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No more waiting. The time for Israel to make peace is now

WITH THE US presidnetial elections on the horizon, the approach to the Middle East seems to be to sit and wait. It's a poor strategy. Time does not work in either party's favour and, in the meantime, the one state vision spreads in both camps and settles within the hearts and minds of indifferent Israelis and frustrated Palestinians.

For three years, attempts to resume negotiations have failed. Mahmoud Abbas has no clear policy except for unilateral action at the UN, paired with short-term measures such as demanding the release of prisoners. Meanwhile Benjamin Netanyahu makes statement after statement about two states for two peoples. But he follows it with no tangible action.

Yet I still believe the vast majority of Israelis and Palestinians want peace. Alone, that may not be enough, but it is something to build on.

It is time for Israel to be proactive, despite the uncertainties, in order to mitigate some of the threats it faces. Doing so would bolster Israel's strategic situation, securing its future as a Jewish and democratic state, and improving — among other things — its international image and countering the delegitimisation campaign.

Israel's efforts should be focused on the resumption of talks, facilitated and monitored by the US. Revisiting the Quartet's 2002 Road Map is one option that might be flexible enough to allow for developments since it was drafted; acknowledging the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative would give talks a broader regional context.

Parallel to that, the parties should strive, unilaterally, for a reality of two states, seeking steps that would not negate the negotiations but rather bolster them. For Israel, this means constructive moves to advance the reality of two states based on the 1967 borders, with land swaps — regardless of whether the Palestinians have agreed to them. Mutual unilateralism would be even better; gradual but tangible changes could begin to transform the situation on the ground.

This might include ending all settlement construction east of the security fence and in the Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem; preparing to relocate settlers living outside the main blocks while establishing a fair compensation package. After the relocation, the IDF would remain in the Palestinian territories until a final status agreement is reached or until a robust international presence takes responsibility for security. It is hoped — but not a necessary precondition— that such steps would be reciprocated by the Palestinians or at least carried out with their co-operation.

The other challenge is to alter the internal discourse, to give broader legitimacy to the idea of two states. We need to change attitudes, both in Israel and in Palestinian society, because inevitably, it is difficult to see the potential benefits of change before it occurs. We should, therefore, try placing the words and images of the future in the consciousness of the public and their leaders, which will enable leaders to act more comfortably. And it will ensure that the next generation speaks a new language, uses different terminology and addresses a different reality.

Such dialogue within civil society would look for common ground and plant the seed for solidarity between those who are bound to live together on the same piece of land. Israelis and Palestinians cannot allow memories and emotions to get the upper hand over reason.

In terms of policy, Israel must prepare a comprehensive plan for the absorption of the settlers, whether this takes place before or after an agreement. Once negotiations are resumed —if indeed they are — they should be conducted in a binding, continuous and well-structured process. Parallel to that, or in the absence of it, Israel should look to gradually resolve the conflict, bringing together top-down diplomacy and bottom-up grassroots action. Measured, independent steps toward a two state reality must be combined with internal dialogue to accommodate peacemaking. And the international community should endorse and encourage this, while imposing a reliable process on the weary parties rather than putting a solution to them.

In 1948, a prayer called for the establishment of "peace in the land, and everlasting joy for its inhabitants". Then there was no peace, but now, as then, there is hope that this will change. Gilead Sher was Prime Minister Ehud Barak's chief of staff and and a chief negotiator at the Camp David summit in 2000 and the Taba talks in 2001

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