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America Can Persuade Israel to Make a Just Peace

By JIMMY CARTER

ATLANTA — In January 1996, with full support from Israel and responding to the invitation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the Carter Center helped to monitor a democratic election in the West Bank and Gaza, which was well organized, open and fair. In that election, 88 members were elected to the Palestinian National Authority, with Yasir Arafat as president. Legally and practically, the Palestinian people were encouraged to form their own government, with the expectation that they would soon have full sovereignty as a state.

When the election was over, I made a strong effort to persuade the leaders of Hamas to accept the election results, with Mr. Arafat as their leader. I relayed a message offering them full participation in the process of developing a permanent constitutional framework for the new political entity, but they refused to accept this proposal. Despite this rejection, it was a time of peace and hope, and there was no threat of violence or even peaceful demonstrations. The legal status of the Palestinian people has not changed since then, but their plight has grown desperate.

Ariel Sharon is a strong and forceful man and has never equivocated in his public declarations nor deviated from his ultimate purpose. His rejection of all peace agreements that included Israeli withdrawal from Arab lands, his invasion of Lebanon, his provocative visit to the Temple Mount, the destruction of villages and homes, the arrests of thousands of Palestinians and his open defiance of President George W. Bush's demand that he comply with international law have all been orchestrated to accomplish his ultimate goals: to establish Israeli settlements as widely as possible throughout occupied territories and to deny Palestinians a cohesive political existence.

There is adequate blame on the other side. Even when he was free and enjoying the full trappings of political power, Yasir Arafat never exerted control over Hamas and other radical Palestinians who reject the concept of a peaceful Israeli existence and adopt any means to accomplish their goal. Mr. Arafat's all-too-rare denunciations of violence have been spasmodic, often expressed only in English and likely insincere. He may well see the suicide attacks as one of the few ways to retaliate against his tormentors, to dramatize the suffering of his people, or as a means for him, vicariously, to be a martyr.

Tragically, the policies of Mr. Sharon have greatly strengthened these criminal elements, enhanced their popular support, and encouraged misguided young men and women to sacrifice their own lives in attacking innocent Israeli citizens. The abhorrent suicide bombings are also counterproductive in that they discredit the Palestinian cause, help perpetuate the military occupation and destruction of villages, and obstruct efforts toward peace and justice.

The situation is not hopeless. There is an ultimate avenue to peace in the implementation of United Nations resolutions, including Resolution 242, expressed most recently in the highly publicized proposal of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah. The basic premises of these resolutions are withdrawal of Israelis from Palestinian lands in exchange for full acceptance of Israel and Israel's right to live in peace. This is a reasonable solution for many Israelis, having been accepted in 1978 by Prime Minister Menachem Begin and ratified by the Israeli Knesset. Egypt, offering the greatest threat to Israel, responded by establishing full diplomatic relations and honoring Israeli rights, including unimpeded use of the Suez canal. This set a pattern for what can and must be done by all other Arab nations. Through constructive negotiations, both sides can consider some modifications of the 1967 boundary lines.

East Jerusalem can be jointly administered with unimpeded access to holy places, and the right of return can be addressed by permitting a limited number of displaced Palestinians to return to their homeland with fair compensation to others. It will be a good investment for the international community to pay this cost.

With the ready and potentially unanimous backing of the international community, the United States government can bring about such a solution to the existing imbroglio. Demands on both sides should be so patently fair and balanced that at least a majority of citizens in the affected area will respond with approval, and an international force can monitor compliance with agreed peace terms, as was approved for the Sinai region in 1979 following Israel's withdrawal from Egyptian territory.

There are two existing factors that offer success to United States persuasion. One is the legal requirement that American weapons are to be used by Israel only for defensive purposes, a premise certainly being violated in the recent destruction of Jenin and other villages. Richard Nixon imposed this requirement to stop Ariel Sharon and Israel's military advance into Egypt in the 1973 war, and I used the same demand to deter Israeli attacks on Lebanon in 1979. (A full invasion was launched by Ariel Sharon after I left office). The other persuasive factor is approximately \$10 million daily in American aid to Israel. President George Bush Sr. threatened this assistance in 1992 to prevent the building of Israeli settlements between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

I understand the extreme political sensitivity in America of using persuasion on the Israelis, but it is important to remember that none of the actions toward peace would involve an encroachment on the sovereign territory of Israel. They all involve lands of the Egyptians, Lebanese and Palestinians, as recognized by international law.

The existing situation is tragic and likely to get worse. Normal diplomatic efforts have failed. It is time for the United States, as the sole recognized intermediary, to consider more forceful action for peace. The rest of the world will welcome this leadership.

Jimmy Carter, the former president, is chairman of the Carter Center, which works worldwide to advance peace and human health.