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'A Local Terrorist Made Good': The Callaghan Government and the Arab-Israeli Peace

Process, 1977-79

Abstract

The British government had played an important role during the 1950s and 1960s as a mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict, most notably through the development of Project Alpha between 1954 and 1956, and through the negotiation of United Nations Security Council resolution 242 in 1967. Between 1977 and 1979, British Prime Minister James Callaghan played a supporting role to US President Jimmy Carter as he negotiated the Camp David Accords of 1978. Callaghan adopted a pro-Israeli stance, cultivating close relations with the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and defending Begin's position over key issues, particularly his reluctance to remove settlements from the occupied territories. In this respect Callaghan's government departed from established British policy, even abstaining over United Nations Security Council resolution 446 in March 1979 which condemned continuing Israeli settlement activity. This resulted in damage to Britain's relations with moderate Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan.

Key Words

Arab-Israeli conflict; Jimmy Carter; Camp David; James Callaghan; Menachem Begin.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Britain played an important, sometimes central role in efforts to broker peace between Israel and the Arab states. “Project Alpha”, the secret attempt to negotiate an Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement between 1954 and 1956, was originally a British initiative, developed by Evelyn Shuckburgh, the assistant Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office responsible for the Middle East, albeit that it was carried forward during 1955 as a joint Anglo-American undertaking.¹ Alpha foundered early in 1956 in the face of the mutual suspicions between Cairo and Tel Aviv, but a decade later, the British role was once again significant when, in the aftermath of the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the British Ambassador to the United Nations, Lord Caradon, backed by Foreign Secretary George Brown, played the pivotal part in negotiating United Nations Security Council resolution 242.² Resolution 242, which laid down a “land for peace” formula under which Israel would withdraw from territories occupied in June 1967 in exchange for full peace with her Arab neighbours, provided the foundation for subsequent efforts to resolve the conflict. While US backing for British diplomacy was once again an essential element in this phase of the peace process, the position carved out by Foreign Secretary Brown over the key issues of Israeli withdrawal and the status of Jerusalem left Britain better placed than the United States to secure Arab backing for the passing of the resolution. Its unanimous adoption by the Security Council on 22 November 1967 was a signal success for Harold Wilson’s Labour Government against an otherwise grim international economic and political backdrop, which saw the government forced to devalue the Pound Sterling in November 1967 and subsequently to take the final decision in January 1968 to withdraw from all of Britain’s remaining military commitments East of Suez by 1971.

In some respects, the successful passage of resolution 242 was a final hurrah both for the British ‘moment in the Middle East’ more generally,³ and specifically for its role as a key diplomatic broker in the Arab-Israeli peace process. While the Four-Power talks, involving

the United States, Soviet Union, France and Britain, theoretically continued to provide Britain with a leading role in diplomatic attempts to resolve the conflict during 1969 and 1970, in practice, the key initiatives during this period, such as the eponymous Rogers plan launched by the US Secretary of State William Rogers in December 1969, and the subsequent Egyptian-Israeli ceasefire initiative of June 1970, were American in origin.⁴ During the October 1973 war, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's attempts to entice the British government into sponsoring a ceasefire in place resolution in the UN Security Council on 12-13 October were no more than a Machiavellian attempt to use the British for what Kissinger knew would be a quixotic mission given the unwillingness of the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to accept such terms at this stage of the war.⁵ British suspicions of Kissinger's intentions were well founded, and the war ended with Anglo-American relations at a low ebb, amid US accusations of British diplomatic and political obstruction.⁶ Britain thus played no significant role in the post-war peace process this time round, with Kissinger keeping the negotiation of the successive disengagement agreements between Egypt and Israel and Syria and Israel during 1974 and 1975 almost entirely in his own hands.

On the face of things it might appear that there is similarly little to be said about the British role in the next phase of the peace process under the Carter Administration between 1977 and 1979. William Quandt's seminal study of the period, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics*, for example, contains not one single reference to Britain or to the British Prime Minister James Callaghan. Indeed the only British Prime Minister who is referred to in Quandt's study is Neville Chamberlain, cited in his familiar role as the arch-exponent of appeasement.⁷ However, there is more substance to the British part in the peace process during this period than might appear at first sight. To begin with, in contrast to the tense state of Anglo-American relations during and after the 1973 war under the Heath government, relations between London and Washington under Callaghan and Carter were close and

relatively harmonious. While the scope of bilateral relations was obviously considerably broader than merely the personal relationship between the Prime Minister and the President, Carter and Callaghan did strike up a strong rapport early in the life of the new Administration which would subsequently prove to be of some importance in the high level diplomacy of the peace process.

The first Callaghan-Carter phone conversation took place on 13 January 1977, shortly before Carter's inauguration.⁸ Callaghan displayed all the familiar characteristics of any British Prime Minister in his first exchange with a new incumbent in the White House, eagerly seeking an early invitation to Washington but not wanting to appear too desperate. The British Presidency of the EEC during the first six months of 1977 gave Callaghan an extra card to play, allowing him to suggest that a visit to Washington before a planned meeting of European Heads of Government on 25 March, would allow him to report back to other EEC leaders on any issues of broader transatlantic concern. In the event Carter readily agreed to a visit in early March which proved to be a signal success for the Prime Minister. A character sketch of the new President prepared by the British Ambassador to the United States, Peter Ramsbotham, in advance of Callaghan's visit noted that while Carter had moved naturally and rapidly into the responsibilities of office, his experience in international affairs was limited. Somewhat more ominously Ramsbotham observed that 'Carter operates on a short fuse, and I find this, together with his streak of obstinacy mildly disturbing and I wonder how he will react to the inevitable frustrations of the Presidency.' Nevertheless, Ramsbotham expressed the belief that Carter would 'recognise and respect the Prime Minister's great personal experience in international affairs.'⁹ In off-the-record answers during a briefing for American correspondents in London before his departure to Washington, Callaghan argued that he had a lot in common with the new President: 'they shared the same initials, they had both been in the Navy, they were both Baptists and both had David Brown tractors.'¹⁰ How

far this eclectic collection of coincidences might provide the basis for a strong personal relationship remained to be seen, however.

In the event, both the business meetings between Carter and Callaghan on 10 and 11 March, and the accompanying social programme for the visit passed off smoothly and successfully. Carter broke the ice during his formal welcome for the Prime Minister on the White House South Lawn by paying generous homage to the “special relationship” between the two countries.¹¹ Callaghan too displayed none of his predecessors Edward Heath or Harold Wilson’s squeamishness about this terminology: ‘I see no reason why we should refrain from using this term’, he noted in his speech during the state dinner. ‘It is not an exclusive relationship. It shuts no one out, and it does describe with accuracy the ease, the intimacy, the common feeling which Americans and Britons share with each other when we meet and talk...’¹²

The Arab-Israeli conflict was one of a series of international issues addressed during the second of the two business meetings on 11 March 1977. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance reported on his recently concluded fact-finding tour of the region, while Carter for his part indicated that the United States ‘was prepared to make a very big effort over the Middle East this year’. In response to Callaghan’s question as to whether there was any way in which Britain could help Carter replied that it was ‘probably best for the Americans to continue to take the lead.’¹³ The exchange did not seem to presage any particular role for Britain or for Callaghan personally in the peace process. Nevertheless, the personal relationship between Carter and Callaghan was soon further buttressed by a successful return visit by the President to Britain in early May. Among a series of personal touches, Callaghan arranged an excursion for Carter to the North-East of England, during which he visited George Washington’s ancestral home and was accorded a rapturous welcome in Newcastle upon Tyne.¹⁴

In terms of progress over the Middle East despite Vance's tour and a series of visits to Washington by leaders from the region, including King Hussein of Jordan and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, the peace process was to a large extent in abeyance during the spring awaiting the outcome of the Israeli Knesset election scheduled for 17 May. The election proved to be a political earthquake in Israel, with the Likud led by Menachem Begin for the first time emerging as the largest party in the Knesset, ending nearly three decades of unbroken rule by the Labour Alignment and its predecessors. While Carter had found the outgoing Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin relatively inflexible in his attitudes regarding the peace process,¹⁵ Begin's reputation as the leading exponent of Zionist Revisionism, committed to retaining the West Bank which he regarded as part of *Eretz Israel* - the biblical Land of Israel, meant that the prospects for negotiations between Israel and the Arab states now appeared considerably worse.¹⁶

The Begin victory came as a shock in both Washington and London. During a phone conversation on 21 May the President and Prime Minister discussed its implications. Both men agreed that the best policy was to attempt to reassure Arab leaders and to counsel calm. But the most interesting part of the discussion concerned Begin himself and the implications of his election for the pro-Israel lobbies in both the United States and Britain. Callaghan, unlike Carter, had met Begin and knew the strength of his ideological convictions. Commenting on his meeting with Begin in February 1974, Callaghan noted that 'he fought very bitterly against us and has the respect that old enemies frequently have. But he is extremely hard line. It was the most confrontable conversation I had the whole of the time I was in the Middle East.'¹⁷ The reference to Begin's past as the leader between 1943 and 1948 of the Irgun terrorist organisation which had fought against the British in Palestine indicated one impediment any British leader would face in dealing with him. Indeed, Callaghan's successor Margaret Thatcher never overcame her instinctive hostility to Begin as the

mastermind behind the King David Hotel bombing of July 1946.¹⁸ But it was perhaps Callaghan's unwitting neologism in describing his conversation with Begin as "confrontable" which best summed up the challenge to be faced in dealing with the new Israeli Prime Minister. Meetings with Begin were indeed often a combination of "confrontational" and "uncomfortable" for his interlocutors, particularly for President Carter. Commenting on some of Begin's statements in relation to settlements on the West Bank, which he always referred to as "Judea and Samaria" in order to assert a notional historical claim, Carter described them as 'unwarranted' and commented that 'he could at least have kept his mouth shut for a few weeks'. But here again, Callaghan drew on his experience of Begin to put his position in perspective: 'but it is unrealistic to expect him to do so. He has been saying this for thirty years. This is where you are going to be really right up against it with him.' Callaghan's insight drew a positive response from Carter, who commented that he would welcome his 'advice on how I should pursue our common purpose. I would certainly not consider that an intrusion but a welcome exhibition of friendship.'

In terms of the reaction of pro-Israel constituencies in both the United States and Britain to Begin's election, both men offered a similar analysis. Carter observed that his main task was to keep with him key members of Congress and the Jewish community, 98% of whom had been loyal to the Labour Alignment and had very little relationship with Begin at all. He expressed what in hindsight appears to have been the rather naïve hope that if the peace process presented a choice between backing Begin and ensuring the security of Israel, then Israel's supporters would choose the latter. Callaghan for his part noted that he had a number of friends among Jewish leaders in Britain, but that he had 'kept away from them this week whilst they are suffering from shock'. But their basic position was likely to remain that they would support Israel. 'I would guess that if Begin is intransigent that this will split the Jews both in your country and mine', he observed.

Callaghan's reference to his friends among Jewish leaders points to another aspect of his government's approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict which merits further discussion. Callaghan had perhaps found his earlier confrontation with Begin all the more surprising since his own fundamental position was highly sympathetic to Israel. Among British Prime Ministers probably only his immediate predecessor Harold Wilson and Tony Blair in later years would rival him in this regard. To some extent Callaghan's position was a product of the extensive links between the British Labour Party and Israel which had been built up during the 1950s and 1960s, most notably through the Socialist International organisation, but also between the Trades Union movements, and as a result of the backing of the British Jewish community for Labour during these years.¹⁹ But Callaghan himself had also staked out a pro-Israel position at key junctures, most notably when, during the October 1973 war, as Shadow Foreign Secretary he had criticised the Conservative government for being too pro-Arab as a result its refusal to condemn the Arab attack and its decision to impose an arms embargo on Israel as well as on the Arab states.²⁰

While some commentators have argued that Harold Wilson's resignation as Prime Minister and Callaghan's subsequent victory in the Labour leadership election ushered in a new era in terms of British policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the Foreign Office taking the opportunity to institute a much less pro-Israeli line than that advocated by Wilson, the evidence which will be presented here suggests otherwise.²¹ Indeed, Callaghan's approach to key issues such as Israeli settlement-building in the occupied territories was to prove in practice if anything even more sympathetic to the Israeli position than that of his predecessor Wilson. What role Callaghan's own ancestry played in shaping his personal convictions regarding Israel during his term of office as Prime Minister is a moot point. While it is worth noting that his paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Bernstein, was Jewish, Callaghan himself appears only to have discovered this fact in 1976 as a result of a tabloid newspaper article

published once he became Prime Minister.²² In any event it is clear that in common with other Prime Ministers who had previously held the post of Foreign Secretary, such as Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, Callaghan adopted a proactive personal approach to Middle East diplomacy. His tenure as Foreign Secretary had also made him suspicious of what he saw as the Foreign Office's ingrained pro-Arabism.²³

Beyond Callaghan's personal diplomacy, events during the summer of 1977 pointed towards two further respects in which the British role in the peace process was to prove of some significance. The first was the Middle East declaration issued by EEC leaders on 29 June 1977 during the European Council meeting in London which marked the close of the British presidency. This went beyond the language of resolution 242 in also calling for 'the need for a homeland for the Palestinian people'.²⁴ In this respect it echoed the language already used by President Carter, when he had responded to a question during a town hall meeting at Clinton, Massachusetts on 16 March 1977, by stating that 'there has to be a homeland provided for the Palestinian refugees who have suffered for many, many years.'²⁵ The EEC was subsequently to play a much more significant role in the diplomacy of the Arab-Israeli conflict, most notably through its landmark Venice Declaration of June 1980. But despite having presided over the issuing of the London declaration in June 1977, the British government remained relatively dismissive of the EEC's role at this stage. Foreign Secretary David Owen confided during a discussion with the Prime Minister and US Secretary of State Vance that: 'the Nine were very insecure on the Middle East. If things were handled with the Nine, the French leaked everything to the Arabs, the Dutch leaked to the Israelis and the Italians were in any case incapable of keeping anything quiet.'²⁶ No doubt this was something of a caricature of Middle East discussions within the EEC, but it did point to the fact that there was a considerable diversity of opinion over the Arab-Israeli conflict. This made it difficult to forge a common position. Nevertheless the British position within the EEC, and, from Israel's

perspective, its ability to help block any unwelcome pro-Arab initiatives sponsored by the French, was an added dimension of the Callaghan government's diplomatic role.²⁷

Callaghan's prime ministerial papers also point towards another area in which the British government held a privileged position in the diplomacy of the peace process. London served as an important venue for the covert diplomacy of the conflict. In late August the Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan scheduled an impromptu trip to London. The public explanation for his visit was that he was coming to meet leaders of the Jewish community and to deal with Foreign Ministry matters, which was taken by the Foreign Office as code to mean delivering a rebuke to the Israeli Ambassador in London who had made negative comments at a private dinner about the likely duration of Begin's government. But Callaghan was evidently aware from other sources that this was not the real reason for his trip. Dayan's visit coincided with the presence in London of King Hussein of Jordan who maintained a property there. Callaghan annotated a dispatch from Cairo, which referred to the diplomacy of UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, with the question: 'has the FCO any idea what passed between Hussein and Dayan if indeed they met? I would like to know before I see Waldheim.'²⁸ The reply from the Foreign Office confirmed Callaghan's suspicions: 'we now know that there was another reason for his visit. We are arranging for a report [section deleted and retained under section 3(4)] to be sent to you.'²⁹ Callaghan's Private Secretary subsequently replied that 'the Prime Minister was interested to see the report you mention', although no copy was evidently retained in his files, presumably because it was immediately returned to its point of origin.³⁰ While the redactions mean that no certain conclusion can be drawn, it is highly likely this was a Security Service (MI5) report on the meeting between Hussein and Dayan.

Since 1963, Hussein had begun meeting Israeli representatives at the home of his London physician, Dr Emmanuel Herbert. Dr Herbert's home was certainly not the only

venue for these covert meetings, many of which took place in the region, but it was the most significant overseas venue. According to one source Dr Herbert had originally been recommended to Hussein and his family in the 1950s by MI5 as a man of discretion who treated many foreign dignitaries. The fact that he was also an ardent Zionist meant that it was relatively easy for officials at the Israeli Embassy to cultivate contact with him as well.³¹ How far MI5 was able to monitor the subsequent contacts between Hussein and Israeli representatives established through Dr Herbert over the years is unclear from the available sources. The former CIA station chief in Amman, Jack O'Connell, later expressed the firm conviction that if the British intelligence services had not bugged Dr Herbert's home and surgery, then they were not doing their job properly.³² But exactly what form such surveillance might have taken cannot be stated with certainty from the available sources. It is highly likely, though, that the report provided to Callaghan on the Hussein-Dayan meeting at Dr Herbert's home on 22 August 1977 came from the Security Service. Callaghan thus had privileged information in his hands about the covert diplomacy of the conflict which was not available even to President Carter (unless of course it was shared through Anglo-American intelligence channels). In any event, on this occasion, the Hussein-Dayan meeting did not produce a breakthrough in the peace process, with both men rehearsing largely familiar and unyielding positions.³³

As the EEC declaration on the Middle East and Carter's statement during the Clinton town hall meeting had made clear, the issues at stake in the peace process by 1977 went beyond resolution 242 and its state-based "land for peace" formula in one key respect. The development of the Palestinian national movement as represented by the PLO in the decade since the June 1967 war meant that the Palestinian question could no longer be treated as one of merely the requirement for a settlement for the refugees as reflected in the terms of resolution 242. Instead, the question of Palestinian self-determination was now firmly on the

diplomatic agenda. In truth the use of the term “homeland” in both the EEC and Carter statements fudged this issue. The term avoided promising the establishment of a Palestinian state, which would incense the Israeli government and its supporters, while indicating that the right of the Palestinians to self-determination had to be acknowledged. Callaghan himself jumped on the bandwagon when, in a speech delivered on 23 October to a special meeting of the Board of Deputies of British Jews held to mark the 60th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, he also referred to the need for a Palestinian homeland. However, when questioned by former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban during a private meeting on 7 November as to what he had actually meant by this reference, the Prime Minister replied that ‘speaking very frankly, he did not really know what he had meant; nor did others who used the same expression. He would like to see a Palestinian/Jordan axis.’³⁴ In effect, then, in Callaghan’s view, any exercise of Palestinian self-determination could not be unfettered and would have to result in the confederation of a Palestinian entity with Jordan.

The importance of Jordan in Callaghan’s thinking was mirrored in the effort he also invested in cultivating relations with King Hussein during 1978. There was a longer pedigree to the close bilateral relationship between Britain and Jordan, and the King had also been a pivotal figure in the British negotiation of resolution 242 a decade earlier.³⁵ But during 1978 Callaghan was to devote a significant effort to trying to overcome the King’s doubts about the direction taken by the peace process in the wake of Egyptian President Sadat’s historic visit to Jerusalem to address the Israeli Knesset on 20 November 1977. The Sadat visit indeed marked a most significant watershed in the process, with the Egyptian President symbolically abandoning the Arab taboo on openly setting foot in Israel. However, the visit also signalled Sadat’s abandonment of the multilateral peace process aimed at re-convening the Geneva Middle East peace conference which had met briefly, then adjourned, in December 1973. Given that reconvening the Geneva conference had been the main focus of US diplomacy

during 1977, Sadat's visit necessitated a significant rethinking of strategy in Washington. It also put other Arab states, particularly Jordan, in a very difficult position. Arab leaders including King Hussein now feared that Sadat was intent on pursuing a bilateral peace settlement with Israel, abandoning Arab solidarity.

In the wake of Sadat's visit, Callaghan engaged in an intensive round of Middle East diplomacy between December 1977 and March 1978. While the Prime Minister did not contemplate supplanting the United States and President Carter as the main great power sponsor of the peace process, the model of what had taken place in the autumn of 1967 may well have been in his mind. Then, by cultivating close relations with all of the key players, and by developing a distinctive position on the key issues, Britain had been uniquely placed to step in and sponsor resolution 242 when US diplomacy foundered in early November 1967. It was not beyond the bounds of possibility that such a role might open up for Britain once again a decade later. However, in contrast to the autumn of 1967, when Brown and Caradon had focused their efforts on wooing the key Arab states, during the winter of 1977-8, the main focus of Callaghan's efforts, which might have seemed most unlikely in view of his comments to Carter about his previous "confrontable" meeting with Begin, was on cultivating relations with the Israeli Prime Minister. Although Callaghan never articulated a clear rationale for this approach, it is possible that he believed the main obstacle to progress in the peace process was likely to lie in Begin's refusal to make concessions. So, successfully cultivating Begin might provide the maximum dividend in terms of advances in the negotiations.

On Sunday 4 December 1977, Callaghan held a long meeting with Begin at 10 Downing Street.³⁶ Begin's visit had originally been scheduled to take place between 20-23 November but had to be postponed in the light of President Sadat's dramatic decision to fly to Jerusalem to speak to the Knesset. The invitation for the visit had been issued by Callaghan in

late August and accepted with alacrity by Begin, who, according to Ambassador Sir John Mason in Tel Aviv, had expressed his gratitude ‘in emotional terms’.³⁷ No doubt this was the result of the complex history of Begin’s personal relationship with Britain, which on the one hand he regarded with gratitude as the author of the Balfour Declaration which had laid the foundation for the creation of Israel, and on the other with hostility as the mandatory power which had endeavoured to block Jewish immigration to Palestine and frustrate Zionist goals during the final phase of the mandate. As former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban had described matters in an earlier conversation with Callaghan, Begin’s attitude towards Britain was ‘highly equivocal – a combination of hatred and admiration.’³⁸ In view of Begin’s background as the former leader of the Irgun which had carried out terrorist attacks against British forces and civilians in Palestine, Callaghan’s invitation was controversial and resulted in a large number of letters of complaint from the public. These included a protest from the last British Governor of Palestine, General Sir Alan Cunningham, which Callaghan answered personally.³⁹ The distaste with which Begin continued to be viewed in official circles was mirrored in the character sketch of him prepared by the Foreign Office, which described him with no small irony as ‘a local terrorist made good’.⁴⁰ Begin’s recognition of the fact that the Prime Minister had taken something of a political risk in inviting him to London was no doubt part of the reason why from the outset, on this occasion, he seemed much more well disposed towards Callaghan, taking him into his confidence by giving him advance information about two sets of secret talks which had been arranged between Israel and Egypt to address security issues and political problems. During their meeting, he also treated Callaghan to an extended explanation as to why the pre-1967 frontiers of Israel were indefensible. Begin further acknowledged that there was a problem of what he called the “Palestinian Arabs”, a term he insisted on using instead of “Palestinians”. But he claimed this was not a problem of territory ‘given the great expanse of Arab lands and the number of sovereign Arab states’. The

message was clear: whatever solution Begin now developed for the Palestinians in the occupied territories it would not involve anything which might lead to statehood. What is most striking about Callaghan's reply is his adoption and use throughout the rest of the conversation of Begin's term "Palestinian Arabs" instead of "Palestinians", a term Begin himself employed in order to indicate that the Palestinians were not a separate people deserving of self-determination. It is possible that Callaghan did not understand the full implications of his adoption of this terminology but in a conflict where language was recruited by all parties in support of their claims, and each and every comment was carefully parsed for political bias, this was a significant signal. Begin, according to Ambassador Mason, 'derived much satisfaction' from this semantic victory, particularly from the Prime Minister's public use of the term 'Palestinian Arabs' during a speech he made at a dinner hosted by Begin at the Savoy Hotel that evening.⁴¹

Begin also raised the issue of the position of the Nine regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict and made a bid for British support in preventing the French from securing any further statement about the need for Israeli withdrawal, which he argued might prejudice the forthcoming negotiations. Callaghan was forthcoming in this respect as well, indicating that he did not envisage any further discussion of the Middle East at the European Council and expressing the hope that in due course the Nine might actually be able 'to work out something that could help Israel's security'. Callaghan was true to his word, persuading fellow EEC leaders during a private discussion after dinner on 5 December that no public statement or declaration on the Middle East should be made for the time being.⁴² While areas of disagreement remained between Begin and Callaghan over the shape of a comprehensive peace agreement, overall, the tone and atmosphere of their meeting was warm and friendly, a far cry from Callaghan's previous meeting with Begin in 1974.

Just over a week later Begin followed up on the meeting by telephoning Callaghan to give him advance notice of what became known as the “Begin Plan”, a proposal for administrative autonomy for the Palestinians living in the occupied territories.⁴³ The plan did not involve Israeli withdrawal and proposed leaving the question of sovereignty in abeyance for a five year transitional period at the end of which there would be further negotiations over the final status of the territories. While Begin did not offer details of the plan over the phone, it is significant that he decided to call Callaghan before flying to the United States to discuss the plan with Carter. Once again, the tone of the call was very warm with Callaghan describing Begin’s decision to move quickly and take the initiative as ‘wonderful’ and Begin for his part enthusing over the ‘wonderful’ London days of his visit a week earlier. The Israeli Prime Minister also made highly complimentary remarks about Foreign Secretary David Owen: ‘he is a wonderful man and a good Foreign Secretary if I may say so.’ Evidently he also regarded Owen as sympathetic to his position.⁴⁴ This was once more a far cry from the “confrontable” exchange of 1974. Indeed, Foreign Secretary Owen subsequently described Begin’s phone call as a ‘remarkable development’ in a personal telegram to Ambassador Peter Jay in Washington.⁴⁵

Callaghan’s budding relationship with Begin also served to underline the limits of EEC solidarity. Officials in the Foreign Office recommended caution in revealing any of the substance of the exchanges to French President Giscard d’Estaing, with whom Callaghan was scheduled to meet later the same day, since ‘the French might use any information we give them against us with the Arabs or ... they might leak the information for their own purposes.’⁴⁶ Callaghan therefore confined himself to vague generalisations about the purpose of Begin’s visit to Washington in his ensuing conversation with Giscard, but this did not stop the French President from observing that ‘the UK now seemed to be leaning markedly towards the side of the Israelis. France for her part endeavoured to be even-handed.’

Interestingly, Callaghan did not seek to deny the allegation, and instead merely deflected it by referring to the 'close historical links between the UK and Israel and the particularly close links between the British Labour Party and the Israelis.'⁴⁷ In any event Begin was pleased by Callaghan's successful blocking operation in the EEC, commenting in a further phone exchange on 15 December that 'I understand that in Brussels you helped very much' and that the decision taken at the Prime Minister's instigation not to make any further EEC statement was a 'very good result'.⁴⁸

While Begin was in Washington between 16-18 December for the purpose of outlining his peace proposals, Carter and Callaghan also spoke by phone. With Begin due to stop off in London on his way back from the United States it made sense for Callaghan to ensure that he was fully briefed on the substance of the President's talks with the Israeli leader. Callaghan described himself during their conversation as operating 'in a supporting role' and Carter promised to send him a full account of his talks with Begin once they had concluded. In the meantime Carter observed that although Begin's ideas were 'not completely unreasonable', they would not be enough to satisfy the Arabs.⁴⁹ The summary of the talks subsequently sent by Carter indicated that the main areas of disagreement between Begin and Sadat were likely to be over the continuation of Israeli settlements in the Sinai, the Israeli security role in the West Bank, and the status of Jerusalem. His general impression was that while Begin's Sinai proposals would be substantially acceptable to Sadat, the West Bank-Gaza proposal had 'a long way to go before Sadat and other Arabs can accept it'.⁵⁰ In the event, this proved to be much too optimistic an interpretation of Sadat's likely view of the Sinai element of Begin's proposals. While both Carter and Callaghan operated on the assumption that it would be the West Bank which would prove to be the key sticking point in negotiations, it was in fact Begin's insistence on retaining Israeli settlements in Egyptian territory in the Sinai which was to prove the most intractable obstacle to agreement over the coming months. This misreading

of the Egyptian position was to contribute to Callaghan's subsequent mishandling of relations with President Sadat.

In terms of Callaghan's handling of Begin, Carter suggested that it would be helpful if he could urge the Israeli Prime Minister to be more flexible. Callaghan acknowledged this suggestion in his response to the President.⁵¹ During his meeting with Begin itself, however, flattery and hyperbole loomed rather larger in Callaghan's approach than the urging of flexibility on the Israeli leader. The minutes record that 'the Prime Minister said that he found Mr Begin's approach remarkable and imaginative. He very much welcomed its constructive nature. It was the best approach to peace which anybody had seen for many years.'⁵² The dangers inherent in this type of statement were reflected in Begin's account to Callaghan of President Carter's response to his plan for the West Bank. According to him, 'President Carter had accepted the plan for Judea and Samaria without qualification', and 'had agreed that the plan constituted a fair basis for negotiations.' But while it was true that Carter, in trying to bolster his personal relations with Begin, had tried to be as positive about the plan as possible, describing it as 'constructive', he had not gone so far as to endorse it in the terms Begin described.⁵³ Evidently the Israeli Prime Minister was selective in how he chose to remember such exchanges.

A further illustration of this point was provided by the way Begin had chosen to use comments made by Foreign Secretary Owen, during his previous 4 December meeting with Callaghan and Owen in London, in his subsequent talks with President Carter. In arguing the case for his plan for the West Bank, Begin had told Carter during their first meeting that 'I would like to be able to say to Sadat that you see this as a fair basis for negotiations... If he agrees to no Palestinian state, and if the US agrees, and if Great Britain agrees, as Mr Owen said, this can be the only solution.'⁵⁴ He returned to this point during his second meeting with Carter, arguing that 'British Foreign Secretary Owen said that the West Bank would

obviously have to be demilitarized, and therefore it could not be a state. It is a contradiction in terms to talk of demilitarization and a state.’⁵⁵ However, a comparison with the record of Begin’s 4 December conversation with Callaghan and Owen in London shows that what Owen had actually said was that ‘the Government had never committed themselves to a Palestinian state partly because demilitarisation seemed essential and this would be hard to enforce for a state.’⁵⁶ But the nuances were lost in Begin’s version and the British position was represented as clear cut opposition to a Palestinian state on the basis that demilitarisation was incompatible with statehood. So Callaghan would have been well advised to choose his words more carefully in giving such a fulsome overall welcome to Begin’s proposals during their 20 December meeting. There were qualifications in Callaghan’s detailed response to Begin’s plan, and he did counsel ‘a measure of flexibility on the Israeli side’, but these nuances risked being ignored by the Israeli Prime Minister who tended to seize selectively on supportive comments.⁵⁷

Callaghan followed up on the meeting by reporting its contents to Carter. While he avoided the hyperbole he had used with Begin himself, he did tell the President that ‘I have modified my view since hearing Begin explain the details of the plan and I am more favourably inclined than I was when I sent you my original reactions.’⁵⁸ Begin’s sense of Callaghan’s sympathy and his desire to keep him fully informed was in evidence once again when he called the Prime Minister immediately after his talks with President Sadat at Ismailiya on Christmas Day 1977. In truth, the talks were a failure, but Begin put a positive gloss on them, describing them as ‘quite successful’. Once again Begin’s regard for Foreign Secretary David Owen was in evidence as he commented ‘I like the name as I told you and the fellow.’⁵⁹

Callaghan followed up immediately on the conversation with Begin by placing a call to Egyptian President Sadat an hour later. His purpose was evidently to compare the Egyptian

leader's account of the Ismailiya talks with that which he had just received from Begin. In fact, Callaghan had a longer-standing personal relationship with Sadat, which dated back to his time as Shadow-Foreign Secretary. In his memoirs Callaghan recalled that his first meeting with Sadat, during his Middle East tour in February 1974, had 'marked the beginning of a close relationship'.⁶⁰ Callaghan painted a highly sympathetic portrait of the Egyptian President, describing him as a 'serious and sensible far-seeing man'.⁶¹ While he noted that Sadat had his faults, including a tendency to belittle other Arab leaders especially King Hussein of Jordan, Sadat 'was a man who thought on a large scale and his historic and courageous decision to visit Jerusalem was the most significant event that had happened since the establishment of the state of Israel.'⁶² In terms of their personal relationship, Callaghan believed that Sadat came to 'rely on my discretion and know that my views and advice were wholly disinterested.'⁶³ The result, Callaghan argued, was that Sadat kept in regular contact with him, particularly during the Camp David process.

During their phone call on 26 December, Sadat indicated that 'I need your help – I mean, in the near future and I am sure that you will give us this help.'⁶⁴ While Sadat was not specific as to exactly what help he needed from Callaghan he did refer to a possible British role both in the peace process and in the guaranteeing of any settlement which might subsequently be agreed. Sadat also put a positive gloss on the state of negotiations, indicating that he remained optimistic that a comprehensive settlement could be achieved.

In addition to his own personal channel of communications to Sadat, Callaghan had another considerable asset at his disposal in judging the approach and state of mind of the Egyptian leader. In a concrete example of the kinds of personal ties which contributed to the diplomatic fabric of the Anglo-American "special relationship", the British Ambassador in Egypt, Willie Morris, had a long-standing personal friendship, dating back to the early 1950s, with his US counterpart, Ambassador Hermann Eilts. The fruit of this relationship as far as

the British were concerned was that Eilts shared both his extensive personal observations of Sadat, and his views of US policy towards the peace process, in an exceptionally candid fashion with Morris. The judgement of the FCO was that Eilts probably frequently exceeded his authority in passing on this information to Morris. Hence, Morris's despatches from Cairo were given very restricted distribution by the FCO to protect their source. Callaghan benefited from seeing these despatches which were copied to his office.⁶⁵

As a follow up to his phone conversation with Sadat, and in a bid to lend his support to US efforts to prevent the peace process from stalling, Callaghan arranged to meet Sadat at his home in Aswan overlooking the Nile on 13 January 1978. This was to prove a crucial meeting to the extent that it fully exposed the Prime Minister's personal sympathies in the peace process. In advance of the meeting two contrasting despatches crossed Callaghan's desk. The first was a telegram from the British Ambassador to Israel, Sir John Mason, in which he reported on a meeting with Begin. The Israeli Prime Minister had conveyed a request to Callaghan that when he met Sadat at Aswan he should persuade him that the Israeli proposals over the Sinai settlements represented 'a far-reaching and fair compromise'.⁶⁶ The second was a telegram from Ambassador Morris in Cairo, in which he made an impassioned plea for Prime Ministerial action: 'I submit that if ever there is to be a time and an issue on which to make use of our credit with the Israel government it is now, in trying to avoid a failure of President Sadat's initiative or equally unsatisfactory a transient success which perpetuates the Arab/Israel problem for another generation.' Morris went further arguing that 'if at this juncture either Mr Begin or President Sadat has to be disappointed by us, there is surely no question who it should be.'⁶⁷

But Callaghan evidently thought otherwise. In an extraordinary meeting the Prime Minister proceeded both to abandon the fundamental principles of British policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and to misjudge completely the mood and priorities of the Egyptian

leader, a man with whom he claimed to have established a close personal relationship. Callaghan arrived at the meeting with two mistaken premises. The first was that the dispute over Sinai settlements was an issue of secondary importance. The second was that Sadat could be persuaded to show “flexibility” over it. But the settlements question was of fundamental importance to Sadat. Agreeing either to allow the Israeli settlements to remain, or to redraw the international border to accommodate them, would have represented a fundamental sacrifice of Egyptian sovereignty. It would also have represented the negation of the terms of the British-sponsored United Nations Security Council resolution 242 which referred to the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war.

While Sadat made clear repeatedly that the retention of the Israeli settlements was totally unacceptable to him, Callaghan in effect acted as Begin’s advocate by referring to his domestic difficulties: ‘Mr Begin could not agree that the settlements should be razed to the ground. He would be turned out of office.’ In a decisive exchange, Callaghan asked how far the settlements were inside the border. When Sadat replied 2-3 kilometres, the Prime Minister ‘exclaimed that surely he was not going to let the initiative break down over 2-3 kilometres of desert in the Middle East. Yes! said President Sadat. It is a matter of principle.’ The exchange continued in the same vein: ‘the Prime Minister commented that President Sadat seemed to be saying that he really was prepared to let the peace initiative fail. President Sadat commented that Egypt had lived within internationally recognised boundaries through thousands of years and he was not going to depart from them now.’ This part of the exchange concluded with Callaghan observing ‘he heard what President Sadat had said and regretted it.’⁶⁸

In describing the meeting during a phone conversation with President Carter the following day, Callaghan commented that ‘Sadat was in a very emotional state at times yesterday.’⁶⁹ But even viewed dispassionately Callaghan had subjected Sadat to unwarranted pressure. Moreover, his advocacy of Begin’s case regarding the Sinai settlements represented

the abandonment of a long-standing principle of British policy. While Carter was complimentary about the Prime Minister's role, joking at the start of their call that 'it looks like you have got the whole Middle East thing straightened out for us', there is no doubt that Callaghan's relations with Sadat had been significantly damaged by their Aswan meeting. According to a report from Morris, US Ambassador Eilts had learned that the Prime Minister's attitude on the Sinai settlements had 'depressed Sadat'.⁷⁰

It was at this juncture that Callaghan came closest to embarking on a significant, high profile initiative of his own in the peace process. In a meeting with senior Foreign Office officials on 30 January, the Prime Minister floated the idea that during President Sadat's forthcoming visit to Washington DC, he might himself travel to Jerusalem 'to act as a channel of communication between President Carter and Mr Begin'.⁷¹ He was only narrowly deflected from his purpose by Michael Weir, the Assistant Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office responsible for the Middle East, who pointed out that 'it might be difficult, in this situation, for the Prime Minister to avoid being cast by Arab opinion and the media as the advocate of the Israelis.' In the face of his officials' sound advice, Callaghan reluctantly accepted that 'there might be too many risks involved in going to Jerusalem.'

The Prime Minister had to content himself instead with a meeting with Sadat during a stopover at Heathrow Airport on his return journey from the United States. Once again Sadat reiterated his perfectly reasonable insistence that 'security could not be based on the acquisition of neighbours' land'. But apparently Callaghan had not learned from his previous exchange with the Egyptian President, stating that 'on the issue of the Sinai settlements... he was not completely at one with the President.... He had no doubt of the justice of Egypt's insistence on its rightful sovereignty but some flexibility would be needed if Mr Begin made his great leap forward on the West Bank issues.' What seemed to be implied here was a trade. Begin was to be persuaded to accept that resolution 242 applied to all fronts including the

West Bank in return for the sacrifice by Egypt of territory in the Sinai. It is hardly surprising that the Egyptian delegation rejected the proposal, with the Speaker of the National Assembly Sayid Marei commenting that ‘if Mr Begin’s political commitments were at issue that was his problem, but the Sinai settlements were a different issue from those on the West Bank.’

The damage done to Anglo-Egyptian relations and Britain’s credibility as an honest broker in the peace process was not apparent to Callaghan. This much is clear from the Prime Minister’s response to Ambassador Willie Morris’s valedictory despatch from Cairo sent a year later in the wake of the Camp David summit. In the course of reviewing his service in Cairo, and with the freedom to speak his mind which his imminent retirement from the Foreign Office brought, Morris wrote that Western governments had failed Sadat from the start by treating Egyptian requirements as being of a lesser order than those of Israel. ‘Instead of support, he got unstinted [sic] praise and admiration for his statesmanship – and was urged to be flexible and give more. It is no secret in Cairo that British ministers twice went even beyond President Carter in urging President Sadat to make concessions on Sinai settlements and boundaries, on which our long-established policy could not have been clearer.’⁷² On the covering letter to Morris’s despatch Callaghan annotated the words: ‘it is a pity to have to have to wait for valedictory despatches to get these strong opinions expressed. What is he referring to on page 4?’ The response from the Foreign Office left no doubt that it was the Prime Minister’s own statements at Aswan and at Heathrow to which Morris had referred.⁷³

If Sadat was one Arab leader whom Callaghan pressed to make unrealistic concessions to satisfy Israeli requirements, King Hussein of Jordan was another. To be sure, Callaghan was not alone in this respect since President Carter’s mishandling of relations with Hussein represented a key flaw in his administration’s diplomatic strategy, which resulted ultimately in the failure of the framework for a comprehensive peace in the region agreed at Camp David. On 22 February, Callaghan entertained Hussein to dinner at 10 Downing Street, the

first of three such meetings during the course of 1978. In his memoirs Callaghan referred to Hussein as 'a courageous leader who steered his country skilfully through the Middle East labyrinth'.⁷⁴ These skills were much in evidence in the King's handling of his exchanges with the Prime Minister. When Callaghan asked Hussein whether the Begin Plan could not be built on to provide an acceptable basis for negotiations in which Jordan could take part, the King was unequivocal in his response: 'he saw no possibility of this.' From Jordan's point of view it was essential that Israel committed itself in advance to withdraw from the West Bank, abandon its claim on sovereignty and offer an assurance of self-determination for the Palestinians. The Begin Plan was designed to avoid all of these outcomes. Hussein's fundamental point was that it was essential to know what the outcome of any transitional period would be before he could agree to participate in it. On several occasions he referred to being 'deeply afraid of a re-run of the Resolution 242 saga' in which the principles for peace had been laid down, but the great powers, principally the United States, had not followed up on their implementation.⁷⁵

Callaghan's meeting with Hussein was followed almost immediately by a visit to Israel and Jordan between 25 and 27 February on the part of Foreign Secretary Owen.⁷⁶ As befitted Prime Minister Begin's favourite Foreign Secretary, Owen was given a warm welcome in Israel and held meetings with Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, Defence Minister Ezer Weizman, and the Prime Minister himself. In Jordan, Owen held a meeting with Crown Prince Hassan in King Hussein's absence. But despite this intensive British diplomacy there was little to show from the visit in terms of concrete progress in the peace process. Callaghan followed up on Owen's visit with a letter to King Hussein summarising the Foreign Secretary's observations from his trip and expressing his conviction that 'Jordan can make a decisive contribution to this effort.'⁷⁷ But over the coming months Callaghan himself drew back somewhat from the active diplomatic role he had played during the winter of 1977-78.

He continued to act as a sounding board for President Carter to vent his frustrations over the peace process, particularly regarding his meetings with Begin. Callaghan's visit to Washington on 23 March, for instance, followed immediately in the wake of a visit by Begin and he found the President more keen to unburden himself about the 'previous two days' harassment' than to discuss the international economic issues which were the ostensible purpose of the meeting.⁷⁸

In July 1978, Britain moved back briefly into central focus in the peace process when an Israeli-Egyptian conference was convened by the Carter administration at Leeds Castle, a stately home in Kent. But Callaghan's role here was confined to vetoing on security grounds the original American plan to hold the meeting at the Churchill Hotel in central London.⁷⁹ The subsequent summit between Sadat and Begin called by President Carter at Camp David between 5 and 17 September coincided with another visit to London by King Hussein, whom Callaghan was scheduled to meet once again on 13 September. The day before the meeting, Callaghan sent an urgent message to Carter offering his help if there were any questions which the President wanted him to put to the King resulting from the summit discussions.⁸⁰ However, when the King arrived for their meeting at 1630 the following afternoon no response from Washington had yet arrived and the two leaders were forced to conduct their discussion without any up to date information on the summit proceedings.⁸¹ This was a reflection both of the chaotic nature of the summit itself and of the fact that Carter had neglected communications with Hussein. It was symptomatic of this neglect that the response from National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, asking the Prime Minister to counsel Hussein to show 'further flexibility', finally arrived later that evening after the two men had already concluded their meeting.⁸²

When Carter, Sadat and Begin eventually emerged from their seclusion at Camp David on 17 September to present twin framework agreements, the one for an Egyptian-

Israeli peace treaty and the other for a comprehensive peace in the region, Callaghan wrote immediately to President Carter offering his warmest congratulations on an achievement which, he argued, owed much to the President's personal dedication and determination. But he correctly identified the key remaining challenge, which would be gaining the backing of the moderate Arab governments, particularly Jordan, for the accords.⁸³ But as far as King Hussein was concerned, the Camp David framework for the West Bank represented little more than the repackaging of the Begin Plan. His opposition to the agreement, which he regarded as providing a cover for a separate peace between Egypt and Israel, coupled with the failure to consult him before assigning significant responsibilities to Jordan in the document, meant that he ultimately refused to participate in the subsequent negotiations.⁸⁴

The close relationship Callaghan had developed with Begin, meanwhile, was in evidence once again in the wake of the Camp David summit when the Israeli Prime Minister decided to hold further talks with him during a stopover at Heathrow Airport on his return journey from the United States. The meeting consisted mainly of a long report from Begin on the summit, but Callaghan did make one creative suggestion to the effect that Begin might help Sadat and forestall the creation of a united Arab front against him by himself making a dramatic gesture towards Syria comparable to that which Sadat had made towards Israel. This might then help open up the possibility of King Hussein's participation in the process. But while Begin described the idea as 'very interesting' nothing came of it.⁸⁵

Callaghan's position on the controversial question of the expansion of Israeli settlements on the West Bank, which Carter had failed to resolve at Camp David, was soon tested again when Begin announced his decision on 26 October to "thicken" a number of existing settlements through the construction of additional housing units. Carter was personally incensed at the decision seeing it as a betrayal of the understanding he believed he had reached with Begin at Camp David over settlements.⁸⁶ However, despite a request from

National Security Adviser Brzezinski that Callaghan should add his weight to the US pressure on Begin to rescind the move and despite a recommendation from the Foreign Secretary to the same effect, Callaghan declined to send the message to the Israeli Prime Minister which Owen had prepared for him. His Private Secretary Bryan Cartledge informed the Foreign Office that ‘the Prime Minister has concluded that by sending a message to Mr Begin along the lines proposed at this time, he would be using up political capital with the Israeli Prime Minister, which might be needed at a later stage, without any real prospect of causing Mr Begin to change his position’.⁸⁷ But set against the backdrop of his earlier pressure on Sadat it is reasonable to conclude that Callaghan was in fact sympathetic to Begin’s position over the settlements.

A further piece of evidence to this effect came the following spring when, against the backdrop of the final phase of the American-sponsored diplomacy aimed at concluding a bilateral Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, Jordan brought forward a resolution to the UN Security Council condemning continued Israeli settlement activity and proposing the creation of a Security Council commission to report back on situation in the occupied territories. The Jordanian resolution reiterated the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to the occupied territories under the terms of which Israeli settlement activity was illegal, a position which the British government had always supported in the past. Before the resolution came to a vote King Hussein wrote personally to Callaghan requesting British backing for it.⁸⁸

Although it was clear that the United States would abstain over the resolution, from Washington Ambassador Peter Jay recommended an approach of ‘measured independent-mindedness’. He argued that ‘the US Administration will be neither surprised nor distressed if the United Kingdom votes in favour of the resolution’. Indeed, he even suspected ‘some among them... will not be sorry to see us take a firm line on the West Bank’. In the event, Callaghan once again decided otherwise. The UK Permanent representative at the UN was left

to perform verbal gymnastics in trying to explain how, while the UK had not departed from its established position that Israeli settlements were illegal under international law and a major obstacle to peace, still the UK would be abstaining over the resolution.⁸⁹ Resolution 446 nevertheless passed on 22 March 1979, with 12 votes in favour and only three abstentions (the UK, USA and Norway). Faced with the established British position regarding the illegality of the settlements, a personal appeal from King Hussein for support, and the advice of his Ambassador in Washington that a vote in favour of the resolution would not damage Anglo-American relations, Callaghan nevertheless opted for abstention. From Amman Ambassador Urwick reported that he had been left in no doubt as to the Jordanian government's disappointment over the vote, especially after the King's personal appeal to the Prime Minister. 'I think we are likely to hear a good deal more of the Jordanian argument that it is little good our welcoming the Egypt/Israel agreement as a first step in a comprehensive settlement if at the same time we condone Israeli moves in the occupied territories which make an ultimate settlement impossible', wrote Urwick.⁹⁰ In yet another meeting with Begin during his stopover at Heathrow the day after the Security Council vote, Callaghan told the Israeli leader in private that the UK did not support Israeli settlement policy.⁹¹ But the Prime Minister's actions spoke louder than his words.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, therefore, that the Callaghan government was an outlier among British governments in its approach to the Arab-Israeli peace process. This was due in large measure to the personal predilections of the Prime Minister who both cultivated a close relationship with the Israeli Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, and departed from established principles of British foreign policy in effectively condoning Begin's position over settlements in the occupied territories. The justification offered by Callaghan for his repeated refusal to take a stand on the issue of Israeli settlement policy was that he was accruing political capital with the Israeli leader which might be used at a later date. But if this was so,

the capital was never drawn down during the period of his administration. While it has been argued that with Wilson's resignation, the Foreign Office was able to promote a more pro-Arab policy under Callaghan, the evidence presented here suggests otherwise.⁹² Faced with the choice of supporting Begin's position or that of the moderate Arab leaders Sadat and Hussein, Callaghan always chose the former. In his memoirs, written with the benefit of hindsight during the 1980s, Callaghan argued that 'by his inflexibility... he [Begin] weakened Israel's position in the world. His narrow view of Israel's future failed to bind the people of Israel together, and despite the slaughter, he was later unable to achieve his purpose in Lebanon. Moreover, he was never able, as Sadat was, to take the broad view. Sadat was the bigger man of the two....'⁹³ But this stood in stark contrast to the approach Callaghan had actually adopted while in office.

In terms of Britain's broader role in the Camp David peace process, Callaghan did provide personal support and advice which President Carter clearly found valuable. As the President put it in one phone conversation in February 1978, 'you've been very helpful in the whole process, Jim, and I thank you for it.'⁹⁴ Indeed, Callaghan's role in absorbing some of Carter's frustration at having to work with Begin was perhaps a case of the Anglo-American special relationship working at the level of consolation rather more than actual consultation. But Callaghan's move closer to Begin came at the cost of damage to Britain's relations with the more moderate Arab states meaning that the potential mediating role which Callaghan appeared to cherish early in 1978 was essentially a mirage. Callaghan was well advised by Foreign Office officials at this stage not to undertake his own journey to Jerusalem.

If Callaghan left office in May 1979 with Britain's relations with the Arab states under strain, the opposite was true of relations with Israel. Indeed, some of Prime Minister Begin's frustration at Callaghan's loss of office was most likely reflected in his extraordinary handling of his first meeting with Callaghan's successor, Margaret Thatcher, a "confrontable"

exchange if ever there was one. According to the recollection of Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington, Begin delivered an unprovoked verbal tirade to the bemused Prime Minister: ““you are responsible for the death of two million Jews at Auschwitz!” Margaret looked somewhat astonished. I suppose she had been aged about thirteen [sic] at the time in question. “You are responsible! Because you didn’t bomb the railway line!””⁹⁵ Thatcher subsequently described the meeting as ‘one of the most difficult she had experienced’, explaining that she had been unable to make any headway at all when she had raised the issue of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories.⁹⁶ But then, this was hardly surprising since Begin had become accustomed to a rather different approach from her predecessor in office.⁹⁷

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¹ For further discussion of Project Alpha see: Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy: Volume Four: Operation Alpha*; Shamir, 'The Collapse of Project Alpha'.

² On Britain and resolution 242 see: Ashton, 'Searching for a Just and Lasting Peace'; Bailey, *The Making of Resolution 242*; Brenchley, *Britain, the Six-Day War and its Aftermath*, 53-92; Louis, 'The Ghost of Suez and Resolution 242', 219-46; Lall, *The UN and the Middle East Crisis, 1967*; McDowall, 'Clarity or Ambiguity?', 1367-81.

³ The term was coined by Elizabeth Monroe in her seminal work *Britain's Moment in the Middle East*.

⁴ On Rogers' diplomacy see Daigle, *The Limits of Détente*; Quandt, *Peace Process*, 55-97.

⁵ For discussion of the ceasefire incident see: Spelling, 'Recrimination and Reconciliation', 492-5.

⁶ For further discussion of Anglo-American relations during this period see: Hughes, 'Britain, the Transatlantic Alliance, and the Arab-Israeli War of 1973'; Robb, 'The Power of Oil'; Scott, *Allies Apart*; Spelling, 'Edward Heath and Anglo-American Relations'.

⁷ Quandt, *Camp David*, 91. Discussion of the British role is absent from the US-centric literature on the Camp David peace process.

⁸ Record of a telephone conversation between the Prime Minister and President-Elect Carter, 13 January 1977, PREM16/1485, The United Kingdom National Archives [TNA].

⁹ Washington to FCO, telegram no.946, 3 March 1977, *ibid*.

¹⁰ Prime Minister's briefing for American Correspondents, 4 March 1977, *ibid*.

¹¹ Ramsbotham to Owen, 18 March 1977, *ibid*.

¹² Prime Minister's Speech at State Dinner, 10 March 1977, *ibid*.

¹³ Record of a meeting held at the White House, 11 March 1977, *ibid*.

¹⁴ Carter spoke at the Newcastle Civic Centre on 6 May 1977, an event witnessed by this author on his twelfth birthday: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7472>.

¹⁵ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 279-80.

¹⁶ For further discussion of Begin's background and political creed see: Shilon, *Menachem Begin*; Temko, *To Win or to Die*.

¹⁷ Text of a Telephone Conversation between the Prime Minister and the President of the United States of America, 21 May 1977, PREM16/1370, TNA. The Callaghan-Begin meeting in 1974 took place at 17.00 on 4 February 1974 at the Knesset. See 'Schedule for Visit to Israel 3-7 February 1974', undated [February 1974], Uncatalogued Papers of Lord Callaghan, Bodleian Library, Oxford [hereafter 'Callaghan Papers'].

¹⁸ Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 510; Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two: The Iron Lady*, 335. See also the record of her first meeting with Begin: Prime Minister's lunch for the Prime Minister of Israel, 23 May 1979, PREM19/92, TNA.

¹⁹ Edmunds, 'The Evolution of British Labour Party Policy on Israel', 26-7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

²¹ Lockery, 'The British Foreign Office and Israel', 497-512. Lockery argues that the Foreign Office capitalised on Wilson's resignation to impose an approach which was much less pro-Israeli. However, his analysis does not extend beyond 1976 to consider Callaghan's approach between 1977 and 1979. June Edmunds adopts a middle position, arguing that while there were some indications of change in Labour's traditional pro-Israeli approach under Callaghan, there were also significant continuities and intolerance for change, most notably exhibited when the Prime Minister forbade his Parliamentary Private Secretary from joining a pro-Palestinian organisation (Edmunds, 'The Evolution of British Labour Party Policy', 30).

²² Morgan, *Callaghan*, 5.

²³ Owen, *Time to Declare*, 261.

²⁴ For the full text of the declaration see: http://aei.pitt.edu/1410/1/London_june_1977.pdf.

²⁵ Quandt, *Camp David*, 48.

²⁶ Note of a Meeting to Discuss the Middle East at Chequers between the Prime Minister and Mr Cyrus Vance, 13 August 1977, PREM16/1371, TNA.

²⁷ See for example the views expressed by the Deputy-Leader of the Israeli Labour Party, Yigal Allon in 'Note of a meeting between the Prime Minister and Yigal Allon at the Brighton Conference Centre', 5 October 1977, *ibid.*

²⁸ Callaghan's annotation on Cairo to FCO, telegram no.844, 22 August 1977, *ibid.*

²⁹ Wall to Meadway, 25 August 1977, 'Visit of Israeli Foreign Minister, *ibid.*

³⁰ Meadway to Wall, 26 August 1977, *ibid.*

³¹ For further discussion of Dr Herbert's role and the establishment of this channel of contact see: Bar-Zohar, *Yaacov Herzog*, 226-31; Shlaim, *Lion of Jordan*, 192-6.

³² Author's interview with Jack O'Connell, Washington D.C., 27 September 2007.

³³ Shlaim, 'His Royal Shyness', 17; Dayan, *Breakthrough*, 35-7.

³⁴ Extract from a record of a meeting between the Prime Minister and Abba Eban, 7 November 1977, PREM16/1371, TNA.

³⁵ For further discussion of Anglo-Jordanian relations see: Ashton, 'Searching for a Just and Lasting Peace'; Ashton, 'A "Special Relationship" in Spite of Ourselves'; Ashton, *Love's Labours Lost*; Blackwell, *British Military Intervention*.

³⁶ Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of Israel at 10 Downing Street, 4 December 1977, PREM16/1372, TNA. For Callaghan's account of the meeting in his memoirs see: Callaghan, *Time and Chance*, 487. Callaghan and Begin had met the night before for a tête-à-tête discussion lasting an hour at which no one else was present (Mason to Owen, 'Mr Begin's Visit to London, 2-7 December 1977', 13 December 1977, PREM16/1729, TNA).

³⁷ Tel Aviv to FCO, telegram no.275, 1 September 1977, FCO93/1160.

³⁸ Note of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and Mr Abba Eban, 7 November 1977, PREM16/1351, TNA.

³⁹ Cunningham to Callaghan, 20 October 1977, FCO93/1161; Callaghan to Cunningham, 31 October 1977, FCO93/1162.

⁴⁰ 'Begin, Menachem', undated [November 1977], FCO93/1163.

⁴¹ Mason to Owen, 'Mr Begin's Visit to London 2-7 December 1977', 13 December 1977, PREM16/1729, TNA. The full text of Callaghan's speech can be found in 'Prime Minister's speech at the Savoy', 4 December 1977, FCO93/1164, TNA.

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- ⁴² Cartledge to Fergusson, 'Middle East and Horn of Africa Discussion during the European Council on 5 December', 6 December 1977, FCO93/1164, TNA.
- ⁴³ Conversation between Mr Begin and the Prime Minister, 12 December 1977, PREM16/1372, TNA.
- ⁴⁴ Owen had also made Begin a gift of a leather-bound volume of *Hansard* from the shelves of the Foreign Secretary's room where the Balfour Declaration had been signed which according to Owen's account had 'thrilled' Begin (Owen, *Time to Declare*, 259).
- ⁴⁵ Owen to Jay, Washington telegram no.4236, 13 December 1977, PREM16/1372, TNA.
- ⁴⁶ Memo for the Prime Minister, 'Your telephone Conversation with Mr Begin', 12 December 1977, *ibid*.
- ⁴⁷ Extracts from a note of a meeting between the Prime Minister and President Giscard d'Estaing of France, 12 December 1977, *ibid*.
- ⁴⁸ Telephone Conversation between the Prime Minister and Mr Begin, 15 December 1977, PREM16/1352, TNA.
- ⁴⁹ Record of a Telephone Conversation between the Prime Minister and the President of the United States, 17 December 1977, PREM16/1372, TNA.
- ⁵⁰ Carter to Callaghan, telex via Cabinet Office Line, T.265/77, 18 December 1977, PREM16/1372, TNA. This communication was evidently regarded as sufficiently significant to be included in the Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS] volume: Document 179, *FRUS, 1977-80, Volume VIII, Arab-Israeli Dispute January 1977-August 1978*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v08>.
- ⁵¹ Callaghan to Carter, telex via Cabinet Office Line, T.266/77, 18 December 1977, PREM16/1372, TNA.
- ⁵² Record of a Discussion between the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of Israel, Mr Menachem Begin at Chequers, 20 December 1977, PREM16/1753, TNA.
- ⁵³ Quandt, *Camp David*, 156-8; Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 299-300.
- ⁵⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, 16 December 1977, Document 177, *FRUS, 1977-80, Volume VIII*.
- ⁵⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, 17 December 1977, Document 178, *ibid*.
- ⁵⁶ Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of Israel at 10 Downing Street, 4 December 1977, PREM16/1372, TNA.
- ⁵⁷ Record of a Discussion between the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of Israel, Mr Menachem Begin at Chequers, 20 December 1977, PREM16/1753, TNA.
- ⁵⁸ Callaghan to Carter, T269/77, 21 December 1977, *ibid*.
- ⁵⁹ Quandt, *Camp David*, 159-60; Telephone Conversation between the Prime Minister and Mr Begin, 16.00 hours, 26 December 1977, PREM16/1753, TNA.
- ⁶⁰ Callaghan, *Time and Chance*, 289.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid*, 291.
- ⁶² *Ibid*, 292.
- ⁶³ *Ibid*.
- ⁶⁴ Telephone Conversation between the Prime Minister and President Sadat, 17.15 hours, 26 December 1977, PREM16/1370, TNA.
- ⁶⁵ Prendergast to Cartledge, 'President Sadat's Initiative', 30 November 1977, PREM16/1372, TNA.
- ⁶⁶ Tel Aviv to Delhi, telegram no.2, 'For Prime Minister's Party', 9 January 1978, PREM16/1754, TNA.
- ⁶⁷ Cairo to FCO, telegram no.31, 9 January 1978, *ibid*.
- ⁶⁸ Meeting with President Sadat at the President's Rest House, Aswan, 13 January 1978, *ibid*.
- ⁶⁹ Prime Minister's Telephone Conversation with President Carter, 14 January 1978, *ibid*.

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- ⁷⁰ Cairo to FCO, telegram no.107, 'Secret and Personal', 26 January 1978, PREM16/1755, TNA.
- ⁷¹ Note of a Meeting at No.10 Downing Street on the Middle East, 30 January 1978, *ibid.*
- ⁷² Wall to Cartledge, 'Valedictory Despatch from HM Ambassador Cairo', 2 April 1979, PREM16/2170, TNA.
- ⁷³ Lever to Cartledge, 'Sir Willie Morris's Valedictory Despatch', 17 April 1979, PREM16/2170, TNA.
- ⁷⁴ Callaghan, *Time and Chance*, 291.
- ⁷⁵ Note of a Conversation at the Prime Minister's Dinner for King Hussein of Jordan, 22 February 1978, PREM16/1732, TNA.
- ⁷⁶ Owen, *Time to Declare*, 365-6.
- ⁷⁷ Callaghan to Hussein, T.47/78, 6 March 1978, PREM16/1757, TNA.
- ⁷⁸ Callaghan, *Time and Chance*, 490.
- ⁷⁹ Cartledge to Walden, 'US/Egyptian/Israeli talks in London, 18/19 July', 15 July 1978, PREM16/1758, TNA.
- ⁸⁰ Callaghan to Carter, T190/78, 12 September 1978, PREM16/1759, TNA.
- ⁸¹ Note of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and King Hussein of Jordan at 10 Downing Street, 13 September 1978, *ibid.*
- ⁸² Washington to FCO, telegram no.3617, 13 September 1978, *ibid.*
- ⁸³ Callaghan to Carter, T199/78, 18 September 1978, *ibid.*
- ⁸⁴ Amman to FCO, telegram no.346, 25 September 1978, *ibid.*; Ashton, *King Hussein of Jordan*, 202-8.
- ⁸⁵ Record of the Prime Minister's Conversation with Mr Begin at Heathrow Airport, 0800 hours, 22 September 1978, PREM16/1759, TNA.
- ⁸⁶ Quandt, *Camp David*, 277.
- ⁸⁷ Cartledge to Prendergast, 'Egypt/Israel', 27 October 1978, FCO93/1749, TNA.
- ⁸⁸ Amman to FCO, telegram no.94, 19 March 1979, PREM16/2170, TNA.
- ⁸⁹ UKMIS New York to FCO, telegram no.366, 22 March 1979, *ibid.*
- ⁹⁰ Amman to FCO, telegram no.103, 27 March 1979, *ibid.*
- ⁹¹ Note of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of Israel, Mr Menachem Begin, at Heathrow Airport, 23 March 1979, *ibid.*
- ⁹² Lockery, 'The British Foreign Office and Israel', 497-512.
- ⁹³ Callaghan, *Time and Chance*, 487.
- ⁹⁴ Record of a Telephone Conversation between the Prime Minister and the President of the United States, 15 February 1978, PREM16/1756, TNA.
- ⁹⁵ Carrington, *Reflect on Things Past*, 346. See also: Record of a Discussion during the Prime Minister's Lunch for the Prime Minister of Israel, Mr Menachem Begin, at 10 Downing Street, 23 May 1979, PREM19/92, TNA.
- ⁹⁶ Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the Vice-President of Egypt, Mr Muhammad Hosni Mubarak in the House of Commons, 14 June 1979, PREM19/92, TNA.
- ⁹⁷ Ambassador Mason subsequently reported privately to Callaghan: 'Mr Begin has convinced himself that the Conservative Government is markedly less favourable towards Israel than was its predecessor.' (Mason to McCaffrey, 12 October 1979, Callaghan Papers.)