

# Carter: Christians have duty to pursue peace in Holy Land

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Former President Jimmy Carter's recent book, *We Can Have Peace in the Holy Land: A Plan that Will Work*, reviews the contributions of past U.S. presidents toward peace in Israel and Palestine, and advances his hopes that President Obama might be able to complete the task.

Members of Hamas security forces sit in front of anti-Israel graffiti in the northern Gaza Strip.  
(PHOTO/REUTERS/Mohammed Salem)

The 85-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner talked about the spiritual, as well as political, issues surrounding the quest for peace in the Holy Land. Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.

**Q: What do you say to fellow evangelical Christians who believe peace won't come to Israel until Jesus returns, that what you suggest is a kind of fool's errand?**

**A:** Well, that's a prediction with which I don't agree, because you may be talking about 1,000 years or 100 years—nobody knows. The Bible says nobody knows when the time will come. You cannot just assume that we have to have war and suffering and strife and persecution for hundreds of years. That's not what the Bible says, and that's not what Jesus intended, for people to suffer until he comes back. ...

What a lot of Christians forget is that we worship the Prince of Peace. We

don't worship the Prince of War or Strife or Hatred and Animosity or Persecution or Suffering. As a Christian, my duty is to bring peace, particularly to the Holy Lands.

**Q: Why do you believe you were successful in brokering peace between Israel and Egypt?**

**A:** Because I took a balanced position. I was neutral between Israel and the Arabs, and it was an extremely unpopular thing to do because all of the political figures in America are 100 percent for Israel. If you are in Congress—both then and now—and you say anything critical of Israel or supportive of the other side, you are looked upon as unworthy to hold public office.

As president, I was pretty much impervious to pressure from any side. And I think that is the role that Obama has assumed for himself. In fact, (Special Middle East Envoy) George Mitchell is already under attack from some of the Israeli supporters just for being “neutral” or “balanced.”

**Q: How does this particular moment in time hold a new and different opportunity for President Obama in bringing a lasting peace to Israel and Palestine?**

 Former President Jimmy Carter
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**A:** It's new and different because of him and because he was willing to address the issue forthrightly. He's willing to start working on it the first day he's in office, which is the same thing I did when I came into office—and not wait until the last year he's in office.

I think (Obama) will take full advantage of what Theodore Roosevelt called

the “bully pulpit.” With his intelligence and with his eloquence, he’s able to put to the American people the reasons why he takes stands or actions that might otherwise be more controversial or even criticized.

**Q: Is there a spiritual appeal that can be made not just to Christians but also to Jews and Muslims in that part of the world that you haven’t heard lately?**

**A:** I think so. There’s not any real difference among the three major religions concerning their commitment to peace and the alleviation of suffering or moral values. All of us share the same basic moral values, and I think peace is an integral part of the scriptures of all three major religions.

**Q: If you had a chance to speak to fellow evangelicals about the importance of this issue right now, what would you say?**

**A:** I’d point out that the ones that have been persecuted most harshly in the West Bank and Gaza have been the Palestinian Christians.

When I first went over there in 1973, 15 percent of all the Palestinians were Christians, but they’d been forced out at a much more rapid rate than the Palestinian Muslims. Now there are only about 50,000 Palestinian Christians left in Palestine. About half of them are in Bethlehem itself. And Bethlehem has now been completely surrounded by a high Israeli wall.