On November 9, 1977, President Anwar el-Sadat announced before Egypt’s People’s Assembly that he was prepared to go “to the end of the Earth” for peace, adding extemporaneously that he was even willing to visit Israel and speak before its parliament, the Knesset.1 Sadat’s pronouncement was shocking given that Egypt had not only repeatedly threatened Israel’s existence and denounced its legitimacy, but had fought against Israel five times since its founding in 1948. For the first time in its history, an Arab head of state was now publicly offering to negotiate directly with Israel.2

Ten days later, Sadat landed at Ben-Gurion Airport, where he was welcomed with warm applause from a crowd of Israeli dignitaries. In a historic scene broadcast to millions around the world, a smiling Sadat deplaned and shook hands with Prime Minister Menachem Begin, kissed former Prime Minister Golda Meir on the cheek, and laughed and joked with Israel’s military heroes Moshe Dayan and Ariel Sharon (both of whom were part of Begin’s cabinet).3 The next day Sadat toured Yad Vashem, Israel’s memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, and laid a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a monu-

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ment honoring Israel’s soldiers killed or missing in war. Sadat then addressed the Knesset in a special session, stating that “in all sincerity, I tell you, we welcome you among us, with full security and safety.” In one dramatic stroke, Sadat conferred de facto recognition on Israel, honored its fallen warriors, acknowledged its security needs, and finally, promised “no more war.”

Sadat overturned Egypt’s long-stated position that the commencement of face-to-face negotiations would occur only if Israel withdrew, or agreed to withdraw, from all the territories it had occupied since the 1967 war. Abandoning this precondition, Sadat suddenly made concessions without any quid pro quo, giving away bargaining chips that could have been used in future rounds of negotiations. Meeting publicly with the Israelis also entailed great personal and political risks, exposing Sadat to physical threats and condemnations from around the Arab world. Domestically, Sadat was rebuked by some Egyptian officers, and members of his inner circle such as Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy and his deputy, Mohammed Riad, both of whom resigned in protest. If traveling to Jerusalem exposed Sadat to myriad risks, then why did he take such a gamble? Why did he make a “bold” or “grand” gesture when smaller, less radical avenues existed to accommodate Israel? Answering these questions allows scholars to better understand a decision that not only helped change the course of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but that has since transformed the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. My study thus constitutes an interpretive or disciplined-configurative case study, as I attempt to explain an event of fundamental historical importance.

11. The terms “interpretive” and “disciplined-configurative” draw from the typology of case studies proposed by Lijphart and Eckstein, respectively. Arend Lijphart, “Comparative Politics and the
In this article, I also draw attention to a meaningful but understudied type of costly signal, the bold gesture. It is a positive sanction that is unprecedented, irreversible, and noncontingent. Decisionmakers employing such signals initiate conciliation through a single, dramatic act, rather than through repeated overtures, relying less on iteration than on a “leap in the dark” to engage rivals. Although sending any costly signal involves risks for the initiator, or signaler, leaders perceive those with the aforementioned characteristics to be the riskiest. Bold moves can not only lead to favorable outcomes, but can also produce the most undesirable, adverse consequences, resulting in outcomes that may be far worse than the status quo. The severity of the risks associated with bold gestures distinguishes this subset of costly signals from all others.

The lack of scholarly interest in this type of signal is puzzling given the frequency with which it has been either used or invoked by policymakers. Third parties often call on disputants to “take bold initiatives for peace.” States locked in a conflict sometimes appeal to their opponents to undertake such moves as proof of their benign intentions.

Despite their use by policymakers, the existent scholarship generally assumes that such signals are too risky and, as a result, either are not employed or are rare. The signaling and trust-building literature posits that if decisionmakers accommodate their enemies, then they do so through an incremental, or step-by-step, process to reduce their vulnerability.
tion states against making major concessions, arguing that those that do so risk appeasing their adversaries and projecting an image of weakness that emboldens rivals to behave more aggressively.\textsuperscript{16} Although some scholars have studied risk-taking, their analyses have been largely restricted to explaining the use of military force.\textsuperscript{17}

Expected utility theory can account for extraordinary acts such as Sadat’s, but it stipulates that decisionmakers would accept great risks only if the payoffs were correspondingly high enough to justify them. A series of explanations seemingly fit this line of thought. Some scholars argue that Sadat sought to pressure Jimmy Carter’s administration to discontinue its work on a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement and redirect its attention to the Egyptian-Israeli peace process.\textsuperscript{18} Others have argued that Sadat’s initiative was motivated by a desire to preserve his regime amid economic and political crises.\textsuperscript{19} These explanations, however, downplay the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the visit and fail to account for the perceptions of Egyptian decisionmakers. Sadat and his advisers believed that the potential benefits of visiting Jerusalem were offset by the potential costs, yet he still chose to travel to Israel.

This article departs from previous studies because it not only integrates disparate explanations of Sadat’s initiative into a single answer, but it also furthers scholars’ understanding of his action in several ways. First, I explain why Sadat chose to reassure Israel through a bold move when less costly alternatives were available. Second, I apply concepts from cognitive psychology to shed light on the process through which Sadat reached his decision, focusing


on those perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs that led him to change course. Finally, I provide a novel account of Sadat’s decisionmaking using primary sources from Egypt; archival materials from the United States and Israel; and the personal papers of key officials who advised or frequently met with Egypt’s president.

I find that Sadat’s disillusionment with the progress and pace of the peace process explains when and why he abandoned multilateral in favor of bilateral diplomacy. Although Sadat had a strong preference for peace, his reliance on U.S. mediation circumscribed his ability to realize this outcome. In 1977, Sadat had hoped that President Carter would quickly reconvene the Geneva Middle East Peace Conference, but as the year progressed, he grew frustrated with the delays and with the procedural debates over its format and structure. Meanwhile, he received positive signals from Begin and third parties about the prospects of negotiating a peace agreement directly with Israel. This situational explanation provides insight into Sadat’s decision to begin talks with Israel, but it cannot account for why, despite all the risks, he chose to visit Jerusalem. I argue that prospect theory explains Sadat’s risk acceptance, while his readiness to reassure Israel through a bold rather than a small gesture was motivated by a desire to reduce mistrust. Together, these two explanations offer a distinct psychological account of Sadat’s initiative.

Prospect theory posits that individuals framing their options from a perceived domain of losses will be risk-seekers, whereas those operating from a perceived domain of gains will be risk-averse. One assesses the domain by using a reference point as a benchmark against which to measure gains and losses. The archival evidence shows that Sadat’s reference point had consistently been Egypt’s pre-1967 border with Israel, as he had never accepted the country’s loss of the Sinai Peninsula. Sadat’s failure to restore the status quo ante not only eroded his popularity and prestige, but prevented him from concluding a peace agreement with Israel. Without peace, Sadat could not reduce defense expenditures and use Egypt’s human, technological, and financial resources to address the country’s growing economic crisis. Identifying himself as operating in a domain of loss affected the way Sadat evaluated policy options and influenced the level of risk he was willing to accept to recover the Sinai.

Although prospect theory explains Sadat’s risk acceptance, it can account

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neither for his motivations nor for the size, form, and symbolism of his conciliatory gestures. Sadat visited Jerusalem because the level of mistrust, in his view, between Egypt and Israel was too high to allow meaningful discussions in direct talks. Desiring an agreement but cognizant of Israel’s security concerns, he would undertake a bold move to address his rival’s fears and overcome, as he often said, the “psychological barriers.” Sadat’s multiple concessions thus constitute “empathic signals” that were designed to unequivocally reassure the Israelis and remove their doubts over Egypt’s benign intentions.21

In the next section, I review prospect theory and outline some of its most important implications for international relations. The second section examines the diplomatic interactions and key events that led Sadat to circumvent the Geneva Conference and negotiate directly with Israel. I then apply prospect theory to explain Sadat’s evaluation of policy options and his willingness to accept one that was much riskier than the rest. The fourth section presents evidence on how Sadat sought to reduce mistrust with Israel by empathetically responding to its fears. I close with a summary of my findings and discuss the theoretical and policy implications of this case for the study of bold gestures.

Prospect Theory in International Relations

Prospect theory provides a systematic way to explain and predict an individual’s risk propensity under conditions of uncertainty. It was derived in the 1970s from a series of experiments conducted by the renowned psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. International relations scholars have since used it to explain why leaders take risks during crises, wars, and negotiations.22 Prospect theory is rooted in the assumption that individuals are more sensitive to gains and losses “from a reference point than to levels of wealth and welfare.”23 Countering the axioms of utility theory, it posits that people

value changes in asset levels (from a reference point) more than total assets.24 Studies have repeatedly shown that there is an asymmetry between gains and losses such that people overvalue losses relative to comparable gains.25

The framing of a situation, particularly of anticipated outcomes, as gains or losses affects risk orientation. Individuals who perceive themselves to be operating in a domain of gain are said to be risk averse, whereas those operating in a domain of loss are said to be risk acceptant. One measures gains or losses against a mental reference point, “an earlier state” that reflects an acceptable state of affairs or “an outcome you expect or perhaps . . . feel entitled” to possess.26 The reference point is usually the current status quo; in some cases, however, it is an aspiration level, or something that one desires or hopes to achieve such as a territorial objective or a performance or policy goal.27 Prospect theory predicts that leaders making decisions from a domain of loss will accept risks to recoup their losses. The implication is that how leaders frame a situation, or how a situation has been framed (or manipulated) by their advisers, influences their risk propensity.28

One notable weakness of prospect theory is its failure to provide a “systematic theory of framing” that clearly defines the criteria for reference point identification and gain/loss coding.29 Given that the frame that individuals adopt may change their risk orientation and reverse their preferences, the absence of such a theory poses problems for nonexperimental research. This raises questions about whether scholars can use prospect theory to explain de-

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cisions in the real world and whether they can do so independent of the observed behavior. I address this problem by using available primary sources not only to identify the perceptions of Egyptian officials, but, more importantly, to trace the process through which Sadat made his decision to visit Jerusalem. The process-tracing technique allows me to ascertain the frame that Sadat adopted from 1973 to 1977 and to operationalize the key elements of prospect theory independent of the outcome. Finally, although prospect theory is better suited to explaining cases of individual rather than group decisionmaking, this limitation does not affect my argument given the degree to which Egypt’s foreign policy was largely influenced by just one person, Anwar el-Sadat.

From Geneva to Jerusalem

Sadat had long desired peace, but translating this preference into reality was difficult given Egypt’s refusal to negotiate directly with Israel. He therefore depended on the United States to mediate between the two states, hoping that it would be able to use its influence as Israel’s patron to pressure the Israelis into offering concessions. Under the administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had helped Egypt and Israel negotiate the First and Second Sinai Disengagement Agreements (or Sinai I and Sinai II), which, among other points, returned a narrow sliver of the Sinai back to Egypt. By 1976, Sadat was seeking a comprehensive peace, and in this endeavor, he found a partner in the newly elected president, Jimmy Carter.

THE ELUSIVE SEARCH FOR A COMPREHENSIVE PEACE

As soon as he entered office, Carter worked tirelessly to reconvene the Geneva Conference, a multilateral forum cochaired by the United States and the Soviet

33. At the Khartoum Summit (1967), the Arab League agreed to a formula known as the “three no’s”—no peace, no recognition (of), and no negotiations with Israel. Morris, Righteous Victims, pp. 345–350.
Union. Its purpose was to bring all the disputants—Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, and the Palestinians—together to reach a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Arabs not only were heartened to see that the United States was engaged in the peace process, but were pleased to hear Carter publicly endorse the creation of a Palestinian homeland.\(^{35}\) They believed that such a pronouncement indicated that the administration was committed to applying United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which established the land-for-peace formula, to all territory Israel had taken in the 1967 Six-Day War, including the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.

Throughout 1977, President Sadat and Foreign Minister Fahmy favored negotiating over the difficult issues beforehand, so that the conference itself would be a mere formality, leading symbolically to the signing of peace agreements.\(^{36}\) Their insistence on this point was motivated by a desire to avoid repeating the fate of the First Geneva Conference, which met in December 1973 but ended inconclusively.\(^{37}\)

The Carter administration underestimated the importance that Sadat and his advisers attached to having “advanced preparations.”\(^{38}\) Although the United States initially sought to reach some agreement on substantive issues, it abandoned this goal by the summer. Convening the conference became an end in itself, as the discussions began to focus on technical and procedural questions such as: Who would represent the Palestinians? What would be the structure of Geneva? And what would be on the agenda?\(^{39}\) Of utmost concern to Sadat was that the Arabs would be organized into a single delegation for the plenary session before splitting into national, or geographic, subcommittees such as Syria-Israel, Egypt-Israel, and Jordan-Israel. Sadat feared that if the plenary was empowered to approve agreements reached in bilateral negotia-

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35. Stein, Heroic Diplomacy, pp. 193–199, 301 nn. 27, 28, 32.
tions, as Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad favored, then this might give intransigent parties such as Syria a veto over Egypt’s actions.40

Sadat began to view the entire process as a waste of time.41 As he told the U.S. ambassador to Egypt, Hermann Eilts, “Peace is slipping through my fingers for procedural reasons.”42 By the fall of 1977, Sadat had grown skeptical that the Geneva Conference could be reconvened and that it could lead to a comprehensive peace.43 The disagreements over how to convene, organize, and conduct the conference, coupled with Syria’s inflexibility, led Sadat to consider other options.44 He grew pessimistic toward multilateral diplomacy just as he became cautiously optimistic about negotiating directly with Israel.

SADAT’S REASSESSMENT OF DIRECT TALKS
In the May 1977 elections, Israelis voted for the Likud bloc over the long-dominant Labor Party. For the first time, a coalition of right-wing parties led by Menachem Begin took control of the Knesset, sending shockwaves throughout the region. Begin had a reputation as a hard-liner and an ideologue given his adherence to the revisionist Zionist teachings of Ze’ev Jabotinsky, which


emphasized the necessity of maintaining control over the entire biblical land of Israel, including over the West Bank.45

Although upset by the Likud’s victory, Sadat and his advisers were encouraged when Begin appointed Moshe Dayan as foreign minister.46 The Egyptians were familiar with Dayan, who had previously served under Prime Minister Meir, and viewed him as a pragmatist with whom they could do business.47

As Sadat began to receive information from third parties regarding Begin’s interest in peace, the Egyptian president’s views of the Israeli prime minister changed. In a visit to Washington in the summer of 1977, Begin revealed his readiness to make substantial territorial concessions in the Sinai.48 This information was received positively by Carter, who, in turn, shared it with Sadat.49 Other third parties such as President Nicolae Ceaușescu of Romania and Austrian Prime Minister Bruno Kreisky provided similar accounts.50

Sadat also established direct contacts with Israel to better gauge Begin’s commitment to the peace process. On September 16, Sadat’s confidante and deputy prime minister, Hassan Tuhami, met secretly with Dayan in Morocco. Dayan was largely noncommittal about territorial questions, but he led his counterpart to believe that Egypt would receive most of the Sinai if it negotiated directly with Israel.51 The meeting revealed serious differences, however, between the two sides regarding the timing of Israel’s withdrawal, the future of its settlements in northeastern Sinai (in the Rafiah-Yamit salient), and the status of the strategic city of Sharm el-Sheik.52 Because any peace agreement

was conditional on an Israeli withdrawal, Begin’s offer confirmed his interest in negotiations but, as a signal, provided little new information. According to Eilts, “Sadat commented to me that the meeting had really resulted in nothing, Dayan, he said, had presented the same old Israeli views.”

It was Begin’s political strength, rather than his ambiguous commitment to withdraw, that piqued Sadat’s interest. One of Sadat’s critiques of Begin’s predecessor, Yitzhak Rabin, was that he led a weak government and this, in turn, made negotiating with him difficult. After Kissinger suspended his shuttle diplomacy in March 1975 (six months prior to the conclusion of Sinai II), Sadat told Eilts that “the Israeli domestic situation had undercuts negotiating prospects. Israel lacked a leader who could guide the public.” In February 1977, he jokingly remarked that he missed Rabin’s predecessor, Golda Meir, because she “had guts and could face the Knesset.”

The secret Dayan-Tuhami meeting reveals that Sadat was encouraged by the strength of Israel’s new government. In a memo to Israel’s foreign ministry in which he summarized his meeting with Tuhami, Dayan reports that “Tuhmai stresses that Sadat had no confidence in former Israeli government,” but “that present (government) is strong and will take dynamic decisions.” Begin’s commanding style of leadership, in addition to his hawkishness, gave Sadat hope that he had a partner who could convince Israel’s public and ruling coalition to make peace.

By November 1977, Sadat was seeking to reduce U.S. involvement in the peace process by circumventing the Geneva Conference and beginning direct
talks with Israel to (in principle) negotiate a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace. Although he possessed multiple pathways to negotiate with Israel, he ultimately chose to accept the riskiest option to begin face-to-face talks.

**Accepting Risks in the Pursuit of Peace**

In this section, I offer a prospect-theoretic account of Sadat’s initiative, arguing that Egypt’s president took a gamble over less risky options because he made decisions from a perceived domain of losses. Although a few scholars seemingly offer such an explanation, their studies are incomplete, as they neither apply nor test some of prospect theory’s key propositions. They also fail to trace the series of important events that led up to Sadat’s decision to visit Jerusalem.

Using recently declassified archival sources, I paint a much more complete picture by identifying and explaining the reference point and domain of Sadat and his advisers. I also examine how they evaluated the relative risks associated with different policy options, something earlier studies neglected to do. Those options believed by Egyptian decisionmakers to have greater variance in potential outcomes are considered riskier than those anticipated to produce less divergent outcomes. This method allows a comparison of the riskiness of alternative prospects without possessing precise probabilities and helps address one of the many difficulties in applying prospect theory to foreign policy decisions. To address potential critiques and strengthen my argument, I end the section by comparing prospect theory with its leading rival, expected utility theory, and present evidence of how the former provides a superior explanation of Sadat’s risk acceptance.

**SADAT’S REFERENCE POINT: RESTORING THE STATUS QUO ANTE**

In prospect theory, the reference point serves as a benchmark against which scholars measure gains and losses, and affects the way choice problems are framed. An examination of the primary documents shows that Sadat aspired

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61. For more on this method, see McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics*, pp. 11, 38–39, 52; and Boettcher, *Presidential Risk Behavior*, pp. 20–23.
to restore the status quo ante, or the line of demarcation, between Egypt and Israel before the 1967 war.

In the war, Israel won a decisive victory against the combined military forces of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. As a result, Israel more than tripled its size, seizing control of the Golan Heights from Syria; the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem from Jordan; and the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula from Egypt. The Arab states were humiliated, as they had not only suffered a crushing defeat but had, in the case of Egypt and Syria, lost national territory.

From 1949 to 1967, the line of demarcation between Egypt and Israel was the de facto border and closely resembled, with the exception of the Gaza Strip, the international border that had existed between the British Palestine Mandate and Egypt (1918–48) and the former Ottoman Empire and Egypt (1906–18). Because the Sinai had been a part of Egypt, Sadat and other officials believed that their country had a historical, moral, and legal claim to every “inch” of the peninsula, precluding Israel’s retention of settlements, airfields, and oil fields.

Egyptian decisionmakers did not adapt, or “renormalize,” to the new status quo because they perceived the territorial loss to be illegitimate. Kahneman and Tversky write “that a person who has not made peace with his losses is likely to accept gambles that would be unacceptable to him otherwise,” adding “that a failure to adapt to losses or to attain an expected gain induces risk-seeking.” Individuals who fail to renormalize might engage in risk-seeking behavior when the status quo falls below their aspiration level. The reason is that individuals who do not accept the new status quo will try to recoup their losses to restore the status quo ante. Such was the case for Sadat and other Egyptian officials who, after the 1967 war, made the recovery of the Sinai Peninsula their strategic objective.

Sadat’s decision for beginning the 1973 October War lends support to this in-
terpretation. He explicitly identified liberating “the occupied territory” as the goal in a directive issued a day before the conflict.68 Egypt would recover its territorial losses not by forcibly restoring the 1967 borders, but by waging, according to Sadat, a more limited war “to persuade the enemy that a continued occupation of our land would be more costly than it can afford.”69 The Egyptian military’s early successes (particularly its crossing of the Suez Canal), coupled with its ability to fight a protracted war, proved that Egypt could make the status quo costly for Israel and led to the perception that the war resulted in a “victory.”

Kissinger’s postwar meetings with Egyptian officials provide additional evidence that the 1967 boundary remained their reference point. Describing his first meeting with Egypt’s president, he wrote, “Sadat told me, he had two objectives: to regain ‘my territory,’ that is to say, to restore the 1967 boundary in the Sinai, and to make peace.”71 Sadat repeatedly said after the war that he could never “give up” or “submit” an “inch of my land” to Israel.72

Egyptian officials communicated their expectation of recovering the Sinai in exchange for peace to the Carter administration as it was seeking to reconvene the Geneva Conference. When Secretary of State Cyrus Vance visited Egypt in August 1977, Sadat handed him a draft peace treaty, the second article of which stated that “the Israeli government solemnly undertakes to withdraw its forces from the Egyptian territory occupied since June 5, 1967 to the international boundaries of Egypt.”73 This position was conveyed less than a month later, when Tuhami secretly met with Dayan. Tuhami emphasized that Sadat “is a soldier who had his land conquered” and, as such, is willing “to discuss and argue on all subjects, but not about the sovereignty over his own land.”74

69. Ibid., pp. 188–190. On Egypt’s decision for war, see ibid., pp. 174–194; Kipnis, Road to War, pp. 110–112; Henry Kissinger, Years of Upheaval (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), pp. 459–60; and Lippman, Hero of the Crossing, pp. 6–14.
70. Nonetheless, Egypt and Syria were once again soundly defeated by Israel. Quandt, Peace Process, pp. 125–126; Fahmy, Negotiating for Peace, pp. 33–34; Kissinger, Years of Upheaval, pp. 618–620; and Lippman, Hero of the Crossing, pp. 30, 38–40, 118.
73. Fahmy, Negotiating for Peace, p. 218.
Before and well after his trip to Jerusalem, Sadat told Israeli officials that he could compromise on all issues except “land and sovereignty,” and that neither he nor the Egyptian people could accept anything less than the entire Sinai. That Sadat showed considerable flexibility in later negotiations but refused to conclude an agreement unless Israel agreed to a full withdrawal proves the status quo ante was Egypt’s minimum bargaining position.

For Sadat, recovering the Sinai would not just restore the country’s honor, but it would also help rehabilitate his image and give him the political cover to justify an agreement before his fellow Egyptians. Concluding a peace agreement was highly desirable because it would allow Sadat to regain the Sinai’s lost oil wells, reduce defense expenditures, and solidify a geostrategic alliance with the United States, which presumably would reward Egypt with greater military aid and economic assistance. This was critical because by 1977, Egypt’s deteriorating economy and its relative decline in power had harmed Sadat’s standing among the public and military. One could argue that Sadat had multiple objectives and that this makes it difficult to apply prospect theory because he did not possess a single reference point. Such a critique does not affect my analysis, however, because his other goals—peace with Israel, strategic realignment with the United States, and regime stability—were all perceived as dependent on restoring the status quo ante.

DOMAIN OF LOSSES

The sharp contrast between Sadat’s aspiration level and the territorial status quo reflected his perception of making decisions from a domain of losses. Sadat was driven less by a desire to make uncertain gains than by a desire to reverse and recoup past territorial losses to achieve his strategic objectives. This distinction is subtle but meaningful, as it helps illuminate whether decisionmakers exhibit the loss aversion and risk orientation predicted by prospect theory.

76. Gamasy, October War, pp. 368–369.
77. Haber, Schiff, and Yaari, Year of the Dove, p. 167; Carter, Keeping Faith, p. 339; and Quandt, Camp David, pp. 215, 220.
By 1977, Sadat had little to show for his military and diplomatic prowess.\footnote{80} Since the end of the 1973 war, the image projected via government publications, artworks, and newspapers was that it was an undisputable victory for the Arabs and that Sadat’s leadership was responsible for this outcome.\footnote{81} Although Sadat had recovered a small sliver of western Sinai through war and two disengagement agreements, the victory was illusory. Israel still retained control over the bulk of the peninsula and over some of its natural resources. Despite returning the Abu Rhodeis oil field as part of Sinai II, Israel still operated a number of smaller oil wells and had discovered in 1975 and 1977 sources of natural gas and oil in northern Sinai and the Gulf of Suez, respectively.\footnote{82} Meanwhile, in northeastern Sinai (adjacent to the Gaza Strip), Israel was continuing its pre-1973 plans to develop the settlement of Yamit into a population center with agriculture, tourism, and a deep water seaport.\footnote{83} According to Mohamed Heikal, a noted Egyptian journalist, Sadat had told him before the war that “every word spoken about Yamit is a knife pointing at me personally and at my self-respect.”\footnote{84} Israel’s continued extraction and exploration of natural resources, coupled with its expansion of Yamit and other nearby settlements, harmed Sadat’s reputation.

By raising expectations about what the 1973 war had accomplished, Sadat compounded Egyptians’ sense of loss, as it soon became apparent that territi-
torially much had not changed. He consistently talked about, but was unable to deliver, the fruits of “victory.” In his secret meeting with Dayan, Tuhami had reportedly said that “the problem is the returning of the territories. This is the key to peace. This is a question of sovereignty, of national dignity, and Sadat’s survival.” He went on to tell Dayan that “once he [Sadat] receives Begin’s word that he agrees to withdrawal, Sadat’s dignity will be rehabilitated.” The use of the word “rehabilitated” suggests that Sadat sought to restore his prestige among the Egyptian people.

Recovering the Sinai was also a means to conclude peace and address Egypt’s economic and political crises. The return of the Sinai’s oil fields would generate badly needed revenue for the economy. This was important given that Egypt’s national debt had climbed to $13.2 billion as a result of increased defense expenditures and population growth. Trade imbalances also contributed to Egypt’s debt because the country was simply importing far more than it was exporting. In 1976, Egypt reportedly spent $5.375 billion on imports but exported only $2.160 billion. The consistent threat of another regional war forced Egypt to reportedly allocate more than 25 percent of its annual budget to military expenditures despite its massive debt. This diverted money that could have otherwise been used to promote economic growth and service and repay military and nonmilitary loans.

For ordinary Egyptians, these issues were not as important as high inflation, which helped increase the cost of living by roughly 65 percent from 1973 to 1976. Although inflation affected the poor the most, they were insulated to

87. Ibid.
88. In later negotiations, Egyptian generals told their Israeli counterparts that Israel’s withdrawal “is a matter of honor and prestige.” Haber, Schiff, and Yaari, Year of the Dove, p. 96.
some extent by the regime’s subsidies on basic goods such as sugar, gas, bread, and clothing, but their situation was precarious. Unemployment was also a problem and was made worse by the growth in Egypt’s population at around 2.5 percent per year, adding around one million people annually to the most populous Arab state.\footnote{By 1977, Egypt had approximately forty million people. Handel, \textit{Diplomacy of Surprise}, p. 322; Burrell and Kelidar, \textit{Egypt}, pp. 23, 47; and Weizman, \textit{Battle for Peace}, p. 60.} Egypt’s population growth occurred without sufficient economic expansion and greater investment into infrastructure and development projects, leaving millions unemployed.\footnote{Memorandum of a Conversation, April 14, 1975, \textit{FRUS}, 1969–1976, Vol. 26, p. 637; and Heikal, \textit{Autumn of Fury}, pp. 88–89.} Sadat’s open-door policy was supposed to ameliorate the situation by attracting foreign investment, but far from helping the poor and the middle class, it actually increased economic and social disparity within the country.\footnote{The foreign investment went into areas such as construction, real estate, tourism, and oil exploration/production. Moseley, “Egypt’s Economic Crisis,” November 5, 1977; Marvin Howe, “Egypt Is Uneasy as Sadat Juggles Promises of Peace and Prosperity,” \textit{New York Times}, August 23, 1977, https://www.nytimes.com/1977/08/23/archives/egypt-is-uneasy-as-sadat-juggles-promises-of-peace-and-prosperity.html; Heikal, \textit{Autumn of Fury}, pp. 88–89; and Burrell and Kelidar, \textit{Egypt}, pp. 23–24.}

Sadat and other officials understood the social and economic dislocations wrought by the crisis and sought U.S. help to remedy the situation. On February 17, 1977, Fahmy told Vance that “Egypt has great economic problems” and that its economy is in need of “overhauling.”\footnote{Memorandum of a Conversation, Cairo [the Foreign Minister’s Office], February 17, 1977, 12:30–2:30 p.m., \textit{FRUS}, 1977–1980, Vol. 8, doc. 9, p. 58.} Less than two months later, Sadat and his minister of the economy, Hamid Sayeh, traveled to Washington, where they briefed the Carter administration on the state of the country.\footnote{Memorandum of a Conversation, “President’s Meeting with President Anwar Sadat of Egypt,” April 5, 1977, \textit{FRUS}, 1977–1980, Vol. 8, pp. 181–184.}

Recently declassified material from the Israeli State Archives shows that the Egyptians also revealed their plight to Israeli officials. In Jerusalem, Sadat told Begin, “Our economic situation is horrible” and attributed the crisis partly to Egypt’s population explosion. He mentioned how Egypt “could not afford another war, mostly because of socio-economic reasons.” He also complained about the level of military expenditures, telling Begin, “We don’t have money for that.”\footnote{“Stenographic Record of a Government Meeting,” November 24 1977, ISA/A/4270/1, p. 3, http://www.archives.gov.il/en/chapter/no-war-begin-governments-peace-initiative-sadats-visit- jerusalem-november-1977/.} Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Egypt’s acting foreign minister (after Fahmy resigned), repeated the same points when he accompanied Sadat to Israel.\footnote{Boutros Boutros-Ghali Papers, Hoover Institution Library and Archives [HILA], box 4, folder}
The historical evidence suggests that Sadat and his advisers believed that Egypt’s economic situation could worsen in the future, a possibility that could lead to the type of domestic turmoil the country had experienced at the start of the year.101 In January 1977, the regime sought a loan from the International Monetary Fund, but to qualify, it had to reduce state expenditures. Sadat suddenly removed subsidies on two dozen basic commodities, which led to demonstrations and riots across the country.

Although triggered by the austerity measures, the underlying cause of the unrest was Sadat’s failure to address the economic crisis.102 The tens of thousands of people who protested nationwide in what became known as the “bread riots” were not just upset with the regime’s policies; their anti-Sadat chants revealed they were angry with the regime itself.103 Sadat asked the military to enforce martial law and impose a curfew, but War Minister Gen. Mohamed Gamasy refused to execute the order unless Sadat restored the subsidies.104 Absolutely powerless to stop the restive crowds, Sadat agreed to this condition. Ahmed Bahaa al-Din, an Egyptian journalist and close friend of Sadat, wrote that “there was nothing that bothered him [Sadat] or was on his nerves more than the bread riots. He felt that the popularity that he had gained . . . after the October war was erased by the protests. It was as though these demonstrations had undermined his legitimacy in front of the whole world. And, in my view, these demonstrations left the biggest imprint on Sadat’s life.”105 Months later, Sadat was still expressing concern that the protests constituted a popular uprising against his regime.106 Statements by political commentators, journalists, and Sadat’s own advisers confirm that the situation was growing acute.107 Sadat reportedly told Tuhami that an “im-
mediate settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict was necessary to reduce his regime’s vulnerability.”

One other notable political factor was the growing discontent within the military. Sadat’s inability to secure adequate weapons and spare parts for his armed forces, coupled with the growing power imbalance between Egypt and Israel, left the military establishment dissatisfied with the status quo. By 1977, the regional balance of power had shifted decisively in Israel’s favor, as Egypt’s moves to align itself more closely with the United States had disrupted its relationship with its traditional arms supplier, the Soviet Union. The move left some of Egypt’s advanced weaponry, including MiG fighter jets, radar installations, and air defense systems, inoperable. Israel meanwhile had since 1973 increased its defense expenditures and received greater arms shipments from the United States. Gamasy privately admitted that if war broke out with Israel, he was “under no illusion that the result would be anything other than defeat, this time perhaps more disastrous than on previous occasions.” Sadat and his closest advisers recognized that Israel’s military superiority would continue well into the future, precluding the use and credible threat of military force.

The weakening of Egypt’s armed forces not only restricted Sadat’s freedom to maneuver but strained his relationship with the military. Sadat could no longer modernize the armed forces and acquire the necessary material to service and repair existing equipment. Fahmy explained the potential danger to Vance, telling him that pacifying the appetite of the military and maintaining its support “is a matter of life and death.” Although “the army is not a prob-

108. Indyk, To the Ends of the Earth, pp. 10, 56 n. 14. See also Quandt, Camp David, p. 51 n. 36.
lem now,” Fahmy went on to say, “We don’t want it to develop into one.”\textsuperscript{114} These poignant comments attracted the attention Vance, who noted “the problem posed for Sadat by the cut-off of Soviet arms supplies.”\textsuperscript{115} Months later, the Policy Review Committee of the National Security Council met to discuss a range of topics relating to the Middle East, including Egyptian requests for U.S. arms.\textsuperscript{116} The officials agreed that it was an inauspicious time to sell Egypt lethal military equipment, but Secretary of Defense Harold Brown said that “even if Sadat understands, he has political problems with his military.”\textsuperscript{117}

Throughout 1977, the importance of reaching a quick settlement with Israel was something Sadat repeatedly communicated to the Carter administration.\textsuperscript{118} When Vance visited Egypt in August, he sent a telegram to Washington in which he observed how Sadat felt that “the time was ripe and we must achieve peace very soon. Time is running out.”\textsuperscript{119}

\section*{How Sadat Framed His Choices}

The weight of historical evidence shows that Sadat clearly perceived himself to be operating in a domain of losses. Despite the 1973 Arab “victory,” it was clear that little had in fact changed; Sadat had failed to recover the Sinai either militarily or diplomatically. Negotiating directly with Israel was a gamble, but it offered Sadat an opportunity to fully recover Egypt’s territorial losses. Such an outcome would not just right a perceived wrong, but would rehabilitate Sadat’s image and provide a basis for him to end the state of war with Israel. Peace was a precondition to reduce Egypt’s defense expenditures and to cement its strategic alliance with the United States. It would allow Sadat to reallocate more funds for development and to secure greater amounts of U.S. economic and military aid to pacify the Egyptian public and military, respectively.\textsuperscript{120}

Framing decisions from a domain of losses affected the level of risk Sadat

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\textsuperscript{114} Memorandum of a Conversation, Cairo [the Foreign Minister’s Office], February 17, 1977, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{118} “Discussions in Egypt,” February 17, 1977, p. 81.
was ultimately willing to accept to recover the Sinai Peninsula. By the fall of 1977, he had decided against waiting for a reconvened Geneva Conference, because it was a cumbersome process that, in his view, would likely end in failure. War, too, was ruled out because it would not help Egypt recover its territorial losses.

Hoping to accelerate the peace process through a bold diplomatic initiative, Sadat considered visiting Jerusalem to begin direct talks with Israel. On a visit to Romania at the end of October, he first told Fahmy about his interest in pursuing this option.121 The foreign minister cautioned the president against visiting Jerusalem, reportedly stating, “The act implies the automatic recognition of Israel and the termination of the state of belligerency. We play our two major political cards and gain nothing. The gain is all on Israel’s side and their bargaining power is doubled. We also make the Arabs and Palestinians furious. And once we go to Jerusalem, we cannot retreat. We have no fall-back position. . . . We will be cornered, without room for maneuvering.”122 Believing it would give “them [the Israelis] a chance to isolate Egypt completely from the Arab world,” Fahmy feared that Sadat’s initiative would lead to a separate peace agreement involving only a partial Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai.123 This would be the worst outcome, as the Arab world, in addition to the Egyptian public and military, would view such a bilateral settlement as a betrayal of the other Arab states and a surrender of Egyptian lands.

While Sadat privately expressed a willingness to move ahead without the other Arabs (the Jordanians, Palestinians, and Syrians), for domestic reasons, he needed to show that he had extracted at least some concessions on their behalf.124 The danger, however, was that Israel might not show flexibility toward these other actors and might refuse to fully withdraw from the Sinai.

After hearing about Sadat’s plan to visit Jerusalem, Fahmy suggested that the president either negotiate with Begin in a neutral location (e.g., Washington or Geneva) or convene an international conference in East Jerusalem, where all the disputants and permanent members of the UN Security Council would lay the groundwork on the principles for a compre-
prehensive peace. These options were less risky and would fit with Sadat’s stated objective of jump-starting the negotiations, but would do so without angering the Arab states.\textsuperscript{125} Another avenue available to Sadat, but unbeknown to Fahmy, was to continue the Dayan-Tuhami back channel and keep contacts hidden until the parties achieved a breakthrough.

By the start of November, Sadat possessed multiple options to overcome the diplomatic inertia. Of the four options, visiting Jerusalem was the riskiest, because it had the greatest variance in outcome. Although the initiative could revive the peace process, it was likely, as Fahmy pointed out, to lead to a suboptimal, if not worst-case, outcome.\textsuperscript{126} The historical evidence reveals that Sadat himself recognized these dangers; he admitted that if it ended in failure, then he might be forced to resign, leave office, or perhaps stand trial.\textsuperscript{127} There was also an understanding that visiting Jerusalem would make him the target of extremists inside and outside Egypt who opposed accommodating Israel.\textsuperscript{128}

Negotiating with Begin in a neutral country or at an international conference would slowly move the peace process forward, but would not produce negative outcomes as extreme as visiting Jerusalem. Continuing secret talks posed the fewest risks, but was slower and less likely to succeed given that the leaders were not directly involved in the negotiations.

With the exception of the Dayan-Tuhami back channel, Fahmy reviewed the other choices with Sadat and persuaded him to convene an international conference in East Jerusalem in lieu of visiting Jerusalem alone.\textsuperscript{129} This proposal was abandoned when it was met with opposition by the Carter administration, which viewed this exercise as an attempt to derail its yearlong efforts to reconvene Geneva.\textsuperscript{130} Growing impatient with the lack of progress, Sadat announced on November 9 his willingness to speak before the Knesset. Acknowledging the riskiness of the move, he reportedly told Kissinger that “he was betting his entire future on this decision.”\textsuperscript{131}

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126. Fahmy, Negotiating for Peace, p. 257; and Boutros Boutros-Ghali Papers, HILA, box 4, folder 4, November 19, 1977, p. 42.


128. Sadat, A Woman of Egypt, pp. 373–375; and U.S. Embassy Cairo to Secretary of State, “Thinking the Unthinkable.”


131. “Simcha Dinitz, Israel’s Ambassador to Washington, to Foreign Minister Dayan and
One could argue that Sadat’s initiative can better be explained by utility theory if Egypt’s president believed that the benefits of accommodating Israel outweighed the potential costs of inaction. Sadat’s decision would be less risky than other options if losing office was an immediate prospect or if Israel offered in advance to trade the entire Sinai (and other occupied territories) for peace. An examination of the primary material shows that neither Sadat nor his advisers perceived the situation in this way.

Before announcing his readiness to visit Jerusalem, Sadat remained uncertain over whether Israel would fully withdraw from the Sinai and other territory it had seized in 1967. If Israel had made such a commitment beforehand, then Sadat would later have claimed that Begin reneged on his promise. The absence of such statements ex post is revealing and suggests he did not have prior assurances on withdrawal.

Another counterargument to a prospect-theoretic explanation is that Egypt’s economic situation was so dire that Sadat had no choice but to conclude an immediate peace with Israel. Although Sadat perceived himself to be operating in a domain of losses, there were a few positive indicators that suggested conditions might improve. After 1975, Egypt began receiving significant U.S. aid, and its revenues were increasing as a result of the reopening of the Suez Canal and the reacquisition of the Abu Rhodeis oil field.\(^\text{132}\)

Moreover, it was unclear how visiting Jerusalem would help Sadat address the country’s financial problems. Israel might simply refuse to fully withdraw from the peninsula and relinquish control over the Sinai’s remaining oil wells. Egypt might also lose foreign investment and economic assistance from fellow Arab countries, particularly from the rich Gulf states.\(^\text{133}\) Whether the United States would offset these financial losses and offer more than the roughly $900 million a year in economic aid it was already providing was uncertain.\(^\text{134}\) Some scholars argue that Sadat’s action was motivated purely by domestic considerations, but their explanations downplay the possibility that Sadat’s gamble could backfire.\(^\text{135}\)

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\(^\text{133}\) “Request for Comments on Draft Memorandum,” December 4, 1977. On the necessity of maintaining the economic support of the Gulf states and the Western powers, see Fahmy, Negotiating for Peace, pp. 257–258.

\(^\text{134}\) Fahmy, Negotiating for Peace, p. 282; and Sharp, “Egypt.”

\(^\text{135}\) Telhami, Power and Leadership, pp. 9–10.
Domestically, the political situation was serious, but Sadat still retained the support of the most important “pillars of authority,” the military and intelligence services. They backed Sadat but expressed misgivings about the president’s proposed visit to Jerusalem. During a National Security Council meeting on November 5, 1977, Sadat announced his readiness to travel to Israel and speak before the Knesset. The reaction was muted, as most officials were not sure if Sadat was serious. The traditionally reserved war minister, General Gamasy, however, shouted, “No Knesset, No Knesset. This is unnecessary.” Gamasy was not alone, as some other members of the armed forces, particularly the junior officers, disapproved of Sadat’s move.

Possessing a somewhat precarious position within the country, Sadat ought to have avoided alienating the very institutional actors and regional allies on whom his regime relied for political and financial support, respectively. As his advisers repeatedly pointed out, there was also no guarantee as to how the Egyptian public would respond and the extent to which the people would fully back his actions, particularly if he returned from Jerusalem empty-handed.

In sum, utility theory cannot account for Sadat’s decision to visit Jerusalem, because he understood that the possible benefits of his bold gesture were offset by the potential costs, yet he still chose to make the visit. While prospect theory better explains Sadat’s tolerance for risks, it does not offer insight into his motivation for accommodating Israel by offering major concessions. Providing specific policy prescriptions is a shortcoming of prospect theory, given that it “is neither a theory of foreign policy nor a theory of international relations.”

In the next section, I examine why Sadat reassured Israel and why he chose to visit the most contested city of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Jerusalem.

**Showing Empathy to Reassure Israel: Sadat’s Jerusalem Initiative**

Sadat’s unprecedented gestures of traveling to Israel, speaking before the Knesset, visiting Yad Vashem, and laying a wreath at the Tomb of the...
Unknown Soldier all constitute unambiguous acts of reassurance. These expressive, symbolic actions were motivated by Sadat’s desire not just to address Israel’s concerns, but, more importantly, to show sensitivity toward its deepest fears. Such actions, I argue, constitute empathic signals that were meant to reassure the Israeli public and government of Egypt’s benign intentions.141

In international relations, reassurance is generally defined as a strategy whereby one state attempts to convince another that it possesses no aggressive, or threatening, intentions.142 For reassurance signals to be believed, scholars from the signaling and trust-building literature argue that they must impose some sort of a cost on the sender.143 They maintain that reassurances must be small or moderately costly—that is, costly enough to be informative but not too costly—otherwise, leaders would be “too fearful to send them.”144 As applied to rivalries, particularly those involving high levels of mistrust, states ought to rely on smaller signals when they suspect that the other side might exploit their cooperation. In such situations, leaders may employ costly signals to reassure their adversaries, but should refrain from undertaking a bold move that might leave them susceptible to great risks. As trust gradually develops between disputants, costlier signals may be sent, resulting in an incremental, or step-by-step, process to reassure adversaries.145

One could argue, however, that bold moves are most needed in adversarial relationships where little to no trust initially exists between rivals. Such “frame-breaking conciliatory moves” might better help reduce mistrust,146 and

141. Holmes and Yarhi-Milo, “The Psychological Logic of Peace Summits.”
145. Ibid., pp. 338, 340; Kydd, Trust and Mistrust, pp. 197–200; and Osgood, Alternative to War or Surrender, pp. 103–104.
remove the various cognitive barriers that prevent decisionmakers from correctly processing information.147 Because these moves are riskier for the signaler, they should not only transmit more information about state type, but do so at a faster rate than other costly signals.148 Robert Jervis argues that beliefs are more susceptible to change “when discrepant information arrives in a large batch than when it is considered bit by bit.”149

There are benefits to this method of signaling, but mutual suspicion renders it difficult for any single party in a rivalry to initiate conciliation through small or modest steps, let alone through bold gestures. Because he was operating in a domain of losses, Sadat was willing to accept great risks to reassure Israel that Egypt was ready to make peace. He did so because he understood the way in which mistrust imposed, in his own words, a “psychological barrier” to resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. The timing of Sadat’s gesture can be explained neither by a sudden feeling of goodwill nor by an unexpected revision of his beliefs about Israel’s intentions. Sadat went to Jerusalem because he changed tactics on how to conclude peace. Relying on the United States to provide Israel with assurances and guarantees prior to November 1977, Sadat felt that negotiations could be conducted without first establishing trust. Once he decided to forgo multilateral diplomacy, however, he believed that it was necessary to reassure Israel to remove its doubts regarding Egypt’s peaceful intentions.

Although this trust-building argument has already been presented, previous studies suffered from many shortcomings. First, they were generally weakly supported, relying on primary sources such as autobiographies and memoirs as well as open-source material (i.e., interviews and public statements).150 Because leaders have incentives to misrepresent the truth in their personal and

public accounts of decisions, this type of evidence is unreliable. To obtain an unvarnished understanding of Sadat’s motivations, I use recently declassified archival sources and, in doing so, rely on evidence unbiased by hindsight or considerations of self-presentation.

Second, earlier works do not explain why Sadat dismissed less costly alternatives, nor do they account for the size and symbolism of Sadat’s gesture or connect his initiative to broader influence strategies in international relations. I argue that Sadat’s move constitutes an example of reassurance and maintain that he reassured Israel by responding empathetically to its fears. He did so not because he shared its leaders’ security concerns, but because he believed that only bold, empathetic statements and actions could help reduce mistrust. As used here, empathy is different from sympathy, as it means understanding the other side’s thoughts and feelings without “having to share [them] on an emotional level.”

151 It allows policymakers to put themselves in the shoes of their adversary and, in doing so, helps them craft more responsive policies to manage crises and prevent, de-escalate, and resolve conflicts.152 Scholars in international relations and psychology have referred to this perspective-taking as “cognitive empathy,” to differentiate it from the more altruistic, pro-social definitions of empathy.153 In the remainder of this section, I argue that Sadat showed this type of empathy in November 1977 when he visited Jerusalem.

NEGOTIATING PEACE WITHOUT TRUST
Sadat sought a diplomatic solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict but recognized that the level of mistrust was too high between Israel and Egypt to facilitate diplomacy to Peace,” in Robert Hutchings and Jeremi Suri, eds., Foreign Policy Breakthroughs: Cases in Successful Diplomacy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 121–147.


successful negotiations. He had repeatedly stressed this point since 1973 and did so once again in a discussion with Vance on August 1, 1977, when he told the secretary of state how “Egypt and Israel were incapable of reaching anything together” because “too much distrust existed on both sides.” Reflecting on the history of the rivalry, Sadat told Vance that this was “only quite natural after 29 years, four wars, and so much violence.”

Sadat recognized that Israel was motivated by fear instead of a pure desire for power, and this belief allowed him to convey empathy. Two sources of information led Sadat to respond empathetically. Since its founding, Israel had been apprehensive about its Arab neighbors, and its media outlets as well as its officials and intellectuals publicly described the basis for their fears. Monitoring Israel’s media as well as its government’s statements and press releases, Egyptian officials were aware of the country’s security concerns.

Sadat’s ability to empathize with his rival, however, was better facilitated by his face-to-face discussions with U.S. officials. In his first meeting with Sadat on November 6, 1973, Kissinger writes in his memoirs that he told Sadat that “he had to understand the psychology of a country that had never enjoyed the minimum attribute of sovereignty, acceptance by its neighbors.” He then asked “Sadat to think of peace with Israel as a psychological, not a diplomatic problem.” Sadat did not respond to this comment until the following month when, according to Kissinger, he said, “I had been right four weeks earlier in stressing that peace was primarily a psychological problem.” Carter, too, attempted to help the Egyptians better understand the perspective and position of the Israelis. He reportedly told Sadat during their first meeting that they remain suspicious of Egypt because they take the fact that “you refuse to meet with them” as a sign that “you are not serious about peace.”

While acknowledging that the Arab states’ actions partly contributed to mis-

155. “Secretary Vance’s Meeting with President Sadat,” August 1, 1977, p. 379.
158. Ibid., pp. 768–769.
trust, Sadat told Eilts back in 1975 that the “Israelis were victims of their own psychological complexes. Even if they are heavily armed, they are paranoid on security.”160 This fear, as Sadat later explained, was the result of the Jewish people’s “special problem”; they “have been living in fear for thousands of years. They lived in ghettos fearing majority populations everywhere. . . . They were exposed to many massacres and persecutions. All that deepened their feeling of fear. . . . Life itself is their problem. . . . They are threatened in merely maintaining an existence.”161 Boutros-Ghali shared this view, writing “that doubt and doubting are part of the Jewish personality as a result of the tragedies and persecution that the Jewish people have known throughout history.”162 The evidence suggests that Sadat and at least some of his advisers believed that the Jewish people’s historical experiences and collective memory had conditioned them to possess an almost existential fear of other actors.

Sadat understood the origins of Israel’s insecurity, but had until November 1977 relied on the United States to reduce Israel’s fears. If it could apply diplomatic pressure while also providing Israel with third-party assurances and security guarantees, then Sadat reasoned this might make its leaders more inclined to negotiate. Sadat wrote, “No one else except the United States can play this role, namely, that of mediator between two sides that harbor intense hate for one another. . . . Hence my assertion that the United States holds 99 percent of the cards in this game.”163

Sadat originally pinned his hopes for peace on U.S. mediation, but he was determined by the end of 1977 to circumvent the Carter administration’s efforts to reconvene the Geneva Conference. The decision to negotiate directly with Israel not only diminished U.S. involvement in the peace process, but, more importantly, led to a transformation in Egypt’s diplomatic calculus on how to conclude peace. After thirty years of hostility, Egypt and Israel regarded each other with fear and suspicion, and so, without the benefit of mediation, bilateral negotiations would undoubtedly fail. To avert such an outcome, Sadat initiated conciliation through a bold gesture to overcome what he referred to as the “psychological barrier,” or “the huge wall of suspicion, fear,

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REASSURING ISRAEL: SADAT, IN HIS OWN WORDS
In his autobiography, Sadat details how the peace process had reached a standstill by the end of 1977 and states that the “root cause was none other than . . . the psychological barrier.” If this deeply entrenched barrier could be removed, then the substantive issues could more easily be resolved since 70 percent of the Arab-Israeli conflict, as Sadat liked to say, was simply psychological. Attributing the failure to reconvene the Geneva Conference to these obstacles, Sadat said that a “new approach” was needed to “pull down the barrier of mistrust” and “break out of the vicious circle and avert the blind alley of the past.” But because leaders have an incentive to provide a self-serving account of important events, I look for patterns from speeches, interviews, meetings, and private conversations to better ascertain the motivations underlying Sadat’s initiative.

In November 1977, Sadat delivered a series of speeches in which he not only discussed the psychological barriers and their negative effects on the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also presented his initiative as a vigorous response to remove them. On November 21, he met with the political parties that made up Israel’s coalition government and said, “Our target [today] is to end or bring down the great barrier that has always separated us and has built distrust, has built bitterness, has built hatred.... What is the main issue now? It should be security for Israel.... We are ready and we have no objection to whatever measures that can be agreed upon to provide you with full security.” In the first part of this passage, Sadat clearly identifies the purpose of his trip as a way to combat the psychological barriers that have “built distrust” and “hatred.” He then shows empathy by restating what he had said a day earlier in his Knesset speech that Egypt was not only ready to live peacefully with Israel, but was ready to agree to measures to ensure its “full security.”
In a series of interviews given prior to his visit, Sadat explained his diplomatic initiative to a baffled international audience by citing the need to overcome the psychological barrier. Well after his visit to Jerusalem, he continued to reiterate the same theme in his many other public appearances. In one interview, Sadat laid out the logic behind his visit, stating that “a psychological wall existed between us and Israel for 30 years. . . . What good are negotiations if both sides mistrust each other? . . . Why should somebody else be the advocate of my cause? Why should the United States or the Soviet Union negotiate instead of me? I am in a good position to lead the negotiations myself. All these considerations were behind my visit.” This statement reveals that Sadat’s attempt to reduce Israel’s mistrust of Egypt was very much linked to a broader strategy of minimizing his reliance on third parties. After returning from Jerusalem, Sadat concluded that U.S. mediation was no longer necessary, telling Eilts that “it is our problem,” and we do not “need guardians to handle this for us.”

Although skeptics might argue that his psychological-barrier explanation was meant to appease a Western audience, Sadat made the same points in interviews across the Arab world. In interviews with media outlets either from Egypt or other Arab countries, Sadat consistently defended his actions as something necessary to overcome years of mistrust. Given that displaying any public sensitivity to Israel’s fears was perceived as weak, and treacherous in the Arab world, it stands to reason that Sadat would not have provided such a justification had there not been some measure of truth to it. Explaining his decision in these terms exposed Sadat to real risks, which he would not have accepted if, as established earlier, he had not been operating in a domain of losses.

Because leaders often have an incentive to misrepresent their motives in

public statements and interviews, this type of material needs to be corroborated with archival evidence. And so, I examine what Sadat said in his private communications with Egyptian, Israeli, and U.S. officials, as this gives scholars an undistorted and unbiased view into his motivations.

Before visiting Jerusalem, Sadat met with high-profile U.S. officials and explained what he hoped to accomplish by embarking on such a fateful mission. Speaking to a congressional delegation led by House Majority Leader James Wright, Sadat reaffirmed that “70 percent of the problem is psychological and 30 percent substance.” He explained that the purpose of the trip was to address the psychological aspects of the conflict, so that the parties could then engage in substantive discussions. Sadat later reiterated this point in a meeting with Eilts on the morning of November 19, the same day he flew to Jerusalem. In a message to Washington, Eilts summarizes part of his conversation with Sadat, writing that “the primary purpose of the visit, Sadat asserted, is to try to break down the psychological barrier that has for so long divided the Arabs and Israelis. He recalled that he has often said that 70 percent of the problem is psychological. If his visit can somehow remove that 70 percent, the remaining 30 percent . . . should be more manageable.” This passage demonstrates an incredible level of consistency between Sadat’s public and private statements.

Given that one of Sadat’s objectives since 1973 had been to establish a special partnership with the United States, one could cynically argue that his statements were meant to curry favor with Washington. If this were true, then one would expect Sadat to have defended his actions differently in front of others, especially in front of Arab leaders. Nonetheless, Syrian President Assad revealed to Mahmoud Riad, the Egyptian secretary-general of the Arab League, that prior to visiting Israel, Sadat had told him that the “problem [the Arab-Israeli conflict] was not the Israeli occupation of the Arab territories but the psychological barrier that prevented them from releasing their grip on these territories.” Sadat’s a priori rationalization illustrates the logic of an empathetic leader who realized that a fearful Israel needed to be heavily reassured, so much so that it would feel secure enough to trade land for peace. According to Thomas Pickering, the U.S. ambassador to Jordan, Sadat had told Jordan’s King Hussein after returning from Jerusalem that the “process [peace process] was bogging down in procedural minutiae and the U.S. could not move the Israelis. Psychological problem was for Israelis very real. Arabs had never talked to them.”

177. Riad, Struggle for Peace, p. 312.
Sadat’s public and private statements show that he justified his trip before different audiences—American, Arab, and Israeli—in the same way. This consistency provides strong support for my argument, because whenever leaders say the same things over time and across situations, they reveal their underlying beliefs. Egyptian officials such as Ismail Fahmy and historians such as Benny Morris have claimed that Sadat’s decision was not motivated by a desire to remove the psychological barrier. They assert that he merely appropriated this clever argument from others to later “justify his trip.” The primary evidence does not support their account, however, as Sadat argued before, during, and after his visit that direct negotiations would fail unless Egypt reassured Israel and eliminated the psychological barrier.

Conclusion

In this article, I have employed a process-oriented approach to explain why Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat chose to visit Jerusalem. The richness of this approach is that it offers an analysis that integrates factors from different levels of analysis into a multilevel explanation. Although this helps enhance the accuracy and comprehensiveness of my explanation for Sadat’s visit, these benefits come at the expense of parsimony. My case study admittedly sacrifices predictive power in favor of greater explanatory breadth, but such a trade-off is necessary to explain something as complex as this decision.

Sadat considered direct talks with Begin once he believed that U.S.-led efforts to reconvene the Geneva Conference would be unsuccessful. His reappraisal of Egyptian foreign policy lends support to the argument that leaders re-evaluate and change their foreign policy when existing approaches are expected to fail. As he grew disillusioned with multilateral diplomacy, Sadat became cautiously optimistic about holding direct talks with Israel after receiving positive information from third parties and from the Dayan-Tuhami...
back channel. While uncertain over Israel’s territorial concessions toward either Egypt or the other disputants, Sadat was encouraged that the country was being led by someone authoritative such as Begin. This suggests that leaders may undertake bold gestures when they confront strong, hawkish governments; when negotiations reach a deadlock; and when the status quo is costly to sustain.

Negotiating directly with Begin was a gamble, but one that Sadat took given that he framed his options from a domain of losses. Returning to the status quo ante, or to the 1967 demarcation lines between Egypt and Israel, was his strategic objective, as it would not only recoup Egypt’s territorial losses, but would right a perceived wrong, rehabilitate his image, and recover Egypt’s remaining oil wells in the Sinai. It would also facilitate a peace agreement with Israel, which would free up resources for economic development and lead to the infusion of greater economic and military assistance from the United States.

Critics contend that prospect theory is supported mainly by experimental findings, but its application here illustrates that it has some degree of applicability to the real world. Scholars in international relations have generally used prospect theory to explain the use of military force, but my study suggests that it can also be applied to shed light on why leaders initiate conciliation and offer concessions.

When Sadat had decided to pursue bilateral negotiations, he believed that this risky, new approach would fail given the mutual fear and suspicion between Egypt and Israel. To avert such an outcome, he sought to eliminate the psychological barriers to establish the climate necessary to conduct meaningful negotiations. Willing to accept risks to overcome this barrier, Sadat traveled to Jerusalem to show empathy and unequivocally reassure Israel about Egypt’s benign intentions.

My study suggests that leaders may show sensitivity toward their adversaries’ fears to better signal their peaceful intentions. Such empathic signals may be shown not just by leaders seeking peace, but by policymakers managing crises and conducting arms control negotiations. The application of empathy to other areas of international relations provides an avenue for future research.

Additional studies should examine when and why leaders undertake bold gestures. Potential cases include Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev’s presentation of an unprecedented disarmament package at Reykjavik, Indian Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee’s symbolic crossing of the line of control and inauguration of the New Delhi–Lahore bus line (as part of the Lahore summit), and President Donald Trump’s first summit meeting with North Korea’s leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore.183

183. On Vajpayee’s initiative, see Nicholas J. Wheeler, “The Promise and Perils of ‘Leaps of Trust’
Scholars should also study the consequences of bold initiatives and assess their efficacy in eliciting cooperation from adversaries. Recently declassified documents from Israel show that Sadat’s visit did not entirely dispel its officials’ deep-rooted suspicions toward Egypt.\footnote{Stenographic Record of a Government Meeting, November 24, 1977. See also Weizman, Battle for Peace, pp. 69–70, 89–90, 96–105, 112–113.} Despite continuing mistrust, Israel’s decisionmakers believed that Sadat was sincere about desiring a peace agreement. In a meeting held on November 24, 1977, Begin said, “As far as one could form an impression, I can say that Sadat’s words did not seem to us idle or intended to deceive.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 11. See also Dayan, Breakthrough, p. 82.} Israel’s deputy prime minister, Yigal Yadin, spoke afterward and said, “I agree with the prime minister’s words, that their intention . . . is to really try and see if peace, or some kind of modus vivendi is achievable. I am convinced by the sincerity of their words and hope that I won’t be proven wrong.”\footnote{Weizman, Battle for Peace, p. 34; Bar-Siman-Tov, Israel and the Peace Process, pp. 54–60; and Haber, Schiff, and Yaari, Year of the Dove, p. 115.} The time was ripe to continue talks because, as the Israeli government realized, it had a partner with which to negotiate. Sadat had not only reassured Israel, but had placed its officials on the defensive such that, for the first time, its leadership felt pressured domestically and internationally to reach a settlement.\footnote{On changes in Israeli public opinion, see Golan, “Sadat and Begin,” p. 132; and Bar-Siman-Tov, Israel and the Peace Process, pp. 59, 284 n. 29.}

Sadat’s bold gesture changed how Israel’s decisionmakers and public viewed Egypt and led to a flurry of diplomatic activity, including a series of high-level talks and summits between Egyptian and Israeli officials from November 1977 to January 1978.\footnote{On Gorbachev’s proposals at Reykjavik, see Shahin Berenji, “Engaging the Reagan Administration, From Small Steps to Bold Proposals: Gorbachev and the Windy Road to Reykjavik,” University of California, Los Angeles, 2019. On the Singapore summit, see Jung H. Pak et al., “Around the Halls: Brookings’ Experts React to the Trump-Kim Jong-un Summit in Singapore,” Brookings Institution, June 12, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/06/12/around-the-halls-brookings-experts-react-to-the-trump-kim-jong-un-summit-in-singapore/.} Although these negotiations ended in failure, the fact that they initially took place with limited, if any, U.S. involvement testifies to how Sadat’s initiative had helped reduce, but not eliminate, mistrust. In the long term, it changed the atmosphere in the Middle East and set in motion an extraordinary diplomatic process that would lead to the Camp David Accords and later, the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty. Given how bold gestures can help alter decisionmakers’ beliefs and images of adversaries, they constitute an influential tool of statecraft that warrant further study.