

Carter Visit to Syria Sparks Hope

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Syrian analysts are hopeful that former United States president Jimmy Carter's upcoming visit to Damascus may thaw the icy relationship between the two countries, and re-ignite the Middle East peace process.

Carter is expected to meet exiled Hamas political chief Khaled Meshaal in Damascus on April 18, and may also see high-level Syrian officials including Foreign Minister Walid Moallem and President Bashar al-Assad.

Carter is advocating for Middle East peace during his nine-day trip, and said earlier this week that Hamas and Syria needed to be included in any agreement.

Syrian analysts welcomed Carter's visit – which the US government and Israel both oppose – and suggest his trip could signal a new beginning for Syrian-Israeli negotiations.

“For the past eight years, we haven't had any talks or negotiations,” said Radwan Ziadeh, director of the Damascus Centre for Human Rights Studies and a fellow at the US Institute of Peace in Washington. “We have a lot of talk about war, and we don't have any news about peace.”

The US government has had limited diplomatic engagement with Damascus since Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated in a car bomb attack in February 2005. The United Nations and the US, which has named Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism, suspect the country was involved in the killing.

Nizar Maihoob, president of the Syrian Academy of Media and International Affairs, said US president George Bush had presided over “an administration of war, not peace”,

Carter's Middle East trip, said Maihoob, is an indication that “there is another current in the United States, one that sees that there is a chance for peace in the Middle East”.

The Syrian government has not publicly acknowledged Carter's visit to Damascus, and the US and Israeli governments are not supporting his efforts to engage with Syria and Hamas.

Neither Hamas representatives in Damascus nor Syria's foreign ministry would comment on the visit.

Israeli leaders refused to meet Carter during his trip there earlier this week.

The former US president says he is touring the region as head of the Carter Centre, which promotes peace, and not as a representative of the US government. But Syrian political activists who asked not to be named speculated that he could be acting as a messenger for the Bush administration to open up dialogue on issues of contention between the two countries, such as Hariri's assassination and Syria's role in Iraq and

Lebanon.

They suggested that his visit might ease US pressure on Syria.

Critics of the government expressed concern that the authorities would use the visit to argue that Syria was not isolated by the international community.

Analysts and Damascus residents acknowledged that Carter's efforts may not influence the Bush administration but said his track record of peace negotiations in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East made him a credible figure in the Middle East.

"Carter was the engineer of peace between Egypt and Israel," said Shireen, a 29-year-old Damascus resident who is Palestinian. "He might play a role in pushing the negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis, to bring about a just and comprehensive peace for everyone."

Ziadeh said Carter's reputation and the fact that he was not connected to the Bush administration could boost his credibility with the Syrian authorities. Ziadeh said he had sent a letter to the Carter Centre asking the former president to raise concerns about human rights issues if he met President al-Assad.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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