Transcript for Interview with Anthony Wanis-St. John

**Interviewer:** We looked at his “Twenty Five Documents After Twenty Five Years” on the Camp David Accords, and it definitely did have some sort of bias attached to it.

**Anthony Wanis-St. John:** Why did you feel it was biased?

**Interviewer:** It appeared to extol only the positive things about the Accords whereas other people we consulted definitely felt there were some aspects of the Accords which didn’t extend to the present day.

**Wanis-St. John:** Well, he of course like all great leaders wants to leave a great legacy and justify what he did. I guess if we discussed Camp David it’s important to note that President Carter’s Camp David was preceded by other diplomatic efforts and his effort followed efforts by for example, President Ford and Nixon, both of whom used Henry Kissinger, their Secretary of State, to advance separation between the Israelis and Egyptians following the 1973 war, and at the time Henry Kissinger was doing his diplomacy, during the Nixon and Ford presidencies, the United States was competing very hard with the Soviet Union for influence over the Middle East conflict. That’s an important contextual matter, because it set the tone for the little issue of President Carter extolling the virtues of Camp David; he extolled them for a good reason I think, part of this is makes us go back a couple of steps, and the Soviets wanted a so-called “comprehensive accord”, while the US side was pretty much interested in seeing if the Egyptians and Israelis could make a separate peace.

**Interviewer:** So by “comprehensive,” do you mean other countries in the region fit as well?

**Wanis-St. John:** Well it’s more than that, but that’s part of it. Comprehensive had different definitions for different people but the way I like to think of the term is that it would involve peace between Israel and all of the states with whom it was officially in a state of war since 1949. In 1949, a US diplomat named Ralph Bunch, an African American man, was busy negotiating ceasefire agreements between Israel and the other Arab states with which it was at war. Bunch is another interesting statesperson; this was long before civil rights, he became a very important player in diplomacy. So there was a state of war either when they weren’t fighting with each other, and every few years they would go back to fighting each other. Now the comprehensive peace, two-dimensions: end the state of war, but also deal with the cause of the whole war. What was the cause of the whole war? The Palestinian question, the issue of what to do about the Palestinian people whose lives were displaced by the creation of Israel, on the land they had hoped to make as the basis of their independent state. So the Soviets took on that cause, this comprehensive approach and the Americans were like “that’s not doable, and Israel’s our ally and we’ll only work on what is convenient to us, which is what’s convenient to Israel, but also whatever gets the Arab states away from the Soviets.” So you see, there’s this whole US-Soviet rivalry that was in the 70s driving preferences to a very narrow peace process, if you will, a bilateral peace process.

**Interviewer:** Why do you think that Sadat would agree to this non-comprehensive peace process?

**Wanis-St. John:** He didn’t and he did at the same time. The peace process that eventually got him signed up included two Accords: one was the bilateral Egypt-Israel framework agreement, but the second was an agreement on the entire Middle East, again it was a skeletal agreement that didn’t have a lot of details, but Camp David, the Camp David Accords of the late 70s, resulted in two Accords, not one. So, Carter in the end got back both the bilateral and the comprehensive, and tried to link them together, even though his predecessors had pretty much favored just the bilateral. So that was one sort of triumph for Carter was to say, “Alright, we do need to do what’s possible - that’s very Kissingerian - but let’s also try to get to the cause of the problem and the cause of the problem was the dispossession of the Palestinians. So Sadat, Begin, Carter, they signed two agreements, not one, and people forget about the second one. Now both of those agreements are what we in the negotiation world call framework agreements; they lack specificity, they are full of general principles, and they set out sort of guidelines for further negotiations that should result in a detailed document. You have to understand the distinction between those two sorts of agreements, some people call them both treaties, and in a sense, they’re not. Only the detailed one is the treaty, and the original one is the framework agreement. So one lacks detail but sets out the rules for negotiations, and the other rule sets out all the answers to the outstanding problems in detail; it’s an important distinction. So agreeing with your friends to go out to dinner on Saturday, when it’s only Tuesday, is like a framework agreement. But bringing in all your six of your friends to discuss where you want to go and what time on Saturday and whose preferences are going to be taken into account is much more detailed set of understandings, rather than a vague and general one.

**Interviewer:** You said that the Camp David Accords, the one in the late 70s, Carter did try to minimally take into account the Palestinian question rather than just addressing the bilateral...

**Wanis-St. John:** Not minimally, very significantly I’d say, because as I said, there are two framework agreements: one on the Egypt-Israel relationship and the other on the Palestinian issue.

**Interviewer:** Did that establish a precedent for later peace agreements, like the Oslo Accords?

**Wanis-St. John:** Yes it did, the Camp David document that dealt with the Palestinian question, and a lot of its text carries over to the Oslo Accords, which was 16-17 years later. But there is some textual parallel between the Carter-mediated Accord on the Middle East and the Oslo Declaration. Now not only did Carter get that put in ink and signed, he delegated the task of working out the details to one of his officials named Sol Linowitz, who also wrote a very interesting memoir. He was the US point-person on the Palestinian issue. The problem at the time was that the PLO was not represented at these talks, so it was the Egyptians and the Israelis talking about the Palestinians, without the Palestinians represented in any way. The PLO rejected any participation in these, and the United States was very ambivalent about talking to them, and the Israelis were very ambivalent about talking to them. Carter accuses the Israelis of having gone back their commitments under that understanding, and that should come through in Carter’s memoirs and several of his subsequent writings. Also, in his writings of the time, he thought that Begin, Sadat, and he correctly that the bilateral Egypt-Israeli peace was linked to an Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian territories known to the Israelis as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. By withdrawal, that meant two things: a withdrawal of the military, since they had been occupying those territories militarily since they fought the 1967 war with Egypt and Jordan, but also to cease the practice of establishing settlements, colonies, within those territories, displacing neighborhoods, taking communal land, and uprooting people who were already there and setting up new neighborhoods and the problem still goes on today, but the problem had its origins back then. Carter really felt that Begin really betrayed the Camp David understanding on the settlements issue. The 1967 war sped up the problems that the 1973 war was meant to resolve, and that the Camp David negotiations ultimately tried to resolve, because it is in the 1967 war that the Israelis gained the West Bank, Gaza, and the entire Sinai territory, and a piece of Syria called the Golan Heights. So that massive expansion of Israeli control over Arab land is what ultimately led the Egyptian president and the Syrians to start the 1973 war to get back their territory, which was only partially successful. Partially in the sense that it got the attention of the United States, which had been sort of not knowing what to do, we weren’t clear how to pay attention to this problem diplomatically. It was clear we wanted to support Israel our ally militarily, but war clearly was not going to resolve these problems. Diplomacy had to resolve them. Peace negotiations had to resolve them. So the Camp David process under Jimmy Carter gets back both the bilateral Egypt-Israeli as well as the comprehensive approaches to peace and coins the term “peace process,” in which you don’t sit down and in one pen stroke create peace, but do it in steps, and you try to build confidence among the parties who distrust each other so that they get to know each other personally but then resolve their military, political, and other issues with each other. By now the Egypt-Israel component of Camp David can be boiled down to a very simple formula: the Egyptians wanted at least one thing badly, and that is all of the Sinai Peninsula back; the dismantlement of Israeli settlements and military bases there because that was sovereign Egyptian territories. The Israelis simply did not want to give it back. Carter unlocked the formula because he realized the reason the Israeli wanted was a little conflicted and ambivalent. Some Israelis wanted it to populate – they wanted to send Israelis there. They felt a biblical connection to the Sinai and thought we can get rid of the Egyptians and live there ourselves. But others said no and thought there was a pragmatic need to have distance between Egyptian weapons and our population centers. So Carter’s innovation was to get the Israelis to agree to withdrawal from all of the Sinai in exchange for the Egyptians demilitarizing the Sinai. It goes back to Egyptian control, but it can’t be used as a tactical launching point for an attack on Israel. That’s the key and very beautiful, most important brick in the wall of the Camp David process. The other piece of this that everyone forgets, the Palestinian issue, was about defining what sort of control the Palestinians could have over their own lives, and the Palestinians of course had been saying for decades, “We want nothing less than to control our own fate. If we want to make a state, we want to declare ourselves a state.” The Israelis weren’t having it and the United States wasn’t really in a position to deliver it so the negotiations entailed the administrative freedoms and power that some sort of Palestinian governing authority could exercise over the lives of ordinary Palestinians.
The Israelis weren’t having it, and the US wasn’t really in a position to deliver it, so the negotiations entailed the administrative freedoms and powers that some sort of Palestinian governing authority could exercise over the lives of ordinary Palestinians. So instead of a very young Israeli soldier with a gun but no civilian expertise running the lives of Palestinians their lives would be governed by their own leaders. And those negotiations were to set out what exactly would be run by whom. Would it just be the traffic lights and garbage collection or would it be policing and to what extent would the policing be Palestinian versus Israeli? All of those civil powers were what were on the table for these talks. And those are the issues that came back in the Oslo peace process, since the Palestinian peace of the Camp David Accords was never fully implemented, was never implemented, period. So it left the Palestinian thing in limbo even as it unlocked the door to Egyptian-Israeli bilateral peace.

**Interviewer:** How successful would you say the Accords were in general?

**Wanis-St. John:** Egypt-Israeli peace has held up, so it’s a success. There has not been a state of war between Egypt and Israel, formally or informally. On the contrary, Egyptians have been a very constructive intermediary between the PLO and Israel, between even Hamas and Israel. So Egypt continues, even now, currently to play an instructive pro-peace role, because they’re able to talk to all sides. Now, so that’s the side of success. Also, the Egyptians did get back all the territory except one little piece; but that piece, they agreed to submit to something called arbitration, and the arbitrators rewarded it to Egypt, as a fabulous little place called Taba, and the Israelis ultimately complied. So the territorial return and the demilitarization held up. They held up pretty well. Now the Palestinian-Israeli comprehensive Middle Eastern thing, that didn’t hold up at all. Even though it’s fallen apart in the last few years completely, what they did at Camp David was say “Alright, these things are discussable, these are issues we can enumerate, and all we need to do is find the right people to negotiate with about them.” So the issues got put on the table, and that was good, because for decades people had been saying “This is an impossible problem, there’s nobody to talk to, and there’s nothing to talk about.” Camp David at least showed that there was something to talk about. I would recommend you look at the Sol Linowitz books, the Linowitz memoir, to see what it is he actually put on the table with both sides. And then you’ll see at least the content of the discussions, even though he was really talking to the wrong people. He was asking the Egyptians to speak on behalf of the Palestinians, and the Israelis who were kind of regretting that they had said they would talk about self-determination and autonomy for the Palestinians. So you want to talk about Oslo and how it’s connected?
The Oslo peace documents are not a peace treaty. They are at least two separate documents. One is called a Declaration of Principles, and the other documents were letters recognizing each other: the PLO recognizing Israel, Israel recognizing the PLO as legitimate parties to talk to. And they date back to 1993, when I started getting interested in the whole peace process. Now because the PLO and the Palestinians had been excluded from Camp David, some say they excluded themselves, some say they were never invited, in any case, they weren’t there. They were not part of Camp David. The PLO was probably looking for a way to get into the picture, to be at the table. And some Israelis were thinking about reversing their ban on talking to the PLO and were considering, who could they talk to on the Palestinian side? So both the PLO and some Israelis were looking to get into the game of negotiation. The US had flirted with the idea of talking to the PLO and had backed off at different times. The director of the CIA during the Ford years (I spoke to him and interviewed him before he died for my book), he had been at some point sent by Henry Kissinger to go and talk to the PLO, even when we were not talking to them at all. So we had contact with them. But again it wasn’t very full or productive contact. So at some point the PLO and the Israeli began to talk to each other secretly without consulting the US or anyone else. Those talks eventually come to fruition with the sponsorship of the Norwegian government, who then makes a safe place available, as well as facilitators, to let the PLO and the Israelis talk to each other directly. Over the course of the year, they came up with a document called the Declaration of Principles that had a lot of content that really was echoing that had been decided. Now at the same time, the US was sponsoring an official peace process to which the PLO had not been invited, and the Israelis had tried to dictate the terms of which Palestinians could come. There were Palestinian, Israeli, Syrian Israeli, Jordanian Israeli talks that the US was sponsoring, even as these secret PLO-Israel talks were going on. And the US talks were very important; they were very interesting in the bilateral sense. But the Palestinian-Israeli track of the US sponsored talks was not very productive. The Palestinian folks were in fact not part of the PLO leadership, but they were taking their orders from the PLO, but the PLO had its secret talks directly with the Israeli. They essentially had two channels of negotiation operating at once. The US was out of the loop, the Norwegians were creating the loop, and the Palestinians and Israelis knew about both channels, the secret one and the open one. In 1993-94, the Oslo agreements were made public and signed; the US seemed to take credit for them, even though we had nothing to do with them. The Palestinians and Israelis began their own process. So they essentially continued the work that Carter had started with Begin and Sadat back in the late 70s. But now the right people were talking to each other. What were they talking about? They were talking about the very issues that Carter and Linowitz had put on the table for the Egyptians and Israelis: how to give to the Palestinians the maximum amount of daily freedom and control over their own lives as they could, in exchange for peaceful relations. Of course, the Palestinians interpreted that to mean, “we will have our independent state,” the Israelis saw it as much less than that, and that’s where the process ended up falling apart much later on. But for a while they made progress, they made good progress and they created a whole series of agreements, some people called them “treaties.” But the big ones are this interim agreement and later that was followed up by another Camp David that was an attempt to finally solve the big issue dividing Palestinians and Israelis. So from 1993 on they were trying to focus on the small issues and make some improvements to the quality of life and existence to the two peoples without fully settling the issue of Jerusalem, the issue of the settlements, the issue of the Palestinian refugees, whether or not Palestinians can be a state or not, those things they sort of left to the side in exchange for the creation of a Palestinian authority run by Palestinians instead of the Israeli military, and the withdrawal of Israeli military soldiers from the big cities in Palestine. All of that the Israelis were going to do in exchange for something very important, and that was cooperation, believe it or not, between Palestinian military and Israeli military: joint patrols. So for several years, the Israelis and Palestinians went together on patrols looking for Islamic militants, terrorists, bombers, etc. and together were the security providers trying to create an interim peace on a way to a full peace.

**Interviewer:** Did the Camp David Accords come at a price for any of the leaders for their respective countries?

**Wanis-St. John:** Yes, some people would lay the deaths of Sadat and Begin at the door of the peace process, and that’s because each side’s population still contained parties and individuals who were opposed to peace with the other side. It’s not simply opposition to peace, there were some people who had disagreements over the terms of peace. The people who assassinated Yitzhak Rabin are fundamentally opposed to any comprehensive peace with Palestinians and Arabs generally. The people who assassinated Sadat were opposed to the division between a bilateral and comprehensive peace, they didn’t want Egypt making a separate deal. It is possible to argue that Sadat and Rabin lost their lives because the peace process didn’t go far enough. When you negotiate with your enemy, when you negotiate peace you have to talk to your enemy. You can’t negotiate peace with your friends because you have peace with them already. But when you talk peace with your enemies, you have to remember that you’ve been telling your own side how bad the enemy is for a long time, and not everyone then catches up to the new message that our enemy is no longer our enemy, and that our enemy can be a friend. That’s a tough message to deliver and not every leader does it well, so it’s no surprise to me that leaders who make a turn toward peace are preyed upon by their own internal opponents.

**Interviewer:** To what extent would you consider the Accords to be a turning point in Middle Eastern peace?

**Wanis-St. John:** Well it was certainly a massive turning point because it marked the very first time that Israel and any other Arab country were officially at peace, and it marked the first time that the Israelis peacefully gave back territory they had taken. It put on the table the Palestinian self-government and autonomy issues, even if they weren’t successfully dealt with. Those are three critical developments. There’s a fourth, and that is a very pro-US turn in the Middle East, and a change the way the Middle East was dealt was, it was seen as a battleground between the United States and the Soviet Union and after Camp David, after the diplomacy of both Kissinger and Carter, it was no longer about us against the Soviets, but pretty much working with us. So those are four massive developments that made this an important turning point.