



The Azerbaijan-Armenia Peace Talks: Lessons from Israel and Egypt

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Forty-four years ago, in March 1979, Israel's Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egypt's President Anwar Sadat signed a peace treaty that many thought impossible. The negotiations were often tense, with numerous crises and complex compromises, but eventually, terms were settled, and the agreement has held firm ever since. The warfare ended; embassies, economic ties and transportation links were established; and over time, close strategic coordination in promoting stability in the region was established. In many respects, this was the most significant example of a successful peace process since the end of World War II, and it can serve as an example for Azerbaijan and Armenia.

On a recent visit to Azerbaijan to participate in an academic conference organized by Ada University in Baku, I heard echoes of Israeli-Egyptian history. Coincidentally, our conference took place at the same time that unprecedented direct talks between officials from Azerbaijan and Armenia were being conducted in Washington. The meeting between the foreign ministers of the two countries, hosted by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, marked an important preliminary step towards ending the conflict. At the end of the meeting, Blinken declared, "The two sides have discussed some very tough issues over the last few days, and they've made tangible progress on a durable peace agreement."

In addition, and perhaps more importantly, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev and Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met in Brussels on May 14 under the auspices of the European Union. A summit between the two leaders suggests a readiness to proceed to serious negotiations.

Although every international conflict has unique characteristics, there are important similarities between Azerbaijan-Armenia and the Israeli-Egyptian case, including ancient animosities, religious and cultural differences, and contested territory. In addition, the involvement of outside powers with their own interests inserts a complicating factor.

In both conflicts, the exploration of the potential for a negotiated resolution that satisfies the vital interests of the two parties followed a series of very costly wars and, in the language of conflict management, “a mutually hurting stalemate.” For Israel and Egypt, exhaustion after the bitter war of 1973 (following earlier clashes in 1948, 1956, and 1967), led both countries to cooperate with US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the first direct talks between officials from Cairo and Jerusalem. These talks produced two disengagement agreements that opened the door for broader peace negotiations.

In 2020, the 44-day war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which followed over 30 years of conflict, ended with Baku recapturing much of the Karabakh region following a successful campaign based on heavy use of drones and other advanced technology. However, the ceasefire lines left the countries dependent on one another for access to areas where citizens from the other side continue to live. This aspect, as well as ongoing military incidents mainly targeting Azerbaijanis, highlight the fragility of the situation and the need to go further. In many ways, this is similar to the Egyptian-Israeli status quo after the ceasefire and disengagement agreements.

The process of turning a fragile ceasefire into a permanent and cooperative peace treaty was launched by Israel’s Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat. As I documented in a recent book on this topic, shortly after the Israeli elections in 1977 that brought Begin to power after three decades in opposition, he and Sadat began to exchange exploratory messages and sent emissaries to explore the potential for finding common ground sufficient to reach an agreement. When these assurances were received, Sadat decided to come to Israel to meet directly with Begin, and less than 18 months later, the terms of the treaty were finalized. Based on the framework of “land for peace,” Israel agreed to dismantle the settlements that had been established as an interim measure, and Egypt agreed to end the state of war that had existed since 1948, normalize relations with Israel, and establish cooperative security measures.

On the territorial issue, the legal status of the Sinai Peninsula and Karabakh are somewhat similar. In 1967, in a defensive war, Israel captured the Sinai from Egypt, but internationally as well as in Israel, the area was considered Egyptian sovereign territory. The Armenian conquest of Karabakh during the collapse of

the Soviet Union (not in a defensive military operation), and its recovery by Azerbaijan in the 2020 war, did not result in a change in the recognition of this region as part of Azerbaijan, including by the United States.

Throughout the detailed negotiations, Begin and Sadat demonstrated the importance of leadership in overcoming obstacles, including from domestic opponents who highlighted the risks and downplayed the benefits of reaching an agreement. Begin's perception of the issues and his strategy of negotiation, as reflected in Israeli documents and transcripts from the negotiations, highlight his political realism, placing the national interest over the ideological emphasis for which he was known before becoming Prime Minister.

No peace process is without significant costs, and at each stage of the discussions with the Egyptian leader, Begin and his advisors carefully weighed the potential risks and benefits of the different options, particularly towards the end, when the most difficult decisions were taken. A major concern was that Egypt would use the gains from the peace agreement, including American weapons, to prepare for another war, but Begin viewed this scenario as unlikely and exceeded by the gains for Israel resulting from a peace agreement.

For Azerbaijan and Armenia, the current geostrategic status points to the logic of moving towards a peace process and winding down the conflict. For Armenia to overcome its isolation and dire economic situation, a rapprochement with Azerbaijan is vital. For Azerbaijan, while the threat from Armenia has decreased following the 2020 war, [the threat from Iran](#) and efforts to undermine its security and independence are increasing. At the Ada University conference, Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev described relations with Iran as "at the lowest level ever," as reflected by a series of terror attacks "organized on a governmental level" (rejecting the Iranian regime's claims that these were the acts of individuals.) In this environment, Baku needs to focus on countering the Iranian threat.

The Israel-Egypt case also provides important insights on the roles of third-party facilitators and mediators as well as "spoilers" who seek to disrupt the negotiations. At times, the US government, led by President Jimmy Carter, provided assistance in overcoming obstacles, first at the Camp David summit when the framework for a treaty was negotiated, and then a few months later, when the details were finalized. American security guarantees and financial aid packages gave Sadat and Begin additional side-benefits to offset the risks they were taking in making concessions. But at other times, Carter and other American officials created obstacles, such as when they sought to involve the Soviet Union and PLO leader Yasser Arafat under the illusion that with them, a "comprehensive agreement" was feasible. After expelling thousands of Soviet "military advisors"

from Egypt a few years earlier, Sadat had no interest in inviting the Kremlin to return, and both he and Begin understood that spoilers would create divisiveness to promote their own agendas. In response, Israel and Egypt detoured around the White House, opening their own direct channels of communication and keeping the spoilers out.

The circumstances for Azerbaijan and Armenia are different, but the leaders will need to watch the American and European mediation efforts for agendas that divert the focus from the shared objectives. And like the Soviet Union 40 years ago, Russia under Putin can be expected to act as a spoiler, using force and threats to maintain influence. At the end of the 2020 war, an Iskander missile was launched against Baku to coerce Azerbaijan into accepting a Russian “peacekeeping force” stationed strategically in Karabakh. (The missile was [reportedly intercepted by an Israeli-made defense system](#).) Russia continues to be directly involved in supporting and arming Armenia, including maintaining bases in its territory and moving invisible arms shipments overland from Iran through this area. However, Russia’s power has been reduced by the morass in Ukraine and the failures of its weapons in the 2020 conflict with Azerbaijan, giving Prime Minister Pashinyan room to maneuver.

When two countries enter into negotiations following difficult wars, there are never any guarantees regarding the outcome. Around the world, numerous peace efforts have failed when one or more of the leaders was either unable or unwilling to make concessions and take the calculated risks necessary to satisfy the basic requirements of the other side. Attempts to duplicate the successful Israel-Egypt negotiations in the cases of Syria and between Palestinians and Israel have collapsed repeatedly, in large part reflecting the absence of leadership.

After decades of bitter conflict, the obstacles to an agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia should not be underestimated. Success depends on the ability of the leaders to negotiate an agreement that would benefit both countries. Four decades ago, Begin and Sadat demonstrated that this was possible.

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