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Negotiation is the road to Mideast peace, by Herbert C. Kelman

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Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel is seeking US support for his government's planned unilateral steps to address the current Israeli-Palestinian crisis, including the construction of a barrier around and within the West Bank and the removal of Israeli settlements and troops from the Gaza Strip. Such unilateral steps would have disastrous consequences.

They would divide the West Bank into disconnected, fenced-off enclaves and further erode the Palestinian economy and quality of life. They would make Gaza ungovernable and probably put it under the control of Islamic extremists. They would make it impossible to form a viable Palestinian state and to resolve the deadly conflict between the two peoples.

The US administration should strongly discourage these unilateral steps and promote a return to serious negotiation of a comprehensive, final agreement between the parties. Negotiations are the only way to develop a formula for ending the conflict that meets the basic needs of both parties, that engenders their commitment, and that is conducive to stable peace, mutually enhancing cooperation, and ultimate reconciliation between the two societies.

Sharon's argument in favor of unilateral steps is that there is no partner for peace on the other side. This view has been widely shared within the Israeli public since the breakdown of the Camp David talks in 2000 and the onset of the second intifada. Indeed, this view is mirrored on the Palestinian side, where there is an equally strong belief that there is no Israeli partner for a solution that would establish an independent, viable Palestinian state.

These mirror images are dangerous because they justify acts of violence and unilateral steps that create self-fulfilling prophecies: The belief or claim that there is no negotiating partner on the other side -- that the only language "they" understand is force -- leads to actions that destroy the possibility of negotiations. There is ample evidence that these images are not only dangerous, but unwarranted.

Public opinion data on both sides continue to show majorities in favor of negotiations and of a compromise based on a two-state solution (while believing that the other side is not ready for such a compromise). Furthermore, in recent months, politically influential Israelis and Palestinians have issued joint proposals for resolving the conflict on the basis of a mutually acceptable two-state formula.

The most elaborate of these proposals is the Geneva accord, developed under the leadership of Yossi Beilin and Yasser Abed Rabbo, Cabinet members and leading negotiators of the Israeli and Palestinian governments, respectively. The Geneva initiative represents a particularly significant contribution to the peace process.

Given the character, background, and experience of the prime movers of this initiative and of the people who joined them in the effort, it suggests very strongly that there is a credible negotiating partner on each side. Given the specific and detailed agreements it achieved on many of the most contentious issues in the conflict, it suggests very strongly that there is a mutually acceptable formula for a two-state solution that can be successfully negotiated.

The Geneva accord itself is not a negotiated agreement in any formal sense of the term, but it is a first-class simulation of such an agreement. As such, it offers a powerful demonstration that a mutually acceptable agreement can be negotiated. It does not substitute for official negotiations, but it provides an impetus for renewed negotiations, by highlighting the principles on which an agreement must and can be based.

Moreover, it should help speed up the negotiation process because it offers concrete ideas for dealing with many of the difficult practical and political issues that a final agreement would have to encompass. Above all, it breaks through the pervasive pessimism, mistrust, and despair that have hampered return to the negotiating table.

The Geneva initiative has already gained considerable support around the world, including the United States.

The possibilities for successful negotiations that it demonstrates can serve as an effective counterweight to Sharon's argument that he has no partner for peace and hence no alternative to the unilateral use of force.

But gaining American and international support is only part of the problem faced by the architects and promoters of the Geneva initiative. The critical challenge they confront is to garner public support for the principles and terms of the accord within their own societies. The compromises envisaged by the Geneva accord entail high costs for the two peoples.

In particular, there is strong resistance to provisions requiring them to relinquish claims heavily laden with emotion and symbolic meaning and central to their national identities and associated narratives – such as those touching on the right of return of Palestinian refugees or sovereignty over the holy sites in Jerusalem. Even among the majorities in each public who support compromise to achieve a two-state solution, there is great reluctance to bear these costs in the face of profound distrust in the other side's willingness or ability to reciprocate and to conclude a genuine, acceptable agreement.

These concerns are exacerbated by a structural problem in the way proponents of the Geneva accord present it to their respective publics. For understandable reasons, they may emphasize to their own constituencies how favorable the accord is to their own interests and how much the other side has conceded.

What may encourage their own public, however, may well discourage the public on the other side – who inevitably also hear these messages – and may reinforce the prevailing distrust. For example, when Palestinians hear Israelis stress that Palestinians have in effect given up the right of return, and Israelis hear Palestinians deny that this is the case, both may come to feel that the accord is a bad deal or that it is sufficiently ambiguous to allow the other side to exploit it to their own side's disadvantage.

There is a need, therefore, for common messages, jointly constructed by thoughtful and credible representatives of both sides, and brought to both populations. Joint construction is essential to ensure that proponents of the Geneva initiative avoid working at cross-purposes as they seek to mobilize their own constituencies – to ensure that their messages are responsive to the concerns and sensitivities of each side without unduly threatening the other side.

Furthermore, to build on the enormous achievement represented by the Geneva accord, its provisions must be communicated in a way that captures the publics' imagination and generates trust and hope. The two publics must be persuaded that a solution along the lines envisioned in the Geneva accord is not only necessary, but that it is possible, that it is safe, that it is fair, and that it promises a better future.

To this end, the Geneva initiative – as inserted into the public debate – should be framed in terms of a principled peace that represents, not just the best available deal, but a historic compromise, which meets the basic needs of both societies, validates the national identity of each people, and conforms to the requirements of attainable justice.

I envisage three central elements to a jointly constructed framework for a principled peace:

Acknowledgment of the other's nationhood and humanity, through explicit recognition of each people's right to national self-determination in a state of its own, acceptance of each other's authentic links to the land, and rejection of language that denies the other people's political legitimacy and historical authenticity; and through words and actions demonstrating that the other side's lives, welfare, and dignity are considered to be as valuable as one's own.

Affirmation of the meaning and logic of a historic compromise, by framing the agreement as a commitment to end the conflict and share the land both sides claim through the establishment and peaceful coexistence of two states, in which the two peoples can fulfill their respective rights to national self-determination, give political expression to their national identities, and pursue independent, secure, and prosperous national lives; and by clearly spelling out the implications of such a commitment in terms of both the costs that the logic of the historic compromise imposes on each side, and the benefits provided by a principled peace.

Creating a positive vision of a common future, by framing the agreement as an opportunity for the two peoples to build a common life in the land they share and to which they both have emotional attachments, rather than as an arrangement being forced on them by outside pressure and the unending cycle of violence.

Consistent with the high degree of interdependence between the two societies, the agreement should be

presented to both publics as the foundation of a future relationship based on mutually beneficial cooperation in many spheres, conducive to stable peace, sustainable development, and ultimate reconciliation.

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