

## Ex-President Carter says Hezbollah won't meet him

Contributed by Reuters  
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BEIRUT (Reuters) - Leaders of the Lebanese Shi'ite Muslim group Hezbollah have turned down a request to meet former U.S. President Jimmy Carter during a visit to Lebanon that began on Tuesday, a Carter spokesman said.

Carter had requested a meeting with the Iran-backed political and military movement, which is listed as a terrorist group by Washington, as part of a visit to assess whether his Carter Center will monitor a legislative election next year.

"I understand that some of the leaders of Hezbollah have said they were not going to meet with any president or former presidents of the United States," Carter said upon his arrival at Beirut airport, adding that he would meet other leaders.

A Carter spokesman confirmed a meeting had been requested with Hezbollah, whose guerrilla army fought a 34-day war with U.S. ally Israel in 2006. "They said they were not able to meet," Carter spokesman Rick Jafculca said.

Hezbollah, which is also backed by Syria, has a strong following among Lebanese Shi'ites and is represented in parliament and government. Lebanon is expected to hold a parliamentary election by June.

Carter's Lebanon visit will be followed by a trip to neighboring Syria, where he caused controversy in April by meeting leaders of the Palestinian Hamas, which is viewed as a terrorist group by the United States and the European Union.

The meeting with Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal angered the Israeli government and drew criticism from the U.S. administration. Carter, who helped negotiate peace between Israel and Egypt, has also angered Israel by describing its policies in the occupied Palestinian territories as "a system of apartheid."

Carter's agenda in Syria includes a meeting with President Bashar al-Assad, whose ties with the United States remain strained despite a recent thaw in relations with Western states including France and Britain.

(Reporting by Tom Perry; Editing by Samia Nakhoul)

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