Transcript for Interview with Mark Levine

**Interviewer:** After the Camp David Accords (in 1978), what was the public’s immediate reaction in Israel?

**Mark LeVine:** Well, the Israelites were ecstatic! Sadat, their main enemy, had come to Jerusalem, offering peace. It was an incredibly brave thing for him to do. Some were suspicious, obviously, but overall it was an ecstatic time. But again, if you look at the Camp David accords, two-thirds, roughly, of the 1978 accords, they don’t even deal with Egypt. They deal with the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Sadat knew that if he went in there and got bamboozled, if he did not come out with an agreement that dealt with the Palestinians, he would be considered a traitor. He understood that. He wasn’t dumb. The majority of that agreement actually deals with how to develop autonomy, an autonomous situation for the Palestinians. Now the reality of that is that the Begin government had no intention of actually following through on those parts of the accords and never did, on any of them. And that helped lead to Sadat’s isolation in the Arab world. It was a bitter defeat for him, and he received assurances from Jimmy Carter that the US would pressure Israel, too. Carter witnessed the agreements, so he was there, and the US was supposed to be the arbiter, and to the extent Israel did not fulfill its obligations to Palestinians under Camp David to ensure that they were held accountable. They never did. Clearly there was no intention of doing that. In the end, that helped cost Sadat his life, when he was assassinated. But so it was a turning point. It removed from Israel, it was an incredible success, because it removed Israel’s main strategic threat, which was Egypt, by far, the only country that could theoretically challenge its position, because of its weapons and the size of the country, while not forcing it to actually do something it was not prepared to do, which was stop building settlements and withdraw from most of the West Bank and give Palestinians some kind of functional autonomy on the way towards, again, what everyone understood even then, eventually you have to have some kind of independence, whether it’s a confederation of Jordan or a state or what have you. Palestinians have to no longer live under Israeli control. So, again, that’s the pattern. It’s a pattern because, the political ideology in power in Israel from that period to today has been one that the dominant concern has been maintaining Jewish control over the West Bank. That has been the single overriding policy objective of every Israeli government for almost 40 years. And every action that is taken, has been that. That’s undeniable. You can say, whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing, whether they should control the West Bank or not, is an entirely different issue. That’s a moral or ethical, religious or historical question. I’m not getting into that. I’m saying, the empirical fact is that the overriding objective has been to maintain Jewish-Israeli control over as much of the West Bank as possible. So when you look at all these events, since Camp David in 1978, the response to the Intifada, ongoing settlements, invasion of Lebanon (1982), the Madrid process in 1991, and then the Oslo process, if you look at them from the standpoint of the stated goals of each of them, and how the reality always differed, you’d think, well these guys were never able to succeed in anything that they were setting out to do. If you look at them from this standpoint, that the ultimate strategic objective is to maintain control as much of the West Bank and East Jerusalem as possible, because they are considered the biblical homeland of Jews, and the dominant ideology in Israel wanted to retain those, as part of a Jewish state in perpetuity, forever, and not give them up, then it all makes sense. The very key thing is to understand, you know, if it becomes too confusing as to why the opposite of what’s supposed to happen keeps happening or why they weren’t able to follow through or succeed in anything, then it has to become clear that in the end it’s, you have to think of a different rationale behind it and not the stated one, and that’s clearly the objective. And again, it becomes very important to stress, this is not a unique negotiating tactic. This is not a unique situation. Very few countries ever openly define their objectives and follow through with them. Whether it’s the US and Iraq, Russia and Chechnya, China and Tibet, you can name it on and on, and almost in every kind of situation of occupation, the stated goals and the obvious goals of the governments who are doing the occupying are very rarely the same thing. And as scholars, you know analysts, our job is to understand that difference and explain it.

**Interviewer:** So what motivated Sadat to reach out and try to establish peace?

**LeVine:** That’s a very important question. The main reason Sadat did this - two reasons. Sadat really believed that he had a historic mission to be a peacemaker. You can’t deny that. But Camp David was part of a larger process that he began already in the early 1970s, pulling away from the Soviet Union. Sadat felt that the Soviet Union was not able to provide Egypt with the aid, strategic and economic aid, military support, etc that Egypt needed to develop, continue to develop, that Sadat’s predecessor Nasser had raised specific kinds of policies, socialist-oriented policies, they had many successes in terms of raising living standards for very poor Egyptians, redistributing land and all kinds of things like that, but by the early mid-1970s, they had run out, they had in many ways run their course and were not working as well, because Israel won the 1967 war very easily. It was clear that it was a much stronger country, and Sadat realized that he could no longer follow the Soviet Union. He needed to take Egypt out of the Soviet orbit and put it into the US orbit. That became possible after the 1973 war, because the stakes were so high then. And it was clear that the US had to deal really seriously with Egypt, which it began to do. Over time, Sadat began to cultivate a stronger set of relations with the US that prepared the way for him to make this move to Jerusalem. He knew that if he could get a peace agreement with Israel, he would guarantee - and he was right, look at the situation today - guarantee US support for Egypt forever. By signing that peace agreement, he was guaranteeing Egypt a central role in US policy for the next half a century. And that is precisely what happened.

**Interviewer:** What would you consider the greatest legacy of the1978 Camp David Accords?

**LeVine:** Well, the greatest legacy was that it reshaped the Arab world. It called the most important Arab country out of the “Conflict Bloc,” as people called it, against Israel, and put it squarely in the US camp, and in so doing, strengthened immeasurably the US position in the Middle East, because now the US controlled not just Israel, not just Saudi Arabia, but Egypt, the most important Arab country. And again, this happens in a crucial time, because another pillar of US foreign policy in the region collapsed in the same moment as the Camp David Accords. It’s the Shah regime in Iran. It collapsed- you can’t look at Camp David without looking at the collapse of the regime of the Shah in Iran, and the birth of the Israeli republic under Ayatollah Khomeini. Which meant Iran, which was one of the three main US strategic pillars in the Middle East—Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran—the US lost one of them, but at the same time gained a new one, which was Egypt. So it was very important for the US to get Egypt like this, to strengthen its security position, and to remove its main enemy. So, for both of them, it was a huge win, and for the Egyptian government, it began a security relationship with the US which has lasted to this day, it’s the second largest recipient of aid, et cetera. And it changed the basic dynamics in the Arab world. So it was a very big thing, of course, except for the Palestinians. The Palestinians, who were the main subject of the Accords were the ones who got screwed the most. Because in the end, Israel had no intention of actually giving them any kind of real autonomy to move towards a confederation with Jordan or whatever the idea was back then. And Egypt had no power to force it and quickly gave up, and the US could care less. So, the people who got screwed, as usual, were the Palestinians. And they had a leadership, which, of course, Arafat and these guys, were so bad, so incompetent, that they had no way of articulating to the world the reality and couldn’t present the case that most people would find convincing, which then allowed, of course, the occupation to continue, and until the next generation in the mid 80’s rose in Palestine that launched the Intifada in ’87 which really was a grassroots uprising, it was an uprising just like the ones you’ve witnessed in the Arab world the last two years ago, of people so fed up with living the way they were living that they said “enough” and were willing to fight with their bare hands to stop it. So that’s the evolution.

**Interviewer:** If you had to say the Accords were a success or failure, you would say it was a failure in that it did not achieve the –?

**LeVine:** Well, you can never say—never make a blanket statement of success or failure, because whose side? For Israel, it was an absolute success.

**Interviewer:** But, in the sense that it did not achieve peace?

**LeVine:** Well, it did! Israel never again has never had a war with a major country. By removing the main enemy, state adversary, to Israel, Egypt, it increased its security situation immeasurably. So from Israel’s perspective, it was a huge win. The Egyptian government won big time, but the cost to Sadat was pretty high, ultimately. The US gained immeasurably, and the Palestinians got screwed.

**Interviewer:** So it was very one sided.

**LeVine:** Well it’s just that they had no presence in the Camp David negotiations, even though they were talked about for most of the accords, they were the main subject of it, and no one fulfilled the terms, the Israelis didn’t, the Egyptians didn’t pressure them, and the US didn’t use its role as the arbiter to ensure that the accords were adhered to. And of course again, the US provided Israel with millions of dollars a year in aid. Theoretically, it could have used that leverage to say, “If you are not fulfilling the obligations of the Accords that you signed, and that we co-signed, we are not going to give you any more aid.” Could have done that. They didn’t—they did nothing, even though Israel was violating the terms, because in the end the US didn’t care. So, you know, the main powers got what they wanted out of it, but the smaller people for whom the accords were ostensibly written, Egyptians, Israelis, Palestinians, did not get what they were supposed to get out of it, which was an actual resolution to the broader conflict.

**Interviewer:** So, I think this is our last question. Did Begin suffer any personal or political cost because of this agreement?

**LeVine:** Well, that’s a very good question. I mean, yes, although I think most people wouldn’t say that, but freeing up Israel from having to worry about Egypt, led directly to Begin’s decision to invade Lebanon in 1982, which, you know, all Israelis would tell you was a mistake, was reckless, was, you know, done essentially on a lie, accusation about the PLO killing or attempting to kill an Israeli diplomat that everyone knew was not true because it wasn’t the PLO, it was a splinter group, in the same way the US invaded Iraq, a lie of weapons of mass destruction that everyone knew was not true, who wanted to know, despite what people say, “If only we knew;” It was very clear the UN had just released a report saying, “There are no weapons,” so people who say “If only we knew there were no weapons,” the report was just released saying “There are no weapons, so, no there are no weapons when they just told you there are no weapons, ludicrous thing. Well, in the same way, we all know the invasion of Lebanon, the stated reasons, were not the real ones. It was to destroy the PLO so that Palestinians would be too weak to fight, and that would help the challenge of Palestinians for any kind of independence. If Israel was still in a conflict, open war or just a cease-fire with Egypt and not a peace agreement, Israel could have never invaded Lebanon like that, long-term. It could have invaded for a week or so, or a month, but not for 18 years. So, once that happened, that lay the groundwork for the Sabra and Shatila massacres in ’82 where Israelis sponsored Lebanese militias, went in and killed hundreds of Palestinians while Israelis watched, literally stood there and watched it happen. And that basically destroyed Begin. That massacre destroyed Begin’s credibility and destroyed Begin’s premiership. So that wouldn’t have happened without the peace agreement. So in that sense, although you will never read it in a book likely, because I haven’t heard actually anyone ask that question, so it’s a very good question. You know, an event has a set of questions, which produces whole other set of events. Israel made this agreement in ’78 to free itself up. To have a stronger strategic hand in the region, and to deal with Palestinians. Part of that strategy that emerged, given that it was so much stronger now that its main adversary was out of the conflict and they knew they would never fight another war with it again, was to act more reckless. Politically, diplomatically, strategically, than they otherwise would have, because the costs were lower. Theoretically. The cost, of course, of occupying a country for 18 years as Israel did with Lebanon, you could say are very high as we know from the cost of occupying Iraq, what it’s done to American soldiers and everything. Nonetheless, strategically, it became much more acceptable, and that kind of recklessness—you know, if you don’t have to worry about your back—you tend to be a little more carefree, and I think Begin did not think through the consequences of his actions, and he put in place a set of events that eventually led to his downfall as premier, because he had to resign really after the Sabra and Shatila Massacres and all the other screw-ups of the Lebanese occupation. So in that sense, something that was his greatest triumph, for sure, became the greatest seeds of his downfall.

**Interviewer:** Okay. I think we’re done with questions. Thank you very much, Mr. LeVine.