CULTURAL ASPECTS OF NEGOTIATION BETWEEN ISRAEL AND EGYPT LEADING TO CAMP DAVID ACCORDS 1979

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Abstract

This article explores the cultural, intercultural, and interpersonal dimensions that shaped the negotiations between Israel and Egypt leading to the 1979 Camp David Accords. Drawing on theoretical frameworks in interculturalism, leadership studies, communication theory, and negotiation analysis, as well as firsthand accounts from actors involved, this study examines how cultural perceptions, religious symbolism, linguistic practices, and interpersonal relationships influenced the peace process. The study argues that while cultural and religious factors were not the direct causes of peace, they played an important enabling role, facilitating dialogue, reducing psychological distance, and helping negotiators humanize one another. Through a thematic and interpretive approach, the article situates the peace process within broader developments in Middle Eastern intercultural dynamics, including the later trajectory culminating in the Abraham Accords. It concludes that the Israel–Egypt peace negotiations demonstrate how intercultural competence, leadership vision, and personal diplomacy can reshape entrenched conflicts, creating new paradigms of regional coexistence.
Keywords: *Interculturalism; Israel–Egypt relations; Camp David Accords; diplomacy; political leadership; religion; communication; Middle East negotiations; Abraham Accords; cultural identity.*

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INTRODUCTION

The 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt stands as one of the most transformative events in the modern Middle East. Beyond its immediate geopolitical significance, the treaty marked a profound shift in the cultural, psychological, and interpersonal landscape of a region long defined by conflict and distrust. While the political and military dimensions of the treaty have been explored extensively, the cultural and intercultural factors that shaped this diplomatic achievement remain underexamined. Yet, these factors played a subtle but crucial role. Cultural perceptions, religious identities, interpersonal rapport, and communicative styles influenced how leaders approached the negotiations, how delegations interacted, and how each side conceptualized the possibility of peace.

This article examines these cultural dimensions, drawing on both theoretical literature and the insights of individuals who participated directly in the negotiations. The article treats the peace process as a site of intercultural encounter, where deeply rooted historical narratives, symbolic gestures, and personal identities met in a complex diplomatic arena. Rather than interpreting the negotiations purely through the lens of strategy or realpolitik, this article approaches the Camp David process as an intercultural negotiation shaped by social norms, religious ideas, communication patterns, and leadership styles.

The thematic, interpretive structure of the article allows for a holistic examination of the ways in which culture operated throughout the process. The first section develops a theoretical understanding of interculturalism, negotiation theory, and leadership studies, illustrating how these frameworks illuminate the specific dynamics between Egypt and Israel, while the second section gives primary examples of intercultural aspects during the negotiations between Israel and Egypt at Camp David. The final concluding section draws broader conclusions about the place of interculturalism in Middle Eastern diplomacy, connecting the 1979 peace to subsequent developments such as the Abraham Accords.

While this article does not claim that cultural factors "caused" the peace, it demonstrates that peace would have been significantly more difficult to achieve without the cultural, symbolic, and interpersonal bridges forged by the leaders and negotiators. By unpacking these dimensions, this study offers a nuanced interpretation of how the peace between Israel and Egypt became possible and what it reveals about the broader possibilities for

intercultural reconciliation in the Middle East. The concept of cultural diplomacy has grown in importance in recent decades. As Joseph Nye argues, cultural diplomacy is a soft power tool, which allows countries to achieve diplomatic goals without the usage of military strength or threatening with economic power.[1] This article further explores the discussions from these vantage points.

SECTION 1 – THEORETICAL APPROACH

Culture profoundly shapes the ways nations perceive one another. Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism* highlights how cultural narratives and symbolic constructions influence political behaviour and interstate relations.[2] In the context of the Arab–Israeli conflict, these dynamics were particularly salient. For decades, Israelis and Egyptians engaged not only in geopolitical confrontation but also in a symbolic and cultural confrontation. Each side interpreted the other through a lens of historical memory, religious identity, and collective trauma.

The cultural weight of these perceptions posed obstacles to diplomacy.[3] For many Egyptians, Israel represented a Western, foreign imposition – a perception rooted in Arab nationalist discourse, anti-colonial narratives, and the trauma of repeated wars. For Israelis, Egypt symbolized the formidable military power of the Arab world, a nation whose nationalism and pan-Arab identity positioned it as Israel's primary adversary for decades. These perceptions created psychological barriers that negotiation alone could not overcome.

The intercultural encounter between the two sides required not only political courage but a willingness to deconstruct entrenched stereotypes. Although cultural differences did not determine the success or failure of the negotiations, they shaped the diplomatic environment in which these negotiations unfolded. The leaders, interlocutors, and advisors who participated in the process had to navigate this cultural terrain carefully, sometimes intuitively, and sometimes through strategies rooted in intercultural competence.

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[1] J.S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics.* New York: Public Affairs, 2005

[2] E. Said, *Orientalism.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1978

[3] See discussion on this matter in: R. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976

Interculturalism offers a more dynamic model of cultural relations than traditional multiculturalism. While multiculturalism emphasizes the coexistence of diverse cultures, interculturalism stresses active engagement, reciprocal understanding, and genuine interaction across cultural boundaries. Scholars such as Michael Byram, who emphasizes intercultural competence, show that engaging across cultural differences requires not only knowledge of the other but the communication skills, empathy, and adaptability necessary to bridge divides. [4]

In the negotiations between Egypt and Israel, interculturalism manifested as a gradual process in which symbolic gestures, respectful behaviour, and the recognition of shared cultural and religious norms helped reduce psychological distance. The fact that both societies were part of a broader Abrahamic tradition was a subtle but meaningful bridge. While this shared religious heritage did not determine the success of negotiations, its symbolic presence helped normalize dialogue.

This dynamic reflects an important element of interculturalism: cultures rarely exist in isolation. They constantly interact, overlap, and influence one another. The Middle East, despite its deeply rooted conflicts, has always been marked by cultural interconnections – linguistic, religious, commercial, and intellectual. The peace negotiations brought these latent interconnections to the surface.

The intercultural dynamics between Egypt and Israel can also be examined through the frameworks of Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars. Hofstede's dimensions, particularly individualism versus collectivism and high versus low power distance, offer useful lenses for understanding leadership and negotiation styles. [5] Egyptian political culture, shaped by millennia of centralized authority and later by Arab nationalist ideologies, reflects relatively high-power distance, collectivist tendencies, and deference to hierarchical leadership. Israel, although also influenced by strong leaders and centralized authority structures, retains characteristics of a more individualistic society with robust internal debate, dissent, and open democratic discourse.

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

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

Trompenaars adds further insights through dimensions such as universalism versus particularism and neutral versus affective cultures.[6] Egyptians tend to operate within a more particularistic and affective cultural framework, where personal relationships and emotional expression are integral components of communication. Israelis, while also capable of emotionally intense communication, tend to emphasize directness, universal principles, and normative frameworks.

These differences influenced the negotiation styles of Sadat and Begin. Sadat, steeped in a political culture that values symbolism, emotional resonance, and charismatic leadership, approached diplomacy through grand gestures, historical speeches, and evocative language. Begin, though charismatic in his own right, operated within a legalistic, principled, and text-oriented mode of communication. His commitment to Jewish tradition and religious symbolism infused his political language with moral weight but also with a degree of rigidity. The ability of these two leaders to navigate their cultural differences – including contrasts in communication, leadership style, and emotional expression – was one of the remarkable features of the negotiations.

Gudykunst's work on intercultural communication, and his Anxiety/ Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory helps explain how individuals manage discomfort in intercultural encounters.[7] Negotiators from different cultural backgrounds often experience uncertainty about the other's intentions, norms, and expectations. High anxiety can lead to misinterpretation, mistrust, or withdrawal, while low anxiety supports open communication and empathy.

The Camp David negotiations, occurring after decades of hostility and multiple wars, naturally generated anxiety. Both sides carried deep historical grievances. Egyptians bore the scars of repeated military defeats, Israeli occupation of Sinai, and a sense of national humiliation offset partly by the 1973 war. Israelis carried the trauma of existential wars, regional isolation, and the fear that peace might compromise national security.

Yet, through symbolic gestures, respectful behaviour, and careful interpersonal communication, Sadat and Begin gradually reduced this anxiety. Their willingness to share religious traditions, whether Sadat's prayers

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[6] F. Trompenaars, *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998

[7] W.B. Gudykunst, *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication.* Los Angeles: SAGE, 2004

or Begin's observance of Jewish ritual, created a humanizing environment. These moments demonstrated how otherwise abstract intercultural theories materialize in diplomatic practice.

Leadership studies offer rich insights into how individuals shape political trajectories. Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority describes how leaders with extraordinary personal qualities can mobilize societies toward transformative goals.[8] Sadat embodied this charismatic dimension. His decision to visit Jerusalem, an unprecedented and electrifying act, shifted the course of Middle Eastern history. It communicated not only political intent but profound cultural courage.

In contrast, Menachem Begin's leadership was grounded in ideological conviction, historical consciousness, and moral narrative. As a leader emerging from the political right in Israel and the first to displace the long-dominant Labour establishment, he carried the weight of representing a new political era. His leadership resonated with a society seeking stability, national pride, and moral clarity after years of war.

While Sadat operated within an authoritarian political culture and Begin within a competitive parliamentary democracy, both leaders shared an ability to articulate a compelling vision of peace. James MacGregor Burns' notion of transformational leadership is useful here: both leaders inspired their societies not by transactional exchange but by appealing to shared values and deep cultural narratives.[9]

Finally, decision-making in international relations often involves navigating uncertainty, cognitive biases, and bureaucratic pressures. Thomas Schelling's rational choice models illustrate how leaders evaluate risks and potential outcomes.[10] For Sadat, the war of 1973 demonstrated both Egypt's military limitations and its symbolic achievements. He understood that Egypt could not regain Sinai by force and that alignment with the United States offered strategic benefits. His decision to embark on a peace initiative was thus grounded in pragmatic calculation as much as in moral rhetoric.

Begin, however, faced greater uncertainties. Withdrawal from Sinai represented a profound territorial and emotional concession. For parts of Israeli society, the Sinai Peninsula carried historical and strategic significance.

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

[9] J.M. Burns, *Leadership*, New York: Harper & Row, 1978

[10] T. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict.* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1960

Using insights from Kahneman and Tversky's prospect theory,[11] Begin's hesitation can be interpreted as the product of loss aversion: the potential losses – territorial, strategic, ideological – loomed larger than the potential gains of peace.

Yet, Begin's adherence to religious and ethical values also shaped his decisions. His belief in the moral necessity of peace, framed through Jewish prophetic tradition, enabled him to overcome the psychological barriers posed by loss aversion.[12] His leadership thus combined rational assessment, moral conviction, and emotional restraint.

President Jimmy Carter played a crucial role as mediator. His leadership style combined moral vision with interpersonal diplomacy, and his Southern Christian background made him receptive to the religious rhetoric of both Sadat and Begin. In this triadic cultural encounter, Carter often served as a bridge, not only politically, but culturally and emotionally.[13] He understood the symbolic elements embedded in the rhetoric of both Middle Eastern leaders and helped translate their narratives into diplomatic outcomes. Carter's ability to empathize, to reframe discussions, and to persist through emotional turbulence made him an essential figure in the intercultural dynamics of Camp David.

SECTION 2 – ASPECTS OF LEADERSHIP AND INTERCULTURALISM WITHIN THE CAMP DAVID ACCORDS

The peace treaty of 1979 represented a rupture in the historical pattern of Arab–Israeli relations. For the first time since 1948, a major Arab state recognized Israel, establishing diplomatic relations and ending decades of warfare. This event marked the beginning of what scholars refer to as the "cold peace" – a peace that was legally binding but socially distant, characterized by minimal cultural exchange and limited interpersonal contact between the two societies. While far from harmonious, the cold peace created

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[11] D. Kahenman & A. Tversky, "Prospect theory: and analysis of decision under risk." *Econometrica* 47:2, 1979, pp. 263-291

[12] W.B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1986, pp. 220-235

[13] Carter discussed these issues of interpersonal dynamics, especially during times of frustration or crisis. See in detail: Carter's memoirs represent his idealist approach. See: J. Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President,* Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press (reprinted edition), 1995, pp. 300-315

the conditions for later, deeper forms of engagement in the region. It broke the taboo against negotiating with Israel, paved the way for subsequent agreements, and opened back channels between Israel and Gulf states.

By situating the Camp David Accords within this broader historical arc, it becomes clear that interculturalism plays a long-term role in reshaping regional relations. Peace is not simply the product of treaties; it evolves through cultural narratives, shared histories, and interpersonal connections.

Religion occupies a central place in Middle Eastern identity formation, affecting attitudes, social norms, and political ideologies. Egyptians found it easier to negotiate with Jews who were visibly religious, as they valued religious identity and viewed atheism negatively. This dynamic reflects cultural norms in which religiosity is associated with moral integrity and cultural authenticity. However, religion was not a decisive factor in the success of the negotiations. Rather, it served as a cultural conduit – a way to build rapport, mutual respect, and symbolic connection.

Religion functioned both as a shared cultural language and a source of symbolic legitimacy. Begin often referenced Jewish tradition, biblical history, and prophetic visions. Sadat invoked Islamic concepts of justice, divine guidance, and reconciliation. Their mutual use of religious rhetoric allowed each leader to frame peace as a moral imperative rather than a political concession.

Symbolic gestures further advanced this religious dimension. At Camp David, discussions of prayer, ritual, and dietary law emerged informally among delegations. Egyptian diplomats sought kosher food in Boston because of the proximity of kosher to halal standards and how Begin hosted Egyptian delegates for a traditional Friday night Kiddush. These moments of religious and cultural sharing did not influence the content of negotiations but helped build a humanizing atmosphere that facilitated trust.[14]

Religion also generated powerful opposition. Islamist groups in Egypt denounced the treaty as a betrayal of Islamic solidarity, culminating in Sadat's assassination in 1981. In Israel, religious-nationalist movements condemned territorial concessions as violations of divine promise. These reactions demonstrate that religion played a dual role: as a bridge between leaders but a barrier among parts of the population. Thus, while religion

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[14] The face-to-face discussions and their influence on the warming of the negotiation teams were detailed in M. Dayan, *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt-Israel Peace Negotiations,* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981, especially in pages 150-200

was not the cause of peace, it was a cultural resource – one that leaders used strategically to mobilize public support, generate moral legitimacy, and construct shared narratives.

Language did not determine negotiation outcomes, but it shaped the structure of interactions. English served as the primary language at Camp David, enabling clear communication between delegations and with the U.S. mediation team. Neither Begin nor Sadat spoke each other's languages, which meant that nuance, tone, and cultural references had to be carefully communicated through English.[15]

Although the negotiations themselves were in English, both leaders relied heavily on Hebrew and Arabic when addressing their domestic audiences. These languages carry deep cultural resonance. Terms such as *shalom*, *salam*, and *sulh* embody cultural concepts of peace, reconciliation, and social order. Sadat's speeches invoked collective identity, moral destiny, and the symbolic breaking of psychological barriers. Begin's rhetoric emphasized legality, prophetic tradition, and historical continuity. Their linguistic choices reflect how leaders translate diplomacy into culturally meaningful narratives for their societies.

Finally, interpersonal communication relies on more than vocabulary. Tone, metaphor, symbolism, and rhythm shape meaning. The Camp David negotiations required not only linguistic but also intercultural translation. Interpreters navigated religious references, idioms, and emotional appeals embedded in both Hebrew and Arabic rhetoric. In this sense, language embodied the cultural complexity of the peace process, becoming a subtle but essential component of diplomacy.

To better understand these concept, one ought to discuss the Personalities of Begin and Sadat. The interpersonal relationship between Begin and Sadat shaped the atmosphere of negotiations. Although stylistically different (i.e. Begin stiff and formal, Sadat charismatic and expressive) both leaders shared a profound sense of historical mission. Their mutual respect enabled a fragile but meaningful rapport.

Sadat's decision to address the Knesset remains one of the most extraordinary gestures of modern diplomacy. Begin's respectful reception of Sadat, infused with religious symbolism, reinforced this gesture. Their encounters created a moral drama that captured public imagination and provided a foundation for trust.

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[15] Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 212-218

The Camp David summit created an emotionally charged environment. The physical isolation – without press, without external distractions – forced the leaders to confront one another repeatedly, sometimes in moments of tension, sometimes in moments of quiet reflection. Emotional highs and lows characterized the summit: walkouts, threats to end discussions, breakthroughs mediated by Carter, and personal appeals delivered in informal settings. This emotional crucible forged interpersonal connections that outpaced formal diplomatic channels.

Not only leaders but also advisors and intermediaries played essential roles. Individuals like Osama El-Baz on the Egyptian side and Israeli diplomats fluent in Arabic helped ease tensions, establish cultural bridges, and sustain communication during difficult moments. Their cultural familiarity with the other side created micro-channels of trust that supported the broader diplomatic effort.

Ultimately, the Camp David negotiations succeeded not solely because of political necessity or strategic calculation but because human beings developed trust across profound cultural divides. Their gestures, conversations, shared rituals, and emotional vulnerability allowed diplomacy to transcend ideology and strategy. These interpersonal moments constitute a core, often unrecognized dimension of peacebuilding.

SECTION 3 – CONCLUSION AND HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE MIDDLE EAST: FROM COLD PEACE TO NORMALIZATION

The Israel–Egypt peace agreement of 1979 was a landmark achievement in international diplomacy, shaped not only by geopolitics but by cultural dynamics, interpersonal interactions, and symbolic gestures. While cultural factors did not determine the outcome of negotiations, they formed an essential backdrop that influenced how leaders behaved, how communication unfolded, and how trust was established.

This article has shown that interculturalism – understood as active engagement across cultural divides – played a subtle but significant role in the peace process. The shared religious heritage of Judaism and Islam, the symbolic language used by both leaders, the cross-cultural gestures exchanged at Camp David, and the mutual respect demonstrated by Begin and Sadat all contributed to reducing psychological distance and fostering a sense of human connection.

Leadership played a decisive role. Both Sadat and Begin embodied forms of transformational and charismatic leadership that enabled them to transcend cultural constraints and envision a new regional reality. Their willingness to engage deeply with symbolic, moral, and emotional dimensions of peace gave the negotiations a cultural richness that extended beyond the formal diplomatic texts.

The peace between Israel and Egypt also laid the groundwork for subsequent forms of regional normalization, including the Abraham Accords. By breaking cultural taboos and demonstrating that dialogue was possible, the 1979 treaty initiated a long-term shift in the Middle Eastern intercultural landscape.

With a gaze into the future, the Abraham Accords of 2020 represent a later stage in the evolution of Middle Eastern intercultural diplomacy. Karataş and Uslu argue that the framing of these agreements as "Abrahamic" reflects a conscious attempt to emphasize shared religious heritage as a basis for normalization.[16] While political and strategic considerations drove the accords, the cultural framing – highlighting dignity, tolerance, and mutual respect – demonstrates the growing importance of intercultural narratives in diplomacy.

In contrast to the cold peace between Israel and Egypt, the Abraham Accords sought to generate warmth through people-to-people engagement, tourism, cultural exchange, and economic cooperation. Whereas the Egypt–Israel treaty emerged from war, the Abraham Accords emerged from overlapping interests, shared threats, and growing regional pragmatism.

Ultimately, this study suggests that peace in the Middle East – or in any region of entrenched conflict – depends not only on political negotiation but on cultural understanding, interpersonal trust, and the courage of leaders to bridge divides rooted in history, identity, and belief. The Camp David Accords stand as a testament to the transformative power of intercultural diplomacy, illustrating that when cultural barriers are softened and human relationships take precedence, even the most intractable conflicts can yield pathways to reconciliation.

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[16] I. Karataş, & N. Uslu, "The Abraham Accords: can interculturalism solve grave conflicts of the Middle East?" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 57:2, 2022, p. 300-301

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