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Israel and the Palestinians

A recognition problem

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Israel exists. A Hamas leader briefly admits the obvious



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DID he or didn't he? This week Khaled Meshal, the head of the Palestinians' ruling Hamas movement, seemed to soften—slightly—his stance on Israel. According to Reuters, he said that "As a Palestinian today I speak of a Palestinian and Arab demand for a state on 1967 borders. It is true that in reality there will be an entity or state called Israel on the rest of Palestinian land." He would not grant Hamas's formal recognition of Israel, one of Israel's and the Western world's conditions for lifting their 10-month-old boycott of the Palestinian Authority (PA) government. But, he said, "The distant future will have its own circumstances and positions"—a seeming climbdown from previous statements that Hamas would never recognise Israel.

Within hours, Hamas spokesmen in Gaza were backpedalling. One suggested that Mr Meshal's words had been distorted, while another hastened to point out that Hamas's position hadn't actually changed.

And the latter, at least, seems to be true. Although Mr Meshal has more weight, plenty of other Hamas leaders have said many times that Israel is a reality, that they want a Palestinian state along the 1967 ceasefire lines (ie, in the West Bank and Gaza only), and that one day, perhaps after a few decades of peaceful coexistence, they might put the question of formally recognising Israel to a Palestinian referendum. More junior politicians, such as Hamas mayors, will sometimes go further and admit that Hamas will have to recognise Israel eventually.

Why, then, the stubborn refusal to just go the extra yard and recognise Israel now, especially as the result is the crushing sanctions regime? Many members of Hamas say that they will not recognise Israel's right to exist and may not do so even if Israel were to withdraw right back to the pre-1967 "green line". The official ideology of Hamas is clear enough. It refuses in principle the idea of a Jewish state in any part of Palestine at all. Israel's position, on the other hand, is that it accepts the right of the Palestinians to a state in the West Bank and Gaza, but says that the final border should be set by negotiation. (Although Israel also says it wants to keep some of the West Bank's land for existing settlements and security purposes.) There may be another reason for Hamas's intransigence that has nothing to do with Israel's stance: recognising Israel could lose it the support of its biggest foreign ally, Iran

In practice, if Hamas really were ready to strike a deal, and if the two sides ever were to sit down to talk

about peace, they could probably work out a land-swap formula that compensates the Palestinians for the bits that Israel wants to keep. But to guarantee this, the Palestinians want the 1967 lines recognised in principle as a way to guarantee a fair swap.



More petulantly, Hamas officials often demand to know why there is so much nit-picking about a recognition which they say would have no legal or practical value—after all, Hamas is a party, not a state. And Fatah, Yasser Arafat's party, with which Israel negotiated the Oslo peace accords, still calls for the destruction of Israel in its written charter; Arafat publicly declared the charter "*caduc*" (null and void) in 1989, but it has never been formally abrogated.

Certainly, many Palestinians feel that Israel and the world are insisting on the formal recognition of out sheer bloody-mindedness. But increasingly, they see Hamas's refusal to bend as no less stupidly stubborn. The face-off between Hamas and Fatah has led to an arms race and an escalation of violence that leaves neither party with much control. Powerful clans, extremist militants and criminal gangs are moving in to fill the vacuum. In its attempts to regain control, Hamas is resorting to the same tactics of co-option and strong-arming that made Fatah despised. Even if it were to do an about-face and accept all the world's conditions, it is doubtful that it could reassert the role it was meant to play as an elected government. The hair-splitting dispute over words is just another a depressing indication that neither side is yet ready to make a serious push for peace.