

Memorandum of Conversation between the US and Egyptian Delegations at Camp David (11 September 1978)

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Anwar Sadat meets with members of the Egyptian Delegation at Camp David
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*Like all other US records of conversations from the Camp David negotiations, this conversation too was a summary of what was discussed and raised, and **not** a verbatim transcript of who said what at the meeting. By comparison, the records of conversations held at the White House between President Carter and other heads of state are verbatim transcripts. Reliance for accuracy and completeness of the Camp David conversations, from American sources found in the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) therefore rests solely upon the person or persons who wrote the summary. From this meeting we learn that when it came time for the Egyptians to respond to Israeli ideas, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat kept very tight control over his advisers' input. The Egyptian delegation's frustration at being ignored by their President appears in this summary. They wanted more than just an Egyptian-Israeli agreement; they wanted Palestinian self-determination, return of Jerusalem, and Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. For example, Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohamed Ibrahim Kamel pointed out that the draft under review did not "state the illegality of settlements." Secretary of State Cyrus Vance reassured the Egyptians that "President Carter will make a speech which will include a reference to [the US] long-standing view that settlements are illegal." When Kamel wanted to know why there was no reference to Palestinian refugees, Vance replied, "the Jewish refugees also have rights." The Egyptians strongly opposed making that equivalence, with Kamel describing the language as making them "deeply troubled." Vance responded that "part of the language on this subject comes directly from Sadat...stressing that Sadat's very words were used," the implication being that Sadat was negotiating with the US team without looping in the rest of his delegation.*

6 August 2018, Ken Stein / Jacob Zack

Camp David, September 11, 1978, 9:30–11 p.m.

Subject: Meeting between the Secretary and Foreign Minister Kamel

Participants:

UNITED STATES

Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State

Hermann Fr. Eilts, U.S. Ambassador to Egypt

EGYPT

Mohamed Ibrahim Kamel, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Ashraf Ghorbal, Egyptian Ambassador to the United States

Ahmed Maher, Director of the Cabinet of the Foreign Minister

Kamel met with Secretary Vance this evening. He was accompanied by Ambassador Ghorbal and Ahmed Maher. Hermann Eilts was present for the American side. Kamel first expressed his apologies for the Egyptian side's inability to be ready with its suggestions at 2000 this evening. He explained that the Egyptian side had not been able to begin work until mid-afternoon; after Sadat had returned from his meeting with President Carter. The Egyptians had thereafter had a brief meeting with Sadat, who had given them some instructions.

Kamel then said that the Egyptian side had found the American paper "perplexing." It was not "coherent." It had given them a great deal of trouble. Things are scattered throughout the paper, and the Egyptians were having trouble following exactly what has been meant. The Secretary asked about the nature of Kamel's concerns. Kamel said the Egyptian side feels it is necessary to study our paper carefully. It is now in the process of doing so. The Secretary stressed that we want the Egyptian views on where they believe the paper is deficient and what should be done about it. Ghorbal stated that the Egyptians are doing exactly that. He indicated that the Egyptians agreed with what Eilts had suggested, namely, that the Egyptians present us with specific textual suggestions.

The Secretary then again asked Kamel for precise indications of where the Egyptians believe our paper is deficient. Reading from a handwritten memorandum, Kamel indicated the following:

- A. First, the Egyptians believe our paper is a departure from previously expressed American positions. Specifically, in the withdrawal language on the West Bank, there is no mention of the '49 lines. The Egyptian side had expected that there would be a reference to a return to the '49 lines with minor rectifications. The Secretary told Kamel that this subject had been discussed between Sadat and President Carter. The language included was that agreed upon by Sadat. Kamel was a bit nonplused, but responded that we should recognize that the Egyptian side must first study the document before agreeing on specific language. There must have been some misunderstanding if President Carter got the impression that Sadat is in total agreement. Sadat, Kamel pointed out, is "shy" and wants to be polite. As Kamel understood it, Sadat had only agreed with President Carter that the paper would be referred to the Egyptian Delegation in order to obtain the latter's observations. These were the instructions that Sadat had given to the Egyptian Delegation. Sadat wants the Egyptian Delegation to scrutinize the paper. Kamel

apologized profusely for any wrong impression that might have been given. Ghorbal added that Sadat had read what President Carter gave him, but that Sadat's comments had been preliminary and off-the-cuff. They were neither complete nor were they intended to be a final judgment. Kamel went on to say that Sadat had said he would agree to anything so long as land and sovereignty are excluded. "We are Egyptians," Kamel said. "You must take us the way we are." Sadat takes it for granted that President Carter will take into consideration Egyptian and Arab interests and concerns. Kamel also noted that Sadat had at the outset presented proposals, which the Egyptian side consider should be agreeable to all. These proposals were well balanced. They should be kept in mind as a background. All of Sadat's ideas are incorporated in the Egyptian proposal. The Egyptians, Kamel stressed, do not want to be embarrassed before the other Arabs. The American language in the American paper will embarrass the Egyptians in the eyes of the other Arabs.

- B. The second point, on which the American paper is deficient, Kamel indicated, is that it makes no clear reference to withdrawal from Sinai. The only reference is to the restoration of Egyptian sovereignty in Sinai. The Secretary interjected that this is because Sadat had told President Carter that he wanted it put that way. Sadat had asked that the Sinai language be written in terms of sovereignty and the inviolability of territory. There is no question, the Secretary noted, about the need for total Israeli withdrawal from Sinai. The American paper, the Secretary stated, had been given the Egyptians in order to obtain their reaction.
- C. The third objection that Kamel indicated is that the rights of the Palestinians are inadequately treated. There is only one sentence on the subject. Moreover, that sentence is a change from the Aswan language. The Secretary noted that President Carter had told Sadat about the concept of a footnote at the beginning of the paper, expressing the meaning of the term Palestinians. He regretted that it had not been possible due to the rush in preparing the paper to include the footnote in the draft that had been given to the Egyptians, but stressed that this is still our idea. The footnote would state clearly that when "Palestinians" are referred to throughout the paper, the meaning is the Palestinian people. Kamel responded that the original Aswan language had included specific reference to the "Palestinian people." This should be retained. The Secretary again explained the footnote idea. He stressed that we were not trying to nitpick, but that in our judgment the problem is eased by such a formulation. Kamel insisted that the Aswan formula is the minimum that Egypt can accept. He noted that even the Saudis oppose it. The Secretary responded that if we define (in a footnote) what we mean by Palestinians, surely this should be all right. Kamel said Sadat had referred to the Palestinian people in recent statements, including in his departure statement. He cannot now accept anything less. The Secretary again stressed that we will be defining the meaning of Palestinians. Kamel insisted that the way the term is used elsewhere in the paper is also different. There were frequent references to the "inhabitants" rather than to the Palestinians. The Secretary thought that "Palestinians" is used throughout the paper. Kamel said this is not the case.
- D. Kamel then turned to another objection, namely the reference to the refugees. This, he noted, departs from previous statements on the subject. There is no reference to UN Resolution 194 or to other UNGA Resolutions having to do with the Palestinian refugees. Moreover, Palestinian and Jewish refugees had been mentioned in the same context. The Secretary commented that he was aware of the Egyptian views, but that he thought they might be wrong. The Jewish refugees also have rights. Ghorbal insisted that

the equation distorts what had been agreed upon unilaterally with respect to the Palestinian refugees for many years. The Secretary noted that we have talked about the admission of displaced persons and refugees to the West Bank and also about the need for an overall settlement of the refugee problem. Ahmed Maher stated that the Jewish refugee matter is a totally different problem. The doctrine of Israel, he recalled, is that Jews anywhere in the world should go back to Israel. This is the essence of the “return law.” How in such circumstances, he asked, can the Israelis argue that people who are returning under this law can properly be considered as refugees. The Secretary urged that the Egyptians read the appropriate language again. He thought that if they consider it carefully, it should not give them too much problem. Kamel commented that the Egyptians have always taken it for granted that displaced persons should be allowed to return to the West Bank and Gaza. Under our language the Israelis have a veto on these people as well as the refugees. The requirement for unanimous agreement gives them this veto. The language of our paper, he stressed, deeply troubles the Egyptians. The Secretary responded that part of the language on this subject comes directly from Sadat. He would be happy to look at any other language that the Egyptians might propose, but he wanted to stress that Sadat’s very words were used in some of the language having to do with displaced persons and refugees. Again, Kamel was nonplused. He recalled that when the Secretary was in Alexandria, he had tried to explain to him that Sadat is looking as an objective to a real peace, but that the President’s phrasing is not always felicitous. The Secretary again noted that we will look at any language the Egyptians care to suggest. We cannot guarantee to accept it, but they could be sure that we will carefully study it.

- E. Kamel next observed that there is no reference in the paper to settlements. The Secretary pointed out that this had been deliberately omitted. He then explained our position on settlements, stressing that we have clear and strong views on the subject. In the case of the Sinai, the settlements should be withdrawn. In the case of the West Bank and Gaza, as he had indicated to Kamel the other day, there should be a freeze on all settlement activity. Kamel asked why there had been no reference to our previously expressed position of the illegality of settlements. The Secretary said President Carter will make a speech which will include a reference to our longstanding view that settlements are illegal. The Secretary then explained why we had left out in our present draft any reference to the settlements. This had been done in the hope that, without such a reference, it might be possible to work out with the Israelis the other aspects of the problem. The Israelis have been made aware, however, that our position on settlements is a strong one and that it will be included in any final document. He could assure Kamel that when we leave Camp David, appropriate language on the settlements will be included in our paper and that this will be made public. Kamel reverted to the overall paper, indicating that the Egyptian side is not at all happy with the paper. The Secretary responded that the Israelis are also unhappy with it. Kamel wanted to know what the Israelis could find in the paper that would make them unhappy. The Secretary went through his copy of the paper and noted the following points: (a) the inclusion of language on the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory through war. Ghorbal noted this is only in the preamble, which we and the Israelis have always claimed does not have the same weight as operative language. (b) The concept of restoring Egyptian sovereignty in the Sinai. The Israelis want to cast this solely in terms of the Begin Peace Plan. (c) The language on Suez and Tiran, which we had refused to include. (d) The Israelis do not like the inclusion of the Aswan language. (e) The Israelis do not like the

transition arrangements as we have worked them out. They want to base these on the Begin self-rule plan. (f) The Israelis do not like the Vienna language. Here Kamel interjected that the Egyptians also do not like the Vienna language. (g) The Israelis also object to the Palestinian refugee language. (h) They dislike the Jerusalem language. They argue that in the case of Jerusalem there is nothing to be resolved. It has been declared to be the capital of Israel. We have not accepted this.

Kamel contended that a major problem with the paper is that all of the obligations are on the Egyptian side. He continued that the only Israeli obligation is to negotiate. Ghorbal reiterated that in many instances there has been an erosion of previous American positions. The United States should not allow this to take place. The Secretary again asked that the Egyptian ideas be given to us. Kamel said this will be done, but he pleaded that we take into consideration the overall effect that the document will have in the Middle East. The United States, he emphasized, needs a strong Sadat. Sadat is a proud man. What is at stake is implementation of Resolution 242 and the establishment of peace.

Eilts pointed out that great care has been given in developing the document to ensure that Sadat is not discredited in the area. The Secretary affirmed this. Ghorbal noted that this is essential. Kamel observed that the Egyptians hope the present meeting will come out with something positive. But there are things in the American paper that Egypt can never accept. He reiterated that the sole Israeli obligation is to negotiate. The Secretary denied this, noting that the Israelis also have the obligation to withdraw and to negotiate their secure borders. Withdrawal, he noted, is fundamental, withdrawal in return for peace and security.

Kamel reiterated that the West Bank language in our paper is unacceptable. Ghorbal added that it is not consistent with previously expressed American principles. Negotiation of minor changes has always been the American concept. Egypt and the United States must be sure that the language is not simply the language that Israel wants. Unless this is done, it will defeat the purpose of the entire effort. Ghorbal expressed appreciation for the efforts of President Carter, Secretary Vance, and the United States Government.

Eilts asked how tomorrow's scenario will work out. Kamel noted that Sadat will meet with President Carter at 10:30 and with the Egyptian Delegation afterwards. Sadat had indicated that he wants to see the Egyptian paper at that time. The Secretary suggested that it is important that Sadat see the Egyptian paper or at least have the Egyptian Delegation's ideas before he meets with President Carter. The Egyptian Delegation was clearly embarrassed. Ghorbal said the Egyptians will try to arrange this. If there is no time for Sadat to read it before his meeting with President Carter, the Egyptian Delegation will alert us to their idea later. Kamel reiterated this, but expressed personal frustration that Sadat seemed to be unwilling to read the Egyptian paper before he meets with President Carter. He wants to do so afterwards. Eilts suggested that, if the Secretary and Kamel agreed, he would be willing to go over to Sadat's bungalow and suggest, in behalf of Secretary Vance, that he read the Egyptian paper or at least be aware of the Egyptian Delegation's objections before he meets with President Carter. He could then indicate to President Carter the areas in which the Egyptians see problems and suggest that details could be discussed later in the day with the Egyptian Delegation. Kamel was skeptical about Eilts' going over there and finally suggested that this not be done. (Comment: Kamel was sensitive to the idea that he had not been able to get to Sadat and that we might be able to do so on our own.)

Kamel noted with some chagrin that President Carter had said that President Sadat is flexible, but that his aides are not. President Carter had indicated the reverse is so with the Israelis. He thought this was not fair. The Egyptian Delegation is seeking to find a fair and honorable settlement. He wished to emphasize this point. It was not seeking to lock what Sadat wants to do. We are passing through a crucial phase, Kamel noted. Sadat has placed all of his faith in the United States. He again urged that the United States, and specifically President Carter, take into consideration Sadat's problems in the Arab world. This is terribly important. Secretary Vance pointed out that we do so. Kamel insisted that the paper in its present form will hurt Sadat in the Arab world. Sadat, unfortunately, does not like to go to President Carter and appear to be "bargaining." The Secretary pointed out that there is no desire to bargain. What we want is Sadat's statement as to what he feels is wrong with the paper. Details can be discussed with the Egyptian Delegation. Kamel did not respond directly, but noted that the present paper will frighten off Hussein, the Saudis, and others. Sadat will be totally isolated.

There were some more exchanges on the possibility of the Egyptian Delegation meeting with Sadat prior to the Sadat meeting with President Carter in order to persuade the President to point out to Carter what is wrong with the paper. That part of the discussion ended inconclusively with the Egyptians indicating they will try, but clearly not being sanguine about the possibility of such an advance meeting. As Ahmed Maher and Eilts were going from Walnut to Laurel to get ice and glasses, Maher said to Eilts that the basic problem that the Egyptians have with our paper is that it is viewed (rightly or wrongly) as a U.S.-Israeli paper. He noted the Egyptian awareness of the fact that we had given the paper first to the Israelis and thereafter spent six hours with the Israelis hearing their suggestions. Eilts pointed out that we had rejected many of the Israeli suggestions and, as Secretary Vance had pointed out, the Israelis are not very happy about this. Maher said he understood this, but that it would have been much easier for the Egyptians to swallow had we given them a copy of our initial paper at the outset. It is now viewed in Egyptian eyes as a U.S.-Israeli paper no matter what we say about it. Kamel had not wanted to say this to the Secretary, but we should know that this is one of the principal Egyptian gripes about it.