

Carter, Jimmy: Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid. Simon & Schuster: New York 2006.

Q: In your book, you often take care to mention that the Palestinians include both Muslims and Christians. Do you have particular concerns about the situation of the Christians in the territories?

A: There has been a tremendous exodus of the Christians from the West Bank and Gaza as a percentage and also in their totality, and this has been a disappointment to me to see that. One of my major commitments in public life for almost 30 years has been to bring peace to Israel, and with its existence accepted by all nations, and, of course, one major step there was to evolve a peace treaty between Israel and its most formidable adversary, Egypt, and I think that this premise has been for Israel to exist within its own legal borders as defined by the United Nations resolutions, by the Oslo agreement, by the Camp David accords, and even by the quartet's recent road map, and to let the Palestinians, and the Syrians, and the Lebanese have their own territory.

Q: In your book, you argue that 'because of powerful political, economic, and religious forces in the United States, Israeli government decisions are rarely questioned or condemned.' Can you explain that more fully?

A: I've been all over the Holy Land, I'll call it, just for a kind of a shorthand description, since the 1970s — the last 30 or 40 years — from Lebanon down to the Sinai. And I've been up into the Golan Heights three times, and I've conducted three elections there — and I've seen the coverage given to Israel's activities in Europe and in Israel itself — a highly contentious debate over [Israel]. There is no such debate in the United States. There's not any debate in the Congress. There's not any debate in the White House, at least since George Bush Sr. and I were there, and in the news media of the United States there is very rarely any editorial comment that would criticize some of the practices of Israel which I consider to be deplorable — and that is the persecution of the Palestinians, and the occupation and confiscation and the colonization of Palestinian land. So there's no open debate in this country if it involves any criticism of the policies of the Israeli government, even though many people in Israel

debate and condemn some of the policies of the right-wing governments under Sharon and Netanyahu and others.

Q: Lately there has been a lot of discussion about the role of the 'Israel lobby.' Can you say a little bit about how that impacted you as president? Has it changed over time?

A: Well, I think the Israel Lobby — so-called to use your phrase, that's not my phrase — is much stronger now and much more effective now than it was when I was in office. I felt, for instance, that we should sell F-16 airplanes to Saudi Arabia so Saudis could defend themselves against threats from Iran, and Aipac and others were adamantly against it, but we finally prevailed. And I called within three months of when I went into office for a Palestinian homeland. And I worked for the Camp David accords, which called for Israel's political and military withdrawal from the occupied territories, and so forth, and I think that that kind of independence was also exhibited by George Bush Sr., who condemned Israeli settlements in the West Bank and even withheld funds from Israel, which I never did, by the way.... That's almost an impossibility now in the present political environment of America.

Q: In response to Republican claims that the Democratic Party is weakening in its support for Israel, Democratic leaders — most prominently Nancy Pelosi and Howard Dean — have recently issued statements saying that you do not represent the Democratic Party on Israel. What is your response?

A: They are right. I don't speak for the Democratic Party. In fact, I don't think anybody speaks for the Democratic Party, including Howard Dean or Bill Clinton or Nancy Pelosi. The Democratic Party is an umbrella under which multiple voices exist. I would just refer to my own record as a president — I was the one who negotiated a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, not a word of which has ever been violated, and I worked throughout the entire four years to bring peace to Israel within its own borders. I don't have to explain my credentials in terms of bringing peace to Israel.

Q: Do you think that most Democrats agree with your views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

A: If you talk about members of the Congress, I would say no, because the Congress members are almost universally silent as far as any criticism of anything that the Israeli government does. But I think that's an anomaly among Democrats in the entire country, and, in fact, among Americans all over. I think there's a tremendous concern that Israel has refused to accept the premise that Israel can have peace if it's willing to define its borders along the official internationally recognized line — that is, the Green Line — modified, if necessary, and I think it would be necessary, by good faith negotiations with the Palestinians on a swap basis. But Israel has not been willing to do that, and I think if Israel doesn't do it, I don't see any possibility that Israel will ever know peace, certainly not in my lifetime, if they insist on confiscation and occupation of Arab land.

Q: Have Democrats in Congress become less willing to criticize Israel since your administration?

A: I think when I was in office, there was a lot of flexibility among Democratic members of the House, and Senate. I had great help from strong Jewish senators, like Senator Jacob Javits, and from Hubert Humphrey, who was a champion of Israel's, and so they all supported me as I went through the process of inducing Israel to withdraw from Egyptian land, that is the Sinai, and of accepting the commitment that Menachem Begin made and the Knesset approved, of Israel's withdrawing its political and military forces from the West Bank, and giving the Palestinians full autonomy, with the right to choose their own government. And so all of that is in the Camp David agreement, which Democrats approved both publicly and privately.

Q: We've talked a lot about criticism of Israel, but you have described the country's existence as 'a moral principle.' How does your faith inform your commitment to the Jewish state?

A: You have to be careful of the so-called Christian evangelicals because the ones who are most vocal support the so-called "left behind" theories — which call for the final days to come, and the Armageddon, and the

premise there, which I think is completely erroneous, by the way, is that in order for Christ to come again, to return, the entire Holy Land has to be swept clean of Muslims and others. But the ultimate stage, according to their beliefs, is that all Jews have to be killed or become Christians. But they do support Israel's occupation of the West Bank.... I think that's a completely stupid and ridiculous premise on which to base foreign policy or on which to base support for Israel. My support for Israel is proven and deeply ingrained in my own soul, but I don't think Israel will ever have peace unless they are willing, as I've said earlier, to live within their borders that are reconfirmed even recently with the international quartet's so-called road map, and that says that United Nations Resolution 242 must be implemented and Israel must withdraw from occupied territory.

Q: When you say support for Israel is ingrained in your soul, what does that mean?

A: I've been teaching the Bible since I was 18 years old, and half of each year I teach in the Jewish scriptures, in what we call the Old Testament. The other half of the year I teach in the New Testament, and for the last three months, I've been teaching about God's covenants, with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, and then with Joshua, and then in the times with the judges, and then going into King David, and Saul and Solomon and so forth. This Sunday, I taught about Josiah. So I've been teaching the Bible and my belief is that God ordained that the Jews should have a homeland there, and I think that international law beginning in 1948 says the same exact thing, and that's what I believe.

Q: For people who don't have a Christian faith, or don't come from that religious background, why should they support Israel?

A: Because it's international law, and because it's been accepted almost unanimously by the whole world. As you know, the Arab League, in 2002, expressed their common belief that Israel should be recognized as a permanent entity in the Middle East, to live in peace within its own borders — that is the Green Line, the 1967 borders — and I believe that that's the only avenue to peace.

Q: What should be our current approach to dealing with Iran?

A: I hope that the strong effort by the European countries, backed up at a distance by the United States, will be successful, and my hope is that China and Russia will join in with that effort and put both pressure on Iran and some enticements on Iran so that perhaps Russia could handle the treatment of nuclear fuels that is now being contemplated by Iran. So I think this is a very important thing. My own belief is that in the future we should reach out and try to negotiate with both Syria and Iran, and get them involved in an overall peace effort in the Middle East and Gulf region.

Q: Some on the right have said that we need to keep all options on the table, including the use of force, and that we have to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. What do you say to that?

A: I think it would be an ill-advised sort of thing. You've seen the results of an unwarranted and unnecessary use of force. In Iraq it's turned into a terrible tragedy and a debacle, and of course, Iran has a much more formidable military capability than Iraq ever did. So I don't think the United States military is at all prepared to make a move against Iran.

Q: Do you have anything to add?

A: I think that my book, which I'm going to promote pretty widely, at least lets people look at the issues and lets people look at what I consider to be the only avenue that I can envision for Israel to have permanent peace recognized by all the other nations in the world, and that's what I tried to describe in the book, and the main purpose is to stimulate that debate and try to bring that into reality.

*Jennifer Siegel: Carter Discusses New Book
on Israel an the Middle East, in "Forward" 16.11.2006*