

## ROMANIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE PROCESS (1977-1982)

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*Abstract: Since 1977, Romania was increasingly involved in the Arab-Israeli peace process, and the external actions of Romanian state have been viewed extremely positively by the Western states. Nicolae Ceausescu tried to mediate the relationship between the Arabs and the Israelis, being actively involved in achieving a peace treaty between the two belligerents. Thus, in the wake of the historic meeting between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, there were numerous discussions and meetings between Romanian diplomats and representatives of the two. The Arab leaders seemed to understand finally, that reconquering the lost territories could not be done only by shedding blood, but needed a objective analysis of the situation that would lead to negotiations with Israel on equal terms. Also, the policy that the Israeli pursued so far with regard to the Arab territories conquered in the 1967 war, needed substantial changes. The final outcome of these negotiations was the signing of the Camp David Agreements in 1978. Although it was a long awaited moment for the entire international community, these accords failed to bring peace to the Near East, and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 confirmed that the two camps were not yet sufficiently prepared to make concessions.*

*Keywords: Arab-Israeli conflict, Camp David, Nicolae Ceausescu, Near East*

### Introduction

After the 1973 conflict, the situation in the Middle East has become increasingly tense. Although the Arab states are the ones who claimed the victory of the Yom Kippur war, in reality they were in fact the great losers of this conflict. Beyond some insignificant concessions, the Israelis continued to administer most of the lands conquered in 1967 war. This situation created discontent among the Arab states who felt betrayed by their traditional ally, the USSR. As a result, some Arab leaders have begun to realize that their only chance to enter into possession – even partial - of the lost territories, was to find a compromise solution with the Israeli leaders.

On the other hand, the Israelis realized that unless they don't make some concessions, they would live forever in tension and uncertainty with their Arab neighbors. Thus, the time that elapsed between 1973 and 1977 was a period of probing between the Israeli and the Arab countries. Negotiations between the two camps were mediated by a number of states with which all parties involved had very good relations, including Morocco and Romania.

The role played by Nicolae Ceausescu in the Arab-Israeli peace process between 1977 and 1982 is a very important one. The Romanian president understood very quickly that the two leaders, Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin, needed a neutral ground to start the peace talks, which is why he agreed to mediate the dialogue between the two. Since we are talking about a time when all communication

channels were closed between the two belligerents, we can say that Romanian diplomacy has really succeeded in creating a bridge between them. The efforts made by Romanian diplomats materialized with the historic visit of President Sadat's to Jerusalem, and from here until the signing of the Camp David Peace Agreements was only one step. However, what should have ended a long period of wars between the two camps, has turned into a new reason for conflict. Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 gave the international community, implicitly Romania, a new opportunity to draw attention to the need to step up efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

### **The Long Road to Peace in the Near East: The Camp David Agreements 1979**

At the end of August 1977, Menachem Begin paid a visit to Romania where he had several talks with President Nicolae Ceausescu on the events evolution in the Middle East. The meetings addressed several sensitive topics for the situation in Israel, including the tense relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization. Given that the opening of the Geneva Peace Conference was approaching, Begin was interested in how Israel's relations with PLO could be improved through the mutual recognition of the two entities.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, during his visit to Romania is assumed that it had several secret meetings with Arab officials, given that, coincidentally or not, at the same time was scheduled in Bucharest a visit by a delegation from Egypt.

Romania's initiative to mediate the negotiations between the two sides came just one day after the disastrous tour made by US Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, in the Middle East. Nicolae Ceausescu's invitation was immediately received by the Israeli Prime Minister, who saw an opportunity to destress relations with the Arab side and especially with the PLO. Begin's discussions in Bucharest were meant to strengthen an eventual Israeli-Arab understanding - as Syria, Egypt and Jordan expressed their interest in concluding peace agreements - being practically the first time since 1948 when several Arab states declared themselves willing to recognize and accept the existence of Israel. Under these circumstances, the most important issue was the Israel-PLO relationship, Palestinian leaders being willing to make some concessions as long as Israel recognizes the right to found a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>2</sup> As a result of these meetings, Nicolae Ceausescu was willing to assume the role of messenger between Israel and Egypt by sending President Sadat the outcome of the discussions in Bucharest and the Israeli wish to continue the peace discussions.

In September of the same year, Moshe Dayan paid a visit to Morocco where he met King Hassan II. The real purpose of this visit was to have discussions with Egyptian Prime Minister Hassan Tuhami, sent by Sadat to probe the ground. Morocco became the second intermediary of the Egyptian-Israeli negotiations. Following this meeting, the two partners changed the drafts of a peace agreement, and according to Israeli sources, the Egyptians would have wanted these meetings and negotiations to remain secret in order to avoid the interference of the United States. This was well received by Israeli leaders who considered President Carter's policy as a pro-Palestinian.<sup>3</sup>

President Sadat was very pleased with Begin's visit to Romania. Although the preparations for his visit to Jerusalem had almost come in a straight line, the Egyptian president wanted to be sure of the Israeli intentions before taking this visit, especially since most Arab leaders saw in his visit a betrayal of the Arab cause. As a result, the Israeli Prime Minister has decided to send an official invitation to

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<sup>1</sup> \*\*\*, *Menachem Begin In Rumania On Peace Bid*, Executive Intelligence Review, vol.IV, no.35, August 29, 1977, section Middle East p.1

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Patrick Strieff, *The President and the Peacemaker: Jimmy Carter and the Domestic Politics of Arab-Israeli Diplomacy, 1977-1980*, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, 2013, pp.104-105

President Sadat to meet in Jerusalem. The decision to visit Jerusalem has attracted many criticisms for the Egyptian president. His counselors repeatedly tried to convince him that such a move would entail the isolation of Egypt among the Arab world. Sadat, however, was of the opinion that "*the Arabs can not isolate Egypt, they can only isolate themselves*".<sup>4</sup> Even after the signing of the Camp David Agreements, Egypt came into a shadow of contention, that lasted until 1984, when the Arab states began to resume diplomatic ties with the Egyptian state, ultimately demonstrating that Sadat was right and that the Arab world needed Egypt.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the historic visit of an Arab leader to Jerusalem has sparked hope among the Arab population that Israel will shake hands with Sadat and show its readiness to bury the war by withdrawing from occupied territories, something that did not happen. The speech of November 20, 1977, in which Sadat addressed the Knesset, was an important step in overcoming the psychological barrier between the two camps.<sup>6</sup> Beyond that, the Egyptian president reminded his critics from among the Arab states that "*as the representative of the largest Arab state, bearing the greatest burden but also the greatest responsibility for war and peace in the Middle East*",<sup>7</sup> is the only one entitled to make such a decision.

This visit had the credit for dividing the Arab world in two. Among the most fervent critics were states like Syria, Iraq, Libya and Algeria. The Damascus media has reacted very harshly to President Sadat's intentions to negotiate with Israel. His speech in Knesset was considered "*the final capitulation to the Israelis*".<sup>8</sup> Among the few positive reactions from the Arab world were the reaction of Jordanian officials who said Sadat's speech was able to shed light on some rather dubious issues.<sup>9</sup>

In an interview on March 14, 1978, Sadat said peace talks would have been much easier if Kissinger was still the US Secretary of State and if Golda Meir or Moshe Dayan had served as Israeli Prime Minister. In the Egyptian president's view, the negotiations in this combination would have been more effective than with Vance as US Secretary of State, and Menachem Begin as Israel's Prime Minister. The very different approach of the two, represented in Sadat's view an impediment to the swift conclusion of peace discussions.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, we can understand more easily why, during his visit to Bucharest, the Egyptian president felt the need to ask some details about Begin's intentions and how he saw the resolution of the Middle East conflict. Also, Sadat said that he was able to return to the Egyptian parliament to resign in conditions in which the negotiations with the Israeli side would have been a failure.<sup>11</sup>

Between 11 to 17 April 1978, Nicholas Ceausescu's made a visit to the USA, honoring the invitation of US President Jimmy Carter. This visit was closely watched by all Arab leaders who hoped that through the good relations between Romania and the US, they would be able to turn the attention of the United States to the problems faced by the Arab world. At the same time, given the contacts the

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth W. Stein, *Sadat's Journey*, în *Sadat and His Legacy, Egypt and the World, 1977-1997*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, 1998, p.36

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36

<sup>6</sup> Central Intelligence Agency - Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, *Middle East: Sadat's Knesset Speech*, Colection President Carter and the Role of Intelligence in the Camp David Accords, November 21, 1977, p.1, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1977-11-21b.pdf> accessed 28.12.2017.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Central Intelligence Agency - Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, *International Reaction to the Sadat and Begin Speeches*, Colection President Carter and the Role of Intelligence in the Camp David Accords, November 21, 1977, p.2, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1977-11-21a.pdf> accessed 28.12.2017.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> CIA-Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Statements by Egyptian President As-Sadat on the Middle East Peace Process*, March 14, 1978, p.6

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7

Romanian president had with all those involved in the conflict, he had the opportunity to create an overview of the situation in the region. As for the position of the two states, Egypt and Israel, the situation was complicated for both sides. First, Egypt had to face the opposition of several Arab states, for which the conclusion of a peace treaty with Israel was the equivalent of betrayal of the Palestinian cause. For Israel, the signing of a peace agreement was greeted with enthusiasm by Prime Minister Begin's supporters, and with disapproval by those who challenged his authority.

The Middle East states as well as those in Africa followed closely the visit of the Romanian President to the United States hoping that Ceausescu will plead the Arab cause in the meetings with the US President, which has happened. This visit has sparked the interest not only of the Arab states directly involved in the conflict but of the African states supporting the Arab camp. The Liberian press has allocated a fairly important space to the news of the Romanian-American meeting. Its appreciations to the Romanian delegation to the US were very positive, highlighting the concern of the Romanian leader for international peace and security. The editor-in-chief of the „Liberian Age” magazine said that *"this very important visit proves once again that Romania wants to have good relations with all countries, regardless of ideology."*<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the Romanian President's speech on this visit received numerous positive appreciations from Palestinian officials who were grateful for Romania's support for the Palestinian cause and especially because Ceausescu supported the idea that in the negotiations with Israel, Palestinians must be represented by the PLO and its legal leader.<sup>13</sup>

After his visit to the United States, Nicolae Ceausescu took seriously its role as mediator in the Middle East and received Moshe Dayan's visit to Bucharest, with which had several discussions on the guidelines to be followed to resolve Arab-Israeli conflict for the benefit of all parties involved.<sup>14</sup>

However, the US Ambassador to Romania, Alfred H. Moses, remembers the Camp David Agreements, a little different than Sadat or Begin's accounts. According to an interview from February 2005, he speaks of the period of negotiations between Israelis and the Egyptians at Camp David, making quite a controversial appreciation of the role played by Nicolae Ceausescu as a mediator between the two camps. Thus, Alfred H. Moses remembers that for 13 days Sadat and Begin spoke to each other only in the first and last day of negotiations. In 1980, the US Ambassador had the opportunity to meet with Sadat and discuss what had happened before the signing of the Camp David Agreements. During this meeting, Sadat confessed that his only regret was that Israeli Prime Minister Begin did not had the necessary strength to go through with the second part of the treaty. The Camp David agreements were structured in two parts, one Egyptian-Israeli and one Palestinian-Israeli which considered Palestinian autonomy. Begin has signed this document that recognizes the legitimate rights of the Palestinian population, being practically the first time that Israel recognized Palestine's right to self-govern.<sup>15</sup>

Also, Alfred H. Moses remembers that after Sadat's death he met with Begin and later with US President Carter. Both, the Israeli Prime Minister and President Carter had participated at the Egyptian President's funeral. The American ambassador says that in his talks with Begin he would have told him that during Sadat's funeral, his son took him in his arms, kissed him on the cheek and told him "I

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<sup>12</sup> Arhivele Ministerului Afacerilor Externe [Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives], Problema 224/1978, Orientul Mijlociu [Issue 224/1978, the Middle East], Dosar 2219, *Unele reacții pe tema Orientului Mijlociu în urma vizitei în SUA a tovarășului președinte Nicolae Ceaușescu, aprilie 1978* [Some Reactions on the Middle East as a result of President Nicholas Ceausescu's visit to the US in April 1978], f.11

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, f.24

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* f.16

<sup>15</sup> The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, *Ambassador Alfred H. Moses*, February 16, 2005, p.31

*consider you my father.*"<sup>16</sup> The story could have a profound significance for the historic reconciliation between the Egyptians and the Israelis if it were not a hilarious one because Alferd H. Moses reports that after two weeks he met with President Carter who told him the exact same story, with Sadat's son who during the funeral procession came to him, embraced him and told him exactly the same words, "*I consider you my father.*" Under these circumstances, it is justified the ironic claim of the American ambassador who asks "*How many fathers can one person have?*".<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the role played by Nicolae Ceausescu in the negotiations between Sadat and Begin, the US ambassador believes that Ceausescu has taken more credit than he deserved. He confesses that Sadat told him about the discussions with Ceausescu regarding Begin's influence, but in his opinion Sadat's decision to visit Jerusalem was in no way influenced by President Ceausescu's intervention.<sup>18</sup>

Although Alfred Moses may be right, it should be noted that many documents from that period show that both Israel and Egypt were interested in negotiations that were not intermediate by the two super powers, the USA and the USSR, in which, both the Arabs and Israelis, had lost confidence. Therefore, the leaders of the two states have turned to more "reliable" communication channels, such as Romania and Morocco.

Finally, in September 1978, the Camp David Conference took place, with the participation of the United States, Israel and Egypt, and the old Israeli-Arab animosities have come to the surface. A hot spot of the negotiations was UN Resolution 242 of 1967 and the Palestinian problem.<sup>19</sup> After long negotiations, the Camp David Agreements were signed by both camps, thus representing the first step towards peace and cooperation in the Middle East, and at the same time being the foundation on which Israeli-Arab relations will be built in the future. However, the signing of the agreements managed to solve only part of the conflict between Israel and the Arab states. Following the efforts made by the Israeli and the Egyptian government, relations between the two countries have begun to enter a normal course. But what Egypt and Israel have failed to do was to find a viable solution to solve the problem of the Palestinian population to please both PLO leaders and other Arab states who accused Egypt of abandoning the Arab cause and especially the Palestinians.<sup>20</sup>

By signing the Agreements, Egypt recognized the existence of the Israeli state and, Israel was giving back to Egypt the Sinai Peninsula, occupied in the wake of the 1967 war. At the same time, for the security border between the two states, the military presence of the Egyptian troops in Sinai was limited.<sup>21</sup>

Assassination of President Sadat on October 6, 1981<sup>22</sup> during the commemoration of the 1973 war, by Islamist extremists who were against the Agreements signed by the Egyptian president at Camp David, and against Sadat's whole policy of concluding a peace with the most important enemy of the Arab world, demonstrates that the creation of a climate of cooperation and understanding in the Middle East was a desiderate yet to be achieved.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.32

<sup>19</sup> Yael Yishai, Amnon Sella, *Israel The Peaceful Belligerent 1967-79*, The Macmillan Press Ltd. United Kingdom, p.74.

<sup>20</sup> William B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 2016, p.1.

<sup>21</sup> Dieter Schmaglowsk, *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Hopeless Case for U.S. Policy in the Middle East?*, School of Advanced Military Studies United States Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2007, p.18.

<sup>22</sup> William B. Quandt, *op. cit.*, p.2.

### **The failure of the Camp David Agreements: the Israeli invasion of Lebanon 1982**

Finally, the glorious conclusion of the Camp David Agreements brought the two signatories a Nobel Peace Prize, but failed to put an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Beyond making an important step towards promoting a lasting peace in the Middle East, the Camp David Agreements have, in the first place, led to the accumulation of very serious tensions between the PLO representatives and the Israeli state. The Palestinians felt betrayed by the Egyptians and chose to solve their problem through weapons. Thus, after the signing of the agreements, the attacks organized by the PLO representatives from the Lebanese territory, against Israel, intensified considerably. Therefore, in order to prevent new attacks to its territorial security and integrity, on June 6, 1982, Israel decided to invade the South Lebanon, where most Palestinian groups were concentrated, in order to eliminate them. The Israeli operation, known as the "Peace operation for Galilee" was supposed to be a limited action that would destroy the Fedayen camps in southern Lebanon. However, the retaliation of the Palestinian militants turned Lebanon into a true battlefield between the PLO and Israel, which would soon bring other states supporting one or both of the two camps into conflict.<sup>23</sup>

For the Bucharest administration, the Israeli campaign in Lebanon was a good opportunity to show once again to the Arab states that they have all the support of the Romanian state. Beyond the annihilation of the PLO leaders, the Israelis hoped to succeed in removing the Syrian army from Lebanon and, moreover, were seeking to establish a Lebanese Christian government led by Bashir Gemayel, with which an Israeli-Lebanese peace treaty would subsequently be signed, through which Israel wanted to secure its northern border with Lebanon.<sup>24</sup> Despite the fact that this campaign was a success, the peace treaty between the two states has never materialized. The PLO leaders had to leave Lebanon and flee to Tunisia, not before President Arafat called for USA guarantees that civilians left behind would be protected. The Sabra and Shatila massacres of 16-19 September in which many Palestinian civilians have died as a result of Lebanese militia actions, have shown that the USA could not provide the necessary protection, and the Israelis assisted passively on this disaster, although they could have intervened.<sup>25</sup> The total number of victims varied according to who did the count. According to the Lebanese authorities, official figures accounted for approximately 2,000 deaths<sup>26</sup>, while Israeli sources spoke about 700 deaths.<sup>27</sup>

Following these events, the Bucharest government had a prompt response condemning both the invasion of Israel and the massacres that took place in the two cities. The Agerpress press agency in its June 7 release announced that "*the Romanian people demand the immediate cessation of military actions and the unconditional withdrawal of the Israeli army on the international border line established by the 1949 truce.*"<sup>28</sup> This is a very natural reaction given, in the first place, the way Romania has reported over time to the situation in the Middle East, and secondly, the excellent relations that Nicolae Ceausescu cultivated with the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat. The Sabra and Shatila massacres were a new opportunity for the authorities in Bucharest to show their concern about Israel's reprehensible actions in Lebanon. The Bucharest radio took information from the Lebanese press showing that "*Soldiers belonging to Christian militias led by Major Saad Haddad, troops that*

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<sup>23</sup> Kirsten E. Schulze, *Israeli Crisis Decision-Making in the Lebanon War: Group Madness or Individual Ambition*, Israel Studies, Volume 3, Number 2, 1998, Published by Indiana University Press, p.215.

<sup>24</sup> Raluca Rus, *The Near East Conflict during 1948-2000*, Editura Lumen, Iași, 2006, p.162

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.162

<sup>26</sup> Leila Shahid, *The Sabra and Shatila Massacres: Eye-Witness Reports*, în *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 32, Nr.1, 2002, p.44,

<sup>27</sup> Michel Gurfinkiel, *Testament of Ariel Sharon*, Pro Editurași Tipografie, Bucharest, 2006, p.60

<sup>28</sup> Raluca Rus, *op. cit.* p.163

constituted an Israeli army auxiliary contingent deployed in Lebanon, killed more than a hundred people in refugee camps in Sabra and Shatila, located in the west of Beirut.<sup>29</sup> As a result of these events, the government in Bucharest requested an urgent UN intervention through an official press release via Agerpress. After the crisis in Lebanon was over, there were voices who said that Romania intended to send troops to Lebanon, but these sources were not officially confirmed.<sup>30</sup>

Romania's position was also this time a constant one, Nicolae Ceausescu repeatedly affirming that an international inquiry is needed to reveal the real culprits of the Sabra and Shatila massacres, militating at the same time for a conference under the auspices of the United Nations in which the Palestinian population issue to be debated.<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusions

The 1977-1982 period can be characterized as a rather prosperous period for what the Arab-Israeli peace process meant. During this time, the Romanian diplomacy stepped up its efforts to support the peace process between the two camps. The good relations that Nicolae Ceausescu had developed with both Israel and the Arab side proved to be very useful in starting the Arab-Israeli negotiations.

Thus, the historic visit of the Egyptian President to Jerusalem in 1977, where he spoke to the Israelis from the Kneset Tribune (Israeli Parliament), was only the first step from what will be the long way to peace of the Near East states. The signing of the Camp David Agreements in 1979 gave hope to the entire international community that the Arab-Israeli conflict had finally come to an end. Unfortunately, these agreements have succeeded in bringing peace to the region for a very short period of time, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, demonstrating once again that the Arab-Israeli peace process was far from over. However, the actions taken by the Bucharest officials to find a viable solution to support all those involved in the Near East conflict, managed to bring to Nicolae Ceausescu a very important image capital among the Arabs leaders and especially internationally.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.167

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.167

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