

unnamed government sources, pointed to pressure from the Bush Administration and from right-wing American Jewish organizations. Nonetheless, Carter met with Israeli President Shimon Peres and Deputy Prime Minister Eli Yishai. With the latter, who is the leader of the religious-based Shas party, Carter attempted to help mediate a prisoner exchange between Israel and the Palestinians, to secure the release of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier captured by Hamas in 2006. Carter met with Shalit's parents, and secured from Hamas the promise that a letter from Shalit would be delivered to his parents, via the Carter Center in Ramallah on the West Bank.

Although the media has chosen to play up Carter's meetings with Hamas leaders, a central focus of his mission was Syria, where he held discussions with President Bashar Assad. Carter said he was impressed by Assad's "eagerness" to conclude a peace agreement with Israel, mediated by the United States. In a speech summing up his tour, given before the Israeli Council on Foreign Relations on April 21, Carter de-

clared that peace in the Middle East must be "comprehensive," and he highlighted the importance of Syria in this process.

"Syria has influence over four of the conflicts that we have been discussing," Carter said: "Syria-Israel, Israel-Palestine, intra-Palestine, and Lebanon. A successful negotiation on each will have positive effects on the other, and conversely, failure to reach agreement on one would make it harder to solve problems tomorrow. If there is an agreement between Israel and Palestine, and reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, then there is no longer any need for Syria to help Hamas; and if there is a consensus on Lebanon, there is no need to support Hezbollah. And finally, if the United States decides to support negotiation with Israel, then U.S. concerns with Syria's performance will be addressed."

Carter added that the United States has the key role to play. "The United States has three options. It can oppose such talks, and that will make it impossible to achieve peace. It can play a neutral role, but that won't be enough. Finally, the United States could play a positive role, as proposed by the Syrian government, and we hope it does. . . ." Carter left no doubt that a U.S. rapprochement with Syria was the key to peace in the entire region.

Carter to Rice: Your Statement 'Is Not True'

No sooner had former President Jimmy Carter completed his ground-breaking tour of the Middle East (April 13-21), than Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated that she had told Carter not to meet with the Syrians or Hamas. In response, Carter released the following statement, which appeared April 23 on the website of the Carter Center:

President Carter has the greatest respect for Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and believes her to be a truthful person. However, perhaps inadvertently, she is continuing to make a statement that is not true. No one in the State Department or any other department of the U.S. government ever asked him to refrain from his recent visit to the Middle East or even suggested that he not meet with Syrian President Assad or leaders of Hamas.

Before leaving on the extended visit to monitor an election in Nepal and then to visit Israel, the West Bank, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, President Carter placed a telephone call to Ms. Rice to describe his itinerary and to inform her of his intended conversations. She was in Europe and her deputy returned his call. They had a very pleasant discussion for about fifteen minutes, during which he never made any of the negative or cautionary comments described above. He [Carter] never talked to anyone else.

Dialogue Between Assad and Olmert

Carter's tour sparked what has been called a "press dialogue" between Assad and Olmert, which the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* characterized as a sort of overture for possibly opening up peace talks.

On April 19, in the Prime Minister's traditional Passover holiday interview in the mass-circulation daily *Yediot Ahronot*, Olmert spoke about the chances for peace with Syria: "All I can say is that I am very interested in a peace process with Syria. I've been acting on this issue and I hope that my efforts mature into something meaningful. I can assure you that on matters concerning Israel and the Syrians, they are well aware of what I want from them, and I know very well what they want from us."

When pressed further, Olmert replied: "I will only say one thing, and I am serious and mean what I say: There is room for a process which will lead to an agreement between Israel and Syria. The Syrians know I want this. They know what my expectations are, and I think I know what their expectations are."

When asked about allegations of Syrian acquisition of nuclear technology, Olmert said: "There are things I won't address. I will only say this: As far as I know, Israel's citizens are not threatened by Syrian nukes."

On the next day, April 20, speaking at a Ba'ath Party Central Committee meeting, Assad confirmed that Syria and Israel had exchanged messages through a third party in the recent period. SANA, Syria's official news agency, quoted Assad: "There are efforts exerted in this direction." While not disclosing the content, Assad said that Israel "knows well