

Engaging Carter on the 'one state' solution in Israel-Palestine

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If the victory of the United States in its half century-long Cold War with the USSR is owed to one person, I wrote in my Democracy in America in 2001, I would choose Jimmy Carter. Conservatives, old and “neo,” naturally dispute this reading, as do dear colleagues on the left like Noam Chomsky. Chomsky and systemic critics see American foreign policy as an intrinsic deterrence to democracy, and the Carter presidential tenure was no exception. Conservatives see the chief un-doer of the Soviets in Ronald Reagan and his team, with then Pentagon’s “Prince of darkness” Richard Perle and fellow hawks behind the US massive military build-up that forced the collapse of the Communist camp.

True, Jimmy Carter’s foreign policy could be deeply flawed. Critics on the right are correct in the rejection of his weak policy toward revolutionary Iran during the hostage crisis, and those on the left recall his toasting Iran’s shah as “an island of stability” on a New Year’s eve visit to Tehran a few weeks before the Pahlavi dictatorship was swept away by the revolutionary tide. Still, I defend a simple argument. By embracing human rights as a cornerstone of America’s foreign policy in his short tenure between 1976 and 1980, Carter introduced the basic moral principle which undermined the fragile colossus opposite, determining its collapse a decade later.

This is one reason why his article in the Washington Post is so important. Carter was a visionary president, and his vision defeated the Soviet system. Another reason is that Carter, idealistic as he may appear, is also a doer. As a visitor to the Carter Center in Atlanta since 1987, I can attest to several manifestations of his vision.

An early occasion was a meeting chaired by him, Richard Murphy and Lakhdar Brahimi in 1991, just after Lebanon’s Taif agreement. With Ambassador Murphy, I sought in 1989-90 to persuade Carter to host a meeting on the Lebanese crisis, so horrendous was internecine fighting between Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea, and between Aoun and the rest of the Lebanese leaders. I still think an Atlanta meeting would have yielded a better result than Taif, but this is academic now. In the meeting we did hold in Atlanta a few months after the guns fell silent, one idea came out forcefully: Since parliamentary elections were key to the restoration of peace in the country, I proposed that President Carter, who already had a considerable experience in election monitoring, lead the way. The Syrian government foiled the attempt at the time, and neither Patriarch Boutros Nasrallah Sfeir nor the late

Raymond Eddé, whom I met in Paris to defend the idea of Carter's international monitoring, volunteered the efforts needed to make it happen at the time. A small consolation: In 2008, Carter was in Beirut to monitor the Lebanese elections, adding to their legitimacy against a fragile setting. I wish his team had more forcefully underlined the straitjacket that an armed Hezbollah exerts on the country's freedoms. And I hope he will monitor the next presidential elections in Tehran, where his services are sorely needed.

Also a doer in the Middle East, Carter was the first leading personality in the United States to call openly for the closing of the Guantanamo prison. In June 2005, I was in Atlanta as part of a delegation of "leading human rights defenders." It is to Carter's credit, and to Saadeddin Ibrahim with whom he shared the closing press conference platform, that the taboo was broken over the systematic breach of the rule of law in a prison where dozens remained years on end without proper judicial review. Today, Barack Obama's central plank is to shut down Guantanamo. Jimmy Carter had led the way.

As the key victor of the Cold War, and as a persistent international democracy and human rights achiever, President Carter should be taken seriously. The September 6 op-ed is a significant landmark in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The international press has already underlined its importance, and the reader can appreciate for him and herself. It is also a highly troubling article.

Carter writes, and the emphasis is mine: "A more likely alternative to the present debacle is one state, which is obviously the goal of Israeli leaders who insist on colonizing the West Bank and East Jerusalem. A majority of the Palestinian leaders with whom we met are seriously considering acceptance of one state, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. By renouncing the dream of an independent Palestine, they would become fellow citizens with their Jewish neighbors and then demand equal rights within a democracy. In this nonviolent civil rights struggle, their examples would be Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela."

And yet, he concludes: "A two-state solution is clearly preferable and has been embraced at the grass roots."

Let us examine this extraordinary text with the closeness that the knowledge, courage and honesty of the author of "Palestine: Peace not Apartheid" requires.

First paradox: A one-state solution is the "obvious goal" of Israeli leaders. It is also being seriously considered by a majority of Palestinian leaders.

Second paradox: The one-state solution, to be achieved in non-violent civil struggle following Gandhi/King/Mandela, is based on a concept of equality and fellow citizenry between Jews and non-Jews in Palestine. It is opposed, the president writes, by the grass roots.

Third paradox: A two-state solution, he says, is preferable to a one state that stands for the non-violent leaders' ideals.

The last paradox is the most troubling: How can dividing the land be preferable to a state of equality and civil rights? And how can Carter support this solution over one dictated by the examples of the three great social liberators of the 20th century?

The answer is not provided in the text, but one can assume it is based on realism: Since Resolution 242 in November 1967, the “Gestalt solution” for the Arab-Israeli conflict is to end the occupation of land acquired by force during Israel’s seven-day blitz war. In terms of Mandate Palestine, it means the emergence of two states, one Palestinian on 22 percent of the territory, the rest Israeli over the remaining 78 percent. Diplomacy the world over supports this solution, and there is now a spate of Security Council resolutions which endorse the Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. It is hard to oppose the elders’ wisdom. In this case, alas, it is flawed. Hence the compounded paradox: Israeli and Palestinian leaders are pursuing one state, even if their grassroots are supporting the separation. Since the Israeli and Palestinian leaders, each for a different reason, are pursuing one state, why does Carter “clearly prefer” the two states solution?

On this page three weeks ago, I joined two Palestinian grassroots’ leaders – Sharhabeel Al Zaeem from Gaza, and Mohammad Aburudeineh from the Sabra refugee camp – to advocate a united, federal Israel-Palestine, on a non-violent, equal rights base. The article was written in response to an articulate speech of Prime Minister Netanyahu on the need to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. We are still awaiting a reaction from the prime minister to our entreaties, but it is heartening to see the debate develop amongst the Palestinian leadership, and now with Carter and his distinguished colleagues, as it is bound to following the “debacle” of an unsustainable status quo. With 500,000 colonists in the West Bank, and the deadlock in Gaza, the wake-up call on the impracticality of the Jewish state is evident. The process may take a generation at least to jell, but this is expected in a civil rights, non-violent strategy.

In a civil rights movement, one also expects the victims to be at the forefront of the battle. It is comforting to see the Palestinian leaders rise to the challenge, but we expect more determination from fellow civil rights leaders in Israel, both Jewish and Arab.

And of course, one would like to convince President Carter and the other “elders” that the one state federal Israel-Palestine solution is preferable, both on moral and practical grounds.

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