

Jimmy Carter under attack

By meeting Hamas leaders during his visit to the region, Jimmy Carter has stirred a hornet's nest, comments
Rupert Fisher



Addressing the media during a session of Israel Council on Foreign Relations in Jerusalem on 21 April, where Carter said Hamas told him it would recognise Israel's right to live in peace if a deal is reached and approved by a Palestinian vote

Once, Jimmy Carter was revered by most Israelis as a hero of peace for his role in bringing about the first ever peace treaty between the Jewish state and an Arab country – Egypt.

But when the former US president arrived in Israel in mid-April as part of a nine-day Middle East tour, he was shunned by most of the Israeli leaders. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defence Minister Ehud Barak refused to set aside time to see him.

Only President Shimon Peres, who enjoys only ceremonial powers, agreed to meet him; and their meeting was not cordial. Peres is reported to have 'reprimanded' Carter for his decision to meet Hamas representatives during his tour.

It was unprecedented in Israel's history for a former US president to be snubbed in this manner. It is customary in Israel that visiting prominent dignitaries and their aides are provided bodyguards. Carter and his aides were not even extended this courtesy.

With the publication of his book,

Palestine: Peace, Not Apartheid, in 2006, Carter has come under heavy criticism in Israel for having used the word 'apartheid' to describe Israel's policies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. A veteran Middle East scholar affiliated with the Carter Center in Atlanta resigned in protest against the book. Kenneth W. Stein, a

professor at Emory University, accused Carter of factual errors, omissions and plagiarism in the book. 'Being a former President does not give one a unique privilege to invent information', Stein wrote in a harshly worded e-mail to friends and colleagues explaining his resignation.

Israel's left-wing newspaper *Haaretz* was perhaps the only Jewish publication to defend Carter. 'Israel is not ready for such comparisons, even though the situation begs it', the paper wrote in its editorial in mid-April. 'It is doubtful whether it is possible to complain when an outside observer, especially a former US president who is well versed in international affairs, sees in the system of separate roads for Jews and Arabs, the lack of freedom of movement, Israel's control over Palestinian lands and their confiscation, and especially the continued settlement activity, which contravenes all promises Israel made and signed, a matter that cannot be accepted. The interim political situation in the territories has crystallized into a kind of apartheid that has been ongoing for 40 years.'



Hamas spokesman Mohammed Nazal talks to reporters following a meeting between Hamas supremo Khaled Meshaal and Jimmy Carter in Damascus

Calev Ben-David, a columnist with the rival *Jerusalem Post* daily, commented that Carter 'has become such a polarizing figure in his own country that the Olmert government is correct in assessing that such a snub to an ex-president will have little impact in the US beyond those who already share Carter's views of this country.'

Carter's decision to meet Hamas leaders drew sharp criticism even from left-wing Israelis. Carter met twice in Damascus Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal. Earlier, he met in Cairo two senior Hamas representatives, Mahmoud Zahar and Said Siam. The talks focused on the current situation in the Gaza Strip and the ongoing violence between Israelis and Palestinians.

Following the Cairo talks, Carter enraged the Israelis further when he condemned their blockade of the Gaza Strip as an atrocity.

Writing in *Haaretz*, political analyst Samuel Rosner expressed support for the government's decision to boycott Carter. Carter's work, for years, he said, 'has had one goal: undermining the status of Israel, thwarting its policies and ridiculing its hopes.'

The Palestine Authority, whose representatives met Carter in Ramallah, urged him not to meet Mashaal for fear



Jimmy Carter with President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in Cairo on 17 April (Top); with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on 18 April (Centre); with King Abdullah II of Jordan on 20 April (Bottom)

that such a move would legitimize Hamas's violent takeover of the Gaza Strip. Columnist Raghida Dergham wrote in the London-based Al-Hayat newspaper that Carter was undermining the Palestine Authority. 'Apart from undermining the Palestine Authority, he is also harming the option of negotiating to end the Israeli occupation of the 1967 Palestinian territories and to reach a peace agreement', she said. 'Carter's insistence on embracing and kissing Hamas leaders reflects the superiority and stubbornness that have characterised Carter in his older age, but that have also resulted in ignorance and recklessness, at the expense of the Palestinians under occupation and at the expense of the moderate Arab states. Carter is encouraging the axis of radicalism and practically providing it with ammunition, whether deliberately or not.'