

Obama Mistake: Failing to Recognize False Sincerity in Mahmoud Abbas

"I believe that President [Mahmoud] Abbas is sincere about his willingness to recognize Israel and its right to exist, to recognize Israel's legitimate security needs, to shun violence, to resolve these issues in a diplomatic fashion that meets the concerns of the people of Israel. And I think that this is a rare quality not just within the Palestinian territories, but in the Middle East generally."

That, in case you didn't come across it the first time, was what President Barack Obama confidently declared to *Bloomberg* journalist Jeffrey Goldberg on March 2. Barely two months later, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki uttered the following words no less than four times at a press briefing: "It's hard to see how Israel can be expected to negotiate with a government that does not believe in its right to exist."

The government Psaki referred to is the one headed by Abbas, which just announced a unity agreement between the Palestinian leader's Fatah movement and the Islamist Hamas terror organization. Hamas, as is well known, believes that Israel has no right to exist and should therefore be violently wiped off the map.

There are any number of questions arising from this sorry episode, most obviously how the Obama administration got Abbas so spectacularly wrong. Go back to Obama's interview with Goldberg for confirmation that, in the president's mind, it's Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who is risking the long-term peace of the region in favor of short-term political gains. The theme of "Israel is blocking the peace talks" will now become "Israel wrecked the peace talks."

In this environment, Abbas has become adept at strategically placing obstacles on the road to peace while portraying himself as a victim of the machinations of others, particularly Israel, with more power and resources than the Palestinian Authority. One important reason he's been able to get away with doing so is that, as Obama said, he "shuns violence."

Abbas certainly glorifies violence, as evidenced by his embrace of Palestinian terrorists past and present, but it's true that violence is not his preferred method. That doesn't mean, however, that he's committed to peace with Israel.

What Abbas wants is to secure international recognition of a Palestinian state without having to make any historic concessions to Israel, such as renouncing the so-called "right of return" for the Palestinians who have inherited (in marked contrast to other refugee populations around the world) refugee status. As Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat summarized it in an April 5 memo, "The PLO seeks to achieve an independent and sovereign Palestinian state on the 1967 border with East Jerusalem as its capital, with a just solution to the refugee issue based on UN General Assembly Resolution 194."

Abbas has, therefore, sought to bypass the negotiations without explicitly withdrawing from them. In doing so, he's pursued a unilateralist strategy, which involves securing a seat at the United Nations for a "State of Palestine." He figures he can achieve that outcome with the votes of Arab and Muslim countries.

That was why, last month, Abbas announced the Palestinians' intent to join 63 international organizations, conventions, and treaties; he has already signed 15 applications for such bodies. By embedding the "State of Palestine" in the infrastructure of global diplomacy, Abbas calculates that a Palestinian state will inexorably emerge.

Another benefit of this strategy, he believes, will be increasing diplomatic pressure on, and isolation of, the Israelis. Most of all, Abbas knows that Israeli objections will be met by Obama-esque protests that Israel is alienating a sincere moderate, the alternatives to whom are so much worse.

It's at this point that Hamas comes in. By announcing that Fatah and Hamas are reconciling—not the first time he's done so since their brutal civil war in Gaza during 2007—Abbas can present a facade of Palestinian unity to the outside world.

On one level, it's a clever strategy, but on another, it's very risky. There is no guarantee that Hamas and Fatah will be able to overcome their serious differences and work together. Hamas will certainly bristle at any suggestion that it should recognize Israel, even tactically, a factor that's derailed efforts to reconcile the Palestinian factions in the past. And in the unlikely event that Abbas is successful, his state will exist primarily on paper, not in reality—day to day, the fortunes of the Palestinians will register no discernible change.

What, then, should Israel do? Netanyahu is right to hope that history repeats itself and that the agreement with Hamas falls apart. But we can do more than hope, which is why it's encouraging that a bipartisan consensus is emerging on Capitol Hill to suspend aid to the Palestinian Authority; given Abbas's decision to violate existing agreements by romancing Hamas, we should expect no less.

In the coming days, there will be much agonizing over whether a two-state solution—which all parties say they want—is achievable. The return of Hamas to the center stage makes that far less likely.

Indeed, following the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt last year, Hamas was actually looking more

isolated than ever. Abbas could have used that reality to renounce Palestinian rejectionism once and for all. Instead, he's doing exactly what critics accuse Netanyahu of doing: sacrificing long-term peace for questionable political goals. Preventing him from doing so—by countering Palestinian unilateralism, freezing aid, and cutting contacts with any Palestinian agency that includes Hamas representatives—is the only appropriate American response.

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