Menachem Begin: A Past Master at Negotiation

William B. Quandt

NOTHING SO SHARPLY CONTRASTED with Menachem Begin's political career as his manner of leaving it. The reclusive, tired, reportedly despondent figure of recent months bears little resemblance to the fiery, determined, and often rigid person who presided over Israeli political life for the crucial six-year period following his selection as prime minister in mid-1977. Begin came to power after a lifetime of political struggle—after years spent in prison, in the underground, and in opposition, often relegated to the fringes of power. He had only a brief chance to translate into reality his compelling ideological and historical vision of Eretz Israel, powerful and independent, able to offer refuge to Jews of the world, with borders stretching from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.

It is too early to know what history's judgment of the Begin era will be, but his legacy is clearly a controversial one that will long be debated in Israel and elsewhere. He can take credit for reaching peace with Israel's largest Arab neighbor, Egypt, but as Begin fades from the scene, so also does the promise of a real, lasting peace between Israel and the Arabs. Even the relationship with Cairo can be described only as a "cold peace," and many Israelis wonder how long it can last. On the domestic front, Begin's retirement coincided with a severe economic crisis that revealed the tenuousness of the prosperity that Begin's economic policies had generated. That shaky prosperity was enough to get Begin reelected in 1981, but it was built on massive debt that entailed great dependency on the United States—and thus susceptibility to a whole range of pressures. And Begin's dream of a revival of Jewish migration to Israel has not been realized. Instead, many Israelis leave their country each year, some never to return.

If, as many reported, Begin was in a state of depression at the time of his retirement, the most likely reason was the unending tragedy of Lebanon, where Israel fought what was, in the eyes of its own citizens, its least justifiable war. Whatever grand design may have convinced Begin to launch "Operation Peace for Galilee" in June, 1982, little of it could be seen in the murky Lebanese realities of late 1983.

Over 500 Israelis, and many thousands of Lebanese and Palestinians, died in a war that left the Middle East as far from peace as ever. True, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was driven from Beirut, but Palestinians have not ended their struggle for control over at least a portion of what they consider to be their homeland. Syria, Israel's most vocal enemy, managed to emerge from the military setback in Lebanon to claim a surprisingly strong position a year later. The Soviets, who stood by while Israeli bombs rained down on Beirut, rushed to resupply the Syrians in late 1982 with advanced weapons and to strengthen Moscow's position in the

William B. Quandt is a senior fellow in the Foreign Policy Studies program at Brookings. He was a Middle East specialist on the National Security Council staff from 1972 to 1974 and from 1977 to 1979. His books include Saudi Arabia in the 1980s *and* Decade of Decisions: American Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1976. *He is currently engaged in a study of the Camp David agreements.*

region. And Israel's Christian allies in Lebanon have not lived up to Begin's high hopes. The laboriously negotiated Lebanese-Israeli accord of May 17, 1983, remains a dead letter. All in all, Begin and his supporters have little to show from the war in Lebanon.

If there is anything that Menachem Begin can take quiet satisfaction from at the end of his tenure, it must be the knowledge that Israel's presence in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem is all but permanent. When he entered office as prime minister, the official policy of the government of Israel was that portions of the West Bank and Gaza would be returned to Arab control in the context of a peace settlement. Begin abruptly changed Israel's policy, declaring that even in exchange for peace and recognition, Israel would not return these territories—which he considered to be a "liberated" part of Eretz Israel. After six years and massive investments in settlements, roads, and infrastructure, Israel's hold on these areas seems assured, and American and Arab efforts to keep open the possibility of trading "territory for peace" have failed.

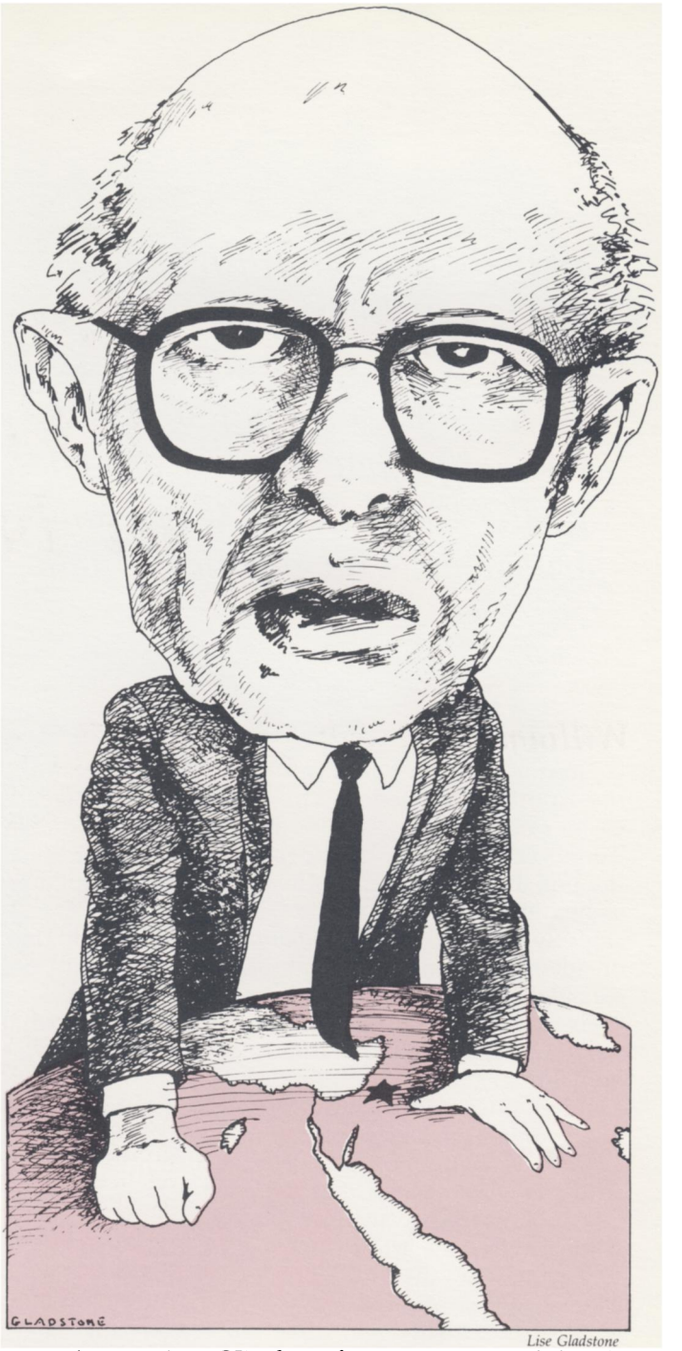
Many of Begin's admirers, and most of his critics, feel that the war in Lebanon was really fought to strengthen Israel's grip on the West Bank and Gaza. If that was in fact his motivation, then Begin may feel that the war served some purpose. But one must still ask whether future generations of Israelis will thank Begin, or blame him, for making Israel responsible not only for the territory of the West Bank and Gaza, but also for the more than one million Palestinian Arabs who live there. If Israel keeps the territory and wishes to remain true to democratic principles, it will become pluralistic and binational, and the main raison d'etre of the Zionist experiment—creation of a Jewish state—will have been forfeited. Or Israel can remain a Jewish state, but one that rules in colonial fashion over 35 to 40 percent of its population—a restive and articulate Palestinian minority that is deprived of political rights.

Tactician or Strategist?

Menachem Begin is a hard man to assess fairly. His strong personality, his old-world demeanor, his ideological bent, and his rhetorical flair arouse strong feelings among his supporters—who chanted during his election campaign, "Begin, King of Israel"—and his detractors. His courtly manners, even his sense of humor, could be disarming, while his rigidity and verbal excesses often provoked antagonism.

What most people never saw was Begin the politician, the man who shrewdly weighed the pros and cons of issues, measured public opinion while seeking to mold it, judiciously leaked stories to the press when it could help his cause, knew the value of compromise, and appreciated the realities of power. This was Begin the tactician, maneuvering, seeking to seize the initiative from others, possessing a fine sense of timing, and using to good effect his reputation for intransigence.

Begin the politician was a master tactician, made more formidable by his absolute certainty about the justice of the goals he was pursuing. These were not personal goals of wealth or prestige. Begin lived modestly and, while a very proud man, did not suffer from excessive egotism. His drive for power seemed deeply rooted in the trauma of his own people. He was determined to make Israel a strong Jewish state in as much of its ancestral homeland as possible. His world was one in which anti-Semitism was an ever-present danger, and opposition to Israeli policies, even by Jews, was seen as tantamount to being anti-Jewish.



Lise Gladstone

Begin was an educated man, yet very parochial. His knowledge was primarily of Europe and European Jewry. Although he was obsessed by the threat to his country posed by Arab nations, he knew little about these neighbors. Unlike Abba Eban or Moshe Dayan, he never learned Arabic. He rarely met with any Arabs, even when he was trying to promote the virtues of his proposals on Palestinian autonomy to the Arabs living under Israeli occupation. In fact, he spent almost no time at all in the areas of Judea and Samaria, to which he was so deeply committed.

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No doubt Begin had a moral blindspot concerning the Palestinian question. This seems to have made it easier for him to characterize the Palestinians and their leaders as irrevocably hostile to Israel. To have accepted the possibility of compromise and mutual recognition, as he did with Egypt, would have obliged him to consider the return of the West Bank to Arab control. This, on ideological and historical grounds, he would not consider. It was on the Palestinian question—and especially on the issue of territorial compromise over what Begin always called Judea and Samaria—that he was unyielding.

Once one understands that Menachem Begin's touchstone was the integrity of Eretz Israel, then much else follows in understandable ways. Begin made peace with Egypt, on terms that included the return of all Sinai, as a step toward incorporating the West Bank. Begin ordered the army into Lebanon in the summer of 1982 to destroy the PLO, but not—as many of his Lebanese allies, and probably General Ariel Sharon, would have wished—to drive out the Syrians. Begin proposed an autonomy plan for the West Bank as a means of deflecting U.S. pressure, but on a day-to-day basis focused on building a strong, irreversible Israeli presence in the territories, not on encouraging Palestinians to assume more responsibility for their own lives.

It was Begin's fundamental strategic judgment that Israel could be secure only if it could defeat its enemies in battle and if it could control all of the territory west of the Jordan River. So intent was he in the pursuit of these goals that he neglected many domestic issues, both economic and social. He may also have missed opportunities to reach tacit or explicit accommodations with King Hussein of Jordan and with Palestinians in the occupied territories. He certainly damaged Israel's standing in American public opinion. And he saddled Israel with the burden of having to decide what to do with more than one million Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza.

Historians of a later era will have to judge the strategic vision pursued by Menachem Begin—and that vision may prove to be so controversial that no consensus on its merits will emerge. What will be agreed upon by all those who saw Begin operate in his prime is his skill as a politician. On the tactical level, he was doubtless brilliant, outmaneuvering his fellow Israelis, the Arabs, and two American presidents. Nowhere was his political acumen more clearly demonstrated than in the Camp David negotiations.

Begin at Camp David and After

At Camp David, Begin was in top form—sure of himself, skillful in his tactics, clear in his objectives, and tenacious in negotiating with two formidable leaders, Anwar Sadat of Egypt and President Jimmy Carter. Begin left Camp David having achieved far more of his objectives than Sadat and Carter achieved of theirs. Let us look for a moment at how he did it.

Soon after becoming prime minister, Begin flew to Washington to meet with Carter. It was immediately clear that Israeli policy had changed. Begin distrusted any substantive role for the United States in negotiations, fearing that Washington would tilt in favor of the Arabs. He sought to restrict his discussions with Carter to procedural issues and to a sweeping review of history. In addition, he placed great emphasis on Israel's strategic importance to the United States in the East-West confrontation.

When Carter managed to get him to focus on substance in a private talk on July 19, 1977, Begin spelled out clearly that he would agree to relinquish most of Sinai in return for peace with Egypt, but that he would never accept any "foreign sovereignty" over the West Bank. In response to Carter's request that he promise not to build more settlements in occupied territory, Begin said that he could not make such a promise, but that he would do his best to act with restraint. In return, he asked Carter not to talk about the 1967 lines as the eventual secure and recognized borders of Israel, and he urged Carter not to repeat the phrase "Palestinian homeland."

From this first encounter, it seemed clear to the Americans present that Begin sought a separate peace with Egypt and would not willingly make any concessions on the Palestinian issue. When looked at closely, his position involved a major departure from that of his predecessor in one respect. The Labor governments from 1967 to 1977 had opposed the creation of a Palestinian state, but they had been prepared to apply the "territory for peace" formula of U.N. Resolution 242 to a future agreement with Jordan—prepared, in other words, to return some, but not all, of the West Bank to Jordanian authority in the context of peace. Begin, who had quit the cabinet in 1970 when Israel formally accepted 242 with this interpretation, staunchly maintained that Israel was under no obligation to withdraw from any of the West Bank, even in the context of peace. In his view, Jordan had no valid claim to sovereignty over any of this territory. In a novel twist, Begin now said that he did accept 242, but that he interpreted its withdrawal provision as applying only to Sinai.

Throughout much of the next year, the United States and Egypt tried to get Begin to agree to a freeze on settlement activities in the occupied territories and to an understanding that the withdrawal provision of U.N. Resolution 242 did indeed apply to all fronts, including the West Bank. Begin was masterful at resisting all pressures. The ability and single-mindedness of the man were much in evidence in the months leading up to Camp David.

On one level, Begin tried to go behind Carter's back to see if a separate deal could be struck with Sadat. Several secret contacts took place in late 1977, along with the highly publicized and politically significant bilateral meetings between Begin and Sadat in Jerusalem in November and Ismailia in December. Sadat soon concluded that his position was too weak to deal with Begin alone, so he asked Carter to rejoin the negotiations. However, Begin had already staked out his basic position. In essence, he offered Sadat most of what he wanted in strict Israeli-Egyptian terms, while refusing to give Sadat anything significant on the Palestinian question. Initially, Sadat refused the offer, and during most of 1978 he tried to use Carter to pressure Begin to be more forthcoming.

Begin simply refused to budge. To ward off U.S. and Egyptian initiatives, he came up with a plan of his own in mid-December, 1977, that he called "home rule" for the Palestinians. It was vintage Begin. A formal document was drawn up with excessive detail. Begin lobbied hard for his plan in the United States, and in one meeting listed for Carter all the prominent Americans who supposedly supported it. When Carter expressed a mildly positive opinion about the plan, Begin immediately told the press that the president had termed it a "fair basis for negotiations." Although he never won full American support for the plan, he did insure that his ideas became the focus of discussion. Eventually the "home rule" proposal was modified and redefined. The Camp David accords did provide for a five-year transitional regime for the West Bank and Gaza during which Palestinians could exercise "self-government" or "administrative autonomy." This was an outgrowth of Begin's original idea.

In addition to recognizing the importance of controlling the agenda for negotiations, Begin also knew how to turn to good advantage his reputation for intransigence. He would resist mightily making even the most insignificant verbal concessions, so that when he would finally decide to give an inch it would seem like a yard. Sadat became thoroughly exasperated by this tactic, which meant that he paid little attention to words and details. Begin was able to get most of what he wanted in the final agreements. Carter also disliked the tactic, but he could never find a way to counter it. Instead, he and Secretary Vance often ended up negotiating the precise words of a text on Sadat's behalf.

Begin also had a great sense of timing. He would push negotiations to the breaking point and then at the last moment would give just enough to get what he really wanted in return. For example, at Camp David he was unwilling to agree, until the next to the last day of discussions, to remove Israeli settlements from Sinai. By then, Sadat had already threatened to walk out once, Carter had nearly concluded that the talks would end in failure, and a whole host of issues were still left to be resolved. Finally, in one marathon session of negotiating, Begin yielded on the question of settlements in Sinai and in return won removal from the agreement of several key points that would have held Israel to the "peace for withdrawal" formula on the West Bank.

In March, 1979, in one of his most remarkable performances, Begin once again took negotiations to the brink of failure before edging back just enough to ensure success on his terms. President Carter decided to travel to the Middle East in a last attempt to clinch an agreement between Sadat and Begin. By the time he arrived in Jerusalem, only a few significant issues remained to be solved. One involved a footnote to one article of the treaty. The Egyptians wanted a phrase changed—from "does not derogate from" to "does not contradict." Begin maintained that this change would nullify the entire sense of the treaty, an implication that none of the native English speakers could see in the proposed revision. Much of one day was spent in Jerusalem with the American and Israeli delegations looking through dictionaries and thesauruses to find substitute language.

The spectacle of the president, the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, the assistant to the president for national security affairs, and half a dozen of their top aides trying to find a word acceptable to Begin must have given him a sense of power and importance. Finally, Begin came into the room and announced that he had found a solution. He proposed the phrase "does not affect," which had exactly the opposite meaning from that which was intended. Secretary Vance replied that "does not contravene" seemed more appropriate. Begin hesitated, gravely acknowledged that this was a serious proposal, and said that he would have to discuss it with his cabinet.

A few hours later the answer came back: Begin could not accept "does not contravene," but he could accept "is not to be construed as contravening." The Americans, who never quite understood the game that was being played, saw no difference, shrugged, and felt relieved to have gotten over one more hurdle. Of course, the other important issues that could have been discussed during those long hours were all still pending, to be dealt with in haste on the morning of Carter's departure from Israel. Begin had once again put his reputation for rigidity and verbal precision to good use for major political purposes.

In the end, it was this combination of single-mindedness, tenacity, and toughness, coupled with a real understanding of the uses of power and persuasion, that made of Menachem Begin a larger than life-size figure. Whether or not his vision of Israel is one that his own countrymen will want to live with for long, he has left them a powerful legacy. And Begin's name will be linked with other great Israeli leaders—Ben Gurion and Golda Meir, for example—who in their time held him in contempt. So, as Menachem Begin eases his grip on Israeli political life and passes the mantle to his chosen successor, he must find some satisfaction in knowing that history will treat him seriously, if not necessarily kindly.