My Problem with Jimmy Carter's Book

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Jimmy Carter's engagement in foreign affairs as a former president is unprecedented in U.S. history. Because he regards the Arab-Israeli conflict as among Washington's most important foreign policy topics, he has written more than two dozen articles and commentaries about the conflict, eight in the past year alone. In these publications, Carter uses his credibility as a former president, Nobel laureate, and key player in the September 1978 Camp David accords and the Egypt-Israel peace treaty to unfold his set of truths and often to criticize U.S. policy. He relishes the role of elder statesman and believes that with his accrued wisdom and experience, he can contribute to solutions.

But Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid,[1] Carter's twenty-first book and his second to focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict, is deficient. He does what no non-fiction author should ever do: He allows ideology or opinion to get in the way of facts. While Carter says that he wrote the book to educate and provoke debate, the narrative aims its attack toward Israel, Israeli politicians, and Israel's supporters. It contains egregious errors of both commission and omission. To suit his desired ends, he manipulates information, redefines facts, and exaggerates conclusions. Falsehoods, when repeated and backed by the prestige of Carter's credentials, can comprise an erroneous baseline for shaping and reinforcing attitudes and policymaking. Rather than bring peace, they can further fuel hostilities, encourage retrenchment, and hamper peacemaking.

"Remember Ken, Only One of Us Was President"

I first met Carter at a 1982 reception welcoming him to Emory University. He invited me to serve as the Carter Center's first permanent executive director, a position I held between 1983 and 1986, and as the center's Middle East fellow, an association I continued until December 2006 when I resigned that post over both the inaccuracies in Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid and its message, which contradicts the Carter Center's founding purposes.

My tasks as Middle East fellow included writing memoranda for Carter about Middle Eastern issues, taking notes at virtually all Carter meetings that addressed Middle Eastern issues, preparing a monthly analysis of events, coordinating major Middle East conferences, and planning Middle Eastern trips. I accompanied Carter as a political adviser and press liaison on three lengthy Middle Eastern trips in March 1983, March 1987, and March 1990.
As we collaborated on The Blood of Abraham,[2] Carter’s first book about the Middle East, I witnessed Carter’s passion, determination, and stubbornness. He was capable of absorbing vast amounts of information, and he had an extraordinary capacity to recall detailed points and concepts almost verbatim months after reading them.

Carter’s preferred method in writing the book was to lay a brief and somewhat selective historical foundation for each chapter and emphasize the contemporary. I sought to anchor each chapter more deeply in history and political culture. He had little patience for precedent or laborious recapitulation of history. Too often it interfered with his desire to find action-oriented solutions, which befit his training as an engineer. For Carter, history and ideology bestowed unwanted moorings and unnecessary rigidities; they shackled the pragmatism and flexibility of the would-be negotiator.

Our relationship was honest. We established a mutual respect and capacity to criticize each other. He asked me not to hold back. I often pressed him on balance, especially when, throughout the 1980s, he criticized the Israeli government repeatedly for obstructing renewed negotiations. While writing The Blood of Abraham, we argued over word choice, phrases, and claims. Once, when I disagreed too strenuously, Carter impishly smiled and, with his blue-eyes twinkling, said, "Remember, Ken, only one of us was president of the United States." Still, he always listened.

While Carter is a regular guest lecturer in my classes, I last sat down with him for a substantive talk in June 2002. At that meeting, I showed Carter a map of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, emphasized the protective aspect of the separation fence that was then being constructed, and suggested that the ensuing division might contribute to the achievement of a two-state solution, something we both sought. Carter viewed the fence as proof that the Israeli government sought to wall in the Palestinians. Several days after our meeting, he wrote an op-ed condemning the U.S. government's alignment with Israel and Washington's unwillingness to pursue talks with Palestinian leaders.[3] His commentary came against the backdrop of White House demands to make engagement conditional upon a Palestinian cessation of terrorism.[4]

The Roots of Carter's Anger

Carter's grievance list against Israel is long: He believes the Israeli government's failure to withdraw fully from the West Bank is illegal and immoral; he condemns settlement construction; and he lambastes its current human rights abuse in the West Bank, which he labels "one of the worst examples of human rights abuse I know."[5] From the time he was president, he has criticized Israel's confiscation of Palestinian land, usurpation of water rights, and retaliatory bulldozing of Palestinian houses. Such policies, he has argued, are responsible for the moribund Palestinian economy. Carter holds particular animus toward the security barrier, first proposed by the late prime minister and Nobel Peace Prize winner Yitzhak Rabin,[6] as the latest example of what he believes to be a policy of de facto annexation of the West Bank.

Carter sees the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the root of both U.S. unpopularity in the region and the wider problem of Middle East instability. Once the historic injustice done to the Palestinians is resolved, he believes, other issues plaguing U.S. foreign policy will dissipate, if not disappear.

Carter believes the conflict's resolution to be simple: After the Israeli government...
agrees in principle to withdraw fully from the West Bank, a dedicated negotiator like himself can usher in an independent, peaceful Palestinian state. That this has not happened is, in Carter's view, primarily due to the legacy of late Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, not the fault of poor Palestinian decision-making or the Palestinian embrace of terrorism. The intransigence of Begin and his successors, Carter believes, was compounded by a failure of U.S. political leaders to pressure the Israeli government to correct its policy. Washington's failure to lead, he believes, is heavily due to the failure of American supporters of Israel to criticize the Jewish state.

Carter believes that if the U.S. government reduces or stops its support for Israel, then the Jewish state will be weakened and become more malleable in negotiations. His underlying logic is based upon an imperial rationality that assumes Washington to have the answer to myriad issues besetting Middle Eastern societies. This plays into the notion in Arab societies that the cause of their problems lies with Western powers and other outsiders. *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* will feed that belief.

In the book, Carter does not mention the counterproductive judgments made by Palestinian leaders or their embrace of terrorism over the last many years. While nineteenth- and twentieth-century European, Ottoman, Arab, and Zionist leaders all sought at various times to stifle Palestinian self-determination, the claim that the establishment of a Palestinian state rests only in the hands of Jerusalem and Washington is rubbish. By adopting so completely the Palestinian historical narrative, Carter may hamper diplomatic efforts enshrined in the "Road Map" and elsewhere that attempt to compel the Palestinian leadership to accept accountability for its actions. In pursuing this path, Carter violates the advice he gave eighty Palestinian business, religious, and political leaders on March 16, 1983, when, speaking to a gathering at the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem, he said, "Unless you take your own destiny into your own hands and stop relying on others," you will not have a state.[7]

Carter's distrust of the U.S. Jewish community and other supporters of Israel runs deep. According to former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Carter's feelings on Israel were always ambivalent. On the one hand, he felt Israel was being intransigent; on the other, he genuinely had an attachment to the country as the 'land of the Bible.'"[8]

In a 1991 research interview with Carter for my book *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace,*[9] Carter recollected that:

[Vice president] Fritz Mondale was much more deeply immersed in the Jewish organization leadership than I was. That was an alien world to me. They [American Jews] didn't support me during the presidential campaign [that] had been predicated greatly upon Jewish money ... Almost all of them were supportive of Scoop Jackson—Scoop Jackson was their spokesman ... their hero. So I was looked upon as an alien challenger to their own candidate. You know, I don't mean unanimously but ... overwhelmingly. So I didn't feel obligated to them or to labor unions and so forth. Fritz ... was committed to Israel ... It was an act just like breathing to him—it wasn't like breathing to me. So I was willing to break the shell more than he was.[10]

The gap between many American Jews and Carter grew during his presidency as Carter increased pressure on Jerusalem. In the 1980 general election, Carter
received a lower proportion of Jewish votes than any Democratic presidential candidate since 1920.

**The Ghost of Menachem Begin**

Carter's animosity toward Begin has grown with time. He blames Begin for refusing to negotiate over the West Bank. Not only did this deny Carter a more complete peace deal, but, Carter believes, it also institutionalized itself in Israeli policymaking, worsening the Palestinians' plight. Since Begin took office on May 17, 1977, ending the Labor movement's hegemony in Israeli political life, Carter has repeatedly blasted Israeli prime ministers for what he terms the creation of a "horrible" and "terrible" state of affairs for the Palestinians in areas of east Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.

The mistrust was mutual and began to surface before Begin's election. According to Eliyahu Ben-Elissar, then Begin's bureau chief, "Begin did not like [Carter's] March 1977 statement that the Palestinian refugees needed a homeland. None of us liked it. We resented it ... Begin considered it a major shift in U.S. policy."[11]

Indeed, skepticism of Carter's intentions may have convinced Begin to take a harder line about the West Bank, which, in line with biblical terminology, he called Judea and Samaria. During his tenure as prime minister, Begin forbade the negotiation agenda to include the West Bank and those portions of Jerusalem that the Israeli government annexed after the 1967 Six-Day war. This refusal to negotiate became Carter's core disagreement with Begin. Carter realized that with Begin adamant against further concessions, he had no tangible item to offer to the Palestinians or other Arab leaders to reach a broader peace agreement. With Begin not offering a fallback position, Carter could not initiate a conclusive Israeli-Palestinian negotiating process. He never forgave Begin.

Intertwined in the dispute over the West Bank was the issue of Israeli settlements. Samuel Lewis, U.S. ambassador to Israel at the time, explained, "Begin would never consider admitting that the [Israeli] right to settle wasn't a right, and Carter, basically, was asking him [Begin] to agree that settlements were illegal."[12] Begin refused. The subsequent expansion of settlements has further embittered Carter's relations with Israeli leaders and with Israel's supporters in the United States, whom he believes are willfully silent on the subject.

While Carter lauds Begin for his intelligence, a point he has repeatedly made when speaking to my students, his animus toward the late Israeli leader is limitless. This became evident when we were writing *The Blood of Abraham*, and Carter insisted on asserting that Begin "wanted to expand Israeli borders to both sides of the Jordan River." In fact, this is anachronistic. True, this had been Begin's view prior to Israel's independence in 1948, but it was not, as Carter implied, Begin's position after his twenty-nine years in the Knesset (parliament) or during his premiership. During chapter editing, I brought the error to Carter's attention. He declined to correct it.[13]

During the difficult negotiations between Egypt and Israel, Carter and his advisers tried to get Sadat to engage in a collusive scheme: They would encourage Sadat to make "deliberately exaggerated" demands. The White House would then intervene to "compel" Cairo to scale back its demands in exchange for Israeli concessions. Then–national security advisor Brzezinski explained that Washington would "apply maximum leverage on Israel to accommodate,"[14] by keeping the West Bank's political future on the table for future negotiations. That Carter risked possible Israeli-Egyptian peace in an effort to extract greater concessions from Begin...
underscores the tension in their relationship.

In 1983, the first time Begin met Carter after both had left office, Begin was icy toward the ex-president. Carter surmised that he may have "aggravated him [Begin] more than usual."[15] Begin's personal secretary later said Begin was angry with what he had learned in the books by Brzezinski and National Security Council staff member William B. Quandt about Carter's behind-the-scenes maneuvering. This anger grew after he read the claim in The Blood of Abraham regarding his alleged desire to expand Israeli borders across the Jordan River.[16] On our 1987 trip to Israel, Begin refused to see Carter, citing health reasons, but Begin's personal secretary told me it was because of the way Carter had treated Begin.

Carter also blames difficulties with Begin for undermining his re-election. In early 1980, with the critical New York Democratic primary looming, Mondale urged Carter to repudiate the U.S. vote for U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 465,[17] which had condemned Israeli settlement activity. According to Brzezinski:

> Sadat did not want a final showdown on the Palestinian problem prior to the return of the Sinai to Egypt. Without pressure from Sadat, our own incentive to push Israel hard was much decreased. Begin proved himself to be a skilled manipulator ... adroit at delaying tactics and in diversionary public appeals ... by mid-June it was clear even to Mondale that Begin wanted Carter defeated.[18]

According to Brzezinski, Carter believed his disagreement with Begin to have both cost him critical primary victories and to have weakened his re-election bid.[19] But other issues—high inflation and mortgage rates, the Iran hostage crisis, a national sense of malaise, and the third party candidature of John Anderson—may have contributed more to Carter's loss.

**Conflating Flexibility and Fact**

Carter possesses missionary zeal. He believes that had he won re-election, he would have succeeded in ending the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Numerous times during the 1980s, Carter quipped after leaving meetings with Middle Eastern or U.S. officials that, if given a chance, he could "make this happen." In order to convey a sense that Middle Eastern leaders or Washington officials trusted him and wanted him to continue to mediate, he would open remarks to either of them with, "I was authorized to report ...."

Carter has come to scorn those who disagree with him. On his recent book tour promoting *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, whenever an interviewer disagreed with a premise or challenged Carter's views, he would respond, "It is obvious you did not read my book." This is Carter's way of chiding the interviewer for not accepting his wisdom. When Carter says, "Everything in the book is accurate; it is correct," he seeks acknowledgment that he possesses a privileged understanding of the conflict's fundamental truths and should, therefore, be accepted as someone qualified to apportion blame. In his 2005 book, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis*,[20] Carter speaks from a similar peremptory pulpit.[21]

But Carter is often wrong. Throughout *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, he allows his premises to supplant the facts. His book contains no footnotes, citations, or sources. It contains an appendix and a series of maps, some of which he seems to have mislabeled and taken from Clinton-era negotiator Dennis Ross' *The Missing
Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace. The maps are reconfigured to support Carter's statement that Israel's best offer in the final months of Clinton's presidency was to divide the West Bank into three non-contiguous areas, thus reinforcing Carter's claim of apartheid. Carter dismissed the allegation that he appropriated the maps, saying that he had never seen Ross's book. If true, Carter ignored the most important and detailed memoir yet published on 1990s-era Arab-Israeli negotiations.

In the book, Carter often uses selective remarks by others to advocate his preferences. He uses the literary device "many believe" or "many say" to avoid tying a statement to himself. While implying that the Israeli government practices apartheid vis-à-vis the Palestinians, Carter refrains from calling Israelis racist but highlights and leaves unanswered the late Syrian president Hafez al-Assad's opinion:

Assad asserted that the Jews of the world constitute one people, regardless of obvious differences in their identities, languages, customs, and citizenship, but deny that the Palestinians comprise a coherent people even though they have one national identity, one language, one culture, and one history. Many Arabs consider these distinctions to be a form of racism by which Israelis regard Palestinian Arabs as inferiors who are not worthy of basic human rights, often branding them as terrorists if they resist Israel's encroachments.

Nowhere in The Blood of Abraham did Carter cite such an account of Assad's views. Perhaps Carter had an additional communication with Assad, but the notes I have of our three extensive meetings with Assad in 1983, 1987, and 1990 do not support such statements. Regardless, his new emphasis of Assad's views segues with publication of Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid, "that Israelis regard Palestinian Arabs as inferiors." If Carter wanted to tar Israel as racist, this was a clever way of doing it.

Carter is frustrated with his successors' Middle East policies. He believes they did not share the concern (George W. Bush), intellectual competence (Ronald Reagan), determination (George H.W. Bush), or experience necessary to pull off a negotiated solution. He believes Bill Clinton could have done a better job at the 2000 Camp David summit between Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman Yasir Arafat and Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak.

Conversely, Carter is convinced that he himself was the essential ingredient to enable the Egyptian-Israeli peace. However, Carter does not understand how fortunate he was to have in Begin and Sadat two leaders who needed agreement. Each possessed vision and courage and faced a common adversary in the Soviet Union. This reality welded them into uncomfortable but necessary interaction. Had Carter continued his diplomacy into a second term, he would not have found Israeli and Palestinian leaders possessing any degree of urgency for a solution. There is no evidence that the Arafat of the early 1980s was more willing to compromise or abandon terror than the Arafat faced by Clinton. Nonetheless, Carter believes his negotiating skills could bear fruit where Clinton failed. His conviction is so great that he need not read Ross's account.

Errors of Revision

A survey of Carter's speeches and writings over the last quarter century reveals the evolution of his views. He has shifted from annoyance to exasperation, from frustration to anger, and from partial blame upon the Palestinians to their

Determines that all measures taken by Israel to change the physical character, demographic composition, institutional structure or status of the Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem, or any part thereof, have no legal validity and that Israel's policy and practices of settling parts of its population and new immigrants in those territories constitute a flagrant violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Carter's use of UNSCR 465 is an example of how he uses accurate information but omits part of the story to bolster his presentation. He wants to show Israel to be in violation of international law by being present in the territories. While he cites the unanimous passage of UNSCR 465 to suggest that there was universal condemnation of Israel's position with regard to east Jerusalem,[27] he omits that two days after its passage, he himself disavowed the U.S. assent to the resolution. At the time, he said the resolution was a mistake which resulted from a "failure to communicate" between the State Department and Donald F. McHenry, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.[28]

Carter also omits the possibility that the vote may have certified for Begin his conviction that Carter could not be trusted. Just two hours before the vote, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance had assured the Israeli ambassador, Ephraim Evron, that all references to Jerusalem would be removed.[29]

Carter is also less than complete in his discussion of U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194. Many Palestinians cite the resolution as an unequivocal endorsement by the international community of the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes in present-day Israel or be compensated if they choose not to exercise that right.[30] Carter accepts this view and implies its universality. He does not acknowledge the fact that five Arab states—Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria—voted against the resolution in protest of its implied recognition of Israel.

Having rarely mentioned this resolution—which has never been a part of U.S.-brokered peace agreements in the region—until the publication of his most recent book, Carter's endorsement of the Palestinian interpretation of Resolution 194 appears more motivated by a desire to position himself as a trusted negotiator for the Arab side than by epistemology.[31] However, in legitimizing a maximalist reading of Resolution 194, Carter flirts with the de-legitimization of Israel as a Jewish state. Hence, within *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, Carter is inconsistent about the right of return, at times suggesting it would apply only to the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem[32] while elsewhere suggesting the right of return would enable Palestinians to return to Israel proper.[33] On his book tour, Carter sidestepped the issue by endorsing the implementation of "all relevant U.N. resolutions."

Whereas Carter had earlier written that "Israel would decide unilaterally how many
Palestinians” would be admitted to Israel "or could return to Palestine or receive appropriate compensation as a fulfillment of UN Security Resolution 194,"[34] his use of the indefinite article "a" in front of "fulfillment" suggests he may harbor multiple interpretations of Palestinian refugee settlement.

Palestinians are less flexible. By demanding Israeli adherence to Resolution 194, Carter ignores the Arabic-language writings of Palestinian officials who say that the Palestinian leadership will never give up the right of return to what is now Israel. In response to Clinton's proposals to allow Palestinian refugees the right to return only to a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, the Palestinian Authority declared:

Resolution 194, which is the basis for a just settlement of the refugee problem, determines the return of the Palestinian refugees "to their homes" and not "to their homeland" or "to historical Palestine." The essence of the right of return is freedom of choice: The Palestinians must be given the right to choose where they live, and that includes returning to the homes out of which they were driven.[35]

Carter, however, scrubs clean Palestinian intransigence.

UNSCR 242 and 338 remain the resolutions around which diplomats center efforts to negotiate a settlement. In its preamble, UNSCR 242 notes "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war" and, in its operative portion, calls for "withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict." Nowhere in the resolution does it stipulate what or where Israel's borders should be, nor does the resolution mandate Israeli withdrawal from all territories taken in the 1967 war. This is not a parsing of an arbitrary phrase; it took five months to negotiate and endorse the intentional ambiguity embodied in the language of the resolution.[36] Carter revises UNSCR 242, though, saying it "confirmed Israel's existence within its 1949 borders as promised in the Camp David Accords and Oslo Agreement" and that it states "Israel must withdraw from occupied territories."[37] Later, he writes that UNSCR 242 "mandates" and "requires" Israeli withdrawal.[38]

This reinterpretation is invention on Carter’s part. He first adopted this revision of UNSCR 242 in his December 10, 2002 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech when he referred to "withdrawal from the occupied territories." Speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations on March 2, 2006, he used a similar phrase and added the false claim that Begin had agreed to Carter's reinterpretation of UNSCR 242 at Camp David in 1978.[39] In effect, Carter is changing the "Land for Peace" formula into "Land for Negotiations." The idea that negotiations should only occur subsequent to Israeli withdrawal was the position held by the PLO at the height of its terrorist campaign in the 1970s.

UNSCR 338 receives similar treatment. Carter alters its call for "negotiations between the parties"—a formulation that would require recognition of Israel—into a call for international mediation, a position that would embolden continued Hamas and Islamic Jihad rejectionism.

**Excusing Terrorism**

Among the most troubling aspects of Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid is Carter's apparent willingness to condone the killing of Israelis. He is deliberate with words. When he writes, "It is imperative that the general Arab community and all significant Palestinian groups make it clear that they will end the suicide bombings and other acts of terrorism when international laws and the ultimate goals of the
Roadmap for Peace are accepted by Israel," he leaves the impression that it is legitimate to engage in terrorism and suicide bombing against Israelis until Jerusalem accepts his interpretation of international law. In doing so, he ignores the fact that the performance-based formula for advancing Israeli-Palestinian talks, the so-called "Road Map" endorsed by the Quartet in 2003, required immediate cessation of terrorism.

To support Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid’s central theme that Israel is intransigent, Carter recasts Hamas as a moderate partner ready to negotiate with Israel. He launders its reputation both with careful word choice and omission. He uses the past tense, for example, to describe Hamas as an "Islamic militant group that opposed recognition of Israel [and] perpetrated acts of violence." Carter adds that he "urged them ... to forgo violence." He omits mention that Hamas denies the right of a Jewish state to exist in the Middle East and the group's belief that historical Palestine belongs in its entirety to Muslims. Carter is incorrect when he writes that Hamas has not been responsible for any terrorist acts since August 2004. Hamas on many subsequent occasions claimed responsibility for firing Qassam rockets into Israel and also claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit in June 2006.

Carter also claims that Hamas supports a 2002 Arab summit resolution which advocates a two-state solution, albeit one dependent on the right of return of Palestinian refugees. But Hamas rejects the two-state solution. Carter states that Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas leader in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, "supports peace talks between Israel and [Palestinian Authority leader] Abbas ... [and] accepts the Road Map in its entirety." He does not. Carter adds that Hamas would modify its rejection of Israel if there were a negotiated agreement that the Palestinian people can approve, "an important facet of the Camp David Accords," but the Camp David accords never specified universal Palestinian ratification.

Carter has defended Hamas against charges of intransigence during his Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid book tour. While visiting Tehran on December 8, 2006, Haniyeh said, "We will never recognize the usurper Zionist government and will continue our jihadist movement until Bayt al-Maqdis [Jerusalem] and the Al-Aqsa Mosque are liberated." When asked by a Denver radio host on station KHOW 630 AM six days later about Haniyeh's statement, Carter answered, "No, he didn't. No, he did not do that. I did not hear that."

Carter's resistance to contrary evidence contrasts with the impatience some Palestinians and intellectuals have for Hamas's rejectionism. On June 4, 2006, for example, Palestinian analyst Muhammad Yaghi wrote:

The problem with Hamas' political platform is its rejection of the principle of the two states on the historical land of Palestine ... This position cannot be accepted internationally, and certainly Israel cannot accept it. On the contrary, this position gives the international community the justifications to turn its back to us and gives Israel enough pretexts to refuse withdrawal and continue its attacks and unilateral solutions. Hamas' political platform is political suicide and cannot constitute the basis for any political agreement.

Inventing History

After reading Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid, I was troubled by a passage recounting a meeting Carter and I had attended with Assad at his presidential office in March 1990. I revisited my notes and saw discrepancies between them and
the story Carter recounts. When discussing the Syrian dispute with Israel, Assad, as always, chose his words carefully. The notes (see Figure 1) show the following passage:

JC: Your severest critics know you keep your word—would you accept demilitarization of [the] Golan Heights?

A: Today, Peres [Israel's foreign minister] said Syria would accept [a] demilitarized Golan. But we cannot accept this because we are sacrificing our sovereignty.

A: In the past we have said that things must be done mutually on both sides of the Golan—international forces, semi-demilitarization—on equal footing. If anyone can ask for additional measures, we should ask for a larger DMZ [demilitarized zone] from their part.

But, in Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid, Carter wrote:

When I visited Damascus in 1990, President Assad informed me that he was willing to negotiate with Israel on the status of the Golan Heights. His proposal was that both sides withdraw from the international border, with a small force of foreign observers and electronic devices to monitor the neutral zone. When I asked him if each nation would have to fall back an equal distance, he replied that Syria might move its troops farther from the border because of the terrain. He also gave me permission to report his proposal to Washington and to the Israelis, which I did in Jerusalem three days later.[47]

Carter reworded the conversation to suggest that Assad was flexible and the Israelis were not. Assad did not say he would accept a demilitarized zone; to do so would be to sacrifice his sovereignty. Nor did he say he would withdraw deeper from his side of the border. This was not a slip of memory for Carter; Carter received a full set of my notes of the March 1990 trip after its conclusion. These were intentional distortions.

When the meeting with Assad ended, Carter held a press conference at the Sheraton Damascus Hotel. In response to a journalist’s question about the substance of a possible Syrian-Israeli agreement to include the future of the Golan Heights, Carter said, “I don’t think you could expect the Syrians to demilitarize five kilometers on their borders without an equal demilitarization on the Israeli side of the border. But with an equivalent, negotiated, mutual establishment of a demilitarized zone, I think there it would be feasible, yes. I don’t think that you can expect one side to demilitarize an area and not have an equivalent demilitarization on the other side of the border. This is something that is a matter of national pride, of national prestige. But I don’t think there is any alternative to what I have just proposed. Let me say again, I am not speaking for anyone except myself.”[48]

What Carter stated as his personal opinion in the 1990 press conference, he transmits as fact in 2006 in his book. He puts words in Assad's mouth. Carter invented the substance of this meeting to indicate that Assad was leaning toward flexibility. Assad only considered demilitarized zones in his negotiations with the Israelis after the Soviet Union’s collapse removed his greatest patron. Assad certainly did not say that Syria would withdraw deeper from his side of the border. These are intentional changes that Carter made for the apparent purpose of misrepresenting Israeli intransigence and Arab state flexibility.
Conclusions

Timing is everything. Had Carter always viewed the issue of settlements with the severity he does now, he might have told Begin privately, if not publicly, that aid to Israel would be conditioned upon the cessation of their construction. At the time there were fewer than 20,000 settlers in the West Bank. However unpopular such a policy would have been, Carter would have not caved in either to Israeli leaders or U.S. supporters of Israel. Carter believes or asserts he had won a five-year, rather than three-month, commitment from Begin not to build settlements, but there is no doubt that Begin only committed himself to three months. In Sadat’s eyes, Carter looked foolish because of Begin’s build-up of settlements. By the time Sadat and Begin signed the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, Carter was focused on other foreign policy matters and how his policies toward the conflict would influence his support in upcoming primaries and the general election.

Had Carter won re-election, he might have recommitted himself to the task of reaching an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. It is a historical “what if?” In Carter’s mind, he would have succeeded. Historians are less sure. Negotiating over Jerusalem’s future and the West Bank would have been more complex, if not impossible, than the discussions over Sinai. Arafat was not Sadat, and many Arab states remained opposed to Israel’s right to exist. The Islamic Revolution in Iran bolstered radicalism. As for Begin, he did not regard the forfeiture of the West Bank, let alone the annexed portions of Jerusalem, as negotiable issues. The obstacles to progress, then, were virtually insurmountable.

Carter is correct that settlements complicate negotiations. Disputes over expropriated land increase in proportion to their numbers. Here, his position is consistent with that of his successors. Carter is also correct that if there is to be any long-term solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, there should be a two-state solution in which both Israel as a Jewish state and a Palestinian Arab state are independent on contiguous land and free from external intrusion. For this to happen, there must be courage, vision, leadership, and a willingness to abandon myths, fictions, and a cult of martyrdom.

Conflict resolution requires precision to supplant ambiguity. Both Israelis and Palestinians will have to abandon exclusive claim to all land west of the Jordan River. Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005, even if unilateral, was an important step. If the Palestinians are to have an independent state, they will have to forfeit support by radical states, abandon terrorism, and end their rejection of Israel.

The best option for peace is perhaps one that was offered thirty years ago when, on March 9, 1977, President Jimmy Carter said “recognized borders have to be mutual ... where sovereignty is mutually agreed. Defense lines may or may not conform to those legal borders. There may be extensions of Israeli defense beyond the permanent and recognized borders.” Unlike the narrative in Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid, Carter at that time was accurate, temperate, and practical.

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[19] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Article XI states, "the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible."
[33] Ibid., p. 167.
Ibid., pp. 207, 208.


Ibid., p. 144.

Ibid., p. 184.


Carter, Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid, p. 186.


Carter, Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid, p. 130-1.


Stein, Heroic Diplomacy, p. 255.