

BRIDGING CULTURES, LEADING PEACE: LEADERSHIP AND INTERCULTURALISM IN THE ISRAEL-EGYPT PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

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Abstract

The 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt marked a historic turning point in Middle Eastern diplomacy, establishing the first formal recognition of Israel by an Arab state. This article revisits the Israeli-Egyptian peace process to examine the interplay between political leadership and intercultural competence in the achievement of breakthrough agreements. While the roles of Anwar Sadat, Menachem Begin, and U.S. President Jimmy Carter have been widely acknowledged, this study argues that visionary and courageous leadership, though indispensable, was not sufficient on its own.

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Instead, it contends that the leaders' ability to navigate intercultural dynamics—through empathy, symbolic communication, and cultural sensitivity—was a critical enabling factor that amplified the effectiveness of their leadership. Drawing on historical analysis and theoretical perspectives from international relations, the article explores how intercultural competence contributed to building trust, overcoming misperceptions, and sustaining diplomatic engagement. By integrating leadership theory with insights from intercultural communication, this study advances a dual proposition: that exceptional leadership is a necessary condition for landmark peace agreements, and that its success in culturally complex conflicts depends significantly on the leader's intercultural acumen. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the conditions under which diplomatic breakthroughs occur and offer practical implications for contemporary conflict resolution and negotiation strategy.

Keywords: Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty (1979); Middle Eastern diplomacy; political leadership; intercultural competence; conflict resolution; diplomatic engagement; international relations; empathy; symbolic communication; cultural sensitivity.

Introduction

The 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt was a historic breakthrough in the Middle East, marking the first time an Arab country formally recognized the State of Israel. More than four decades later, the legacy of this treaty continues to influence regional dynamics and inspire contemporary diplomatic efforts, such as the Abraham Accords.¹ At the heart of the Israeli-Egyptian peace process were two leaders—Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin—whose political courage and strategic foresight redefined possibilities for peace. Yet, their leadership alone does not fully explain the treaty's success. This article argues that while leadership was the

¹ See The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "The Egyptian-Israeli Peace: Lessons for Today", Policy Report, 24 March, 2009, <<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egyptian-israeli-peace-lessons-today>>.

most critical and indispensable factor in achieving the agreement, its success was also deeply dependent on the leaders' capacity to understand and navigate intercultural dynamics. Bridging cultural differences was not the determinant factor, but it was a substantial enabler of effective leadership.

The central claim of this paper is therefore twofold: (1) visionary and courageous leadership is a necessary condition for breakthrough peace agreements, and (2) the success of such leadership in intercultural conflict settings is contingent on the leader's capacity for cultural empathy, communication, and symbolic engagement. This article examines these propositions by analyzing the Israel-Egypt peace process, with particular emphasis on the roles played by Sadat and Begin, as well as U.S. President Jimmy Carter as mediator. Through a combination of historical analysis and theoretical framing, this article contributes to the understanding of leadership in high-stakes negotiations and the essential, yet often underestimated, role of intercultural competence.

To develop this argument, the article proceeds as follows. It begins with a review of relevant literature on leadership and interculturalism in international relations. It then outlines the methodology employed in the research, followed by a presentation of key findings derived from content analysis and historical accounts. The article concludes by discussing the implications of this case study for both theory and practice in the fields of diplomacy and conflict resolution.

Literature Review

In the fields of political science and international relations, leadership has long been identified as a critical variable in determining the outcomes of negotiations and conflict resolution. Max Weber's classical typology of authority identified "charismatic authority" as a central force in shaping social change, with leaders relying on personal magnetism and vision to inspire their followers.² James MacGregor Burns later built on this framework with his

² M. Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Los Angeles: The Free Press, 1947.

concept of transformational leadership—leaders who mobilize others by articulating a compelling vision and appealing to shared values.³ In contrast, transactional leadership, focused on structured exchanges and reward mechanisms, often lacks the capacity for innovation needed in breakthrough negotiations.

In international affairs, Kenneth Waltz's neorealism contends that leaders operate within an anarchic global system driven by power and security concerns, thereby limiting individual agency.⁴ However, scholars such as Robert Keohane (liberal institutionalism) and Alexander Wendt (constructivism) argue for a more nuanced understanding: leadership can emerge from cooperation, shared norms, and intersubjective meanings.⁵

Interculturalism, on the other hand, has gained growing attention in diplomacy studies. According to Michael Byram, intercultural competence involves not only awareness of cultural differences but also the communicative and behavioral skills to bridge these differences constructively.⁶ Hofstede's dimensions of culture, such as power distance and individualism vs. collectivism, provide analytical tools to assess how cultural frameworks shape diplomatic behavior.⁷ Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner extend this by exploring emotional expression (neutral vs. affective) and rule application (universalism vs. particularism), showing how misunderstandings can arise from clashing cultural norms.⁸

³ J. M. Burns, *Leadership*, New York: Harper, 1978.

⁴ K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1979.

⁵ R. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984; A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁶ M. Byram, *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*, Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 1997.

⁷ G. Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 1980.

⁸ C. Hampden-Turner and F. Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012.

Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory further explains how intercultural interactions often involve psychological discomfort, which can be mitigated through empathy, cultural awareness, and active listening.⁹ These theories are essential to understanding how Sadat and Begin were able to transcend cultural barriers—not by eliminating them, but by skillfully navigating them to serve political goals.

The interplay between leadership and interculturalism is thus not merely complementary but symbiotic. Leaders in international settings must engage not only in strategic calculations but also in symbolic communication that resonates across cultural lines. In high-stakes peace negotiations, the ability to reframe historical enmities through shared values or religious symbolism—such as Sadat's address to the Knesset or Begin's references to Jewish prophetic tradition—is a testament to the fusion of effective leadership with intercultural sensitivity.

Methodology

This paper relies on research which adopted a qualitative methodology based on content analysis of primary and secondary sources. The study combines interpretive analysis of historical records, speeches, and memoirs with theoretical frameworks from the fields of political science and intercultural communication. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how leadership and intercultural competence interacted in the Israeli-Egyptian peace process.

Primary sources include speeches by Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin, official transcripts from the Camp David Accords, and statements made during and after the 1979 peace treaty. In addition, the memoir of Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt-Israel Peace Negotiations*, provides firsthand insights into the negotiation dynamics.¹⁰

⁹ W. B. Gudykunst, *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2005.

¹⁰ M. Dayan, *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt-Israel Peace Negotiations*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981.

The study also draws on qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with chief American, Egyptians, Israeli and Emirati diplomats and decision makers involved in or close to the negotiation, as well as people from the academia.¹¹ This research uses a qualitative approach, drawing from a wide range of written and spoken sources. Written materials include official documents, press coverage, and think-tank studies, while interviews were conducted with key officials and experts from Israel, Egypt, the UAE, and academia. It aims to contribute to intercultural studies and negotiation diplomacy, offering insights that could inform future peace efforts and the development of broader conflict resolution models.

The methodology prioritizes thematic coding of leadership behavior, symbolic gestures, and intercultural interactions, using a triangulation approach to enhance credibility. In line with constructivist paradigms, this study does not seek to generalize findings to all peace processes but to elucidate the mechanisms that made this agreement successful. Emphasis is placed on the interpretive context in which decisions were made and how cultural awareness was leveraged by each actor to advance political objectives.

Findings

The findings of this research underscore the pivotal role of leadership in the Israel-Egypt peace process while illuminating the enabling role of intercultural competence in facilitating effective negotiations. The data collected from content analysis and interviews reveal several consistent themes.

¹¹ See discussion on the main aspects of qualitative approach method in D. K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, 'Introduction' in Idem (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005; J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2024. For methods of case study research the theoretical background included: J. W. Creswell, *op. cit.*, p. 100. See also R. K. Yin (2017) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2017; J. Blatter and M. Haverland, *Designing Case Studies: Explanatory Approaches in Small-N Research*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

First, participants' interviews widely acknowledged that leadership was the decisive factor in reaching the agreement. President Anwar Sadat's 1977 visit to Jerusalem broke a psychological barrier and redefined Arab-Israeli diplomacy. His willingness to address the Israeli Knesset and speak of peace as a moral obligation reflected not only strategic calculation but also deep symbolic engagement. Menachem Begin, Israel's first right-wing prime minister, faced immense internal pressure but managed to present territorial concessions—most notably, the withdrawal from Sinai—as a national interest anchored in Jewish ethical tradition.

Second, both leaders leveraged intercultural tools to support their leadership goals. According to one interview with a leading legal expert involved in the negotiations, Sadat's use of shared religious symbolism and inclusive language ("our children," "our future") resonated across Israeli society and softened longstanding hostilities. Similarly, Begin incorporated biblical references to frame the treaty as a continuation of Jewish prophetic visions of peace. Though neither leader spoke the other's language, both used rhetorical and symbolic strategies that communicated respect and spiritual solidarity.

Third, the mediating role of U.S. President Jimmy Carter demonstrated the importance of bridging strategies in high-stakes negotiations. According to one person interviewed, who was a senior diplomat involved in the negotiations, Carter engaged in active shuttle diplomacy and reframed divisive issues by proposing phased implementation and language ambiguity (e.g., regarding Palestinian autonomy), which allowed each side interpretive flexibility. His empathetic leadership, rooted in religious and moral convictions, enabled trust-building even when talks threatened to collapse.

Fourth, structural cultural differences presented real challenges. Begin's Western legalistic style clashed with Sadat's more emotive and relational approach. Sadat, grounded in high-context communication, often relied on indirect cues, while Begin, from a low-context culture, preferred clear legal formulations. These differences created friction but were ultimately managed

through Carter's cultural mediation and the use of intermediaries (e.g., Aharon Barak and Osama el-Baz).

Finally, the interviewees suggest that while cultural factors did not determine the outcome, they significantly shaped the process. Religion played a dual role. It was invoked by leaders to legitimize peace as a divine mission but also mobilized opposition—such as Gush Emunim in Israel and Islamist militants in Egypt—who viewed the treaty as theological betrayal. Despite this, the leaders' ability to co-opt religious language helped them overcome resistance and build consensus.

The findings reinforce the argument that leadership is the determinant factor in peace negotiations, but its success—especially in culturally charged environments—is critically enhanced by intercultural competence.

Conclusions

The Israel-Egypt peace treaty of 1979 is a powerful testament to the capacity of leadership to reshape history, particularly when exercised with cultural sensitivity and diplomatic creativity. This case study affirms the article's core thesis: leadership is the decisive and indispensable factor in achieving a peace agreement, but in complex intercultural contexts, leadership must be coupled with an acute understanding of cultural dynamics to succeed.

Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin demonstrated distinct leadership styles, yet both understood the need to frame their actions in ways that resonated with their domestic audiences and international observers. Their symbolic gestures, moral language, and use of religious narratives were instrumental in transforming what might have been a narrow political agreement into a historic reconciliation. Without Sadat's psychological breakthrough and Begin's ideological pragmatism, the treaty might never have been signed.

Moreover, their leadership was complemented and supported by the intercultural bridging efforts of U.S. President Jimmy Carter, whose role as mediator was characterized not only by persistence but by deep empathy

and cultural awareness. His ability to reframe contentious issues, offer creative compromises, and maintain personal relationships with both leaders underscores the value of third-party mediation grounded in intercultural competence.

While cultural barriers—linguistic, religious, historical—were real and at times formidable, they were not insurmountable. On the contrary, they became tools in the hands of leaders who knew how to use them to build legitimacy and moral authority. Religion functioned both as a bridge and a barrier. The same cultural symbols that generated resistance among radical factions were employed by leaders to elevate peace into the realm of ethical and spiritual duty.

This article's analysis demonstrates that successful leadership in international peace negotiations is not merely a function of strategic interest or power dynamics. It is also an act of cultural navigation, requiring the ability to build trust, craft inclusive narratives, and manage symbolic capital. The implications of this case are far-reaching: future diplomatic efforts in culturally divided regions must invest in cultivating intercultural competence alongside political courage.

Thus, bridging cultural divides may not be sufficient, but it is certainly necessary. As this study has shown, it is not the soft element that distracts from hard politics, it is what enables politics to function at its highest level. In the case of Israel and Egypt, it was the fusion of leadership and interculturalism that made peace not only imaginable but real.

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