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COMMENTARY

Truth at last, while breaking a U.S. taboo of criticizing Israel

By George Bisharat

Americans owe a debt to former President Jimmy Carter for speaking long hidden but vital truths. His book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* breaks the taboo barring criticism in the United States of Israel's discriminatory treatment of Palestinians. Our government's tacit acceptance of Israel's unfair policies causes global hostility against us.

Israel's friends have attacked Carter, a Nobel laureate who has worked tirelessly for Middle East peace, even raising the specter of anti-Semitism. Genuine anti-Semitism is abhorrent. But exploiting the term to quash legitimate criticism of another system of racial oppression, and to tarnish a principled man, is indefensible. Criticizing Israeli government policies - a staple in Israeli newspapers - is no more anti-Semitic than criticizing the Bush administration is anti-American.

The word *apartheid* typically evokes images of former South Africa, but it also refers to any institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over another. Carter applies the term only to Israel's rule of the occupied Palestinian territories, where it has established more than 200 Jewish-only settlements and a network of roads and other services to support them. These settlements violate international law and the rights of Palestinian property owners. Carter maintains that "greed for land," not racism, fuels Israel's settlement drive. He is only partially right.

Israel is seizing land and water from Palestinians for Jews. Resources are being transferred, under the guns of Israel's military occupation, from one disempowered group - Palestinian Christians and Muslims - to another, preferred group - Jews. That is racism, pure and simple.

Moreover, there is abundant evidence that Israel discriminates against Palestinians elsewhere. The "Israeli Arabs" - about 1.4 million Palestinian Christian and Muslim citizens who live in Israel - vote in elections. But they are a subordinated and marginalized minority. The Star of David on Israel's flag symbolically tells Palestinian citizens: "You do not belong." Israel's Law of Return grants rights of automatic citizenship to Jews anywhere in the world, while those rights are denied to 750,000 Palestinian refugees who were forced or fled in fear from their homes in what became Israel in 1948.

Israel's Basic Law of Human Dignity and Liberty establishes the state as a "Jewish democracy" although 24 percent of the population is non-Jewish. Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, counted 20 laws that explicitly privilege Jews over non-Jews.

The government favors Jews over Palestinians in the allocation of resources. Palestinian children in Israel attend "separate and unequal" schools that receive a fraction of the funding awarded to Jewish schools, according to Human Rights Watch. Many Palestinian villages, some predating the establishment of Israel, are unrecognized by the government, do not appear on maps, and thus receive no running water, electricity, or access roads. Since 1948, scores of new communities have been founded for Jews, but none for Palestinians, causing them severe residential overcrowding.

Anti-Arab bigotry is rarely condemned in Israeli public discourse, in which Palestinians are routinely construed as a "demographic threat." Palestinians in Israel's soccer league have played to chants of "Death to Arabs!" Israeli academic Daniel Bar-Tal studied 124 Israeli school texts, finding that they commonly depicted Arabs as inferior, backward, violent, and immoral. A 2006 survey revealed that two-thirds of Israeli Jews would refuse to live in a building with an Arab, nearly half would not allow a Palestinian in their home, and 40 percent want the government to encourage emigration by Palestinian citizens. Last March, Israeli voters awarded 11 parliamentary seats to the Israel Beitenu Party, which advocates drawing Israel's borders to exclude 500,000 of its current Palestinian citizens.

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Some say that Palestinian citizens in Israel enjoy better circumstances than those in surrounding Arab countries. Ironically, white South Africans made identical claims to defend their version of apartheid, as is made clear in books such as Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*.

Americans are awakening to the costs of our unconditional support of Israel. We urgently need frank debate to chart policies that honor our values, advance our interests, and promote a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. It is telling that it took a former president, immune from electoral pressures, to show the way.

The debate should now be extended. Are Israel's founding ideals truly consistent with democracy? Can a state established in a multiethnic milieu be simultaneously "Jewish" and "democratic"? Isn't strife the predictable yield of preserving the dominance of Jews in Israel over a native Palestinian population? Does our unconditional aid merely enable Israel to continue abusing Palestinian rights with impunity, deepening regional hostilities and distancing peace? Isn't it time that Israel lived by rules observed in any democracy - including equal rights for all?

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