

## Obama Puts the Onus on Hamas, Where It Belongs -- and 1967 Borders, with Swaps, Makes Sense

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### President Obama surprised most observers by publicly recognizing that the primary stumbling block preventing forward movement on the peace process is not settlements, or even the status of Jerusalem or the right of return, but Hamas.

It was no surprise that President Obama's Middle East speech included comments about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although these were remanded to the President's concluding remarks in an address otherwise focused on America's commitment to support the democratic aspirations reflected in the revolutions that have swept across the Middle East and North Africa.

What did surprise, and runs contrary to the conventional wisdom among many within the chattering classes analyzing the speech, was that the President publicly recognized that the primary stumbling block preventing forward movement on the peace process is not settlements, or even the status of Jerusalem or the right of return, but Hamas.

Many commentators quickly seized on the President's call for border negotiations to "be based on the 1967 lines," without noting that he qualified the statement by adding "with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states." In fact, border negotiations have in the past been premised on this very formula, using the "Green Line" not as a hard and fast border but as the starting point for negotiations.

Some of the best creative thinking on how to move the process forward has focused on brainstorming variations of the very border swaps the President alluded to. Consider, for example, the mapping project spearheaded by my colleague, David Makovsky, [Imagining the Border: Options for Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Territorial Issue \(/templateC04.php?CID=301\)](#).

Such studies lay bare the myth that the peace process is dead for lack of diplomatic options, frozen in the face of ongoing settlement activity. In fact, as the President highlighted in his speech, everyone knows that borders and security have to be addressed; the question is how to get the Palestinians, who "have walked away from talks," back to the table. The Palestinian Authority's current gambit, delegitimizing Israel and seeking to isolate it at the United Nations, "won't create an independent state."

The key, the President noted, is for Palestinian leaders to understand they "will not achieve peace or prosperity if Hamas insists on a path of terror and rejection." And that Hamas does. In the words of Mahmoud Zahar, a senior Hamas leader in Gaza, Hamas may negotiate with Israel over such things as the release of Hamas terrorists in exchange for Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier Hamas captured in June 2006, but it would never recognize Israel.

"Talks are a means," Zahar explained, "but recognition is a matter of principle." What are Hamas' intentions? In an interview on Hamas' television station last week, Hamas Parliamentarian Yunis al-Astal stated that "in just a few years, all the Zionists and the settlers will realize that their arrival in Palestine was for the purpose of the great massacre, by means of which Allah wants to relieve humanity of their evil."

Hamas should be taken at its word, especially in light of its recent past. Just last month Hamas operatives in Gaza fired a sophisticated anti-tank missile at a bright yellow school bus driving on the Israeli side of the border fence. Fortunately, the bus driver had just dropped most of the students off at school and only one student and the driver were wounded. Hamas, however, clearly intended to kill and wound as many innocent children as possible.

Today, Hamas is the fox in the peace process henhouse. A reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah, recently signed in Cairo, brought Hamas back into the Palestinian government without demanding the group forswear violence, commit to the peace process, or recognize Israel. This, the President noted, "raises profound and legitimate questions for Israel -- how can one negotiate with a party that has shown itself unwilling to recognize your right to exist?"

In fact, it raises profound and legitimate questions for the United States, its Quartet partners and anyone else truly committed to a negotiated, two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And so, the President placed the onus for overcoming the challenge of Hamas -- and by extension for renewing the peace process -- squarely on the shoulders of the Palestinian leadership: "In the weeks and months to come," the President warned, "Palestinian leaders will have to provide a credible answer to that question."

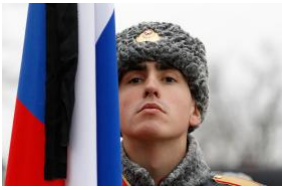
"Ultimately," the President stated, "it is up to Israelis and Palestinians to take action." But for any progress to be possible, it is the Palestinians who must take the first step by finding a "credible answer" to Hamas. Until then, there is little anyone else -- including the United States -- can do to move the process forward.

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