

A New Proposal for Hamas' Dilemma

By Kermit Zarley

In 1987, the Muslim Brotherhood founded the religious, political organization Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In 2005, Israel vacated the Gaza Strip and effectively turned it over to the Palestinians. In 2006, elections were held and Hamas unexpectedly won a majority of seats in the Palestinian Parliament. In 2007, Hamas militarily wrested control of the Gaza Strip from Fatah. Since then, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA), which controls Palestinians in the West Bank, have been at odds. But in June, 2014, they signed a “unity agreement.” But both Israel and the U.S. regard Hamas as “a terrorist organization” and therefore will not negotiate with it. This situation inhibits the ongoing peace process.

Hamas demands all of “the land of Palestine” in which to establish the “State of Palestine.” If the Palestinians could have all of the land of Palestine, would Hamas agree to recognize the State of Israel? Is that a contradiction, an oxymoron? Maybe not.

Hamas now faces a dilemma between world opinion and its Covenant (Charter). Hamas' Covenant rejects the peace process and seemingly calls for the extinction of Israel. The Quartet—U.S., EU, UN, Russia—has conducted the peace process. It has demanded that Hamas renounce violence, recognize Israel's right to exist, and honor past agreements between the PA and Israel. If not, the Quartet will not recognize Hamas.

But the U.S. doesn't recognize Hamas, anyway. The U.S. has had Hamas on its foreign terrorist list since 1999. And U.S. policy is that it does not negotiate with terrorists.

Despite rhetorical statements by Hamas' leaders, its Covenant never mentions “Israel” (except once in its preamble), the “State of Israel,” or demand Israel's extinction. Rather, Hamas' Covenant focuses on Palestinians liberating and possessing “Palestine,” or “the land of Palestine,” in order to establish a Palestinian state there.

But what is “the land of Palestine?” The answer to this question could be key to Hamas escaping its dilemma. Discussing this question fits perfectly its Covenant. It states that Hamas “does not refrain from discussing new situations on the regional...level.”

Following WWI, the Allied Powers revived the Greco-Roman practice of calling some land in the Levant “Palestine,” which derives from the word “Philistine.” Philistines lived in the coastal plain, and the ancient Israelite community was centered in today's West Bank. Why not re-identify “the land of Palestine” according to antiquity to help solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Some folks object to this idea by asserting, “Palestinians are not Philistines.” How do they know that? Today's Palestinians probably have a stronger genetic link to the ancient Philistines than to any other people group. Plus, many people are identified ethnically while lacking a strong ethnic derivation. For instance, many African-American “Blacks” do not resemble that much their Black African ancestors, and the same can be said of some Jews about their genetic makeup.

Where were ancient Philistia and Israel located? Philistia consisted of five city-states: Ashdod, Askelon, Gaza, Gath, and Ekron. For most of Philistia's history, its borders were the Mediterranean Sea, the Nahal Sorek in the north, the Shephelah and western environs of Beersheba and Kadesh-Barnea to the east, and the Wadi el Arish to the south. So, modern Israel has always existed in some land the ancient Israelites never possessed, especially the coastal plain south of Tel Aviv between the Nahal Sorek and the Gaza Strip. That land belonged to the Philistines throughout most of their existence. Thus, Israel's present coastal cities of Ashdod and Ashkelon—which are not Jewish names—used to belong to the Philistines. In my book, *Palestine Is Coming: The Revival of Ancient Philistia*, I quote Jewish military historian and author Mordechai Gichon as rightly stating, “From a geographical-historical point of view, the [Gaza] strip extends [north] from El-Arish.”

The size of this proposed Palestinian state would equal in size to the Gaza Strip and all of the West Bank combined. Egypt would relinquish a small portion of the northern Sinai Peninsula since ancient Egypt usually never possessed it. Israel would do a land swap: (1) annex the entire West Bank in exchange for (2) forfeiting its coastal plain from the Nahal Sorek to Gaza and that portion of the Negev from Gaza to Beersheba and Kadesh-Barnea.

This solution obviously would require a transfer of peoples. Many Palestinians living in the West Bank would gladly accept it due to the hardship imposed on them by Israel's West Bank Separation Barrier. Other West Bank Palestinians would be reluctant to leave until they realized that this proposed territory for a Palestinian state would be far superior to a West Bank-Gaza-corridor entity. For instance, Israel and Palestine would lie side-by-side and thus have no non-contiguous lands. And both states would have a most minimal and most defensible border conceivable between them.

But one thing that is needed for this solution to work is water. Egypt's Al Salaam Canal terminates at the Wadi el Arish basin. Egypt and other Nile riparian nations of North Africa might agree to let the Palestinians receive some Nile water through this canal. A West Bank component as part of a Palestinian state would be entangled in water disputes with Israel. Infrastructure costs would be less in this proposed region than those needed in a West Bank-Gaza entity. And such a state likely would be more acceptable to refugees.

Ever since the modern State of Israel was founded, it has avoided the question, “What is Eretz Yisrael (land of Israel)?” Its Proclamation of Independence claims that Jews are entitled to “the land of Israel,” implicitly identifying it as their “ancestral land.” But Ashdod, Askelon, and Gaza were not part of ancient Israel. And during much of Egypt's ancient history, the far northeastern Sinai—between the Gaza Strip, the Wadi el Arish, and Kadesh-Barnea—was not the Egyptians' ancestral land either; rather, it belonged to the Philistines. Although Israel would be reluctant to forfeit its coastal plain south of Tel Aviv, a national debate about “the land of Israel” might cause Israelis to agree to this exchange in order to obtain the entire West Bank—the heart of the Jews' ancestral land.

So, the way out of Hamas' political dilemma may be to return to the ancient identification of the land of Palestine/Philistines and call for the Palestinian state to be established there. It would be an expanded Gaza Strip, with Gaza as its center. Hamas would save face by not having to annul the major thrust of its Covenant—Palestinians possessing all of Palestine. In early 2012, Hamas' Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh told The Associated

Press he disagreed with anti-Semitic slogans. He explained, “We are not against the Jews because they are Jews. Our problem is with those occupying the land of Palestine.”

Would the international community accept this solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Since it accepted the Jews’ claim to a right to their ancestral land in their Proclamation of Independence, surely the world will accept a Palestinian claim to *their* ancestral land too.

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