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Carter compares conflict to U.S. civil rights movement, not apartheid, says former adviser

Mordechai Twersky

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Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter views Israel's treatment of the Palestinians as similar to that of the "African Americans of the 1950s and '60s," a former Carter adviser told Haaretz during a recent trip to Israel.

According to Stuart E. Eizenstat, who served as Carter's chief White House domestic policy adviser from 1977 to 1981, Carter "looks at the conflict through the lens of the Civil Rights movement, as a Southerner who witnessed discrimination against African Americans, who he equates with the Palestinians."

Carter, the 39th U.S. president and the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, believes "the Israeli military has not treated the Palestinians fairly," Eizenstat told Haaretz while he was in Jerusalem last week to attend the President's Conference. Eizenstat added that he took issue with previous public statements by Carter comparing the Palestinians' "non-violent civil rights struggle" to the U.S. Civil Rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"In my estimation it's a totally wrong context," said Eizenstat, a veteran diplomat and a native of Atlanta, Georgia, who has served in numerous senior government positions, including U.S. ambassador to the European Union. "I have said to him [Carter], 'If the Palestinians had a Martin Luther King, they would have a state today - if they hadn't thrown bombs but held peaceful demonstrations and were willing to live with Israel.'"

But Eizenstat said Carter, a native of Plains, Georgia, views the Palestinians as "the weak victims."

"I think, again, it's an incorrect dimension to look at it, but I think it explains that process," Eizenstat said, noting that some 20 years ago Carter spoke to him "about the fact that blacks had been mistreated by whites during the Civil Rights era, and that now the Palestinians were the weaker party."

"I want to try to explain this as best as I can," said Eizenstat, who said he met last month with the 87-year-old former president, his wife, Rosalynn, and former vice president Walter Mondale at a White House staff reunion in Maryland. "I remain very close to the president. But that hasn't stopped me, however, from being critical, personally and otherwise, of some of his more recent statements - the apartheid statements and so forth."

Eizenstat was referring to Carter's controversial 2006 book, "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid," which assailed Israel's policies toward the Palestinians in the territories. Upon hearing of the book's imminent publication, Eizenstat said he wrote to Carter and later phoned him to convey his concerns that the word "apartheid" in the book's title would wrongly "invoke images of South African apartheid."

He said he warned Carter at the time that "whatever his feelings about Israel's settlement policy, it was not historically, legally or morally the same as the white South African regime's denial of basic rights to its own black citizens."

Carter responded that he "appreciated my comments and understood my concerns" but insisted it was too late to change the book's title, Eizenstat recalled. However, according to Eizenstat, Carter said he would "try to better explain his views," and a short time later, following the book's publication, Carter gave a speech at Brandeis University in which he explained he "was not equating Israel's settlement policy with South Africa's."

Deep respect for the Jewish people

Eizenstat, who served as the Clinton administration's special representative on Holocaust-era issues, said Carter's comments should not be taken to mean he is anti-Israel or anti-Semitic. "He doesn't have an anti-Semitic bone in his body," Eizenstat said, noting the Carter Administration's achievements in brokering the 1979 Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt; his support for the plight of Soviet Jews; and his creation of a presidential commission to recommend a Holocaust memorial in Washington.

"He had Jewish advisers, myself included, and multiple ambassadors," said Eizenstat. "He has a deep respect for the Jewish people and a deep respect for the State of Israel - as a man of the Bible."

"But this Palestinian issue gnaws at him," Eizenstat continued, "and I wish he had expressed it in different ways." That said, he maintained, "It's important not to take the next step and say, therefore he is 'anti-Israel or anti-Semitic.' That's not true either."

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