution did not recognize Palestinians as a people with national claims.¹²

Enter the Palestinians

Waage, “The Winner Takes All: The 1949 Island of Rhodes Armistice Negotiations Revisited,” *The Middle East Journal* 65, no. 2 (2011): 279–304.

⁸ Marte Heian-Engdal, “Twenty Years of Crocodile Tears: The International Treatment of the Palestinian Refugee Issue, 1948-1968” (PhD, University of Oslo, 2015).

⁹ Alain Gresh, *The PLO: The Struggle Within: Towards an Independent Palestinian State* (London: Zed Books, 1988), 22.

¹⁰ Avi Raz, *The Bride and the Dowry: Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians in the Aftermath of the June 1967 War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 43–44.

¹¹ “UN Security Council Resolution 242,” November 22, 1967, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/240/94/IMG/NR024094.pdf?OpenElement>.

¹² Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy* (London: University of California Press, 2001), 116–17; Omar M. Dajani, “Forty Years without Resolve: Tracing the Influence of Security Council Resolution 242 on the Middle East Peace Process,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 37, no. 1 (2007): 28–29, 31.

In 1969 the PLO underwent a significant change in its political composition. Yasir Arafat and the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah, meaning “conquest” but a reverse acronym of the Arabic *Harakat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Filastini*) assumed the leadership of the PLO. Arafat’s Fatah took the lead in transforming the Palestinian issue from being part of a broader pan-Arab political project into being a particularistic nationalist movement.¹³ The more Palestinians demanded statehood the more out-of-tune Resolution 242 became with the political reality due to its side-lining of the Palestinians. At the same time, the early 1970s was a violent and turbulent period for the PLO. The decade started with the Black September civil war in Jordan in 1970, which pitted the PLO against the Jordanian monarchy. The PLO lost and was expelled from the country, moving its central base to Lebanon. The early 1970s also included a series of Palestinian terror attacks against Israeli and Jordanian targets, such as the infamous 1970 airplane hijackings and the 1972 Munich Olympic massacre, as well as a shadow war between Israel and the PLO.¹⁴ This meant that while the Palestinians became internationally noticed as a party to the Arab-Israeli conflict, they did not become an acceptable political party.

Originally the PLO had supported the position that there should be one secular democratic state in all of historical Palestine and declared that the establishment of Israel was illegal.¹⁵ From late 1973 and into 1974, however, the PLO gradually moved toward accepting a two-state solution. The first concrete move in that direction came in 1974 with the 10-point plan at the 12th Palestinian National Council (PNC) which declared that the PLO would establish a “national authority [...] over every part of Palestinian territory that is liberated.”¹⁶ This implied that partial liberation was an option. The PLO expanded on this move at the 13th PNC in March 1977. Here the declaration referred to the establishment of an “independent

¹³ Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal, *The Palestinian People: A History* (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 252–55.

¹⁴ Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State. The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Washington DC: Oxford University Press, 1999), 143–317.

¹⁵ Palestinian National Charter, 1-17 July 1968, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/22573.htm> (29.11.2018); Kimmerling and Migdal, *The Palestinian People*, 256.

¹⁶ PLO Ten Point Plan, 8 June 1974, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ten-point-plan-of-the-plo-june-1974> (11.10.2018); Wendy Pearlman, “Spoiling Inside and Out: Internal Political Contestation and the Middle East Peace Process,” *International Security* 33, no. 3 (2008): 87–88; Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive*, 237–38; Helga Baumgarten, “The Three Faces/Phases of Palestinian Nationalism, 1948–2005,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34, no. 4 (2005): 35–36.

national state on their national soil.”¹⁷ This implied that there could be more than one state on that “national soil”.¹⁸ This was far from a clear policy shift, but it showed a gradual movement within the moderate PLO leadership. It should be noted, however, while this process of political moderation was taking place groups within the PLO continued to launch cross-border attacks into Israel. Moderation was not a one-way process and as Wendy Pearlman has demonstrated it created an intense internal struggle in the PLO.¹⁹

In tandem with these developments within the Palestinian national movement, other changes took place in the mid-1970s that also pointed in the direction that there had to be made space for Palestinians in the political approaches to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In October 1974, the Arab League supported “the right of the Palestinian people to establish an independent national authority under the command of the [PLO], the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in any Palestinian territory that is liberated.”²⁰ In November 1974, Yasir Arafat held his famous speech in the UN General Assembly, which adopted resolutions supporting Palestinians’ right to statehood and granted the PLO official observer status.²¹ The PLO had thus gained the stamp of approval from the world body. By refusing to recognize the PLO as a legitimate political actor the US was out of sync with world politics.

The Carter window

When Jimmy Carter became US president in 1977, he aimed to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict in its entirety, including issues pertaining to Palestinians: representation, Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Jerusalem, and the refugee question.²² The archival evidence clearly shows that Carter’s dedication to finding a solution to the Palestinian

¹⁷ Resolutions of the Thirteenth Palestine National Council, Cairo, Issued March 21-25 1977, in “Arab Documents on Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict 6(3),” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 6, no. 3 (1977): 189.

¹⁸ Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation: People, Power and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 79; Sabri Jiryis, “On Political Settlement in the Middle East: The Palestinian Dimension,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 7, no. 1 (1977): 3–4; Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 415; Ann Mosely Lesch, *Political Perceptions of the Palestinians on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip* (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 1980), 86–87.

¹⁹ Pearlman, “Spoiling Inside and Out.”

²⁰ Seventh Arab League Summit Conference, 28 October 1974, <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/63D9A930E2B428DF852572C0006D06B8> (17.10.2016)

²¹ UN General Assembly Resolution 3236, 22 November 1974, <http://domino.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/025974039acfb171852560de00548bbe> (21.01.2014); UN General Assembly Resolution 3237, 22 November 1974, <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/512BAA69B5A32794852560DE00548B9B2> (21.01.2014).

²² For a full detailed study of Carter’s approach see Jørgen Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*.

question was anything but a feeble initiative. In fact, it was a remarkably stable part of Carter's Middle East policy. His approach was unprecedented: he was the first US president who seriously tried to obtain a political solution to the Palestinian question, *and* aimed to include Palestinian participants in the negotiations. Indeed, this was a grand ambition by the Carter Administration.

Carter publicly called for "a homeland provided for the Palestinian refugees who have suffered for many, many years."²³ This "homeland" statement, though, was vague and difficult to interpret for the parties to the conflict. Certainly, Carter did not mention statehood.²⁴ More importantly, then, is the fact that Carter also demanded Israeli withdrawal on all fronts, with only "minor, mutually agreed modifications" in the West Bank, and a cessation of Israeli settlement construction.²⁵ The responses were predictable. The PLO welcomed the "homeland" statement, while the largest Israel lobby in the US, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), launched a lobbying effort against this policy.²⁶

Carter did not operate in a political vacuum. Despite his desire to move forward on the Palestinian issue and the fact that the PLO had moved in a moderating direction, and gained international legitimacy, the United States continued to refuse to speak with the PLO. This refusal was formally rooted in a secret pledge made by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger as part of the Sinai II negotiations in 1975. Kissinger had promised Israel that the US would "not recognize or negotiate with the Palestine Liberation Organization so long as the Palestine Liberation Organization does not recognize Israel's right to exist and does not accept Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338."²⁷

Even when this promise was made, there had been many individuals within the US government, particularly within the State Department, that realized that the Palestinians could

²³ Jimmy Carter, "Clinton, Massachusetts Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at the Clinton Town Meeting," March 16, 1977, Papers of Jimmy Carter, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7180#axzz1valH9Qqn>.

²⁴ For a study of the the relationship between the Carter position and the central concept of self-determination see Craig Daigle, "Beyond Camp David: Jimmy Carter, Palestinian Self-Determination, and Human Rights."

²⁵ Discussion Paper for the PRC Meeting on Middle East, 10 June 1977, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, NLC-132-61-6-2-9; Memorandum of Conversation, 8 March 1977, *FRUS: Foreign Relations of the United States - 1977-1980 Volume VIII Arab-Israeli Dispute January 1977 - August 1978* (Washington D.C.: Department of State, United States Printing Office, 2013), 148–56.

²⁶ Middle East to Brzezinski, 21 March 1977, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, NLC-25-17-4-10-1; Middle East to Brzezinski, 29 March 1977, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, NLC-10-1-7-29-1; Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine*, 168.

²⁷ Quoted in Edward R. F. Sheehan, "How Kissinger Did It: Step by Step in the Middle East", in Jeffrey Z. Rubin, *Dynamics of Third Party Intervention* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 86.

not be ignored forever.²⁸ Nonetheless, the Sinai II pledge became what Kathleen Christison called a “diplomatic straitjacket”.²⁹ For many years it remained the most important document stopping President Carter, and later US presidents, from talking to the PLO directly.

Despite his strict adherence to this pledge, President Carter clearly wanted to find a way to open negotiations with the PLO.³⁰ However, he allowed Israel to remain the gatekeeper for such talks through a veto over who could participate in negotiations. His discussions with the Israeli leadership reveal as much. Carter told Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin: “we don’t know any Palestinian leaders other than the PLO. [...] It would be a blow to US support for Israel if you refused to participate in the Geneva talks over the technicality of the PLO being in the negotiations.”³¹ Rabin, though, would not budge. He told Carter: “You have your position and we have ours.” When Carter then tried to push him on the question of how Israel would react if the PLO recognized Israel and accepted resolutions 224 and 338, Rabin responded dismissively: “we don’t want to argue about hypothetical questions.”³²

Even before Menachem Begin came to power in June 1977, Israel had dug in its heels on the Palestinian question. This was not the first time the Carter team had received such a deflective response from the Israelis. For instance, when prodded over whether Israel could talk to the PLO if it accepted Resolution 242, Israeli foreign minister Yigal Allon had responded in much the same vein as Rabin: “[W]hen this tiger becomes a horse let me know and I will think about riding it.”³³ Carter faced an uphill struggle against Israel and there was little support for his approach in the US. The PLO would have to transform itself drastically for Israel to even consider accepting the organization as a partner in negotiations. Given the advent of right-wing nationalist government after the May 1977

²⁸ Simen Zernichow and Hilde Henriksen Waage, “The Palestine Option: Nixon, the National Security Council, and the Search for a New Policy, 1970,” *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 1 (2014): 182–209; James R. Stocker, “A Historical Inevitability?: Kissinger and US Contacts with the Palestinians (1973–76),” *The International History Review* 39, no. 2 (2017): 316–37; James Stocker, “Diplomacy as Counter-Revolution? The ‘Moderate States’, the Fedayeen and State Department Initiatives towards the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969–1970,” *Cold War History* 12, no. 3 (2012): 407–28; Marwan R. Buheiry, “The Saunders Document,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8, no. 1 (1978): 28–40; Osamah F. Khalil, “The Radical Crescent: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and the Lebanese Civil War, 1973–1978,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 27, no. 3 (2016): 496–522; Jensehaugen, “Blueprint for Arab–Israeli Peace?”

²⁹ Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine*, 155.

³⁰ NSC Meeting, 23 February 1977, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, NLC-15-31-4-4-3; MemCon, 8 March 1977, *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 148–56.

³¹ MemCon, 8 March 1977, *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 149.

³² MemCon, 8 March 1977, *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 150–51.

³³ MemCon, 16 February 1977, *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 29–30.

election in Israel, it became increasingly unlikely whether even such a momentous change in PLO policies would have had the desired effect of getting Israeli approval for negotiations which included the PLO.

An unwavering claim

Menachem Begin, who became prime minister after his right-wing Likud party won the Israeli election in May 1977, was much more adamant that the PLO could never be part of any negotiations. Unlike Allon, Begin refused to even consider riding the horse. Begin, however, was faced with a conundrum. To join the US lead peace process he had to provide some sort of solution for the Palestinians, yet he refused to risk giving up the land he considered to be the historical Land of Israel (*Eretz Israel*), that is the West Bank and Gaza.³⁴

For Begin all of historical Palestine was eternally Jewish, which until recently had been in a state of *terra morata*, that is in a temporal hiatus awaiting the Jews' return. This concept differs from *terra nullius* in that not only did the Palestinian population not have a claim to the land, but that the land itself was considered to have waited for the return of its rightful owner, the Jewish people. Begin's ideology rested on the important assumption that the indigenous population of Palestine was the Jewish people, and not the Palestinians. For Begin, once the land was reclaimed by its rightful owners, then, the intermission was finally over and there was no giving it up.³⁵

As historian of Israeli right-wing ideology Colin Shindler noted, "No distinction was made by Begin between the biblical narrative eons ago and the factual events of the previous seventy years. It was one continuum of events where the ahistorical merged with the historical."³⁶ Only through this ideological lens can we understand Begin's Palestinian solution. In Begin's ideological worldview there was absolutely no room for conceding any of the territory he

³⁴ Galia Golan, "Sadat and Begin: Successful Diplomacy to Peace", in Robert Hutchings and Jeremi Suri, eds., *Foreign Policy Breakthroughs: Cases in Successful Diplomacy* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 125–26.

³⁵ The phrase *terra morata* is my own, but an ideological analysis of Begin along these lines can be found in Dani Filc, *Political Right in Israel: Different Faces of Jewish Populism*. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 21–22; Arye Naor, "'A Simple Historical Truth': Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip in Menachem Begin's Ideology," *Israel Affairs* 21, no. 3 (2015): 462–81; Arye Naor, "Hawks' Beaks', Doves' Feathers: Likud Prime Ministers Between Ideology and Reality," *Israel Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 155–69.

³⁶ Colin Shindler, *The Rise of the Israeli Right: From Odessa to Hebron* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 279.

considered to be part of *Eretz Israel* (Israel, the West Bank and Gaza), or for granting the Palestinians any form of self-determination or sovereignty.³⁷ This also explains Begin's longstanding policy that Jewish Israelis could settle anywhere in the West Bank and Gaza, even densely populated Palestinian areas such as Hebron.³⁸ This was one of the practical differences between his position and the Labor Party's, namely, that settlements should not be established inside Palestinian towns and cities.

Launching self-rule

By late 1977 Carter had unsuccessfully pushed for a comprehensive peace for almost a year. It had been an exhausting process with little progress to show. Despite all his hard work there was no US dialogue with the PLO and there was a hardened Israeli stance. Apart from Egypt, the Arab states were back-tracking. However, both Begin and Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat wanted an Egyptian-Israeli peace. This was illustrated through Sadat's famous visit to Jerusalem that November and the secret indirect talks the two had beforehand through Moroccan and Romanian channels. However, Sadat was under pressure from the other Arab states and the PLO to not make a separate peace with Israel. Nobody had granted Sadat the authority to negotiate on the Palestinians' behalf, but he needed to get something for them to defend his move toward a separate peace process with Israel. President Carter, for his part, was set on getting as much on Palestine as possible so that the process could gradually evolve into a comprehensive approach later. The odd man out was Menachem Begin who would concede nothing on the Palestinian front.

Begin's rigidity made the odds favour him, because unlike Sadat he could afford to reject any proposal in which Israel was asked to concede too much. However, he needed to show some flexibility, or at least the appearance of some, to push the negotiations forward. To counter the US demand for a Palestinian solution, and the Egyptian demand for just enough on the Palestinian front to legitimize a separate peace with Israel, Begin reluctantly understood that he had to give something on the Palestinian issue, however vague, to get Sadat and Carter on board.³⁹

³⁷ Seth Anziska, "Autonomy as State Prevention," 292.

³⁸ Yechiam Weitz, "The Road to the 'Upheaval': A Capsule History of the Herut Movement, 1948-1977," *Israel Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 77.

³⁹ Jørgen Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 102–3.

To that end, Begin devised a form of Palestinian autonomy whereby a local Palestinian administration would nominally rule the Palestinians inhabiting the West Bank and Gaza. Such autonomy would not lead to a Palestinian state, and the land would remain under Israeli control. Neither the PLO nor local Palestinians could accept this premise since it did nothing to address their demands of liberated Palestinian territory. However, Sadat and Carter gradually came to the conclusion that this was the best Palestinians could get at the time. Since it was first launched in December 1977 the self-rule concept gradually became part of the US-led Israeli-Egyptian negotiations until they collapsed in November 1980 when the peace treaty had been securely implemented and Carter had lost his re-election bid. What was this self-rule scheme and how did Carter come to accept it? What was its function in the peace process?

Begin originally tried to offer Palestinians “cultural autonomy”. This would entail such things as the right to have “schools based on their own heritage”.⁴⁰ After suggesting this to US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in August and September 1977, Begin realized that it was not an adequate offer.⁴¹ Begin then launched the self-rule scheme, which he offered to President Carter on December 16 of that year. Self-rule was a step beyond cultural autonomy, in that the Palestinians could run their own domestic affairs, but Israel would still retain responsibility for security in the West Bank and Gaza and control the borders.⁴²

Carter and his foreign policy team were unsure of what to make of this proposal, but it was clearly not what they were hoping for. They asked for clarification on how the decision-making in the West Bank and Gaza would be delegated. Tellingly, Begin responded that issues concerning land and immigration would be under Israeli authority. In other words, territory and sovereignty would remain under full Israeli control.⁴³ This Palestinian council, then, would have no real political powers. Instead of rejecting the proposal, however, Carter considered it a useful starting point but insisted on more sovereign rights for Palestinians and clearer indications of Israeli withdrawal.⁴⁴ All in all though, Begin had Carter on the hook.

⁴⁰ MemCon, 10 August 1977 *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 448.

⁴¹ MemCon, 10 August 1977 *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 435–50; Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process, 1977-1982*, 64–65; Naor, “Hawks’ Beaks’, Doves’ Feathers,” 166.

⁴² MemCon, 16 December 1977, *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 861–72; Heller, “Begin’s False Autonomy”; “Autonomy-Israeli Style.”

⁴³ Quandt to Brzezinski, 17 December 1977, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Box 13, Middle East—Negotiations [10-77–12-77].

⁴⁴ MemCon, 17 December 1977, *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 873–87.

This was not because the offer was good, but rather because Begin was so rigid that as talks stagnated self-rule became the only Palestinian option on the table.

Carter was not the only one that needed to acquiesce the proposal. Sadat too needed to accept it if it was going to have any effect on the possibility for an Egyptian-Israeli peace. On December 27, Sadat was presented with Begin's proposal.⁴⁵ Like Carter, Sadat insisted that an acceptable solution had to address the question of Palestinian self-determination. To this request Begin responded that "'self-determination' is tantamount to recognizing the right to an independent [Palestinian] state."⁴⁶ For Begin that was an absolute non-starter. It was clear, already at this point, that the self-rule proposal provided nothing substantial for the Palestinians. As Begin later told Carter: "We must be sure that no Palestinian state will emerge from the autonomy [...] We are speaking of autonomy, not sovereignty, not a state."⁴⁷

At this point in time, Begin's proposal was not going to cut it. Palestinian leaders in the Occupied Territories rejected the proposal outright.⁴⁸ There are no indications that this mattered to Begin. The Israeli prime minister's policy was not to find something the Palestinians could accept. On the contrary, it is clear that what Begin feared the most was Palestinian participation in the political process. He insisted on their continued political marginalization. Begin's policy should therefore be understood as reactive, or preventive diplomacy: realizing that the PLO was becoming palatable to much of world opinion, and that the US was pushing for some form of Palestinian solution entailing Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, Begin needed to counter this development and put the process of including the Palestinians in formaldehyde.⁴⁹

If self-rule was accepted by the United States and some of the Arab states, Israel could retain control over the territory, enlarge the settlements and postpone a political solution indefinitely. This, however, was easier said than done. Both the US and Egypt first rejected

⁴⁵ SecState WashDC to White House, 27 December 1977, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Box 13, Middle East—Negotiations [10-77-12-77].

⁴⁶ Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, 27 December 1977; see also Telegram from the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, 27 December 1977 *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 893, 897–903.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Seth Anziska, "Autonomy as State Prevention," 292.

⁴⁸ Press Statement by Karim Khalaf, Mayor of Ramallah. [Excerpt], 30 October 1977, "Arab Documents on Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict 7(2)," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 7, no. 2 (1978): 178; Statement by West Bank Mayors on Sadat's visit to Israel, issued by "Wafa," 21 December, 1977 [Excerpts], "Arab Documents on Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict 7(3)," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 7, no. 3 (1978): 195–96.

⁴⁹ This expression is how Ariel Sharon's advisor Dov Weisglass described the Gaza disengagement plan. Ari Shavit, "Top PM aide: Gaza Plan Aims to Freeze the Peace Process", *Haaretz*, 6 October 2004, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4710372> (24.04.2018).

the self-rule proposal. In January 1978, for instance, Secretary of State Vance insisted that an acceptable solution is one that “recognizes the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and enables them to participate in the determination of their own future.”⁵⁰ Palestinian self-determination was important for the US, but it was off the table as far as Begin was concerned. How could these two views be reconciled?

Getting Carter and Sadat on board

Despite having insisted on Palestinian self-determination in some form in January 1978, the US gradually accepted Begin’s self-rule proposal. This shift came about because of the developments surrounding Sadat’s trip to Jerusalem in November 1977: the divide between the Arab states; the hardening of both Arab and Israeli positions with regard to the comprehensive approach; the development of a separate Egyptian-Israeli negotiation track; and a PLO which reverted to a rejectionist stance. For instance, attempts to get a PLO acceptance of a 242 with reservations formula had stranded by September 1977.⁵¹ With these developments, President Carter and his foreign policy team gradually warmed to the idea that self-rule could be acceptable as a temporary solution while the parties would negotiate a solution that entailed Israeli withdrawal and Palestinian sovereignty.⁵² That is to say, if self-rule was the key to ending the diplomatic deadlock between Egypt and Israel, it could be seen as an acceptable starting point. Importantly, though, the Carter team did not buy the concept itself, unless it was used as a phased transition.⁵³

Illustrative of Carter’s resistance to self-rule is the following statement to Begin: “If I were an Arab, I would prefer the present Israeli occupation to this proposal of yours.”⁵⁴ As we will see, this resistance did not stop him from gradually accepting Begin’s proposal. The more Carter came to accept this concept the more marginalized the Palestinians became from the negotiations. No Palestinians were seriously consulted and the US pressure for some form of

⁵⁰ Telegram from the Secretary of State to the White House and the Department of State, 17 January 1978; Telegram from Secretary of State Vance to the White House and the Department of State, 17 January 1978, *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 946–52.

⁵¹ Jørgen Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 68–75.

⁵² President’s Meeting with President Anwar Sadat, 4 February 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Box 36, Serial Xs – [8-77 – 8-78].

⁵³ Brzezinski to the President, 6 January 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, NLC-15-126-2-2-2; Alfred L. Atherton to the Deputy Secretary, 12 January 1978, RG59, Office of the Deputy Secretary Records of Warren Christopher, 1977–1980, Box 19, Memos to WC from offices/bureaus, NARA, Maryland; William Quandt to Brzezinski, 12 January 1978, *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 926–28.

⁵⁴ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (London: Bantam Books, 1982), 377.

PLO participation in Arab-Israeli negotiations was long gone. This again lowered the pressure on Begin to provide anything substantial on the Palestinian front.

Begin made no moves to enhance the concept to meet US and Egyptian demands. On the contrary. Going into 1978 and beyond, the self-rule proposal was often amended by Israeli officials. While the US and Egyptian demands were for more authority to the Palestinians, the Israelis decreased the amount of authority instead. One of the most glaring examples was that the original phrase that the Israeli military presence would be “abolished” was replaced with the far weaker “withdrawn”, implying that they could remain in the Occupied Territories.⁵⁵ The same thing happened during the Oslo negotiations fifteen years later when the Israelis insisted on “withdrawn” instead of “dissolved” to describe the future status of the military government in the Occupied Territories.⁵⁶

Despite Begin’s insistence on reducing the amount of authority to be given to the Palestinians, self-rule gradually became accepted as a starting point for the negotiations. When Carter and his team worked for a Declaration of Principles (DoP) in February 1978, the concept of Palestinian self-rule was integrated as a temporary solution into the US position.⁵⁷ The idea was that self-rule would gradually evolve into a broader Palestinian solution. The Americans hoped this would happen during a five-year transition phase, but there were no mechanisms for such an evolution. This development showed that it was not an Israeli softening of the concept that made self-rule acceptable. On the contrary, it was the fact that the Israeli-Egyptian negotiations became deadlocked, decreasing how much both Carter and Sadat insisted on getting something substantial for the Palestinians, that made self-rule palatable.

Self-rule was a sleight of hand, and the Israelis knew it. This is clear from minister of foreign affairs Moshe Dayan’s presentation of the concept to Carter in March 1978: “Israeli forces will stay there [West Bank] to defend Israel, but not to rule the Palestinians. This is equivalent to withdrawal, not in a territorial sense, but in substance.”⁵⁸ Although non-territorial

⁵⁵ Heller, “Begin’s False Autonomy,” 118–19; “Autonomy-Israeli Style,” 142.

⁵⁶ Hilde Henriksen Waage, *Peacemaking Is a Risky Business: Norway’s Role in the Peace Process in the Middle East, 1993–96* (Oslo: PRIO, 2004), 100.

⁵⁷ Hal Saunders to Warren Christopher, 4 February 1978, RG59, Office of the Deputy Secretary Records of Warren Christopher, 1977-1980, Box 19, Memos to WC from offices/bureaus, NARA, Maryland.

⁵⁸ President’s Meeting with Prime Minister Begin, 21 March 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Box 36, Serial Xs – [8-77 – 8-78]; MemCon, 21 March 1978, *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 1062–80.

withdrawal is not withdrawal at all, at this point, it seemed to the US that self-rule was the only way to push talks forward, and Carter grudgingly accepted this premise.⁵⁹

Still, the stage was set for hard negotiations at Camp David and beyond. Importantly though, these negotiations would only be *about* the Palestinians, who themselves were far removed from all talk of the temporality of self-rule. They had no say in whether sovereignty should or should not be included in the final peace treaty. By this point the Palestinian issue had become reduced to a tool for facilitating a separate Egyptian-Israeli peace.

At Camp David in September 1978, as in the preceding months, the US demanded that self-rule could only be a temporary solution, while Begin refused to commit to anything after self-rule.⁶⁰ The West Bank and Gaza section of the Camp David Accords consisted of a timetable for further negotiations, as well as some principles guiding those negotiations. These negotiations were to take place in three stages. First there would be negotiations for “the details of a transitional arrangement”, to which Jordan would be invited as a party. In the second phase, Egypt, Israel and Jordan would “agree on the modalities for establishing the elected self-governing authority”. In the third phase the self-governing authority would be established and the “transitional period of five years will begin.” Only then would negotiations “to determine the final status of the West Bank and Gaza” start.⁶¹ All of this was vague, and the content of this “final status” was kicked further down the road.⁶² In essence it was an agreement to negotiate, not a negotiated agreement.

The notes from the Camp David negotiations show how Sadat at various instances insisted on the phrase “self-determination” for the Palestinians, while Begin stood his ground.⁶³ There are no traces of this phrase in the final agreement.⁶⁴ Carter and his team had pushed for a clear

⁵⁹ President’s Meeting with Prime Minister Begin, 22 March 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Box 36, Serial Xs – [8-88 – 8-78]; Jørgen Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter*, 119–23.

⁶⁰ A Framework for Peace in the Middle East Agreed at Camp David, 10 September 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, NLC-128-9-7-2-1; Lawrence Wright, *Thirteen Days in September: Carter, Begin, and Sadat at Camp David* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 74–75, 83–84; Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Picador, 2010), 222–23; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 346–50; Ezer Weizman, *The Battle for Peace* (New York: Bantam, 1981), 351–56; Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process, 1977-1982*, 118.

⁶¹ “The Camp David Summit, September 1978” (Department of State, September 1978), 7–8.

⁶² Quandt, *Camp David*, 255–56; Anziska, *Preventing Palestine*, 124–25.

⁶³ Begin-Sadat meeting, 7 September 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Vertical File Box 8(A), Camp David – Summit Meetings; Draft #11: A Framework for Peace in the Middle East Agreed at Camp David, 10 September 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, NLC-128-9-7-2-1.

⁶⁴ “The Camp David Summit, September 1978.”

timeline for when self-rule should be implemented but Begin would have nothing of it.⁶⁵ Returning to Israel after Camp David, Begin informed the Knesset that there would be no withdrawal from the West Bank, and that in fact the settlements there would increase in size.⁶⁶

Begin seemed willing to forego peace with Egypt if he had to commit to concrete concessions on the West Bank and Gaza. Neither Carter nor Sadat were willing to push the issue. For them the Israeli-Egyptian peace process had become all important. It is precisely this imbalance of power which ensured Begin's success; Sadat's desperation for a treaty, Carter's reluctance to fail, and the absence of the Palestinians, along with Begin's willingness to call everything off all tilted the negotiations in Begin's favour. In this political calculation Palestinians lost out at every turn.

Once again, the Palestinians would not be party to these talks, except possibly as members of the Egyptian or Jordanian delegation. Jordan, together with Egypt, were given the right to negotiate on their behalf, despite the fact that Jordan was not represented at Camp David.⁶⁷ Neither the Palestinians nor Jordan had any say in this and they were both infuriated by how Egypt, Israel and the US made decisions on their behalf.⁶⁸

When the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was finally signed on March 26 1979, the stage was set for further tiresome negotiations over Palestinian autonomy. This period of negotiations revealed that Begin did not even want such a limited process to be implemented. He had got what he wanted — a peace treaty with Egypt — and there was no need to make further concessions. Israel, under his leadership, would not concede anything in the West Bank and Gaza — to say nothing of Jerusalem.

Fearing implementation

⁶⁵ Vance to The President, 29 November 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, NLC-15-11-1-33-6; Egyptian-Israeli Peace Negotiations: Where They Stand on 17 December, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, NLC-15-123-4-7-8; Carter, *White House Diary*, 265; Cyrus R. Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 241–42.

⁶⁶ Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process, 1977-1982*, 142–43.

⁶⁷ Revised Draft Language #5, 16 September 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, NLC-128-9-8-2-0.

⁶⁸ See e.g. Statement by the PLO Executive Committee on the Camp David Agreements, issued in Beirut, September 18, 1978, "Arab Documents on Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict 8(2)," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8, no. 2 (1979): 177–79; Madiha Rashid al Madfai, *Jordan, the United States and the Middle East Peace Process, 1974-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 54–55.

The autonomy negotiations started two months after the peace treaty was signed. Begin and the Israeli negotiators immediately slowed the process to a halt, while neither Carter nor Sadat showed any real interest in pushing it forward. By the summer of 1979 Carter had plenty of other things on his plate, such as the Iranian revolution, and Sadat was afraid that pushing the Palestinian issue might have a negative effect on Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. The evidence supports the argument that the self-rule scheme had been Begin's ploy to facilitate for a separate peace with Egypt and secure the side-lining of the PLO. Nonetheless, Begin took steps to ensure that if self-rule was to become a reality, then Israel would concede nothing on territory or sovereignty. As Begin publicly stated in an Israeli radio interview: "We obligated ourselves in the Camp David accord to autonomy, not sovereignty. [...] Autonomy is not a state. The exact opposite is true."⁶⁹

Two days after this interview, on May 21 1979, the Israeli cabinet approved Begin's revised autonomy plan. The plan rejected the potential for a Palestinian state. Instead, it asserted that Israel would "reserve the right to apply its claim to sovereignty" over the West Bank and Gaza after the five-year transition period.⁷⁰ So, while Begin accepted the temporariness of the proposal, he asserted that the land would remain under full Israeli control after the period of self-rule had been completed. This was the opposite of what Carter had worked for.

Despite the US's adoption of Begin's autonomy plan, Begin fought to water it down even further, in case it should be implemented. For instance, he insisted that Israeli settlers would not be affected, since they were Israelis.⁷¹ This assertion that the settlers were Israelis underscored the fact that the land would remain Israeli, and that the Palestinian had no territorial claim to it. The settlers, in Begin's view, were residing in Israeli territory. The fact that Israel would technically refrain from claiming sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza was a fiction since the rights of the people residing there would vary according to who they were. Israelis had national rights to all of the land, whilst Palestinians would only have individual rights on parts of it. This point was underscored by Begin's choice of representative to the autonomy negotiations: Israeli minister of the interior Joseph Burg. This

⁶⁹ Interview with Prime Minister Begin on I.D.F Radio, 19 May 1979, Meron Medzini, ed., *Israel's Foreign Relations Volume 6: 1979-80* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1984), 22.

⁷⁰ Warren Christopher to The President, 21 May 1979, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, NLC-128-14-7-14-2; Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process, 1977-1982*, 196–98.

⁷¹ Summary of the President's First Meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, 15 April 1980, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Box 37, Serial Xs – [4-15-80 – 4-30-80].

was a clear signal that the West Bank and Gaza were not considered a foreign affairs issue, but rather a domestic matter.⁷²

Jerusalem was the last Palestinian issue where Carter tried to remain firm against Begin. Carter argued that if East Jerusalem was excluded from the Self-Governing Authority, then the concept could not work. Begin would not budge, since for him Jerusalem was eternally and indivisibly Israeli. He countered that allowing Palestinians in East-Jerusalem to vote for the composition of the Self-Governing Authority would be the equivalent of “destroy[ing] Israel’s connection with Jerusalem.”⁷³

The above points, that the settlements and East Jerusalem were integral parts of Israel, and that the minister of the interior headed the negotiations, all showed that there was no hope of making Palestinian autonomy territorial. Israel would retain the territory with or without the actual implementation of the self-rule scheme.

Rather than succumb to Carter’s pressure on Jerusalem, Begin instead used the Arab and US position on Jerusalem as a way to shut down the process. The antagonism over Jerusalem had been clear in the Camp David Accords where Jerusalem was dealt with in three side-letters. The Egyptian side-letter stated that Arab Jerusalem was “an integral part of the West Bank” and that “[a]ll the measures taken by Israel to alter the status of the City are null and void”.⁷⁴ Dismissing this position entirely, Begin’s letter had stated: “the Government of Israel decreed in July 1967 that Jerusalem is one city indivisible, the Capital of the State of Israel.”⁷⁵ Carter, illustrating how difficult the Jerusalem question was, wrote a side-letter merely referencing previous US statements in the UN on Jerusalem.⁷⁶ The US position was that East-Jerusalem was occupied, but if Carter had stated so explicitly Begin would have left the talks. Begin knew that this worked the other way around too. Since the US and the Arab states insisted that Israel could not keep all of Jerusalem, Begin understood that any significant change in the status of the city would make further talks very difficult, if not impossible.

⁷² Anziska, *Preventing Palestine*, 145; Peleg, *Begin’s Foreign Policy, 1977-83*, 107.

⁷³ Summary of the President’s Second Meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, 15 April 1980, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Box 37, Serial Xs – [4-15-80 – 4-30-80]; See also Excerpts from an interview with Prime Minister Begin in “Yediot Achronot”, 25 April 1980, Medzini, *Israel’s Foreign Relations Volume 6: 1979-80*, 243–47.

⁷⁴ Mohammed Anwar El Sadat to Jimmy Carter, 17 September 1978, “The Camp David Summit, September 1978,” 14.

⁷⁵ Menachem Begin to The President, 17 September 1978, “The Camp David Summit, September 1978,” 14.

⁷⁶ Jimmy Carter to Anwar Al-Sadat, 22 September 1978, “The Camp David Summit, September 1978,” 14.

The Begin government utilized this knowledge and destroyed all possibility for progress in negotiations when Israel's parliament, the Knesset, passed a bill July 30 1980, that made the entire city Israel's capital.⁷⁷ This bill was what is known as a basic law, which made it the Israeli equivalent of part of the constitution. Israel does not have a constitution and it is the set of basic laws which forms the central legal structure of the state.

Carter was exasperated. He exclaimed that the Jerusalem bill "puts the final nail in the coffin of the Camp David negotiations".⁷⁸ It is not far-fetched to argue that the Begin government purposefully torpedoed the autonomy talks. As Michael Zank argued, the Jerusalem Basic Law came precisely as the threat of dividing Jerusalem "was looming [...] during the US-brokered negotiations between Israel and Egypt on Palestinian autonomy." It was perceived as a "poke-in-the-eye of Israel's partners in peace".⁷⁹

Torpedoing the negotiations at this time was risk free for Begin since the self-rule proposal had served its dual purpose: the PLO had been completely side-lined and the separate peace with Egypt was secured. With these momentous gains pocketed there was no longer any need for Israel to provide Palestinians with any form of autonomy, territorial or otherwise. The Jerusalem Basic Law both destroyed the talks and signalled that Israel would not accept any division of Jerusalem.

A smokescreen solution

While the US administration had tried to make Palestinian self-rule a temporary solution to the Palestinian issue, hoping to get more further down the road, it was unable to make Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin agree to the evolution of a Palestinian "homeland" in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. There was no way Begin would withdraw from territories that he considered the eternal patrimony of the Jewish people.

For all intents and purposes, the Occupied Palestinian Territories remained an integral part of Israel. The Carter period was a negotiation between the US president's comprehensive approach, which entailed Israeli withdrawal and Palestinian self-determination, on the one

⁷⁷ Basic Law: Jerusalem, Knesset Resolution, 30 July 1980, Medzini, *Israel's Foreign Relations Volume 6: 1979-80*, 319; Bar-Siman-Tov, *Israel and the Peace Process, 1977-1982*, 211–12.

⁷⁸ Carter, *White House Diary*, 452.

⁷⁹ Michael Zank, "The Jerusalem Basic Law (1980) and the Jerusalem Embassy Act (1995): A Comparative Investigation of Israeli and US Legislation on the Status of Jerusalem," *Israel Studies* 21, no. 3 (2016): 22.

hand, and Begin's desire for a separate peace with Egypt, enabled by self-rule, while insisting on retaining the West Bank and Gaza, avoiding a Geneva conference and refusing to negotiate with any Palestinians, on the other. Begin won. Once he had secured the peace treaty with Egypt, he pocketed his gains and watered down his concessions. Even the modest self-rule scheme was never implemented. Ariel Sharon later insisted that autonomy had been a mere "subterfuge" to secure peace with Egypt.⁸⁰ Or, as Moshe Dayan had reacted when he first heard of the proposal: "This is not for real ... merely going through the motions".⁸¹

Important to note, however, is that Begin had hedged his bets. While the evidence indicates that Begin never wanted Palestinian self-rule to be implemented, he made sure that if it were implemented, it would not lead to anything resembling statehood. He ensured that the self-rule proposal did not provide an acceptable end-game for the Palestinians. It did not spell out full Israeli withdrawal, an end to Israeli control over the occupied territories, nor did it address Palestinian sovereignty. Instead, it secured continued Israeli control for an indefinite period. As Seth Anziska argued, autonomy was "state prevention."⁸²

The cornerstone of the concept of self-rule was that while neither people would claim sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza, Israel would not withdraw from the territories, and Palestinians would be allowed to run only their personal affairs under the leadership of an elected administrative authority.⁸³ Furthermore, the PLO would remain banned and anything that could suggest that the authority was developing into a state would be illegal, such as issuing postage stamps and minting coins.⁸⁴ Begin even insisted that Israel would "reimpose military rule" if it was necessary to stop self-rule developing into deeper autonomy.⁸⁵

Palestinians had little opportunity to object to the process, with or without its implementation, as they were excluded from all negotiations. While Carter had wanted to include Palestinians in the peace process, he had strictly adhered to former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's 1975 pledge at the Sinai II and refused to negotiate with the Palestine Liberation Organization. Carter realized that this was a massive problem, admitting toward the end of his term: "It is absolutely ridiculous that we pledged under Kissinger and Nixon that we would

⁸⁰ Colin Shindler, *The Rise of the Israeli Right*, 348.

⁸¹ Quoted in Peleg, *Begin's Foreign Policy, 1977-83*, 137.

⁸² Seth Anziska, "Autonomy as State Prevention."

⁸³ MemCon, 16 December 1977, *FRUS 1977-80 Vol. VIII*, 861-72.

⁸⁴ "Israel's Autonomy Plan," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 9, no. 3 (1980): 1961; Lesch, *Political Perceptions of the Palestinians on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip*, 7.

⁸⁵ Heller, "Begin's False Autonomy," 117.

not negotiate with the PLO; but our country's honor is at stake."⁸⁶ That national honor ensured that the PLO would be excluded from the talks and that, once again, Palestinians would be politically marginalized.

It was not until December 1988 that the US finally lifted the ban on dealing with the PLO, after Arafat had declared his acceptance of resolutions 242 and 338, renounced terrorism and accepted Israel's right to exist. Arafat's formulation was drafted almost word by word by the Americans.⁸⁷ Then, when the Oslo treaty was signed in 1993, Israel also finally engaged with the PLO. Oslo was effectively an implementation of Begin's autonomy model. As we know all too well, it did not lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

⁸⁶ Carter, *White House Diary*, 352.

⁸⁷ William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press and the University of California Press, 2005), 282–84.