

Jimmy Carter's book on Israel and Palestine touches a raw Zionist nerve

Peter Daniels
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The uproar that greeted the publication two months ago of *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, the best-selling book by former US president Jimmy Carter, shows no sign of abating.

Carter has been vilified as an anti-Semite and denounced, in particular, for the title of his book, with its implied comparison between the Zionist occupation of Palestinian land in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the denial of political and human rights to the majority black population in South Africa under the racist apartheid regime. His Zionist opponents are incensed at his limited defense of Palestinian rights, as well as his charge that the Israeli regime and its supporters in the United States seek to squelch criticism of Israel.

Fourteen Atlanta-area business leaders resigned from the 200-member advisory board of the Carter Center, the non-profit organization founded by the former president after he left office 25 years ago. They accused Carter of having “turned to a world of advocacy, even malicious advocacy.”

Dennis Ross, former Middle East envoy under the Clinton and the first Bush administrations, claimed the former president had improperly and without permission used maps that he had created. Harvard law professor and ardent Zionist Alan Dershowitz demanded that Carter debate him, and when Carter spoke recently at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, Dershowitz spoke immediately afterwards.

Carter has also been harshly criticized in newspaper columns and book reviews. The review of *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* in the *New York Times*, written by *Times* deputy foreign editor Ethan Bronner, called it “a strange little book” and declared that the complaint about the word “apartheid” in the title was a legitimate one.

In the *Washington Post*, Michael Kinsley added his condemnation of Carter. And the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, the most active public voice of the Zionist lobby in the US, published advertisements attacking Carter in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

While not substantively answering Carter’s criticisms, his critics confirmed Carter’s claim that the Zionist lobby tries to intimidate its critics by charging them with anti-Semitism. In this connection, the reaction from Carter’s fellow Democrats, which ranged from joining in the criticism to a deafening silence, is particularly revealing.

What does Carter actually write that has provoked the charges that have been leveled against him? Not only is the former president not an anti-Semite, he writes as a longstanding supporter of the Zionist state and speaks about his friendship with such figures as Yitzhak Rabin, Golda Meir and Abba Eban.

He writes, for instance, that “of necessity, Israel has maintained one

of the most powerful military forces in the world...” In a recent column in the *Washington Post*, he reiterates his support for a “two-state solution” to the crisis, and for “Israel’s status as a peaceful nation living in harmony with its neighbors.”

As for the hysteria over the use of the term “apartheid” in Carter’s title, the former president defends the use of the word by characterizing the status quo in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip as a system “...with two peoples occupying the same land but completely separated from each other, with Israelis totally dominant and suppressing violence by depriving Palestinians of their basic human rights.”

This is absolutely accurate as far as it goes. As Carter explains in a chapter of his book entitled “The Wall as a Prison,” the wall being erected by the Israeli regime inside the West Bank is imposing apartheid-like conditions on the citizens of the occupied territories.

Charges similar to and even sharper than those leveled by Carter, including the use of apartheid terminology, are regularly made inside Israel by writers and academics, and even by elements within the political establishment itself. Tommy Lapid, the head of the council of the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Israel and a Holocaust survivor himself, used a radio broadcast on January 20 to denounce Zionist settlers’ abuse of Palestinians in the West Bank city of Hebron in terms far more “inflammatory” than those used by Jimmy Carter.

“It was not the crematoria or pogroms that made our life in the diaspora bitter before they began to kill us, but persecution, harassment, stone-throwing, damage to livelihood, intimidation, spitting and scorn,” said Lapid, describing his childhood in Croatia.

“I was afraid to go to school, because of the little anti-Semites who used to lay in ambush on the way and beat us up. How is that different from a Palestinian child in Hebron?” Lapid was referring in part to television footage showing a settler hissing “whore” at a Palestinian neighbor and settler children throwing rocks at Arab homes.

“It is inconceivable for the memory of Auschwitz to warrant ignoring the fact that there are Jews among us who behave today towards Palestinians just like German, Hungarian, Polish and other anti-Semites behaved towards Jews,” said Lapid.

Tommy Lapid is a well-known Zionist politician. The former head of the secular center-left Shinui party, he participated in the coalition government only a few years ago under Ariel Sharon.

That this man now forthrightly compares conditions the Palestinians face under Zionist occupation with the torment of his own family at the hands of fascists in the period leading up to the Holocaust is a devastating indictment of Zionism and a sign of its desperate crisis. He apologized for the fact that “I tolerated this [settler abuse of Palestinians] silently as justice minister.”

The outrage being directed at Carter can be understood only in the context of the longstanding “special relationship” between US imperialism and its Zionist ally, and the hints of strains in that relationship in the wake of the deep crises that have overtaken both the Bush administration and Israel.

Jimmy Carter is a longstanding spokesman for the interests of American capitalism. In the quarter century since he left office, he has successfully cultivated the image of elder statesman and human rights advocate. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 as the “friendly” face of US foreign policy. (See “Nobel Peace Prize goes to Jimmy Carter—the ‘friendly’ face of US imperialism”).

Like every other US administration since that of Harry Truman, the Carter government maintained a strategic alliance with the state of Israel. Carter’s years in office, however, coincided with a period, following the Yom Kippur War of 1973, when the US ruling elite had to make some tactical shifts.

The quadrupling of oil prices left the major capitalist economies reeling and exposed their immense dependence on Middle East oil imports. Under the Carter administration there was a major effort to bolster regional stability, thus lessening the threat that oil imports would become unavailable or that prices would continue to soar.

This took the form of the Camp David Accords of 1978 between Israel and Egypt. Carter pushed for a settlement that would strengthen and stabilize both the Zionist state and the bourgeois Arab regimes.

He secured Egyptian recognition of Israel. This sanctioning of the expulsion of the Palestinian people from their land was legitimately viewed by the Palestinians and their supporters as a historic betrayal.

The Camp David Accords also included promises by all sides to abide by United Nations Resolution 242, with its formal recognition of the right of self-determination for the Palestinians, its call for a halt to Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, and its call for negotiations for the complete withdrawal of Israel from Palestinian land occupied after the 1967 war.

Carter’s hopes to broker a grand bargain in the Middle East were not to be, however. As he acknowledges in his book, for the Israeli regime under Likud Party leader Menachem Begin, Camp David was to be limited to the peace treaty with Egypt, a treaty which was used precisely to free the hands of the Zionist regime to deepen its grip on the occupied territories. “...solemn promises regarding the West Bank and Palestinians would be finessed or deliberately violated,” Carter writes.

While Likud spearheaded a general rightward shift within Israeli politics, the Republican administration of Ronald Reagan marked the same trend in US politics. The Zionist right found sympathy and support in Washington.

But this shift to the right was occurring within the entire US political establishment, as was demonstrated in the 1990s. It was during Clinton’s years in office, the only period since Carter’s single term almost 30 years ago that saw a Democratic occupant of the White House, that, as Carter reports, “there was a 90 percent growth in the number of settlers in the occupied territories.” The same Dennis Ross who is now denouncing Carter was the Middle East envoy under both the first Bush and the Clinton administrations.

The Oslo Agreement of 1993 was another failed attempt to broker a deal. By 2000, Carter admits, the Clinton White House was offering the Palestinians a settlement that would have cut the West Bank into different fragments and essentially legitimized Zionist occupation of huge areas.

“There was no possibility that any Palestinian leader could accept

such terms and survive,” writes Carter, “but official statements from Washington and Jerusalem were successful in placing the entire onus for the failure on Yasir Arafat.”

This is what set the stage for Ariel Sharon’s provocation at Temple Mount in 2000, followed by the launching of the second Palestinian intifada. The administration of George W. Bush made fewer attempts than ever to hide its full support for the most extreme Israeli policies.

The adventurism and unrestrained militarism of the Bush administration, however, encouraged by its Zionist ally, has created a crisis for imperialism that makes the problems that Carter confronted 30 years ago pale in comparison. The Iranian regime has been strengthened by the removal of Saddam Hussein and the chaos in Iraq. American economic and diplomatic influence has been dealt major blows. Efforts to install and strengthen a pro-US regime in Lebanon were dealt a major setback by the failure of the Israeli invasion last summer and the political strengthening of Hezbollah.

With the regional stability under imperialist domination that is the common aim of all sections of the US ruling elite more remote than ever, Carter now comes forward as a prominent spokesman for that section of the American establishment seeking a change in course. He points to the growing hatred for the US government among hundreds of millions of people all over the world. He stresses that indefinite occupation of the West Bank will only deepen the crisis for Zionism, and he suggests that the interests of the Zionist state and those of American capitalism may overlap, but they are not identical.

Carter is not suggesting anything like a break with the Zionist regime, which still serves an important function in defending “regional stability.” Even a partial shift in US policy, however, can have important negative consequences for the Israeli elite.

Israel is the largest single recipient of US military and economic aid over the past half century. This massive aid, unprecedented on a per capita basis, has been used by the Zionist state, alongside its incessant battle against the Arab “enemy,” to dampen the class struggle inside Israel and build up support for an increasingly expansionist and reactionary course.

Fear of even a slight diminution in this financial and diplomatic support is driving the attacks on Carter and others who have questioned the power of the Zionist lobby in the US, like historians John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt and Tony Judt. (See “Zionists seek to silence critics of US policy toward Israel”).

From the relatively safer perch of respected elder statesman, Carter has declared that the Zionist emperor has lost most of his clothes. There is something increasingly desperate and hysterical about the reaction of the Zionist lobby to Carter’s measured criticisms. Its claims to oppose anti-Semitism are entirely bogus. What it really fears is that the reverberations from the debacle facing the Bush administration in Iraq will undermine the unconditional US support for the Zionist state, triggering a deep political, economic and social crisis in Israel itself.



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