

Hamas leader says Israel's existence is a reality, January 10 2007

Sean Maguire and Khaled Oweis (Reuters)

DAMASCUS - Hamas acknowledges the existence of Israel as a reality but formal recognition will only be considered when a Palestinian state has been created, the movement's exiled leader Khaled Meshaal said on Wednesday.

Softening a previous refusal to accept the Jewish state's existence, Meshaal said Israel was a "matter of fact" and a reality that will persist.

"There will remain a state called Israel," Meshaal said in an interview in the Syrian capital, in what appeared to be clearest statement yet by the Islamist group on its attitude toward the state it previously said had no right to exist.

"The problem is not that there is an entity called Israel," said Meshaal, who survived an Israeli assassination attempt in 1997. "The problem is that the Palestinian state is non-existent."

Israel and Western governments have put financial sanctions on the Hamas-led Palestinian government for refusing to recognize Israel, renounce violence and accept past peace accords. The embargo has hit the Palestinian economy hard.

Meshaal said Hamas would defy the Western conditions, which he described as blackmail, and would refuse to consider formal recognition of Israel until a viable Palestinian state was established.

Changing the Hamas charter, which calls for the destruction of Israel, was also a matter for the future, he said.

"The distant future will have its own circumstances and positions could be determined then," he said in a wide-ranging interview.

Past concessions to Israel by Palestinian negotiators went unrewarded, he argued, and his Islamist group would drive hard bargains over key issues such as recognition.

"For Israel to suck us into bargains in stages and in packages - this road constitutes an attempt to weaken the Palestinian position."

1967 BORDERS

Asked about Meshaal's comments Israeli foreign ministry spokesman Mark Regev responded that Hamas had said in the past it wanted to wipe Israel from the map and there was no indication it had changed its position.

Meshaal said Hamas backed Arab demands that a Palestinian state should include Gaza, the West Bank and east Jerusalem and that Israel should accept the right of Palestinian refugees to return to homes lost in a 1967 war and before.

"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," said Meshaal.

"This is a reality but I won't deal with it in terms of recognizing or admitting it," he added.

A vast gulf exists between the Hamas goals for a state and Israel 's insistence that it will never give up Arab east Jerusalem or allow Palestinian refugees to return from abroad.

Meshaal called for international pressure on Israel to accept Palestinian demands in the interest of regional peace and security. He criticised U.S. financial and political backing for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as interference.

Hamas and Abbas's Fatah are locked in a power struggle that has sparked deadly armed clashes that some fear will lead to a Palestinian civil war. Meshaal called for renewed dialogue between the groups to try to form a national unity government.

In his interview Meshaal did not threaten armed action by his Islamist group against Israel but warned that Palestinian frustration over a stalled peace process could lead to attacks.

Hamas has largely abided by a November 26 truce which has calmed Israeli-Palestinian violence in Gaza . It launched dozens of suicide bombings against Israel during a Palestinian uprising that began in 2000 but halted them in early 2005.

(Additional reporting by Nadim Ladki and Allyn Fisher-Ilan)