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REVIEW & OUTLOOK | MAY 21, 2011

The 1967 Line of Fire

Obama creates a needless furor over Israel's borders.

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President Obama's address Thursday on the Middle East had much to recommend it, so it's a pity that he stepped all over his own headline by diving back into the Israel-Palestinian maelstrom.

Mr. Obama went to the State Department to offer a mostly inspiring vision of U.S. policy amid the political upheavals sweeping the region. But all attention is now focused on the coda he offered about the Arab-Israeli conflict, in which he said that "the borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines." Though he immediately added that those lines should be adjusted "with mutually agreed swaps" of territory "so that secure and recognized borders are established for both parties," it's the 1967 line that is sticking.

And with good reason. At its neck, the distance from the Mediterranean coast to the West Bank is nine miles. Foreign analysts may imagine that strategic depth no longer matters, but Israelis know better thanks to the thousands of short-range rockets fired at their towns from Hamas-controlled Gaza. As candidate Obama said when he toured one such Israeli town in 2008, "If someone was sending rockets into my house where my two daughters sleep at night, I'm going to do everything in my power to stop that, and I would expect Israelis to do the same thing."

Well, exactly. Which is why it was strange to hear Mr. Obama, in a speech otherwise devoted to urging change in the nature of Arab societies, suddenly revert to the tired land-for-peace formula that has so often failed. Since the rest of Mr. Obama's speech borrowed heavily from President Bush's Freedom Agenda, he might also have taken a cue from his predecessor's June 2002 speech, which conditioned Palestinian statehood on renouncing terrorism and liberalizing politics.

That concept is all the more appropriate now that Hamas has joined the Palestinian government, a point Mr. Obama acknowledged in his speech. Most Israelis would not object to a Palestinian state, even on the 1967 lines, if its politics resembled those of, say, Canada. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's problem is that political trends among the

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Palestinians lean more in the direction of Iran, despite some recent promising economic trends.

Nor does it help that Mr. Obama wants Israel to withdraw from Palestinian territory even before the two sides resolve the issues of the status of Jerusalem and of the 1948 Palestinian refugees, recently in the news with their attempt to force their way through Israel's borders. No Israeli leader is going to give up the West Bank without resolving those existential issues, since it would merely allow the Palestinians to pocket the territorial gains while perpetuating the conflict.

The President's team is explaining the speech as an attempt to restart the moribund Israeli-Palestinian talks, but it will accomplish no such thing. It's more accurate to say he obscured the important substance of his speech by needlessly raising an irrelevant and neuralgic subject. He provided Palestinian hardliners with a negotiating line that will become totemic to them and their sympathizers in the years ahead, no matter what happens on the ground.

He also alienated the leader of a key U.S. ally, as yesterday's chilly photo-op of the President with Prime Minister Netanyahu made clear. If this is what Hillary Clinton likes to call "smart diplomacy," we'd hate to see what qualifies as dumb.

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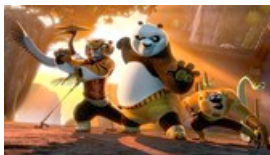
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