

Thirty Years of Peace

On March 26, Israel and Egypt marked the 30th anniversary of the 1979 signing of their peace treaty – Israel’s first peace treaty with an Arab nation.

The breakthrough in Egyptian-Israeli relations came when President Anwar Sadat surprised the entire world by traveling to Israel and addressing the Knesset in Jerusalem. “I have come to you so that together we might build a durable peace based on justice, to avoid the shedding of one single drop of blood from an Arab or an Israeli,” Sadat said.

Under the treaty, Egypt ended its state of war with Israel, formally recognized the Jewish state and established full diplomatic relations with it. Cairo opened the Suez Canal to Israeli shipping, recognized the Strait of Tiran and the Gulf of Eilat as international waterways and agreed to demilitarize the Sinai Peninsula.

In return, Israel withdrew from all of Sinai and evacuated the more than 7,000 Jewish settlers who lived in thriving Sinai settlements. Israel also relinquished productive oil fields in Sinai, some of which the Israelis themselves had discovered.

Israel’s security situation improved dramatically as a result of the treaty. Once Egypt removed itself from the camp of Israel’s enemies, the Arab world realized that no combination of Arab armies could challenge the Israel Defense Forces.

While Israel today remains under severe threat from Iran, Syria, Hizballah and Hamas, the nightmare scenario of the 1970s – thousands of Arab tanks and jet fighters surging into Israel – has become a distant memory.

The peace treaty was a giant leap forward in Egypt-Israel relations, yet there is still a long way to go. Egypt has consistently refused to normalize trade, tourism and cultural relations with Israel, and President Hosni Mubarak has refused to visit. (He came once, for Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s funeral in 1995.)

Nonetheless, the benefits of the 30-year-old peace treaty far outweigh its drawbacks. Israel and Egypt had fought four major wars against each other, yet since the treaty was signed it has never been violated by either side.

Israel is still waiting for other Arab nations to recognize its existence and normalize ties. If, for example, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Saudi King Abdullah are sincere with their diplomatic overtures to Israel, they should follow Sadat’s heroic example and come to Jerusalem to speak directly to the Israeli people. They would find an audience that wants peace more than ever.