

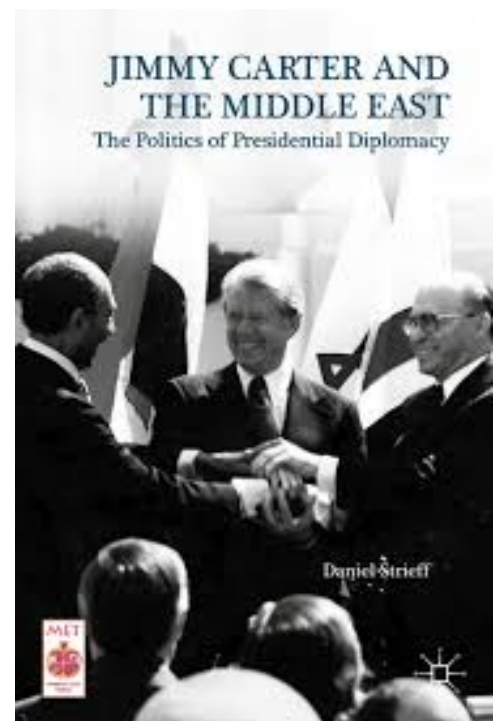
Book Review: Jimmy Carter and the Middle East: The Politics of Presidential Diplomacy by Daniel Strieff

In Jimmy Carter and the Middle East: The Politics of Presidential Diplomacy, Daniel Strieff seeks to reappraise Carter's perceived role as a peacemaker in the Middle East during his presidency. While suggesting that the book overstates its critique of Carter's compromises during this period, Jeff Roquen particularly welcomes the volume's engagement with the impact of the US media on public perceptions of the 'Palestinian Question'.

Jimmy Carter and the Middle East: The Politics of Presidential Diplomacy. Daniel Strieff. Palgrave. 2015.

When Jimmy Carter took the podium in the Cleveland Convention Center Music Hall in Cleveland, Ohio, on 28 October 1980, one week before the presidential election, to defend his term in office, he possessed a slim lead in the polls over his Republican challenger. At the end of the first and only presidential debate, Ronald Reagan, a former Governor of California, looked into the TV camera and asked the viewing audience of nearly 81 million Americans a brilliant rhetorical question in his closing statement: '[Are] you better off than you were 4 years ago?' For most voters, the answer was self-evident.

Despite the widespread perception of him being a largely ineffectual head of state, both historians and the US public still credit Carter with promoting human rights and securing a treaty between Egypt and Israel after decades of strife and conflict. In the provocative new monograph *Jimmy Carter and the Middle East: The Politics of Presidential Diplomacy*, Daniel Strieff not only questions Carter's efficacious role as a Middle East peacemaker, but ultimately casts the former president as an often opportunistic and rudderless leader who succumbed to the pressure of pro-Israeli lobbyists and elements of public opinion, and expediently betrayed the Palestinians for political purposes.



Throughout the opening chapters, Strieff ably chronicles the focused and ambitious diplomatic tack taken by Carter toward Israel and the Arab states. In recruiting Hamilton Jordan and Patrick Caddell as his chief political adviser and private pollster respectively, the relatively young, ex-peanut farmer from Georgia signalled a paradigm shift from the secretive nature of the Nixon administration (1969-74) to 'transparency', 'open diplomacy' and a robust dialogue with the public through the media. Shortly after taking the oath of office, Carter altered the diplomatic landscape by telling a town hall audience in Massachusetts that 'there has to be a homeland provided for the Palestinian refugees who have suffered for many, many years', to the chagrin of the Israeli government and AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) – a powerful group of lobbyists who held a disproportionate amount of influence on Capitol Hill (30).

In May 1977, a political revolution occurred in Israel with the rise of the right-wing Likud party and the elevation of a radical Zionist as prime minister. Menachem Begin, who had once been branded as a terrorist by Britain as a member of the paramilitary organisation, Irgun, prior to the creation of Israel (1948), would assume power and decide questions of war and peace for the Israeli state. Although stunned by the results of the election, Carter remained undeterred and indefatigably pursued a comprehensive settlement to ensure Israeli security, normalise

relations between Cairo and Jerusalem and establish Palestinian autonomy.

Upon the release of the US-Soviet Joint Communiqué on 1 October 1977, a barrage of criticism emanated from both the Israeli government and hawkish US conservatives. Three days later, the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, Moshe Dayan, adamantly objected to the notion of Palestinian 'national rights', flatly ruled out the participation of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in future negotiations and refused to consider a withdrawal from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, [seized by Israeli forces during the Six-Day War](#) (1967). At the same time, the PLO remained split over whether or not to recognise the state of Israel as defined in UN Security Council Resolution 242 (1967).



Image Credit: Jimmy Carter and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat by Marion S. Trikosko, 1977 (LOC)

While all roads to a Geneva conference had been blocked, the Egyptian President, Anwar Sadat, made a courageous and unprecedented visit to Israel in late 1977 to initiate a face-to-face dialogue with his counterparts. In detailing the 'saturation coverage' of Sadat's trip by the US news media and its pronounced effect on public opinion, Strieff has made a significant historiographical contribution to a crucial time period in US foreign policy. Indeed, Americans were profoundly moved by Sadat's gesture of goodwill and came to sympathise with and support a resolution to the 'Palestinian Question'. In the latter chapters of the book, however, portions of Strieff's revisionist account fail to adequately appreciate the stark and seemingly intractable divide between Israel and the Arab world.

In September 1978, the President welcomed Begin and Sadat to the presidential retreat sixty-two miles (100km) from Washington, DC, and brokered nearly two weeks of contentious talks to produce the Camp David Accords – the schematic basis for Egypt's recognition of Israel and an Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula under a finalised Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. For the world watching the signing ceremony at the White House on live television on 26 March 1979, this momentous act of US statecraft represented an historic achievement. According to Strieff, however, Carter's decision to detach the Palestinian Question from the final agreement was due to '[subordinating] his diplomatic objectives to his political needs' (188). In fact, it was Begin – not Carter – who was diplomatically circumscribed by hardline constituents as intense resentment lingered after the loss of 2,688 Israelis from a surprise attack led by Egypt and Syria on Yom Kippur (one of the holiest days in the Jewish Calendar) on 6 October 1973.

By embracing Sadat and leading Egypt out of the Khartoum Resolution of 1967, whereby eight Arab nations proclaimed 'no recognition, no negotiations, [and] no peace' with Israel, Carter significantly reduced tensions in both the region and the world. If the President had attempted to coerce Israel into withdrawing from the West Bank and Gaza by suspending economic and military aid, as suggested by Strieff, it could have invited another invasion and potentially set off a wider war in the Middle East. Contrary to assertions made by the author in the final chapters, Carter continued to promote 'the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people' throughout his re-election campaign and even criticised the construction of Israeli settlements in the West Bank as 'an obstacle to peace' in remarks before the American Jewish Press Association.

As an engaging analysis of the public sphere and US foreign policy, *Jimmy Carter and the Middle East* unquestionably merits scholarly consideration, despite its somewhat overstated thesis and overcritical assessment of the thirty-ninth president. For a more conventional and sympathetic appraisal of Carter's herculean diplomatic feat in an international context, readers might also consult *Thirteen Days in September: Carter, Begin, and Sadat at Camp David* (2014) by Lawrence Wright.

Jeff Roquen is an independent scholar based in the United States. [Read more reviews by Jeff Roquen.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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