**Israel is ready for peace. Are its neighbors? The settlement freeze shows Israel is serious.**

**But peace won't become reality without an immediate and serious return to the negotiating table.**

*Nadav Tamir. The Christian Science Monitor, Dec 15, 2009.*

The time for peace in the Middle East is now. This has been the consistent message from both the Netanyahu and Obama administrations. And it is time to take advantage of the fact that we have a stable government in Israel capable of making a move toward peace, a US government that has made it an important foreign-policy priority, our best Palestinian Authority negotiating partner thus far in President Mahmoud Abbas, and a majority of the population and government on both sides who desire a two-state solution.

Unfortunately, Israel’s repeated requests for renewed negotiations without preconditions have yet to yield results. Nonetheless, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wasn’t deterred from announcing a historically unprecedented 10-month settlement freeze. To understand the significance of this, one must understand the domestic politics the prime minister overcame, and the consequences it brings for thousands of settlers living in the West Bank. Israel’s most recent unilateral action - withdrawing from Gaza in 2005 - was an absolute disaster. Since 2000, Israeli civilians had weathered thousands of rocket attacks from Gaza. But after Israel’s withdrawal, Hamas turned Gaza into an essential terrorist base, intensifying the rate of rocket attacks until the Israeli government had no choice but to respond militarily last winter. So it would stand to reason, absent any corresponding goodwill gestures from surrounding Arab states, that the Israeli people would be a little hesitant to support unilateral efforts.

Moreover, the prime minister is, in essence, telling Israeli families living in Judea and Samaria (the biblical cradle of the Jewish people) that they will have to sacrifice their right to continue building there. Add to this the fact that no previous Israeli government has instituted such a policy as a precursor to negotiations, and it is clear that Mr. Netanyahu is making a major gesture toward moving the peace process forward. The record is clear: Israelis - and the Israeli government - are willing to compromise when peace is a possibility.

Critics say that because the freeze doesn’t include Jerusalem, it’s an empty move. However, it’s absolutely vital that Jerusalem remains a final-status negotiations issue due to the sensitivity on both sides toward it.

Currently, there are plenty of reasons for optimism on the ground, where the conditions for peace are riper than they have been in decades. The West Bank economy, predicted by the International Monetary Fund to grow at a rate of 8 percent in coming years, is blossoming. Nablus, Ramallah, and Hebron are all bustling with activity thanks to policies instituted by Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, and the Israeli removal of checkpoints made possible through improved Palestinian security forces.

Ambitious plans for a new city, Rawabi, are already under way, and parts of these plans include collaborative efforts between Israeli and Palestinian city planners to build parks and other public amenities surrounding the city. Other efforts include strawberry fields in Qalqilyah, where Israeli farming experts teach best practices to Palestinians, who aim to sell the lucrative crop on the European market. Better yet, future collaborations could involve Palestinian participation in Israeli renewable-energy initiatives. The prospect of working with our neighbors to create a green oasis in the Middle East is tantalizing, but this and many other possibilities won’t become reality without an immediate and serious return to the negotiating table. And make no mistake; the recent settlement freeze is aimed at accomplishing exactly that. It’s time to sit down and renew the work of achieving a durable and sustainable resolution to the conflict.

