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Craig Daigle. "Beyond Camp David: Jimmy Carter, Palestinian Self-Determination, and Human Rights." *Diplomatic History* 42:5 (September 2018): 802-830. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhy001>.

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Review by **Jeremy Pressman**, University of Connecticut

With the election of Menachem Begin's right-wing Likud Party in Israel's 1977 elections, the Carter administration faced two starkly different visions for addressing the question of Palestine. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) continued to seek an independent, sovereign Palestinian state as the genuine fulfillment of the Palestinian right to self-determination. In exchange for a statehood commitment, the PLO was ready to endorse United Nations Security Resolution (UNSC) 242, the post-1967 war resolution based on the land-for-peace principle. In contrast, Begin's government supported autonomy or self-rule for the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza but completely rejected Israeli territorial withdrawal and Palestinian independence, sovereignty, and statehood. Israel remained committed to settlement expansion as well.

Craig Daigle's article concisely documents the limited and fleeting nature of U.S. President Jimmy Carter's commitment to self-determination in this environment. Despite his early use of the term, Carter left it undefined and never linked the idea of self-determination to concrete measures like Israeli withdrawal and Palestinian sovereignty in the West Bank. He also did not accept the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people.

By January 1978, in Aswan, Egypt, Carter had dropped the term self-determination altogether. Instead, the U.S. president used language that was similar, but not the same—watered-down in Daigle's view—including "the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people" to participate "in the determination of their own future" (822).

By the Camp David summit in September 1978, the United States was not pressing Israel to commit to withdraw from West Bank territory. Carter was supportive of linking the Palestinian entity to Jordan. Yet meaningful Palestinian self-determination would have to include both withdrawal and the right of the Palestinian people to decide whether or not they wanted to affiliate with Jordan.

The United States had largely adopted Israeli positions on Palestinian self-rule – a plan well short of statehood—that Begin first presented in December 1977.¹ Daigle concludes that Carter “never envisioned the Palestinians having complete freedom to choose their form of government or the borders in which they would reside” (804).

Is “never” the best word? Daigle seems to suggest in the article that the problem was a conceptual issue. Carter did not believe that self-determination did or had to include independence and statehood, whether in the Palestinian case or otherwise. Like former U.S. presidents (for example, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt), even though Carter used the term, he did not feel committed to the tangible manifestations of self-determination, that the party with that right should determine its own political and territorial future.

But perhaps we should think of this in a different way, in pragmatic rather than conceptual terms. In theory, Carter may have accepted that self-determination is associated with agency, independence, and sovereignty over a defined piece of territory. In an ideal world, the PLO would have negotiated for an independent, sovereign state to emerge alongside Israel. We know that the Carter administration had a number of indirect communication channels to the PLO.²

But as Daigle notes, Carter was constrained by Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and others. Egypt and Jordan wanted the Palestinian entity to be linked to Jordan; that cut against genuine Palestinian self-determination. Meanwhile, Begin was, as Carter himself said to Israel’s Moshe Dayan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, the “obstacle to peace” (825).

Carter faced a choice: move forward on the Egypt-Israel track and accept a mushy self-determination avenue OR carefully define self-determination with genuine Palestinian agency and abandon hope of an Egypt-Israel breakthrough. Daigle writes: “No Israeli government—Labor or Likud—would have supported an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, and to press for that at the outset of the administration would have ensured the failure of any comprehensive negotiating process” (816).³

Another dimension that reinforced Begin’s position was support from the American Jewish Community. Carter faced domestic political pushback every time he said anything that challenged the Israeli government, such as after he referenced a Palestinian “homeland” in March 1977 or when the U.S.-Soviet joint

¹ For ways that the United States at Camp David modified Begin’s self-rule ideas, see 1135-1136 of Jeremy Pressman, “Explaining the Carter administration’s Israeli-Palestinian Solution,” *Diplomatic History* 37:5 (November 2013): 1117-1147.

² William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 186; and Jorgen Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy under Carter: The US, Israel and the Palestinians* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 58-65.

³ Israel’s claim to the West Bank was as “an ideological red line for Begin” according to Jorgen Jensehaugen. Jensehaugen is open to the idea that material U.S. pressure, for example, withholding U.S. aid for Israel, might have modified Israel’s position on the Palestinian question. See Jensehaugen, *Arab-Israeli Diplomacy* 7: 179-180, and 196.

communiqué was issued on 1 October 1977.⁴ The combination of the Israeli government and its American Jewish supporters left Carter with little maneuverability as long as he wanted to stay in their good graces.

In other words, I am not sure what other choice Carter really had short of sanctioning Israel. Begin's government did not believe that the Palestinians were a people entitled to self-determination. Again, in Daigle's words: "Carter simply saw no alternative to self-rule." (824) Thus he chose the pragmatic path, as Daigle shows with two pithy quotations from Carter officials. U.S. Ambassador Alfred Leroy Atherton Jr. said, "On the Palestinian question, we believe the Aswan formulation was a practical one" (824); William B. Quandt, a member of Carter's National Security Council staff, explained: "The goal of all this maneuvering was, of course, a separate Egyptian-Israeli agreement, only thinly disguised as part of a broader framework" (825).

However, I am less convinced than Daigle that Carter fully abandoned hope of moving toward Palestinian statehood. As I have suggested elsewhere, despite the limits that existed in 1977-1978, Carter officials saw two inter-related possibilities for how the situation might change for the better in terms of Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution. First, Begin and Likud would not be in charge forever; perhaps a future Israeli government would be more accommodating. As the process unfolded, that future, presumably-leftist Israeli government could be open to much more progress with the Palestinians. Second, getting the ball rolling could transform the situation: "Even limited negotiations on the Palestinian question could start to change the public and elite mindset about what was possible."⁵

Daigle concludes that Carter hurt the Palestinian cause (829). I am not so sure. I would say it depends on how we answer three questions. The Camp David ideas directly fed into the Oslo process of the 1990s.⁶ Did Oslo hurt the Palestinian cause? Second, the Egyptian-Israeli treaty fundamentally changed the Arab-Israeli military equation. Without Egypt's armed forces, the Arab side was far weaker, giving Israel a freer hand. Did that hurt the Palestinian cause? Third, if Carter had more assertively defined self-determination and clashed with Israel over that definition, would the result for the Palestinians have been any different?

Daigle links the case of the Carter administration and Palestinian self-determination to a larger critique that Carter's rhetoric on human rights was significantly greater than his "accomplishments" (805). That leaves us with an additional question as well, perhaps one for future study. How much did the countervailing pressures in this case – a foreign government (Israel) and a domestic interest group (the American Jewish community) – mirror those in other cases where Carter fell short on human rights? Perhaps this tells us something about how hard it is to shift the U.S. government policy apparatus in the face of established national security practices, foreign pressure, and domestic constituencies.

⁴ Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 41, 87-91. See also Jensehaugen, 76-77; and Pressman 1127-1128.

⁵ Pressman, 1142.

⁶ Pressman, 1123.

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