

Obama's '1967 borders' call brings back deep fears in Israel

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JERUSALEM // Israel may bear all the hallmarks of a state, but 63 years after it was established, its people cannot agree on a basic prerequisite for nationhood: borders.

The argument pits a powerful right-wing political and military establishment, which says Israel must keep lands captured during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, against those who say that land must be relinquished to secure peace with the Palestinians and the Arab world.

It was no surprise, then, that the US president, Barack Obama, provoked a mixed response last week when he called for negotiations on the borders of a future state of Palestine to be "based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognised borders are established for both states".

Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, immediately rejected the idea, calling the 1967 borders "indefensible".

Many Israelis and Palestinians say, however, that the prime minister's criticism is rooted as much in ideology as cold military calculation.

[Meir Elran, a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Israel, said there is no question that Israel can defend itself inside the 1967 borders.](#)

[What is at issue, Mr Elran said, is "conceptual" and "whether you believe you can live in peace with a Palestinian state".](#)

Mr Obama was the first US president to publicly call for the 1967 lines to be the basis of peace negotiations.

But the idea has long been implicitly recognised by US, Palestinian and even Israeli politicians in previous rounds of peace negotiations. Ehud Olmert, a former Israeli prime minister, called in 2008 for an Israeli withdrawal from "almost all" the land captured in 1967, which includes the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Syria-claimed Golan Heights.

However, ceding parts of this land continues to evoke memories of the days preceding the 1967 war, when the build-up of surrounding Arab armies stirred fears that Israel could be wiped off the map, said Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, a professor of international relations at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

"I remember as a young soldier in the army, when I was mobilised for the war. The rabbis were preparing the national gardens to be national cemeteries, with the idea that we would face a lot casualties," he said.

That helped to ingrain in the consciousness of Israelis a fear that the pre-war borders would be a return to what Abba Eban, a famous Israeli diplomat, once called the "Auschwitz borders", Mr Bar-Siman-Tov said. This was partly a reference to the 14-kilometre gap between the northern West Bank and Israel's coastline.

"With all our military strength, there's a lot of insecurity," said Mr Bar-Siman-Tov.

The 1967 war was a major military victory for Israel and led to the formation of a powerful movement that, by supporting settlements, opposes withdrawing from the West Bank.

Some Israelis, pointing to their country's overwhelming military superiority, cite the settler movement and its prominent government supporters as perpetuating a West Bank occupation that can no longer be justified by the security argument alone.

Gershon Baskin, the co-founder of the Israel Palestine Centre for Research and Information, said: "This is part of the whole national myth that Israelis learn. And the miracle of the Six-Day War, in which we're taught that it was not only a military victory but the will of God."

The question Mr Baskin and others ask is where Mr Netanyahu falls in this debate and whether he wants an Israel that is both Jewish and democratic.

Withdrawing to an Israel whose frontiers conform roughly to 1967 borders would require relocating many of the some 300,000 settlers in the West Bank. Is Mr Netanyahu willing to uproot a large number of these settlers and offer concessions acceptable to Palestinians and defy many in his pro-settler government? Will he abandon his insistence in maintaining a long-term Israeli military presence in the West Bank?

In an indication of where Mr Netanyahu's government stands on the issue, some in his pro-settler government have suggested a deep reluctance to negotiate a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders.

Danny Danon, the deputy speaker of Israel's parliament, wrote last week in The New York Times that in response to the Palestinian attempt at lobbying the UN for recognition of an independent state in September, Israel's "leaders must seize this opportunity and right a historic wrong by annexing parts of our homeland". This was a reference to the West Bank.

<http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/middle-east/obamas-1967-borders-call-brings-back-deep-fears-in-israel?pageCount=0>