

U.S., Israel Criticize Carter Plans to See Hamas

By [Global Research](#)

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. State Department said on Thursday it had advised former President Jimmy Carter against meeting the leader of Hamas in Syria next week, saying it went against U.S. policy of isolating the militant group.

Carter plans to visit Israel, the West Bank, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Jordan during a nine-day trip due to start on Sunday but gave no details of specific meetings.

"This is a study mission and our purpose is not to negotiate but to support and provide momentum for current efforts to secure peace in the Middle East," the Carter Center said in a statement.

"Our delegation has considerable experience in the region, and we go there with an open mind and heart to listen and learn from all parties," it said.

Carter, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, discussed with the State Department's point person on Israeli-Palestinian issues, David Welch, his plans to meet exiled Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal in Damascus, but the department said it went against U.S. policy.

"We counseled against it," said State Department spokesman Sean McCormack.

"U.S. government policy is that Hamas is a terrorist organization and we don't believe it is in the interests of our policy or in the interests of peace to have such a meeting."

Israel's ambassador to the United States, Sallai Meridor, also expressed concern over such a meeting. "The unintended consequences of such a meeting would be to embolden terrorists and undermine the cause of peace," he told Reuters.

Carter, 83, served one term as president from 1977 to 1981. He succeeded in negotiating the 1978 Camp David Accords that paved the way for peace between Israel and Egypt but he has increasingly taken positions highly critical of Israel.

In a 2006 book, he described Israeli policy in the occupied territories as "a system of apartheid."

U.S. policy is to isolate Hamas, which has control of Gaza and is committed to the destruction of Israel. Washington sees pro-Western Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as its partner in U.S.-sponsored peace talks with the Israelis.

PLANS UNDER WAY

"There is an agreement to hold the meeting and arrangements are under way," Hamas

official Ayman Taha told Reuters in Gaza of Carter's meeting.

Taha said the meeting was to be held following a request from the Atlanta-based Carter Center, which aims to promote global peace, health, democracy and human rights.

A spokeswoman for Carter declined to comment on specific meetings. The delegation will include former first lady Rosalynn Carter and ex-Congressman Stephen Solarz.

Initially, Carter had hoped to go with a group of 'elder statesmen,' including former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan and former South African President Nelson Mandela, but the others decided the timing was wrong.

"The elders will consider consultations with key leaders in the region and outside with the purpose of developing a comprehensive report, but have decided to postpone their visit," said a statement on Tuesday from the group of 12 former leaders on their Web site, www.theelders.org.

Carter has been harshly critical of the Bush administration's foreign policy, from the invasion of Iraq to its approach to Iran as well as the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

McCormack said the U.S. government would provide support for Carter's Syrian trip but would not take part in any of his meetings or the planning and scheduling of those talks.

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