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Citizens show peace is possible

Bill Clinton

Israelis and Palestinians reached agreement in a meeting in Geneva this week on a settlement of all issues that have divided them for so many years. No one was acting in an official capacity, so the plan has no force of law. But the fact it happened at all is an encouraging sign for a region so bloodied by conflict.

After three years of intense violence, we know what needs to be done. The Palestinian terrorist infrastructure must be thoroughly dismantled and the Palestinian Authority reformed. Israel needs to evacuate settlement outposts, freeze settlement activity and withdraw from reoccupied territory. Both sides must cease acts of provocation.

But experience tells us that the goal of peace in that region no longer can be achieved solely through an incremental approach in which each side takes tangible steps without knowing precisely how the process will end.

The Palestinians need to take on extremists who attack Israeli civilians. But it is hard to believe that they will do so -- morally necessary and politically imperative as it is -- until they see a path toward ending the occupation and realizing their legitimate aspirations.

Israel must take steps to stop the settlement enterprise and withdraw from territory. But it is difficult to imagine it will do so before being persuaded that Palestinians are prepared to accept Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, free from the fear of violence or unlimited refugee returns.

For both sides to have confidence that their core concerns will be met, they must achieve a common understanding of what peace will look like. That, in turn, can bolster peace constituencies, isolate extremists and empower Palestinian moderates to crack down on violence, all of which will energize a political process leading toward peace.

The sides can agree

That's why the agreement in Geneva is so important, as is the statement by Ami Ayalon, former head of Israel's counterintelligence agency, and Sari Nusseibeh, a prominent Palestinian intellectual. Such efforts prove that Israelis and Palestinians of goodwill can agree on even the most vexing settlement issues. They build on a decade of negotiations, including a plan I presented in December 2000. The outlines of such agreements enjoy majority support on both sides, according to recent public opinion polls.

Although the basic solution is known and both peoples are willing to endorse it, progress remains elusive. The burden, therefore, must be on Israeli and Palestinian citizens and on

the international community to create a mechanism for translating popular support into a genuine agreement.

For the United States, in particular, linked to the region by moral, historic and strategic ties, engagement in the peace process needs to be unrelenting and vigorous. We should empower Israeli and Palestinian citizens who support a comprehensive settlement. And we should make clear our willingness, along with the international community, to back up any agreement with military and political weight, providing the two sides with confidence that the deal will be implemented and their security ensured.

Not what terrorists desire

Addressing final-status issues now does not constitute a prize for terrorists. Those responsible for the suicide bombings do not want a negotiated peace; they want Israel eliminated. They do not want the refugees resettled in Palestine; they want them to flood Israel. They do not want to share Jerusalem.

Ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will deal terrorists a harsh blow. In contrast, further delay in dealing with the basic questions only helps all who advocate terror in the region and around the world.

Details of a final agreement may differ from those of the Geneva and Ayalon-Nusseibeh initiatives. But we have known for years what must be done to achieve a just peace. The time has come to fashion such a lasting gift to the Israeli and Palestinian peoples and all who pray for a new beginning in the Middle East.

Bill Clinton was the 42nd U.S. president.

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