A Big-Hearted US President Dedicated to Peace

By Khalaf Ahmad Al Habtoor

Earlier this month, I had the privilege of spending quality time exchanging ideas with President Carter and his wife Rosalynn at the Carter Center in Atlanta as well as at Illinois College, Jacksonville, where he came at my invitation to initiate ‘Pathways to Peace’ - a proposal designed to find solutions for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, an issue afflicting our region and the West.

Regularly held seminars involving 12 Illinois College students and faculty members will be held in the spring of 2015 so that participants can study methods of resolving ethnic, cultural and religious conflicts with a view to nurturing fresh ideas on how to bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Students will travel to Jordan, Palestine and Israel to meet with other students and decision-makers and to garner their opinions. Final papers will be presented to me in Dubai for evaluation.

“I really think the problem is we don’t see other people’s points of views,” was the insightful message from Illinois College President Barbara Farley. “We just try to push our own. So we need to get people over there to see what’s going on and then say how can we change what’s going on over there based on their beliefs not on our beliefs.”

Having President Carter on board gives this initiative impetus and the gravitas it deserves. Thank you, Mr. President, for answering the call without hesitation and for being an outstanding leadership role model at a time when true leadership is sorely lacking worldwide. While you are out there, working hard to assist the poor and disenfranchised, unafraid to speak the truth about the plight of the Palestinians, others make meaningless diplomatic noises. Presidents, Prime Ministers and human rights organisations are big on talk but do anything to back-up their words. You make a difference.

Not for you a quiet retirement on the golf course. You fly from country to country, even those that are conflict-ridden or undergoing epidemics, risking your life for the betterment of mankind irrespective of race or colour. To quote my friend, Congressman Paul Findley, who has worked tirelessly for the Palestinian cause, “Jimmy Carter is the only president whose presidency didn’t end after he left the White House”.

Like Barack Obama, President Carter was the recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize. The difference is that whereas as Jimmy Carter earned his “for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights and to promote economic and social development”, Obama has done nothing but make hollow promises.

When Carter said “I’ll never tell a lie” and “I’ll never avoid a controversial issue” during the run-up to his election, he meant ever word, but, unfortunately, the Iranian hostage crisis and America’s failed attempt to release its citizens forcibly held by Iranian radicals in the US embassy, cast a shadow over his re-election prospects. He told the packed-to-capacity hall at Illinois College that when he is asked about how his life has been in the last few years he cites a cartoon depicting a small boy telling his daddy “When I grow up I want to be a former President”.

President Carter’s presidential achievements should not be glossed-over. One of the most outstanding was his mediation at Camp David that helped to seal an Israeli-Egyptian peace deal and laid the foundations for future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on two states. His reflections and insights on that era can be found in his book “The Blood of Abraham”. He aspired to making his government competent and compassionate; he produced eight million jobs and reduced the budget deficit. He expanded the National Parks by millions of acres, improved the Social Security system and ensured that government jobs were available to women, African Americans and Hispanics. Moreover, he boldly established diplomatic relations with China and successfully negotiated a nuclear limitation treaty with the Soviet Union.

Determined to continue making a difference, Mr. and Mrs. Carter opened the Carter Center – a nongovernmental, non-profit organisation to ‘advance human rights and alleviate human suffering’ in 1982 in Atlanta partnered with Emory University. Besides being a respected, neutral election observing body, it mediates conflicts, champions human rights, and works to eradicate diseases. President Carter has been a hands-on founder clearing the path for a US-North Korea nuclear pact; accompanying Colin Powell to Haiti to restore the country’s democratically-elected president, negotiating a treaty between Sudan and Uganda and making an historic visit to Cuba aimed at improving US-Cuban relations.

However, elusive peace between Israel and the Palestinians remains close to this heart. His best-selling book “Palestine: Peace not Apartheid” was praised for its honesty in a climate hostile to opponents of Israeli policies and condemned by the pro-Israel lobby for bordering on anti-Semitism, a label Israeli advocates throw around like confetti in an attempt to cast a slur on anyone who dares to challenge Israel’s impunity.

Undeterred, President Carter said, “Many controversial issues concerning Palestine and the path to peace for Israel are intensely debated among Israelis and throughout other nations – but not in the United States. This reluctance to criticise any policies of the Israeli government is because of the extraordinary lobbying efforts of the American-Israeli Political Action Committee and the absence of any significant contrary voices.”

Following Israel’s recent onslaught on Gaza that robbed over 2,000 Palestinians of their lives and displaced 250,000 from their homes, President Carter condemned Israel for committing war crimes. He called for international judicial proceedings to hold Israel to account and for Israel to immediately lift the blockade on the Gaza Strip.

President Carter’s career is indelibly associated with compassion for those less fortunate and his passion to further human rights. His humility is well-known. At his inauguration he waved away a limousine in favour of strolling with his wife down Pennsylvania Avenue and he always carried his own bag when boarding Air Force One. I’ve met him three times, including twice in Dubai where I hosted him and members of his family at my farm. A former farmer, he was entranced by our farm animals and felt right at home.

I’ve always found him to be very humble, gracious, positive and energetic. In short, an impressive human being who takes his Christian values seriously. His wife, former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, has been his right hand since they wed in 1946. A forceful personality in her own right, she was present at Cabinet and Policy meetings during her years at the White House and was appointed US envoy to Latin America. I think President Carter would willingly endorse the saying, ‘Behind every great man is a woman’. One thing’s for certain. If there were more people with influence with President Carter’s courage and commitment our world would be a far better and more peaceful place.