

# **Punishing the innocent is a crime**

*by Jimmy Carter*

International Herald Tribune

SUNDAY, MAY 7, 2006

<http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/05/07/opinion/edcarter.php>

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Hamas and the Palestinians

Innocent Palestinian people are being treated like animals, with the presumption that they are guilty of some crime. Because they voted for candidates who are members of Hamas, the United States government has become the driving force behind an apparently effective scheme of depriving the general public of income, access to the outside world and the necessities of life.

Overwhelmingly, these are school teachers, nurses, social workers, police officers, farm families, shopkeepers, and their employees and families who are just hoping for a better life. Public opinion polls conducted after the January parliamentary election show that 80 percent of Palestinians still want a peace agreement with Israel based on the international road map premises. Although Fatah party members refused to join Hamas in a coalition government, nearly 70 percent of Palestinians continue to support Fatah's leader, Mahmoud Abbas, as their president.

It is almost a miracle that the Palestinians have been able to orchestrate three elections during the past 10 years, all of which have been honest, fair, strongly contested, without violence and with the results accepted by winners and losers. Among the 62 elections that have been monitored by us at the Carter Center, these are among the best in portraying the will of the people.

One clear reason for the surprising Hamas victory for legislative seats was that the voters were in despair about prospects for peace. With American acquiescence, the Israelis had avoided any substantive peace talks for more than five years, regardless of who had been chosen to represent the Palestinian side as interlocutor.

The day after his party lost the election, Abbas told me that his own struggling government could not sustain itself financially with their daily lives and economy so severely disrupted, and access from Palestine to Israel and the outside world almost totally restricted. They were already \$900 million in debt and had no way to meet the payroll for the following month. The additional restraints imposed on the new government are a planned and deliberate catastrophe for the citizens of the occupied territories, in

hopes that Hamas will yield to the economic pressure.

With all their faults, Hamas leaders have continued to honor a temporary cease-fire, or hudna, during the past 18 months, and their spokesman told me that this "can be extended for two, 10 or even 50 years if the Israelis will reciprocate." Although Hamas leaders have refused to recognize the state of Israel while their territory is being occupied, Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh has expressed approval for peace talks between Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel. He added that if these negotiations result in an agreement that can be accepted by Palestinians, then the Hamas position regarding Israel would be changed.

Regardless of these intricate and long-term political interrelationships, it is unconscionable for Israel, the United States and others under their influence to continue punishing the innocent and already persecuted people of Palestine. The Israelis are withholding approximately \$55 million a month in taxes and customs duties that, without dispute, belong to the Palestinians. Although some Arab nations have allocated funds for humanitarian purposes to alleviate human suffering, the U.S. government is threatening the financial existence of any Jordanian or other bank that dares to transfer this assistance into Palestine.

There is no way to predict what will happen in Palestine, but it would be a tragedy for the international community to abandon the hope that a peaceful coexistence of two states in the Holy Land is possible. Like Egypt and all other Arab nations before the Camp David Accords of 1978, and the Palestine Liberation Organization before the Oslo peace agreement of 1993, Hamas has so far refused to recognize the sovereign state of Israel as legitimate, with a right to live in peace. This is a matter of great concern to all of us, and the international community needs to probe for an acceptable way out of this quagmire. There is no doubt that Israelis and Palestinians both want a durable two-state solution, but depriving the people of Palestine of their basic human rights just to punish their elected leaders is not a path to peace.

(Former President Jimmy Carter is founder of the Carter Center, a nonprofit organization working for peace and health worldwide.)