

Our fantasy Middle East

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Secretary of State John Kerry Photo: AP

When it comes to setting Middle East policy, too often Washington prefers not to confront inconvenient realities. We now have two examples before us.

The first is the fiction that the western half of Jerusalem isn't part of the state of Israel, even though the Israelis have controlled it since 1948. Such is the power of this fiction that the dispute has now become an issue for the US Supreme Court.

The issue is the State Department's refusal to include the word "Israel" on passports of US citizens born in Jerusalem — notwithstanding a law requiring it do so. The policy dates to the Bush years but continues to be carried out by the Obama State Department. And the argument for this fiction is twofold: changing it would infringe on the president's executive powers and incite Islamist violence.

As columnist Jeffrey Goldberg asks: "What does it say that we allow the fear of violence to make us deny what is true?"

The other reality Washington doesn't want to confront is that the agreement between Fatah and Hamas to establish a unified Palestinian government means we face a new, terrorist government. That is, if you accept the State Department's designation of Hamas as a terrorist organization.

By law, the United States has to withdraw financial aid to any terrorist group. But to do so here would likely lead to the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, at least if the unity agreement manages to produce a government (earlier attempts have collapsed). And no one in Washington is prepared to risk that.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has promised Secretary of State John Kerry the new unity government will recognize Israel and renounce violence. But there's been no confirmation of this from Hamas.

In both cases, in other words, we're told the fictions are necessary if peace is to advance peace. Meanwhile history tells us it's precisely the denial of reality that makes our Middle East policies such a mess.

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