

# Carter Peace Effort Breaks Mideast Taboos

by Dean Andromidas

Former President Jimmy Carter's nine-day tour of the Middle East is one of the most important peace missions since the catastrophic Bush Administration took office. Beginning on April 13, Carter held meetings with leaders of all the relevant players in a much needed effort to shift the region from its current vector of war to that of peace and cooperation. Most notably, Carter met with representatives of both Hamas and Syria, whose involvement is essential for peace between Israel and its neighbors, and with the broader region. These two meetings alone have broken the Bush Administration's taboo against recognizing Hamas, and could lead to new initiatives from other major powers.

Carter's trip followed a "war tour" of the region by Vice President Dick Cheney, who reportedly did his "war dance" in every capital he visited, demanding cooperation in an attack against Iran, and against Syria, which he hopes to accomplish before his Administration leaves office.

According to Middle East sources, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, and King Abdullah II of Jordan gave Carter a very warm welcome, sending a message to Washington and to the Arab world, that an American policy—contrary to that of the Bush Administration—is desired and will be supported. In addition, the Carter trip had the support of the group known as "The Elders," which includes former South African President Nelson Mandela and former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, among others. One source commented that the trip was an important step in repairing the damage from "the worst Arab-U.S. relations in history," as a result of seven years of the Bush Administration.

Although President Carter has dedicated his life, since leaving the White House, to serve the cause of peace and human rights, make no mistake: He is not a peace activist. He is a peace maker, who rolls up his sleeves, puts himself forward as a mediator, and brings warring sides together in an effort to resolve the causes of conflict to the mutual benefit of the parties concerned.

A man of patience, and a good listener with a thick skin, Carter comes well qualified for the task. But the secret to his success is that he represents what Lyndon LaRouche has called the "institution of the Presidency of the United States," which is not to be confused with the current occupant of the White House. This has enabled Carter to bring together, as no other mediator could, two warring parties, as he did in 1979,



The Carter Center

*Jimmy Carter brought to bear the enormous prestige of a former President of the United States, to talk with conflicting parties in the Mideast—those who will have to make peace with one another, if peace is to be achieved at all. He met top Syrian and Palestinian leaders, as well as Israeli President Shimon Peres.*

when he mediated the peace between Israel and Egypt. Although the pros and cons of that agreement are under debate to this day, the fact is that, for the three decades since that peace, not one shot has been fired between those two nations, which had gone to war no fewer than four times in the previous three decades.

Carter's Middle East "Study Mission" was a carefully thought-out diplomatic effort, which presented a course of action that the current and next occupier of the White House should follow to achieve peace in the region. The mission is already bearing fruit. Carter conducted the mission in much the same way that LaRouche has advised, including using the tremendous prestige of a former President of the United States, to bring together conflicting parties while involving other relevant regional forces.

Thus, Carter very clearly acted on the idea that establishing a Syrian-Israeli peace process, backed by the United States, is key to shift the current dynamic of war. At the same time, Carter sought out the advice and cooperation of other key regional powers, including Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

### Breaking the Hamas Taboo

Carter's meetings with Hamas leaders, including Khalid Meshal, who lives in exile in Damascus, broke the taboo en-

forced by the Bush Administration, which has left the group boycotted by the United States, Europe, and Israel. It is already hoped that a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel in Gaza could be finally concluded, in addition to a rapprochement between Hamas and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Carter also met with Abbas (Abu Mazen).

Carter was widely considered to have been snubbed by the Israeli leadership, because he was unable to meet Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Defense Minister Ehud Barak, or Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, and even the Israeli press, citing

## LaRouche Congratulates President Carter

Lyndon LaRouche offered his congratulations April 23 to former President Jimmy Carter, for his just-completed peace mission to the Middle East, in which he met with top officials of Hamas, and attempted to mediate a prisoner release agreement between the Palestinian organization and Israel.

Carter's courageous efforts to revive the peace process are to be commended, LaRouche said, noting that the Bush Administration, under British prodding, is pushing for a new regional confrontation. Some Bush Administration officials, led by Vice President Dick Cheney, are attempting to create the conditions, in which they can induce a mentally fragile President George W. Bush to authorize a bombing campaign against Iran.

Under those specially ominous circumstances, LaRouche concluded, former President Carter's actions, breaking the taboo against speaking with Hamas leaders, have opened up new avenues for war-avoidance. And any such actions are sorely welcome, with the world on the brink of British-manipulated global war.

Carter's harsh criticism of the Bush Administration, for sabotaging prospects for a peace treaty between Israel and Syria, echoed LaRouche's own well-known assessments. LaRouche has urged that Israel and Syria reach a comprehensive agreement, as an important first step to an overall regional peace settlement. On two occasions, in 1994 and 2000, Israel and Syria almost reached a final peace deal, involving the return of the Golan Heights to Syria. Both Israeli and Syrian officials have publicly acknowledged, in recent months, that the details of a peace accord between the two countries is "98% completed."

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

what is accepted and not accepted by Syria. Syria rejects secret direct talks or contacts with Israel.... Anything Syria does in this regard will be announced to the public.”

Two days later, it was reported that the “third party” Assad had referred to was Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who had delivered a message to Assad from Olmert, declaring that Israel was prepared to turn over the Golan Heights to Syria, in return for peace. (Israel captured the Golan Heights during the 1967 War.) Assad confirmed this report one day later.

On April 24, commentators in both Israel and Syria referred to these exchanges, especially in the context of the Carter visit, as reflecting the strongest desire by Israel and Syria to enter peace negotiations, since President Bush came into office. The London-based Arabic daily *Al-Hayat* published a commentary on April 23 by Dr. Fawzi Shoeibi, who heads the Data and Strategic Studies Center in Syria and who is close to Assad. Under the title “The time has come to break through the Syrian-Israeli channel,” Shoeibi cited the press dialogue reported above as going a long way to fulfill the three conditions for peace talks, which Assad laid out in a speech given in July 2007. These include an official, public statement by Israel that it wants peace with Syria; the return of the entire Golan Heights to Syria; and talks not simply over the return of territory, but over arrangements for peace and security. (The full statement follows this article.)

Shoeibi noted Olmert’s declaration that Syria is not a nuclear risk for Israel, nullifying previous statements, and even constituting an Israeli apology for the bombing of a target in Syria in September 2007. These developments demonstrated, he said, that “it is clear analytically that the Syrian track has become a regional and international choice.”

On the same day that the Shoeibi article was excerpted in *Ha’aretz*, the daily reported that its own Turkish sources not only confirmed their role as mediators, but said that their efforts have reached “a level of ripeness unmatched in the past.” A lead editorial in *Ha’aretz*, titled “The time is ripe for negotiations with Syria,” references the Shoeibi article, writing that now that the Bush Administration is on its way out, it and all the Presidential candidates, including John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama, would support an Israel-Syria peace agreement as key for the region. *Ha’aretz* concluded that it is time for Israel to open talks: “Nothing contributes to Israel’s security more than a peace accord,” and such an accord “is endorsed not only by bleeding hearts, but by distinctly security-minded figures....”

In an attempt to sabotage this process, the Cheney-Bush Administration had the CIA present testimony in Congress claiming to prove that the site bombed by Israel in Syria was a nuclear facility, being built with the cooperation of North Korea. *Ha’aretz* reported that Israeli officials explicitly did not want these hearings to be held, and “expressed concerns” that the hearings could “re-ignite tensions between Jerusalem and Damascus.”