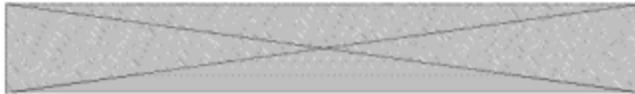

From: Daniel C. Kurtzer <[REDACTED]>
Sent: Sun May 22 19:11:48 2011
Subject: Kurtzer article in NY Daily News

Dear friends,

Following is an op-ed that appeared in today's NY Daily News. All the best. Dan



Opinion

The border between reality and politics: What's new and what's not in Obama's stance on '67 border

BY [DANIEL KURTZER](#)

Sunday, May 22nd 2011

In his Middle East speech last week, President Obama argued forcefully for Israeli-Palestinian peace, emphasizing unshakeable U.S. support for Israel's security and the need for an outcome that results in two states, Israel and Palestine, living within viable and secure boundaries — based on the pre-1967 borders, as amended by land swaps. The President broke little new ground in his remarks. Instead, the speech reflected this administration's basic approach to diplomacy: seek out the art of the possible through incremental change, while avoiding grand plans and big strategies.

Yet already, the remarks have become deeply controversial. Mitt Romney, a 2012 Republican presidential contender, said Obama threw Israel "under the bus." Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee said, "President Obama has betrayed Israel." A statement by the Simon Wiesenthal Center referred to the 1967 lines as "the

'Auschwitz' borders." Unnamed Israelis in Netanyahu's entourage said Obama just doesn't understand Israel and its situation.

A nasty U.S.-Israeli spat has erupted. It was laid bare in the unusually blunt remarks made by Netanyahu after meeting Obama on Friday, and is certain to impact both the President's speech today to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and Netanyahu's address to Congress tomorrow.

What are we to make of the heated rhetoric in the wake of Obama's remarks? Is this about reality, politics or a little bit of both? Was Obama's statement a major break from previous U.S. policy or rather an incremental step forward?

First, a brief primer on a very complicated subject. Before 1967, the dividing line between Israel and the West Bank was the Armistice Line, negotiated between Israel and Jordan in 1949. Subsequently, Jordan annexed the West Bank but renounced its claim to this territory in 1988.

Israel occupied this territory in the 1967 war. Since the Madrid peace conference in 1991, Israel and the Palestinians have been negotiating the details of the transfer of these territories to the Palestinians. The expectation has been that the Palestinians would set up an independent state, and Israeli security requirements would be addressed.

Meantime, over the course of the last few generations, Israel has built settlements in the West Bank. (Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip, taken from Egyptian control in 1967, were evacuated unilaterally by Israel in 2005.) About 500,000 Israeli settlers live in settlements in the West Bank and in neighborhoods of Jerusalem considered by the international community to be settlements, although Israel considers those neighborhoods to be part of a sovereign united Jerusalem. About 80% of the Israeli settlers reside on about 5% of all settled land.

What will happen to those settlements, some of which sit on land that Israel believes to be vital to its capacity to defend itself, is one of the core issues in the peace negotiations. Israel insists upon retaining settlements in major blocs around Jerusalem and near the former Armistice lines. The Palestinians insist on regaining 100% of the West Bank or its equivalent.

Thus, we arrive at "swaps."

Words matter in diplomacy, and the President did use a new formulation to describe American policy regarding the location of the border: "The borders of Israel and Palestine," the President said, "should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreeable swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both

states."

But Obama's words must be seen against the backdrop of formulations used by his two predecessors, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

In parameters for negotiations laid out in early 2001, Clinton spoke about land swaps to bridge Israeli desires to keep areas heavily settled since 1967 and Palestinian desires to get all the territories occupied in the 1967 war. Clinton suggested percentages of land that would be involved in the swaps.

Four years later, Bush sent a letter to then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that approached the issue from a different angle, but with the same effect. Bush said the U.S. understands it is not realistic to expect Israel to withdraw "already existing major Israeli population centers" — a formulation widely believed to refer to the two or three largest Israeli settlement blocs — or to return to the 1949 Armistice lines; rather, Bush said, a peace agreement can be achieved only "on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities."

On one level, a central question is whether there is any fundamental difference between Bush's, Clinton's and Obama's ways of framing the issue.

The answer is somewhat yes, but mostly no. Obama talked about a starting point for the negotiations on the border, while Bush talked about an end point. Both statements assume that the basis for negotiating the border is the line of 1967 or the armistice line of 1949 — effectively the same line.

Further, Obama said a number of things in his speech specifically supportive of what Netanyahu has been demanding. He said Hamas is not a partner for peace as long as it does not recognize Israel or renounce terrorism. By implication, the President thus effectively opposed the recent reconciliation agreement between Fatah, which renounced terrorism in the 1993 Oslo Accords, and Hamas, which has not renounced terrorism. Obama also criticized the Palestinians for considering a unilateral declaration of statehood. Most importantly, Obama associated the U.S. fully with the importance of recognizing Israel as a democratic and Jewish state; and he spoke at some length about the imperative of meeting Israel's security requirements in a manner that would give Israel the confidence that it could defend itself by itself.

It was thus surprising that Netanyahu reacted so swiftly and harshly to the President's speech, saying America did not understand Israel's situation and emphasizing that the 1967 borders are "indefensible."

Netanyahu implied that Obama had called for Israel to withdraw to the 1967 lines —which Obama did not do — and repeated demands that Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state and accept an Israeli military presence along the Jordan River.

Even before arriving in Washington to discuss the President's policy, the Prime Minister felt compelled to oppose it.

In effect, Netanyahu's reaction to Obama's words revealed far more about the politics of the peace process in both countries than about the nuances of American policy. Netanyahu, like all Israelis, wants peace, but it is unclear whether he or his coalition wants a peace process. The prime minister has laid out a series of preconditions and demands that are not unreasonable as outcomes of negotiations, but effectively serve as roadblocks to getting to negotiations.

Netanyahu has also made what can only be considered a fundamental political gaffe by seeking support for his position within the domestic politics of the U.S. It is both usual and acceptable for Israel or others to argue their case before the American people; it is quite another matter to seek to pit the opposition against the President.

This has never worked in the past — witness then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's attempt to reach over the head of President George H. W. Bush to the Congress to secure loan guarantees for Soviet immigrants, an effort that failed. Netanyahu has been unwise to try this again, and the Republicans have been unwise to take this bait. The peace process, for many years immune to the partisanship that besets so much of our national discourse, has now become just another political pawn in the partisan squabbling between our parties.

In all of this Israeli-American infighting, can it be assumed that the Palestinians will cheer the President's speech? Clearly not. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has called an "emergency meeting" to decide how to react, reflecting the fact that Obama's speech contains much that the Palestinians will find troublesome. Abbas himself complicated matters in an op-ed published earlier this week in *The New York Times* that has been roundly criticized for its misrepresentation of history and its unyielding position on core elements of the conflict.

We should all hope that the U.S.-Israeli consultations over the weekend and the Palestinian deliberations in Ramallah will result in a common decision to resume peace negotiations. This diplomatic foreplay, related far more to politics than substance, ought to give way to the far more important challenge of making peace in the Middle East.

Kurtzer, former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and Egypt, teaches Middle East policy studies at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.