

My Study Trip to the Middle East

Jimmy Carter

Jimmy Carter was the thirty-ninth president of the United States (1977-1981). He now heads the Carter Center in Atlanta, which he founded in 1982. These remarks, reproduced here verbatim, were presented to a session of the Israel Council on Foreign Relations on April 21, 2007.

First of all, I want to thank the Israel Council on Foreign Relations for this opportunity to explain to you the trip that we have taken, the reasons for it and some of the potential results. During the past eight days, as some of you may know, we visited Israel and a wide range of leaders in this country. We visited the West Bank, and a wide range of Palestinians there, both representing Fatah and Hamas, and those who are not aligned with either party. We had a chance to go to Egypt. We have been to Syria, to Saudi Arabia and to Jordan. We have met with two groups of Hamas leaders—those who came to Cairo to meet with us from Gaza, and then we met with a group who were the leaders of the politbureau in Syria, headed by Mr. Mashaal. After we made our presentations to them, the group from Gaza left to Damascus.

We have had a chance to learn a great deal on this trip. I have said numerous times on this trip that we are not here as negotiators, as mediators—we have no authority. As you may or may not have heard, our trip has not been endorsed by either Israel or the United States government. We are here to learn and to meet with all those that we are convinced must be involved in a final solution to this proper and great peace. My own philosophy and political background and experience prove that those who have to be involved in the final determinations should be involved in the discussions leading up to a final agreement. Our intention is, then, just to get a clear view of what has occurred here, what is now occurring and what might occur in the future. We believe that the problem is not that I met with Hamas and the Syrians; the problem is that Israel and the United States refuse to meet with these people, who must be involved.

Well, let me go on to say that in Israel, we visited Sderot and also Ashkelon. We saw firsthand hundreds of rockets that had been fired by Hamas, with the only potential target being innocent people, not soldiers. This is a despicable action on the part of Hamas, and an act of terrorism, and I said exactly the same words when I met with the Hamas leaders.

We visited the hospital in Ashkelon and also Hadassah Hospital [in Jerusalem]. We saw the dedicated medical personnel treating on a completely equal basis

victims of the bombs in Gaza and Sderot. This is a vivid indication that treatment of people on an equal basis is a foundation for peace.

We met with men and women in Palestine whose loved ones have been in prison for twenty years or more. There are 11,600 Palestinians in prison, many of them women and little children, who were taken at the age of twelve and have been incarcerated since. Many of their loved ones have been killed, so the tears that spring from our eyes are for the Israelis and the Palestinians whose lives have been lost and whose freedom has been lost in this altercation. I am glad that President Bush and Condoleezza Rice have committed themselves to completing a peace agreement this year and I hope that such an agreement can bring a state of wider recognition to Israel throughout the world and its right to exist in peace and security, and also the recognition and acceptance of a sovereign Palestinian state adjacent to Israel.

However, there is a general feeling, almost unanimously agreed [upon], that no progress is being made in the peace talks of any significance. As a matter of fact, since Annapolis, the peace proposals have regressed. More settlements have been announced; more roadblocks have been established. The siege around Gaza has been tightened and even President Mahmoud Abbas said recently in Moscow the same thing that I have just said to you. And this permeating belief that no progress is being made while announcements of new and more settlements are being made every week is sending a sense of despair among all Palestinians—those who love and desire peace and those, on the other hand, who are militant and resort to violence. This is a unanimous belief. Even the highest possible officials in the Palestinian government agree with what I have just said. When there is despair of this kind, unfortunately some people in groups on both sides resort to violence.

There are four levels of peace talks now occurring, as you know; I am saying something that some of you experts know. First of all, between president Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert, on the final solution, the final status issues. Second, between Ahmed Qurie and Tzipi Livni, the foreign minister, on the same issues but on a lower level, a more technical level. Third, between technical teams on both sides, and fourth, between Prime Minister Fayed, Minister Ehud Barak and General Fraser, on monitoring the progress toward the road map. As I have already said, President Abbas has described the lack of progress at the top level, and we know that recently, in a meeting convened by General Fraser, Minister Barak chose not even to attend the meeting, which is an indication that nothing positive was there to be put on the table. Since Annapolis, as you know, this program has gone down, but both the impression of no progress on final status issues combined with the status of settlements and roadblocks have left the Palestinians increasingly angry and, unfortunately, violence continues on both sides.

We met with a group of young leaders in Ramallah, college-age students, some graduates of college. When this meeting was over, my wife was in tears because of their [sense of] hopelessness and frustration with their lifestyle. Some had been born in Ramallah or born in other parts of Palestine. Because of the intricacies of legal decisions, they had lost their citizenship and now have no citizenship at all. They don't even know if they can reside permanently in the place where they were born. They deplored the violence, they said, but these young people said they understood the motivation of those who resorted to violence.

There are five interlocking conflicts that we have tried to address. First of all, of course, is one I have already mentioned—the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which is the center of everything else. Another one is the conflict between Palestinian groups, Fatah and Hamas. Next is the conflict, unresolved, between Israel and Syria. The fourth is the conflict of Lebanon, nearby. Fifth, the exacerbation of these conflicts from Iran. Each crisis, obviously, needs to be addressed on its own, but there is no way to separate one from another if we want comprehensive peace in this region.

I have listened for hours, maybe seven hours, to the exchange between us and Hamas leaders. They believe that some violence must be necessary just to let the world know about the plight of the Palestinians, particularly in Gaza, and that without some element of forceful show of their military strength and courage, the issue may fade away. Obviously they are looked upon, in many ways, as terrorists and they did commit terrorist acts. On the other hand, the Palestinians believe that Israel is not willing to reach a common agreement for a ceasefire, even involving just Gaza, much less involving Gaza and [the] West Bank. The Palestinians desperately seek an agreement with Israel for a comprehensive ceasefire while the peace talks are taking place. This, obviously, is not possible.

All of Israel's neighbors believe that it needs to contribute a positive element. As many of you know, there are now direct discussions between Israel and Hamas, but with Egypt as an intermediary. This permits Israel to deny that it is communicating with Hamas, but it is well known that Egypt, on behalf of Israel, is seeking to reach an agreement on key issues—a ceasefire and exchange of prisoners, and so forth.

I think that the next thing I will mention is my comments with Hamas. I understand why Israel and other governments are reluctant to recognize Hamas in some kind of official talks. They have not agreed, yet, to recognize Israel. They have not renounced violence, as I have just said. And they did not accept all the previous agreements that were reached, including Oslo. Many Palestinians feel that the Oslo agreements were not fair to Palestine as implemented. We do not believe peace is

likely, and we are certain that peace is not sustainable, unless a way is found to bring Hamas into the discussions in some way. The present strategy of excluding Hamas and excluding Syria is just not working. It only exacerbates the cycle of violence, misunderstanding and animosity between the sides and among all those that I have mentioned. Hamas should accept all the points. They should recognize the right of Israel to exist in peace, within the 1967 borders. They should do that and they should also renounce violence. There is no doubt about that. We insisted upon these things. As you know, violence freezes adversaries in uncompromising positions. It makes it much more difficult for anyone to communicate with one another. We hope that President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert will find a way to resolve all these major problems.

I met with Hamas leaders, as I have said, who represent both the West Bank (some are still there) and Gaza, and also those who are outside, in Damascus. They said that they would accept a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders if approved by Palestinians, and that they would accept the right of Israel to live as their neighbor, next door, in peace, provided the agreements negotiated by Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas were submitted to the Palestinians for their approval. Even though Hamas might disagree with some terms of the agreement, let me read exactly what they accepted, verbatim. This is their language:

If President Abbas succeeds in negotiating a final status agreement with Israel, Hamas will accept the decision made by the Palestinian people and their will through a referendum monitored by the international observers, including those from the Carter Center, or by a newly elected Palestinian National Council by mechanisms agreed upon nationally, even if Hamas is opposed to the agreement. In order to ensure that the referendum can be debated and the choice by voters truly reflects the will of the Palestinian people, a national reconciliation, in particular between Fatah and Hamas, will be necessary.

There is no way, obviously, to have an election or a referendum in [the] West Bank and Gaza among the Palestinian people unless there is a reconciliation before the referendum. Let me underscore the significance of the statement. It means that Hamas will not undermine Abbas' efforts to negotiate an agreement, and whatever position Hamas chooses to take on the agreement, Hamas will accept the agreement if the Palestinian people support it in a free vote. That includes the recognition of the existence of Israel to live in peace adjacent to the Palestinian people.

I am not here to speak for anyone and I condemn strongly any violence that is perpetrated against innocent civilians.

Let me summarize very briefly the specific proposals made to Hamas:

First of all, we pressed them hard on a ceasefire. My proposal was that they accept a unilateral ceasefire without a response from Israel for thirty days. They met all day yesterday to consider this proposal and they finally decided that they were dependent upon Egypt as an intermediary and [that] the progress that had been made already with Egypt should prevail. They couldn't terminate [the violence] unilaterally because they didn't trust Israel to follow up by lessening their attacks on Gaza and in the West Bank.

The second thing we proposed was a rapid exchange of prisoners, involving the early transfer of Corporal Gilad Shalit. I met with his parents; I talked to his mother just a few minutes ago, and we also met with the parents of the soldiers captured in Lebanon. I wanted to propose an exchange of people Israel is holding that are not guilty of any violent crimes, involving all of the government leaders that are now in prison. Forty-one Hamas leaders who were elected in a free election to serve in the national congress are in prison. And ten ministers who have tried to serve in the unity government are in prison. I ask that they be released and also all the women and children only, period, in exchange for Corporal Shalit. Hamas turned that down, to my regret, and said that they were making progress, particularly the evening after we met with the Gaza Hamas leaders and they had confidence that Egypt could help to bring about a solution. I have to say [that] in a way, I can understand their rejection, because they had made up their list of people to be released in accordance with an agreement reached with Israel. Hamas leaders had promised the parents and husbands and wives of some of those prisoners that they would have them on their list. To accept my proposal meant that they would have to violate their promise to the families of the prisoners [incarcerated in Israel] that they had met. I preferred my solution but they refused it. We received an affirmation from Hamas that they would accept the agreement. I have already said that. That was one of our strong proposals.

We made another proposal that they accept a border crossing at Rafah to be reopened under certain circumstances. They agreed, with only one major proviso. It is a very complex thing and I need not go into details. There is a small group of European observers there who have been negotiating with Israel. As you know, the Rafah gate opens up into the Sinai and they proposed that they would accept almost any agreement so long as those European observers would communicate with Egypt, and Egypt would make a decision about when the border crossing might be reopened. I don't think that's irrational and I don't argue with them particularly about that.

They also are prepared to negotiate an agreement with President Abbas, and this is something that was put forward by the prime minister of Israel, to create a government of national consensus with [a] unified professional security force for the West Bank and Gaza. In the cabinet, the government would be composed not of representatives of Hamas or Fatah, but professionals, not politicians, who would help them until the next election could be held. This would remove Hamas from involvement in the government of consensus and would permit professionals, like Prime Minister Fayed, to conduct the affairs.

Finally, the Hamas leaders asked me to read this paragraph for them, and I agreed:

The leaders of Hamas express their greatest concern with the terrible suffering of the Palestinian people and reiterated that the basis for peace would be the fulfillment of their national right of self-determination and the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state on the 1967 borders.

That concludes my long comments here.

Rosalynn, my wife, who is the ultimate boss of the Carter Center, reminded me that we asked the Hamas to permit Corporal Shalit to send his parents another letter to show them that he was in good condition and alive, and they agreed to do so. That letter will be forthcoming very shortly and channeled to Corporal Shalit's parents through the Carter Center. They also said that these serious good faith efforts demonstrate, in exchange for prisoners, at the first stage, that they would transfer Corporal Shalit to Egypt where he could be kept there, and perhaps visited by his parents, while the final exchange of prisoners is conducted.

I ought to mention Syria briefly, because Syria plays an important role. As you know, there is practically no communication between the United States and Syria. There are no diplomatic relations between Israel and Syria. In our conversation with the Syrian government leaders, including President Assad, whom I have known since he was a college student, I was impressed with their eagerness to complete the agreements on the Golan Heights. He said that the only major difference in starting good faith talks was that Israel insisted that there be no public acknowledgement that the talks were going on, whereas Syria insisted that the talks being conducted would not be a secret and that 85 percent of all the differences had already been resolved, including an agreement on the borders; on the riparian, or water, rights as they apply to the Sea of Galilee; on the security zones; and on the presence of international forces. So Syria believes that for all practical purposes, all the differences have already been basically resolved between it and Israel. It is just a matter of reconvening the talks and concluding an agreement.

I am an American. I don't speak at all for the American government but the United States, in dealing with Syria, has three options. One: it can oppose peace talks between Israel and Syria. That is what it is doing now. This will make it impossible to have an agreement between Israel and Syria. Second, it can play a neutral role, and say that our hands are off. Let the Syrians and Israelis work out their own differences. I think this won't be enough. Syria is very eager for the United States to play a strong role and convene the meetings that will lead to a resolution of the differences. I hope that the third option is what will be done.

In brief, Syria does have influence over four of the conflicts: obviously in the conflict between Syria and Israel they have influence; between Israel and Palestine; the intra-Palestinian arguments between Palestinian factions; and also in Lebanon. We pressed Syrian leaders, including the president, to take a positive role in Lebanon to resolve the differences there. But there is still a median government and no election of a president. They claim that since they have been forced, in effect, to withdraw their troops—they used to have about 30,000 troops when I was president—their influence is minimal. They are strongly in favor of a dialogue continuing between the different elements in Lebanon, which are quite complex.

The last thing I want to say is that we urged Syria to release people who are in prison after the Damascus delegation called for, you might say, a pure democracy to exist in Syria. President Assad said that of the ninety originally detained, only seven still remain in prison and if they asked for clemency, they would be released from prison. We also asked him about Guy Hever, the young Israeli soldier who has been missing since August 1997, and he said that they had no evidence of his whereabouts and no knowledge about him. We also asked about Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, who were captured by Hizbullah, and the president of Syria said he had no information about those two Israeli soldiers, who we pray will be released some time in the future.