

Carter; Still a Presidential Outsider

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Former American President Jimmy Carter had always been atypical president. His personal life, his presidency, his political and humanitarian services are totally different than the rest of the American presidents. He has been “cut from a different clay”. He has been, and is still considered, a presidential outsider. Yet this does not change the fact that he is a real genuine humanitarian figure.

Being a new comer to the Congress, still not tainted by its corrupting politics, especially after Nixon’s Watergate scandal, the American people trusted Carter more than any other 1976 presidential candidates, and elected him president.

Since his first day in presidency Carter had implemented reforms on the internal front. His first step was the reduction of unnecessary expense by reducing the size of White House staff to one third, and the reduction of government agencies from 300 to 30. He appointed record numbers of women, blacks, and Hispanics to government jobs and signed legislation to increase the payroll tax for social security. He declared unconditional amnesty for Vietnam War-era draft evaders. He pushed for legislature providing equal state aid to schools in the poor as the wealthy areas. His deregulation acts lessened government control over transportation and travel industry, and over the interest rates to encourage people to save their money. He created the United States Department of Energy to encourage conservation and research in alternate energy resources. He was the only president who installed solar panels on the White House, later removed by President Reagan. Carter’s Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act preserved 103 million acres as national parks in Alaska.

Carter’s two major acts were cutting down the defense budget by \$6 billion during his first month in office, and his unilateral removal of all nuclear weapons from South Korea and his intention of cutting down the number of American troops stationed there. These acts gained him the enmity of all military industries.

Carter’s foreign policies could also be considered different and non-aligned with the line of previous presidents. One of his most controversial acts was the signing of the Panama Canal Treaties in September 1977 transferring the control of the canal to Panama. Carter considered American control of the canal a form of occupation.

Pursuing his vision of completely vanishing nuclear weapons from the face of the earth Carter signed the SALT II Treaty in 1979 with the former Soviet Union reducing the number of nuclear weapons produced and maintained by both countries. He later had to face the Soviet Union due to its invasion of Afghanistan that led to administration’s fear of Soviet expansion to reach the oil-rich Persian Gulf. Carter announced the “Carter Doctrine” of not allowing any other outside force to gain control of Persian Gulf. He also terminated the

Russian Wheat Deal and financed Pakistan's president Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq to train Afghanistan's freedom fighters.

Carter's Iran hostage crisis was the major factor for losing his 1980 election. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979 the Shah was granted a temporary asylum in the US for the duration of his cancer treatment. This had exploded the bottled Iranian anger against the US since the American overthrow of Mosaddeq's democratic government in 1953. The Iranians raided the American embassy in Tehran and took 52 Americans hostage. For their return the Iranians demanded the return of the Shah and his wealth back to Iran. After the failure of the military operation to secure the release of the hostages, Carter, with the help of Algerian diplomat Abdulkarim Ghuraib, opened serious negotiations with the Iranians culminated in the release of all hostages. Yet the hostages were not released until January 1981 moments after Reagan was sworn as president due to secret deals between Reagan and Iran, known as Iran-Contra Scandal. An important result of Carter/Iran negotiations was the establishment of Iran-US Claims Tribunal that had awarded over \$2 billion to the American claimants against the Iranian government. This tribunal was considered the most important arbitration bodies in the history of International Law.

Carter's legacy that won him the Nobel Peace Prize was the signing of the September 1978 Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt despite the peace talk stalling by Israel's Likud Party. The Accords led directly to the still-standing 1979 Israel/Egypt Peace Treaty.

After his presidency Carter immersed himself into global humanitarian affairs. He established the Carter Center to promote democracy, mediate between conflicting countries, monitor electoral process in different countries, and improve global health through controlling and eradicating preventable diseases. He also devoted time and effort for Habitat for Humanity; a volunteer program that helps the building and the purchase of homes for low income working families. Besides his Nobel Peace Prize, Carter had also received the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism.

Later in his life Carter gained more enmity from the American power elite when he voiced his concern about the increasing influence of the religious right on American politics, when he visited Cuba in May 2002 meeting Fidel Castro and addressing Cuban public on national television, when he upheld the results of the 2004 Venezuela's recall election choosing Chavez as the president, when he criticized Bush and Blair for waging war "based on lies and misinterpretations" against Iraq, when he denounced Vice President Dick Cheney as a "disaster" for the country and a "militant" who has had an excessive influence in setting foreign policy, when he urged for the closing of the Guantanamo Bay Prison in Cuba, and most importantly when he published his book "Palestine: Peace not Apartheid" and for his criticism of Israeli aggression within Palestine and against Lebanon. Carter criticized Israel as an obstacle to peace in the Middle East for its continued violations of the UN resolutions, its usurpation of Arab land and its oppression of the Palestinians. He condemned the Israeli apartheid wall; a barrier that separates and jails Palestinian communities. He also referred to the barrier caused by the ignorance of American people of the realities of the Arab/Israeli conflict due to the timidity of American media and politicians of criticizing Israeli oppression less they are labeled anti-Semite and deprived of Zionist funding. Carter explained that criticizing Israel in the US is a political suicide.

Political suicide or not, Carter decided to tour the Middle East in another attempt, maybe his last, to mediate between Israelis and Arabs. Having monitored the Palestinian elections in

2005 and 2006 and recognizing Hamas as the democratically elected Palestinian representatives, Carter declared his wish to meet with Hamas leaderships in Gaza and in Syria. Despite the criticism of the American administration and the Israeli government to his wishes Carter explained that advancing the peace process in the Middle East requires the involvement of Hamas and Syria.

Visiting Israel Carter was ignored and disrespected by almost all the Israeli officials. The only Israeli officials who met Carter were President Shimon Peres and Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of the extremist Yisrael Beituna, only to chastise him for his decision to meet Hamas officials. Yet Carter was not discouraged, for not all Israelis oppose contact with Hamas. A poll by the Israeli daily Haaretz newspaper published in February found that 64% of Israelis supported direct talks with Hamas over a ceasefire and the release of Israeli soldier Shalit. Former Israeli foreign minister Shlomo Ben-Ami and former head of Israel's Mossad spy agency Ephraim Halevy declared that Israel needs to engage Hamas in dialogue.

Israel gave Carter a tour of Sderot, an Israeli colony built on Palestinian usurped land, to show him the damage caused by Qassam rockets, which he called a "despicable crime". Yet Israel barred Carter from visiting Gaza; an indication of how severe Gaza siege is. Even one of the well known international political figures is forbidden to visit Gaza. The aim was not to give Carter the chance to make a real comparison between the devastating damage to Gaza's infrastructure and civilian homes caused by Israeli air and tank raids to the little structural damage caused by the "silly" Qassam rocket (as described by Palestinian President Abbas) to Sderot colony.

Yet after meeting with Hamas representatives in Cairo and being familiarized with the situation in Gaza Carter joined other world humanitarian leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and all UN Human Rights representatives in describing the situation in Gaza as a crime and an atrocity. He said "It's an atrocity what is being perpetrated as punishment on the people in Gaza. It's a crime ...I think it is an abomination that this continues to go on ... Palestinians in Gaza are being starved to death". Arab leaders should take a notice from Carter on how to defend their Palestinian brothers rather than contributing to their starvation.

At the end of his trip that included Israel, Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia Carter concluded that "The problem is that Israel and the US refuse to meet with someone who must be involved ... There is no doubt that both the Arab World and Hamas will accept Israel's right to exist in peace within 1967 borders". Worth to note here that such an existence was militarily forced on Arabs on occupied Palestinian land.

Hamas, one more time, had offered a 10-years truce to Israel if it withdraws from all land occupied since 1967, and would accept the right of Israel to live in peace as a neighbor. Yet Israel and the US administration refuse to accept Hamas as the democratically elected Palestinian government, and refuse to accept all its peaceful gestures, falsely labeling its legitimate right of self defense against Israeli terrorist occupation as terrorism. They also refuse to accept the Arab Peace Initiative that would guarantee peace and security to Israel. Israel has plans for more expansions and is getting ready for another war against Lebanese Hezbollah expected to take place during the coming summer.

Still a presidential outsider to the American power elite, Carter will not succeed in changing the political landscape of the Middle East. Yet his genuine peaceful efforts will definitely have an impact on the perspectives of the Western, especially American, people, who will

recognize Israel as what it is; a terrorist state. This is an important step towards peace.

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