

Jimmy Carter: So What's New?

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From time to time, someone will ask me: what happened to Jimmy Carter? The questioner is usually someone who thought highly of the former president and is now confronted with Carter's incessant anti-Israel bias, as reflected in his book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* and his just completed trip to the Middle East.

I respond to the well-meaning question that, in fact, nothing much has "happened" to Jimmy Carter, that the signs of what he has become were there all along. And I say that, fully aware of the role he played at Camp David to bring about the groundbreaking an Egyptian-Israel agreement and eventually a peace treaty.

It now seems like ancient history, but troubles between Carter and Israel started early on in his presidency. Some attributed them to a difficult relationship between him and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and some cover those difficulties in ideological terms.

Actually, however the problem preceded Begin's taking over as Prime Minister. For a number of months of the Carter presidency, Yitzhak Rabin was still prime minister of Israel. As is the custom, Israeli prime ministers visit Washington to meet with a new president. Rabin did that in February 1977 and the meeting did not go well. Some reported that Rabin called it the worst meeting of his life. In his memoirs, Rabin toned down that description, but still indicated that the president was quite hard on him.

When Begin was elected prime minister, tensions between the White House and Jerusalem grew as the administration pressed its idea of a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, even to the point of signing an agreement with the Soviet Union in October to push this approach. Israel correctly saw this initiative as inevitably leading to undue pressure on Israel and resisted.

Relations could well have sunk even further had Anwar Sadat not decided to go it alone. His historic visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 put an end to the Carter approach.

Interestingly, for two or three months, the Carter Administration, rather than welcoming Sadat's move, was publicly reserved and even seemed to be questioning it, instead of hailing the Sadat breakthrough.

The willingness by President Carter to see Israel as the primary problem in the region, therefore, has a long history.

A second element we see today which was evident a long time ago was his greater comfort level with dictators than with democratic leaders. At Camp David, when Carter did fully engage the process, he made no bones about the fact that he preferred dealing with Sadat who could make

unilateral decisions, rather than with Begin, who was subject to the whims and complexities of a messy Israeli democracy.

One more relevant historical point. The American Jewish community understood what Jimmy Carter was way back then. The 1980 election between Carter and Ronald Reagan was unique in elections over the past four decades and more in that the Jewish community did not overwhelmingly vote for the Democratic candidate.

Even though the community did not really know Reagan at that time and was strongly in sync with Carter on domestic issues, many American Jews could not bring themselves to vote for Carter because they so distrusted him on Israel. The Jewish vote was 44 percent for Carter, 39 percent for Reagan and 17 percent for John Anderson. Before and since, Jewish voting patterns have been 70 percent and more for the Democratic candidate. So for many American Jews, what we are now seeing from him is not a big surprise.

Still, distrust is one thing, but the current level of his bias and his even playing into the hands of anti-Semites is astonishing. In his book, it is not only his appalling use of the term "apartheid" to refer to Israeli policies, but his playing with the notion that Jews control discussion of American Middle East policy to the detriment of America, that is so disturbing.

And now, his eagerness to break the international boycott against the terrorist, anti-Semitic Hamas has taken his animus and irresponsibility to a new level.

All of this would not be of such great concern if he were not a former President and if he did not have the reputation of leading the most virtuous and productive life of any ex-President. To many people, what Jimmy Carter says and does still matters.

In my view, the usual hesitancy to criticize an ex-President has long expired. His outrageous and dangerous statements and actions against Israel require us to be as blunt as we can be. He has abused his position in ways that are harmful to Israel and the Jewish people and it is our responsibility to impress this on those who would hear his message.

There is much speculation about Carter's motives -- religious, personal, financial. In the end, none of that matters. What does matter is that he is an adversary of the State of Israel and we have our responsibility to treat him accordingly.

SOURCE: http://www.adl.org/ADL_Opinions/Israel/20080430-Op-ed.htm

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